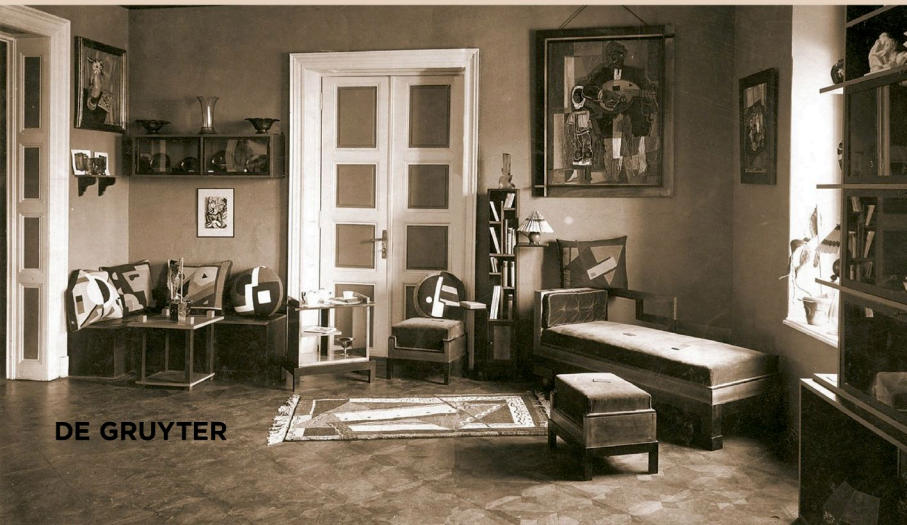




Alexandra Chiriac

# PERFORMING MODERNISM

A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest



DE GRUYTER

## **Performing Modernism**



Alexandra Chiriac

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A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest

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Some sections of this book have appeared in other guises. The chapter "Romanian Modernism and the Perils of the Peripheral" in the volume *Borders of Modernism* edited by Massimiliano Tortora and Annalisa Volpone (part of the European Modernism book series of the Centre for European Modernism Studies at the University of Perugia, Morlacchi Editore, 2019) and the article "Ephemeral Modernisms, Transnational Lives: Reconstructing Avant-Garde Performance in Bucharest" in the *Journal of Romanian Studies* no. 1 (2020), contained some aspects of the link between the Vilna Troupe and Maxy's Integralism more amply discussed in the chapter "The Vilna Troupe in Romania: Reconstructing Avant-garde Performance." The article "The Magical and the Mechanical: M. H. Maxy, Iacob Sternberg and the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio" published in *Revista de istorie a evreilor din România* no. 2 (18) (2017), discussed two theatrical productions that also appear in the final chapter of this book.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my parents for their patience, love, and unfailing support, and more prosaically for frequently providing delicious meals and accompanying me on research trips to far-flung locations. This book is dedicated to them.

# PREFACE: A DE-CONSTRUCTIVIST NARRATIVE OF THE BUCHAREST AVANT-GARDE

Irina Livezeanu

Alexandra Chiriac's study is more than a welcome addition to the substantial number of volumes, exhibition catalogues, and articles published over the last three decades on Romania's interwar avant-garde. There are good reasons for this surge of interest and output on this topic. Figures like Maxy, Iancu (Janco), Tzara, Brauner, Voronca, Vinea, Luca, even Brancusi had been forbidden fare in Romania for some or all of the communist years. Relevant archives in the communist bloc were unavailable, and the periodicals of the avant-garde kept in special, restricted collections until 1990. Romanian editors were not encouraging studies on cubism, expressionism, surrealism, Dadaism, futurism, integralism, or constructivism.

Like *Bucharest in the 1920s and 1930s: Between Avant-Garde and Modernism* (1994); *Marcel Janco in Interwar Romania: Architect, Fine Artist, Theorist* (1996); or *Colours of the Avant-Garde: Romanian Art 1910–1950* (2011), Chiriac's book is intended to reach international audiences as well it should since it breaks rich new ground. However, while the volumes already mentioned, and others such as Michael Ilk's *Brancusi, Tzara und die Rumänische Avantgarde* (1997), and his *Maxy: Der integrale Künstler* (2003); or Radu Stern's *From Dada to Surrealism: Jewish Avant-Garde Artists from Romania, 1910–1938* (2011), to mention just a few, are essentially exhibition catalogues bursting with glossy reproductions and photographs, Alexandra Chiriac's *Performing Modernism: A Jewish Avant-Garde in Bucharest* is both more and less than that. It too has a trove of illustrations, many quite rare, but it doesn't try to be comprehensive, or cover all of Maxy's work in different genres or the phases of his long career. Basing her book on careful research derived from peregrinations through archives, museums, and private art collections in Germany, Romania, Latvia, and the United States, Chiriac offers readers a tale of discoveries of marginalised figures and disciplines, and thus a critique of the artistic canon, as well as a fresh appraisal of M. H. Maxy in the context of interwar Bucharest society. Hers is an attempt to foreground the often overlooked—in the Romanian context—applied arts and a number of overshadowed personalities, and to untangle for presentation the entangled histories of transnational artists such as Andrei Vespremie, and institutions such as the Vilna Troupe based for some years in Bucharest in the mid-1920s.

Maxy, whose reputation in the firmament of the Romanian avant-garde looms large to this day, emerges from Chiriac's account a little smaller. She renders a punctual, clean history of the Academy of Decorative Arts, demystified of its aura as an interwar "outpost of the Bauhaus in Bucharest." In this "de-constructivist" narrative

Chiriac introduces the little known and often misidentified Andrei Vespremie who established the Academy in 1924 with financial backing from Heinrich Fischer-Galați, the scion of a wealthy German family arrived in Romania in 1866 in the entourage of prince Carol of Hohenzollern later crowned king of Romania. It was Vespremie who was the Academy's original director and organiser, and quite probably Maxy's teacher in metalwork. A Hungarian Jew from Transylvania, educated in Budapest and then Berlin, Vespremie modelled the Academy after the Schule Reimann in Berlin and not the Bauhaus in Weimar. After three years at the Academy's helm, Vespremie left Bucharest for Latvia. Then, in 1927, Maxy took over the leadership of the Academy of Decorative Arts. In Riga Vespremie taught art at Jewish gymnasia, and became part of Latvia's modernist art scene. He was murdered in the Kaiserwald concentration camp near Riga during the Holocaust.

Out of sight, out of mind, one might say. Vespremie was forgotten in Romania after his departure, whereas Maxy remained a fixture of the local avant-garde scene, later recasting its history to his advantage. Maxy, who was also Jewish, survived the war and the Antonescu regime in Bucharest working in local segregated institutions: the School of Fine Arts for Jews and the Barașeum Jewish theatre. After the war he built a career anew under the communist regime, becoming its close ally, and the director of the Romanian National Art Museum among other leadership positions, and adapting to socialist realist artistic norms when necessary. During the 1960s Thaw, when it was safe again, Maxy recuperated his avant-garde past, fudging the record to encompass decorative objects designed by Vespremie, and the founding of the Academy of Decorative Arts itself, to which he had been a late-comer.

Alexandra Chiriac's book also deals with another forgotten aspect of Maxy's interwar artistic career: stage and costume design for avant-garde theatre. The theatre group that first attracted Maxy to the stage was the Yiddish language Vilna Troupe that alighted in Bucharest in 1923 to the acclaim of the theatre-going public and reviewers. After 1927, Maxy went on to collaborate with Dida Solomon-Callimachi and Iacob Sternberg, designing sets for Solomon's Caragiale Theatre, for the Bukarester Idische Theatre Studio (BITS), and outdoor revue shows. Chiriac is again here inspired to bring into view marginalised figures: neither Solomon-Callimachi nor Sternberg have received the attention they might have in the literature about the avant-garde.

It is notable that Romanian reviewers and literati regarded the Vilna Troupe with respect and admired its creativity and innovation, not minding the Yiddish delivery. The plays the Vilna Troupe produced, written by An-Sky, Sholem Asch, Sholem Aleichem, Osip Dymov, Lev Tolstoy, Molière, and Ibsen were reviewed in the Romanian Jewish press, wide-circulation Bucharest dailies, and in the Romanian cultural press. At some sold-out shows Bucharest Jewish audiences intermingled with local aristocrats, Romanian actors, royalty, and members of the young generation, among them the still unpublished Eugène Ionesco!

Like these Yiddish plays seen by such a diverse public, the modernist design objects sold by the Academy of Decorative Arts ended up in the possession of various

buyers. In the 1920s–1930s, and presumably thereafter, Maxy and his first wife Mela Brun-Maxy favoured modernist design, of course, and it’s no surprise that they kept and used some of the objects produced at the Academy. Others are now on display in the rather traditional Rebreanu and the much more modernist Minulescu memorial homes. We learn that some objects were in common use in the household of Maxy and his second wife, Mimi Şaraga-Maxy before being donated to the Brăila Museum. This is hardly a representative sample of places where such objects found homes, of course. But these few surviving items in domestic settings together with Chiriac’s incisive discussion of the sponsors, patrons, and clients of the Academy suggest a possible social history of taste and design in interwar Romania. We learn that the Academy’s Board included bankers, politicians, members of the Romanian Academy, and professors, while its main sponsor, Heinrich Fischer-Galaţi, was a wealthy industrialist, collector, and antiquarian with a strong interest in Esperanto. This private school then, a venue for modernist decorative art, was a capitalist, commercial venture and had the backing of establishment figures who favoured modernism and innovation.

Alexandra Chiriac’s work incites us to think through the whole enterprise of applied modernism in interwar Romania from the creative, pedagogical, and consumption angles. Modernism’s sponsorship, reception, and impact inasmuch as it resulted in commodities and a market was not limited to the small circle of its creators, many of them Jews, but was deeply intertwined with clients and patrons from among the country’s political, financial, and intellectual elites. This web of relationships is a fascinating world to re-imagine based on this consummate research, alongside the marginalised, almost forgotten figures and groups brought back into focus in Chiriac’s study.

# INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Magda Cârnelci observed that “the history of the Romanian arts in the interwar period is still to be written” and this statement remains true today in many respects.<sup>1</sup> The entity known as the “Romanian avant-garde” still inhabits a shifting and unstable terrain, its very designation a contested one: how Romanian and how avant-garde can it claim to be? In some ways, it might seem like it has by now attracted a fair amount of scholarship, as have the Jewish origins of its protagonists. These central figures have been discussed by Romanian scholars, and increasingly by international scholars, part of the growing movement towards expanding histories of modernism and the avant-garde. Yet the narrative that has emerged has focused on a small group of male artists who achieved success outside the boundaries of Eastern Europe, such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Iancu/Janco or Victor Brauner, and who could thus be more easily integrated within canonical accounts of the international avant-garde and “presented as a fragment of the global or universal art history... produced in the West,” to use the words of Piotr Piotrowski.<sup>2</sup> This book steers away from such well-known figures to uncover a series of vibrant and diverse avant-garde activities that occurred in Bucharest in the 1920s and early 1930s, as the city became a nexus for creative encounters and Jewish artistic networks. Furthermore, by focusing on the realms of design and performance, this book tells a story that is largely absent from other accounts of the avant-garde in Romania. It highlights not just visual artists and literary figures, but also design educators, arts patrons, and women entrepreneurs whose invisible labour, creative vision, and financial support brought the avant-garde into being.

To briefly summarise existing accounts of the interwar avant-garde in Romania, the nucleus of the Bucharest-based group is considered to have formed during the period 1922–1924, when two young artists returned from their studies abroad. Marcel Iancu had spent the previous decade in Zürich and Paris studying architecture, as well as being one of the founders of the Dada movement alongside Tristan Tzara. Max Herman Maxy had been in Berlin, studying painting with Arthur Segal, another Jewish-Romanian émigré, and exhibiting with Herwarth Walden’s gallery *Der Sturm* and with the *Novembergruppe*. They were joined by Hans Mattis-Teutsch, who was based in the Transylvanian city of Braşov and had studied in Vienna and Munich, and by Victor Brauner who had studied at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest and would eventually move to Paris, becoming a prominent Surrealist. Broadly speaking, accounts of the interwar avant-garde in Romania focus on these four figures in the

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<sup>1</sup> Magda Cârnelci, “O expoziție despre avangarda românească,” in *Bucharest in the 1920s and 1930s: Between Avant-Garde and Modernism*, ed. Magda Cârnelci (Bucureşti: Simetria, 1994), 11–17, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 25–26.

domain of fine arts and occasionally architecture, with several other figures joining them from the realm of literature for collaborations that resulted in the creation of a string of periodicals.

The first to appear, in 1922, was *Contimporanul* (The Contemporary), edited by poet Ion Vinea who as a teenager had collaborated on two symbolist publications with the equally youthful Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu, before their emigration to Switzerland. *Contimporanul* had a strong political agenda during its first two years of existence, frequently commenting on government policies, but from 1924 gave increasing prevalence to artistic matters, both national and international. Collaborating with the artists outlined above, it became the mouthpiece of the avant-garde and that same year it published its “Activist Manifesto to Youth,” considered the first interbellum avant-garde manifesto published in a Romanian context.<sup>3</sup> Also in 1924, the artistic group around *Contimporanul* organised the first international avant-garde exhibition in Bucharest, inviting colleagues from Poland, Hungary, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Yugoslavia and Sweden, as well as special guest Constantin Brancusi, to join them in exhibiting their work.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was organised by Vinea, Iancu and Maxy, but soon after the latter formed his own splinter group around the publication *Integral*, first published in March 1925. The publication’s subtitle, “A Review of Modern Synthesis,” and the very definition of Integralism provided by Maxy’s collaborator, writer Mihail Cosma, were characterised by eclecticism: “a scientific and objective synthesis of all the aesthetic pursuits we have witnessed so far (futurism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, etc.), all combined on constructivist foundations.”<sup>5</sup> *Integral*’s content was equally diverse, covering painting, graphic arts, film, theatre, and applied arts from Romania and abroad.

Other significant publications of this decade were *75HP*, *Punct* and *unu*. Although its first issue, published in 1924, was the only one, *75HP* became a defining moment for the Romanian avant-garde. Collaborators Victor Brauner and poet Ilarie Voronca created an innovative blend of word and image, which they named pictopoetry, and gave the magazine’s design equal importance to its contents, experimenting with lettering, language and typography. *Punct* (Full stop or Point), which ran for sixteen issues between 1924 and 1925, aligned itself with international constructivism and was edited by left-leaning writer Scarlat Callimachi. Its collaborators included many of the artists and writers already mentioned, emphasising the interconnectivity of the avant-garde in Romania. Although rivalries did occasionally spring up, such as that between Iancu and Maxy, the many short-lived ventures of the avant-garde included its core

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<sup>3</sup> Literary historian Paul Cernat calls this manifesto “the birth certificate of the autochthonous avant-garde.” See Paul Cernat, *Avangarda românească și complexul periferiei* (București: Cartea Românească, 2007), 146.

<sup>4</sup> See *Contimporanul*, no. 50–51 (30 November 1924).

<sup>5</sup> Mihail Cosma, “De vorbă cu Luigi Pirandello,” *Integral*, no. 8 (December 1925): 2–3.

members in one configuration or another. The decade ended with the publication of *unu* (“one” in lowercase characters, utilising the graphic potential of the Romanian word), which first appeared in 1928, edited by the writer Sașa Pană. Its focus was predominantly literary and its agenda experimental with a dose of mischievousness, on one occasion presenting its audience with an entirely blank number entitled *unu alb*, or “white *unu*.” It thus heralded the next generation of surrealist periodicals, which flourished in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

## The “Theoretical Mutability” of the Avant-Garde in Romania

This lively and diverse flowering of print periodicals has probably been the most closely studied aspect of the avant-garde in Romania, attracting a number of prominent literary historians, such as Ion Pop, Marin Mincu, and Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu (who wrote about it in connection to Jewish identity).<sup>7</sup> It is thus possible to trace the history of these magazines from the symbolist leanings of the pre-World War One period to the surrealist sympathies of the 1930s, through the artists that gathered around them and the programmatic writings and manifestos they included. More recently, although also a literary critic, Paul Cernat has produced a self-confessed attempt to evade “literature-centrism” by also examining the magazines through their attitudes to visual arts, theatre and film.<sup>8</sup> His account of the avant-garde is thus one of the most complex to date, incorporating a variety of art forms. Nonetheless, by focusing on the artistic groups that gathered around the printed periodicals Cernat follows a scholarly tradition that restricts the avant-garde in Romania to a central nucleus of artists and maps its trajectory according to the rise and fall of *Contimporanul*, *Integral*, and their competitors. Thus, Cernat’s own assessment is that the Romanian avant-garde was an “aesthetic avant-garde” that did not directly engage with the political, focusing instead on seeking new artistic expressions.<sup>9</sup> This not only overlooks activities such as the explicitly political revues of theatre-maker Iacob Sternberg, but it also fails to consider how a focus on international artistic trends could be construed as dissent, at a time when the arts were being called upon to reinforce a purely “Romanian”

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller account of Romanian avant-garde periodicals, see Shona Kallestrup, “‘Romania Is Being Built Today!’ Avant-Garde Journal Illustration 1912–1932,” *Centropa* 4, no. 1 (January 2004): 64–79; and Irina Livezeanu, “Romania: ‘Windows towards the West’. New Forms and the ‘Poetry of True Life,’” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. Peter Brooker et al., vol. III, Europe 1880–1940 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1157–1183.

<sup>7</sup> Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, *Evreii în mișcarea de avangardă românească* (București: Hasefer, 2001); Marin Mincu, *Avangarda literară românească* (Constanța: Pontica, 2006); Ion Pop, *Introducere în avangarda literară românească* (București: Institutul Cultural Român, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Cernat, *Avangarda românească*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.



national expression. The activities of the Academy of Decorative Arts, Bucharest's first modern design institution, were perhaps not overtly radical, but they did consciously deviate from a political agenda that rendered the applied arts markers of an expressly Romanian national identity embodied by folk and Orthodox religious art.

A similar interpretation has made its way into Western scholarship construing the preoccupations of the avant-garde in Romania as purely aesthetic, and positing that artists preferred to create composites of established international styles instead of engaging with national issues. Two influential surveys of modern art in Eastern Europe were published on either side of the historical cusp that marked the region's transition towards post-communism. In 1988, Krisztina Passuth's *Les Avant-Gardes de l'Europe Centrale* was probably the first international work of scholarship to broach the subject of the avant-garde in Romania in contemporary historiography, observing that Romania's cultural history during this period contained more lacunae than the other countries in her study.<sup>10</sup> Although Passuth's overall assessment was a positive one, she proposed a rather restrictive time period: Romania's avant-garde came of age and peaked between 1922 and 1925.<sup>11</sup> The following decade, in 1999, Steven Mansbach's study of *Modern Art in Eastern Europe* appeared.<sup>12</sup> Romania's artistic output was discussed more widely, beginning with the establishment of its art academies in the nineteenth century and encompassing a closer analysis of painting alongside that of print culture and little magazines. The avant-garde was judged to have flourished for a whole decade, from 1922 to 1932.<sup>13</sup> The work of Passuth and Mansbach reiterate some of the parameters that we have encountered so far and that, although somewhat questionable, have endured since, or rather have not been disputed by new evidence.

Firstly, there is the problem of location. Passuth posits that Romania's prominent avant-gardists flourished mainly abroad as was the case with Tristan Tzara or Arthur Segal, while Mansbach's overall thesis is that Romania's home gown avant-garde embraced "foreign" styles rather than creating a "national" artistic identity like other equivalent artistic groups in the region.<sup>14</sup> According to both of these scholars, the artists who remained or returned to Bucharest did not attain the same quality of work as their expatriate counterparts. For example, Maxy's painting output is described as struggling to reach the virtuosity of his Berlin master Segal, remaining "half-way between the figurative and the abstract," while Marcel Iancu's return to figuration in

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<sup>10</sup> Krisztina Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l'Europe Centrale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 209–210.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Mansbach first advanced this notion in a 1998 essay in which he argued that "Romania's modern art differs from that of other Balkan countries where modernism was a principal vehicle for the development and expression of national identity." See Steven Mansbach, "The 'Foreignness' of Classical Modern Art in Romania," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 3 (September 1998): 534–554, 534.

Bucharest is judged to have produced a “modest modernism” that lacked “the visual power and aesthetic challenge” of his earlier dadaist output.<sup>15</sup> These assessments lead to the second parameter, that of the programmatic ambiguity of the Romanian avant-garde becoming its Achilles’ heel. For Passuth, *Contimporanul* lost its cutting edge in 1925 when it became “eclectic,” while in Mansbach’s view *Integral*’s “fashioning of syncretic modernism... was self-contradictory and self-defeating.”<sup>16</sup> According to both scholars, the avant-garde in Romania ultimately failed by not elaborating “a unified and consistent philosophy,” although Passuth and Mansbach disagree on what caused this: too close an alignment with the tastes of Bucharest’s bourgeoisie or, on the contrary, a case of “aesthetic hermeticism.”<sup>17</sup> The use of *Contimporanul* and *Integral* as barometers point to the third and final parameter: the role of printed periodicals as the main primary source on the subject of the avant-garde in Romania and an emphasis on the dominance of printed matter rather than the visual and other arts as its most significant output.

In Romania, one of the first publications of the post-communist era to tackle the topic of the avant-garde in a detailed manner was the 1994 exhibition catalogue *Bucharest in the 1920s–1940s. Between Avant-Garde and Modernism* which took stock of the existing historiography.<sup>18</sup> The volume contained essays on architecture, music, literature, as well as the visual arts, thus providing a relatively rounded analysis of the phenomenon of the avant-garde in Romania’s capital. In the introduction, editor Magda Cârnelci referred to the lacunae existent in the Romanian-language bibliography of the subject, terming the latter “frugal.”<sup>19</sup> She observed that the subject of the avant-garde, which may seem familiar and even exhausted to a Western audience, has barely been touched upon in Romanian culture, aside from a small number of studies that focus largely on literary modernism. Her observation was borne out by the essay selected to provide an overview of the visual and applied arts, a text which was over a decade old, having been written by art historian Andrei Pintilie in 1982.<sup>20</sup> Pintilie’s article has aged well, however. Without falling into the trap of nationalist bathos, he gave due credit to early proponents of avant-gardism in Romania such as the writers Urmuz or Vinea and highlighted the little-known abstract wooden reliefs produced by Iancu in Zürich in synchronicity with the emergence of abstraction elsewhere in

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15 Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe Centrale*, 216; Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, 250.

16 Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe Centrale*, 213; Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, 262.

17 Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe Centrale*, 213; Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, 266.

18 Magda Cârnelci, ed., *Bucharest in the 1920s and 1930s. Between Avant-Garde and Modernism* (București: Simetria, 1994).

19 Cârnelci, “O expoziție despre avangarda românească,” 11.

20 Andrei Pintilie, “Considerații asupra mișcării de avangardă în plastica românească,” in *Bucharest in the 1920s and 1930s*, ed. Cârnelci, 27–37. The text was first published as Andrei Pintilie, “Considerations sur le mouvement roumain d’avant-garde,” *Revue roumaine d’histoire de l’art*, no. XXIV (1987): 49–58, and written in 1982, as revealed in a footnote.

Europe. Pintilie's notion of the avant-garde as an art historical concept was quite prescient, allowing for flexibility and change: "avant-gardism is a state of mind; ... it can acquire various particular forms that change according to events and people."<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Integralism's move away from a strict constructivism was construed as a positive development, an attempt to capture the evolving zeitgeist through its "diversity and... spontaneity."<sup>22</sup> In the same exhibition catalogue, Ioana VlasIU's contribution was rather more critical. Although she posited that the Romanian avant-garde demonstrated "an authentic creative impulse" that aligned them with their European peers, she qualified this with the remark that the Integralist movement remained "an unfinished project" that adopted constructivist principles in a selective manner and could never shake off its attachment to the figurative.<sup>23</sup>

This apparent ambiguity of the avant-garde in Romania continues to remain divisive in scholarship on the subject. In 2011, Erwin Kessler's contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Colours of the Avant-Garde. Romanian Art 1910–1950* was entitled "Retro-gardes," lamenting "the hybridization and compromising practices" of the art of this period.<sup>24</sup> Kessler interpreted the artistic practices of the avant-garde as surface endeavours that privileged the aesthetic in an attempt to capture the burgeoning local market for modernity.<sup>25</sup> Maxy and Iancu's endeavours to create outlets for modern applied arts and architecture on their return to Bucharest were characterised as a desire to be part of a "corporate aesthetics," while their changing pictorial vision was described as a downfall from the truly avant-garde towards a "common modernis[m]."<sup>26</sup> A more nuanced approach was taken by Shona Kallestrup in a 2006 monograph on Romanian art and design, analysing this phenomenon in the context of dissolving borders, both geographic and artistic. Kallestrup acknowledged that the vocabulary of the Romanian avant-garde tended towards notions of fusion, from Integralism itself to the experiments of Ilarie Voronca and Victor Brauner who merged painting and poetry in a new art form named pictopoetry.<sup>27</sup> This tendency towards a synthesis of different artistic movements and disciplines was defined by Kallestrup as being a particularity of Romanian modernism that, rather than being interpreted as a "theoretical mutability [that] demonstrated the weakness of the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ioana VlasIU, "Idei constructiviste în arta românească a anilor '20: Integralismul," in *Bucharest in the 1920s and 1930s*, ed. Cârnelci, 38–46, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Erwin Kessler, "Retro-Gardes," in *Colours of the Avant-Garde. Romanian Art 1910–1950*, ed. Erwin Kessler (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), 9–20, 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19.

<sup>27</sup> Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania 1866–1927. Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression* (Boulder; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 194.

Romanian avant-garde,” could be understood as a reaction to the country’s culturally diverse context.<sup>28</sup>

This book goes further, making a case for this synthesising or totalising aesthetic as a mark of true strength, often in the face of adversity: it reveals innovative artistic practices and vibrant collaborative experimentations that fluidly moved between media and across borders. The types of cultural production presented in the chapters that follow disrupt the criteria we have come to think of as defining avant-garde artistic practices, such as originality, individuality, aesthetic hermeticism, or national specificity. Performance, whether theatrical or otherwise, is repetitive, collaborative and frequently transnational. Likewise, design is collaborative, reproducible and apt to circulate. Furthermore, the book’s title and its contents purposely eschew the category of the “Romanian avant-garde,” which, although a common approach in existing scholarship, would sit uncomfortably with the findings discussed.<sup>29</sup> This shift in focus became apparent as the research progressed and several of its protagonists came to the fore. It was a welcome development that highlighted the extent to which histories of the Romanian and European avant-gardes can be selective in their narrative, neglecting artists or artworks that defy categorisation, be it national, disciplinary, or otherwise. Some of the artistic practitioners who come to the fore in this book have been neglected precisely due to nation-based scholarly frameworks that separate rather than connect. As the following chapter reveals, Andrei Vespremie was of Hungarian Jewish ethnicity, born in a Transylvania that belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, subsequently naturalised Romanian and later Latvian. Scholars of the Romanian avant-garde considered him Latvian and thus of limited interest, yet he was also invisible to experts on the Latvian avant-garde having settled into a teaching career in Riga’s Jewish schools during his time in the country. The same can be said of the Vilna Troupe, whose itinerant brand of experimental theatre has found no place in national narratives of avant-garde performance.<sup>30</sup>

## A Jewish Avant-Garde?

To what extent can Jewish identity function as a framework in this case? Tackling as it does the Bucharest-based avant-garde, most of this book concentrates on Jewish artists

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>29</sup> This is firstly due to the artists present in this book, who come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and locations, and secondly due to the shifting geographies of Romania and its neighbouring countries during their lifetimes, which frequently affected their nationalities and trajectories. Some were or became Romanian nationals, some were denied this status at certain points in their lives, and some were in Romania only temporarily.

<sup>30</sup> Debra Caplan, “Nomadic Chutzpah. The Vilna Troupe’s Transnational Yiddish Theatre Paradigm, 1915–1935,” *Theatre Survey* 55, no. 3 (September 2014): 296–317, 298.

and Jewish cultural production. For these artists, the consequences of their identity were perpetually present and could not be ignored. They were greatly impacted by Romania's territorial expansion in the aftermath of the First World War, when the regions of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia became part of the newly enlarged state, more than doubling its territories and its population.<sup>31</sup> The creation of Greater Romania was considered by many the pinnacle of a long process of emancipation from Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian forces, with the country finally free to pursue its own destiny. There was only one spanner in the works for those who sought to achieve cultural and social homogeneity across the new state: the new territories were an ethnic, linguistic, and religious melting pot.<sup>32</sup> It meant that almost one in three of the inhabitants of Greater Romania were not ethnic Romanians, and about 4% were Jews.<sup>33</sup>

The search for a national style in art, already an important part of the Romanian cultural sphere before the First World War, intensified in the years following the unification. This "authentic" Romanian cultural expression had to hinge on the values of Orthodoxy and rural life, thus excluding any hint of "dangerous" multiculturalism that could undermine the nation-state's new-found unity. The conservative critic and artist Horia Igiroșanu drew a clear separation between "our ploughmen's and shepherds' country, with vast and fertile plains" and those he considered "intruders in our fine arts... artists who do not have a country and do not understand [how] to have one."<sup>34</sup> As Radu Stern has observed: "the 'national specificity' was thought to be connected to the values of autochthonism, which idealized the Romanian national values as embodied by the peasant and contrasted them to the urban and decadent 'foreign' population... If only ethnic Romanians could create a 'national art,' it followed there was no hope in this field for Jewish artists."<sup>35</sup>

In recent years, an increasing number of historical and art historical studies have tackled antisemitism and nationalism in interwar Romania, so it is not my intention to provide a detailed analysis here.<sup>36</sup> In particular, Stern has written eloquently on

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**31** Romania's territories increased from 137,000 km<sup>2</sup> to 295,000 km<sup>2</sup> and its population from just over 7 million to about 18 million.

**32** According to the first comprehensive national census to be conducted post-war, in 1930, ethnic Romanians represented 71.9% of the country's population. The 1930 census counted the Jewish population as a distinct ethnic category alongside Hungarians, Germans, and so on, whereas some pre-war censuses in the region had used mother-tongue as a criteria for ethnicity. See Lucian Boia, *Cum s-a româniizat România* (București: Humanitas, 2015), 54 and 60.

**33** Lucian Boia, *Capcanele istoriei. Elita intelectuală românească între 1930 și 1950* (București: Humanitas, 2011), 53.

**34** Quoted and translated in Radu Stern, "Jews and the Avant-Garde. The Case of Romania," in *Jewish Aspects in Avant-Garde. Between Rebellion and Revelation*, ed. Mark H. Gelber and Sami Sjöberg (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 35–51, 46.

**35** Stern, "Jews and the Avant-Garde," 47–49.

**36** For an art historical and cultural perspective, see Cristina Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in*

this topic in relation to the avant-garde, showing how Maxy and Iancu were called “aliens to our land” in the Romanian cultural press, how Brauner’s art was described as a product of “dark foreignness,” and how Maxy was grotesquely caricatured dripping poisonous venom and “kosher paint” onto his canvases to make modern art.<sup>37</sup> As well as personal attacks, these artists also had to contend with antisemitic rhetoric and legislation affecting their everyday life. In the years after the unification, daily newspapers contained countless articles about the purported efforts of ethnic minorities to undermine Romania from within, with Jews in particular being linked to communism and the Soviet sphere of influence. Nationalist cultural policies determined the subsidies that Jewish performers could (or could not) obtain and the taxes they were required to pay, leading to financial struggles for theatre-makers such as the Vilna Troupe and Jacob Sternberg during their time in Romania.<sup>38</sup> Citizenship laws for Jews changed several times during the lifespan of the avant-garde: although born in Romania, Iancu and Maxy had to apply to be naturalised on two different occasions: in 1923, when the new constitution made it possible for ethnic minorities to become Romanian nationals, and in 1938 when antisemitic legislation came into effect leading to over 200,000 Jews being deprived of their constitutional rights.<sup>39</sup> In the early 1940s, as Romania grew closer to Nazi Germany and eventually became its ally, further laws led to the rights of Jews being severely curtailed, with Jewish artists being excluded from art institutions and theatres across the country.<sup>40</sup>

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*Interwar Romania. The Criterion Association* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Lucian Boia, Monica Enache, and Valentina Iancu, eds., *Mitul național. Contribuția artelor la definirea identității românești* (București: Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2012); Monica Enache and Valentina Iancu, eds., *Destine la răscruce. Artiști evrei în perioada Holocaustului/ Crossroads. Jewish Artists During the Holocaust* (București: Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2010); Radu Stern and Edward van Voolen, eds., *Jewish Avant-Garde Artists from Romania 1910–1938. From Dada to Surrealism* (Amsterdam: Jewish Historical Museum, 2011). Historical studies on the topic include, but are not limited to: Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth. Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Anca Filipovici and Attila Gidó, eds., *Trecutul prezent. Evreii din România. Istorie, memorie, reprezentare* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2018); Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România 1919–1938. De la emancipare la marginalizare* (București: Hasefer, 2000); Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania. Regionalism, Nation Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

37 Stern, “Jews and the Avant-Garde,” 46–48.

38 As the historian Irina Livezeanu has shown, interwar cultural policies were often focused on Romanianising areas inhabited by minority groups. See Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*.

39 Enache and Iancu, eds., *Destine la răscruce*, 23. See also Stern, “Jews and the Avant-Garde,” 43. Stern also points out that Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu, now hailed as the Dadaist founders of the “Romanian avant-garde,” were not in fact permitted to have Romanian citizenship at the time of their involvement with the Zürich Dada group.

40 During the Holocaust, between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews were murdered in Romanian-controlled territories. This occurred mainly in Bukovina and Bessarabia and during deportations to Transnistria.

That is not to say however that during the 1920s and early 1930s, the period covered by this book, the cultural battle lines were homogeneously drawn. Modernist architecture was embraced by many ethnic Romanian practitioners, including Horia Creangă, grandson of emblematic writer of rural Romania Ion Creangă. Yiddish theatre had many non-Jewish supporters, from poet Tudor Arghezi to music hall impresario Constantin Tănase. The avant-garde had a staunch supporter in the poet Ion Minulescu, who was also Minister for Culture during the period 1922 to 1940. Furthermore, the avant-garde artists themselves varied widely in their political sensibilities and their commitment to Judaism: the financial backer of the periodical *Integral*, A. L. Zissu, was a staunch Zionist; Tristan Tzara and Arthur Segal were non-observant; Iancu married a gentile but chose to emigrate to Palestine when the opportunity arose and actively raised awareness of antisemitism in the pages of *Contimporanul*. As Irina Livezeanu has shown, the proliferation of new avant-garde periodicals in the 1920s in Bucharest stemmed from the frequent disagreements that led to the forming and reforming of splinter artistic groups. When Marinetti visited Bucharest in 1930, the *Contimporanul* group welcomed him and organised his itinerary, while the editors of *unu* chose not to attend the events organised for “Mussolini’s academician,” as they called him.<sup>41</sup>

What then is Jewish about the Bucharest avant-garde? Stern believes there is little specifically Jewish content in the work of avant-garde artists in Romania, at least until the 1940s when both Maxy and Iancu depicted the plight of Jews under Romania’s right-wing regimes.<sup>42</sup> However, as this book reveals through overlooked sources and objects, that is not entirely the case. Together with the designer and pedagogue Andrei Vespremie, Maxy undertook commissions from Jewish patrons that included religious objects and imagery, while in the theatrical realm Maxy transposed the work of prominent Jewish writers, as well as the story of Shabetai Tsevi, a key figure in the Jewish imaginary, to the stage. In particular, the (re)incorporation of Yiddish theatre as an important means of expression for the avant-garde in Bucharest makes evident their interest in exploring their Jewish identity. In the case of someone like Jacob Sternberg, the experimental theatre-maker who, as this book posits, deserves a prominent place within the ranks of the avant-garde in Romania, providing a platform for Jewish cultural expression was a veritable *raison d’être*.

Further to such outputs that explicitly engaged with Jewish identity, another important finding that emerged from the research for this book is the extent to which

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In Bucharest, there was a pogrom in January 1941: Jewish homes and businesses were looted and vandalised and 125 Jews were murdered, including Marcel Iancu’s brother-in-law. See Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, Mihail E. Ionescu, eds., *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (Bucureşti: Polirom, 2004), and Stern and van Voolen, eds., *Jewish Avant-Garde Artists*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Irina Livezeanu, “Romania: ‘Windows towards the West,’” 1181.

<sup>42</sup> Stern, “Jews and the Avant-Garde,” 37.

transnational Jewish networks were at play in the development of modernism in Bucharest. Jewish artists, patrons, performers, and pedagogues from Romania and abroad were connected by visible and invisible links that made a wide range of experimental activities possible. Both Maxy and Vespremie trained with Jewish arts professionals in Berlin, Jewish patrons supported their work in Bucharest, and both went on to teach in Jewish schools later in life.<sup>43</sup> Maxy's access to the Parisian avant-garde and encounters with the work of Jewish artists such as Sonia Delaunay were mediated by Tristan Tzara. When setting up her experimental theatre in Bucharest in 1927, actor Dida Solomon chose to work with a team of Jewish stage designers and theatre directors that included Iancu, Maxy, Sternberg and Sandu Eliad. The Vilna Troupe's world-wide success was of course based on these transnational networks, while local Jewish theatre initiatives in Eastern Europe also benefitted from the knowledge transfers produced when actors and directors moved from one company or one location to another.

At the same time, this book wishes to avoid making sweeping statements about the identity or self-identification of its protagonists. To imply that the output of these Jewish artists was unified in its "foreignness," as Mansbach has done for example, is to ignore both their varied social and political engagement with the local context and their myriad artistic visions, as this book demonstrates.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in the case of many of them there is not sufficient information at present to allow us to understand their perception of themselves and their own situation.<sup>45</sup> We do not know how Andrei Vespremie felt on becoming a citizen of Greater Romania or what determined him to subsequently move to Latvia. The accounts of Joseph Buloff, the Vilna Troupe actor, about his time in Romania are overtly positive. The arts patron Heinrich Fischer-Galați was seemingly well-integrated within the circles of the Romanian royalty and aristocracy, who lent him works for the exhibitions he organised, at the same time as being a vocal proponent of the transnational language of Esperanto.<sup>46</sup> As the

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**43** It should be specified however that Maxy taught in a Jewish school as a consequence of the antisemitic legislation that led to the expulsion of Jewish artists from Romanian arts institutions and the creation of an arts school for Jewish students by the Bucharest Jewish community.

**44** Mansbach, "The 'Foreignness' of Classical Modern Art in Romania."

**45** Some recent publications have tackled the issue of identity with respect to more prominent members of the avant-garde such as Iancu and Tzara. See for example Alexandru Bar, "The Transformation of Tristan Tzara's and Marcel Janco's National Identity," *Judaica Petropolitana* no. 10 (2018): 134–153; Amelia Miholca, "Between Zurich and Romania. A Dada Exchange," in *Narratives Crossing Borders: The Dynamics of Cultural Interaction*, ed. H. Jonsson et al. (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2021), 123–144. There is also a comprehensive biography of Tzara: Marius Hentea, *TaTa Dada. The Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

**46** He established the Federation of Romanian Esperanto Societies and participated in many international Esperanto conventions. To this activity he also owed his life: when in peril during the Second World War due to his Jewish origins, he managed to escape Romania together with his wife and to relocate to Switzerland with help from the Esperanto community. He died there in poverty in



historian Roland Clark has argued, while excavating Romania's difficult histories is a crucial task for researchers at present, we also need to understand "how people were able to live and sometimes thrive in a society as diverse as interwar Romania undeniably was."<sup>47</sup> This book is therefore only a first step in recuperating some of these art practitioners and artistic activities and an attempt to gather, in as much as possible, factual information that future scholarship may build upon.

## **Design, Performance and the Bucharest Avant-Garde**

The starting point for this book was an investigation into how modernism manifested itself in the realms of design and performance in Bucharest, expanding the field of enquiry into the avant-garde outside two-dimensional production. I began by focusing on Max Herman Maxy (1895–1971) as a case study due to his engagement in a wide breadth of artistic activities, more so than most other artists associated with the nucleus of the Bucharest avant-garde. He produced an avant-garde publication, collaborated with an institution for applied arts education and commercialised his own designs, produced advertising graphics and designed for the theatrical stage on numerous occasions. These diverse activities are rarely discussed in detail in existing scholarship, despite Maxy's prominent place in the history of twentieth century Romanian art. Born in a Jewish family in the port city of Brăila in 1895, Maxy studied at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest until the outbreak of the First World War. During the war he served in the Romanian army and took the opportunity to participate in his first group exhibition in 1918 in Iași, the city where the Romanian Army Headquarters were located. Back in Bucharest, he continued to exhibit his work and had his first personal exhibition in 1920. The following year he met Ana-Melania Brun, known as Mela, who became his wife. Together they travelled to Berlin where Maxy studied with Arthur Segal and familiarised himself with new artistic trends. This book examines his activities after his return to Bucharest in 1922, when he became one of the central figures of the local avant-garde, while at the same time challenging his centrality to avant-garde narratives. As I discovered, much of what is known about the avant-garde in Bucharest has been filtered through Maxy's watchful gaze. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Maxy became the director of the Romanian National Art Museum, which was inaugurated in 1950 during the communist regime. He led the museum until his death in 1971, thus not only being a participant in the history of Romanian art but also a shaping force in its narrative. A controversial figure, Maxy is thus ever-

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1960 and it is not known what happened to his impressive graphic art collection, which may have been expropriated in the early 1940s before he left Romania.

<sup>47</sup> Roland Clark, "The Shape of Interwar Romanian History," *Journal of Romanian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 11–42, 13.

present in discussions of Romanian art, engendering both approval and opprobrium. This book focuses on two of Maxy's activities: his contribution to modern design in Romania through his collaboration with a private venture named the Academy of Decorative Arts (*Academia de Arte Decorative*) and his activity as a stage designer. Both of these aspects are briefly mentioned in scholarship on the Romanian avant-garde, but the details are seldom sketched in. Recently, Irina Cărăbaș's essay "The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art" dedicated a section to the Academy and its output, but concluded that the institution had left too few traces for a more detailed analysis.<sup>48</sup> With regards to Maxy's theatrical collaborations, the existing information is even scarcer, with dates and names of plays sometimes differing between publications, but accompanied by tantalising illustrations of sketches from museum collections.<sup>49</sup> I thus focused on following these two trails—design and theatre—eventually unearthing several diverse, vibrant and intriguing facets of Bucharest's avant-garde.

Yet, while Maxy is a conduit for the narrative of this study, he is rarely its main protagonist. If anything, he occasionally becomes the antagonist, as his propensity for self-mythologising leads to some uneasy revelations. Many of the claims he made regarding his status as innovator do not stand up to archival scrutiny.<sup>50</sup> Instead, a number of neglected figures make their way to the fore, expanding the ranks of Bucharest's avant-garde. The first half of the book recovers the history of the Academy of Decorative Arts and of its founder, Andrei Vespremie, a pedagogue and designer of Jewish Hungarian origin, who worked in Berlin, Bucharest and Riga, and whose contribution to the avant-garde in Romania has been heretofore overlooked. Through newly uncovered archival material, this study demonstrates that Maxy and his narrative of a Bauhaus connection were far less influential than previously thought in the creation of the Academy and its diverse curriculum. Instead, the Academy was established by Vespremie based on the curriculum of the *Schule Reimann*, an innovative Berlin institution specialising in commercial applied arts and design. By

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**48** Irina Cărăbaș, "The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art," in *Dis(Continuities). Fragments of Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 101–142, 128. There is also a brief account of the Academy's activities in Roland Prügel, *Im Zeichen der Stadt. Avantgarde in Rumänien* (Köln: Böhlau, 2008), 76–79.

**49** See for example Magda Cârnelci, ed., *Rădăcini și ecouri ale avangardei în colecțiile de grafică ale Bibliotecii Academiei Române* (București: Academia Română, 2011); Michael Ilk, *Maxy. Der integrale Künstler* (Ludwigshafen: Michael Ilk, 2003).

**50** While my findings refer mostly to the period between 1924 and 1934, it seems that Maxy made a habit of overstating his achievements. For example, Irina Cărăbaș has found that although Maxy is often thought to be the first director of the Romanian National Art Museum documents show that art historian George Oprescu occupied this function during the entire preparation phase, before the Museum opened its doors to the public. See Irina Cărăbaș, *Realismul socialist cu fața spre trecut. Instituții și artiști în România: 1944–1953* (Cluj-Napoca: Ideea, 2017), 135.

delving further into the workshops of the Academy and the objects produced there, the work of Vespremie and Maxy can be untangled, showing the former as a decisive influence on the latter. The importance of Vespremie as a pedagogue and designer in this field can no longer be underestimated, especially as the emergence of formerly misattributed works signals the extent to which his reputation was suppressed by that of Maxy.

Furthermore, the commercial undertakings of the Academy are explored, examining the use of graphics to create a visual identity, the interest in window displays and show interiors and the opening of its commercial space under the directorship of Mela Brun-Maxy. Her contribution has long been subsumed to that of her husband even though, as well as funding and managing this commercial venture, she played an important part in creating the displays themselves. Under Brun-Maxy's leadership, the Academy's showroom came to embody the modernist aesthetics of Bucharest's cosmopolitan vanguard. The objects on display resisted the pressure to adopt the historicist national style intended to soothe social anxieties within the changing landscape of post-First World War Romania. Many of the Academy's clients and supporters were Jewish entrepreneurs, whose cultural influence has suffered a two-fold erasure over the past one hundred years. Both their "bourgeois" collecting practices, and their instrumental contribution to urban modernity in Romania have been suppressed in favour of a national narrative that has championed the folk art of an archetypal "Romanian peasant."

The second part of this book explores the realm of theatre. Following the path of Maxy's on-stage artistic partnerships, it highlights a number of innovative practitioners whose contribution to avant-garde performance in Romania has not been sufficiently explored. In particular, this study examines the experimental productions of the celebrated Yiddish theatre group the Vilna Troupe, zoning in on the ensemble's formative time in Romania between 1923 and 1927. Making use of newly uncovered archival material, several performances are reconstructed and examined, revealing the changing nature of the collaboration as well as the practical application of Maxy's ideas regarding modern artistic developments. The manipulation of actors' bodies, the multi-functional sets, the flat backdrops with cubist shapes, and the three-dimensional spaces with echoes of modernist design are just some of the elements that align these productions with contemporary developments in stage design and performance across Europe. Moreover, the integration of signifiers of urban contemporaneity, from the shop window to the cinema screen, reveals a sophisticated understanding of avant-garde artistic practices, blurring the boundaries between modern life, modern commerce, and the theatrical stage.

After the departure of the Vilna Troupe, it is actor and theatre-owner Dida Solomon who takes centre stage. She very seldom appears in accounts of the Romanian avant-garde, even though she was a participant in the 1924 *Contemporanul* exhibition and a regular contributor to vanguard periodicals. Although a full account of her career is beyond the scope of the present work, her theatrical entrepreneurship is examined

through the case study of the short-lived Caragiale Theatre of 1927, a truly avant-garde local initiative. The book's final protagonist is Jacob Sternberg, shown to be an innovative and influential maker of theatre, whose connection to the Yiddish stage and revue theatre has probably impeded the recognition he deserves as an important contributor to the avant-garde. Sternberg's projects of the early 1930s, some of which were designed by Maxy, built upon the experimentation of the Vilna Troupe, taking avant-garde theatre in Bucharest to new heights. His multi-disciplinary productions incorporated choreography and movement, lighting, specially composed music and cinematic framings. Furthermore, his work in revue theatre was imbued with social and political commentary at a troubling time for Europe and its Jewish population.

The shifting geographical and disciplinary terrain of this study has brought a number of challenges. In particular, fleshing out these artists, their outputs and their journeys has been frustrating and rewarding in equal measures. The vagaries of the communist regime and its effect on research and preservation, as well as the lack of dedicated museum spaces for modern design and performance in Romania have contributed to a scarcity of relevant material in national collections. My search for artworks and archival materials thus evolved in surprising ways and would deserve a chapter in itself, such as the chance encounter with Vespremie's own hallmark on an erroneously catalogued metal dish in the memorial house of writer Ion Minulescu, or the discovery of Maxy's grinning face amidst Harvard Library's collection of photographs, as part of a Jewish theatrical archive. Some of the most important materials for this study came from disparate corners of the world: the Latvian State Historical Archives, Harvard's Widener Library and its Judaica Division, the Staatsbibliothek and the Humboldt Library in Berlin, the Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania and the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, as well as private collections. Amongst Romanian state institutions, I made use of the Romanian National Art Museum, the Brăila Museum, the Romanian Academy Library, the Central University Library, the National Romanian Archives, the Bucharest National Theatre, the Romanian Institute for Art History, and the National Museum of Romanian Literature. Nonetheless, some questions remain unanswered at present, and some objects remain lost or missing, while the ephemerality of the theatrical arts raises difficulties when attempting to flesh out performances that occurred nearly a century ago, some of which completely lack visual material. Furthermore, witnesses to the events presented here who have left behind written testimonies prove to be unreliable more often than not. Yet despite these theoretical and practical challenges, I posit that recovering such narratives is a task worth undertaking and one that may ultimately open the door towards a more inclusive understanding of the avant-garde in Romania and elsewhere.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Romanian, German, and French are my own. Titles of plays, theatrical troupes, institutions or artistic groups, and works of art have been translated into English, while titles of journals and newspapers have been left in the original language. When titles are in Yiddish, the

Romanian transliteration of the period has been preserved, as employed by the artists themselves. When several variants exist, the selection made is explained within the footnotes. Likewise, the spelling of names is preserved as used by the artists themselves in Romanian publications and documents of the period i.e. Marcel Iancu not Marcel Janco; Iacob Sternberg, not Yankev Shternberg. Biographical notes for the main figures discussed are available at the end of this book, alongside a series of appendices that contain first-time English translations of several documents discussed in the following chapters. Finally, footnote references are given in full on first use in each chapter, and in abbreviated form subsequently.

# MYTH, MAKING AND MODERNITY: VESPREMIE, MAXY AND THE ACADEMY OF DECORATIVE ARTS

Frequently labelled an outpost of the Bauhaus in Bucharest, the Academy of Decorative Arts (Academia de Arte Decorative) has been credited with introducing modern applied arts to the city's inhabitants through its educational and commercial activities. Led by a young designer named Andrei Vespremie and financed by the philanthropist Heinrich Fischer-Galați, it opened in 1924 offering classes in a number of applied and visual arts disciplines including metalwork, ivory carving, bookbinding, drawing and sculpture. In 1926 the Academy expanded its educational programme to include contemporary offerings such as advertising and interior design and opened a permanent exhibition space where a wide range of items, some produced in its own workshops, were displayed for sale. This expansion occurred with the aid of Mela Brun-Maxy and Max Herman Maxy who joined the institution at this time (Fig. 1). The following year Vespremie left Romania for Latvia and Maxy became the Academy's figurehead until its dissolution in 1929.



**Fig. 1:** Staff and apprentices of the Academy of Decorative Arts, October 1926. Middle row, third from left: Mela Brun-Maxy, then Andrei Vespremie with three-year old Liana Maxy, and M. H. Maxy. Romanian National Art Museum.

Despite its short lifespan, the Academy has achieved a kind of mythical status in scholarship on the avant-garde in Romania. One of the rare applied arts initiatives that veered away from the national style, its association with prominent members of the avant-garde and its presence in a number of avant-garde periodicals, coupled with a lack of available archival material, has meant that while it has garnered many mentions in academic literature, these have been invariably riddled with inaccuracies. The following three chapters chart the development of the Academy with much more precision than was previously thought possible, challenging some of its most pervasive myths.

## Teaching and Exhibiting the Decorative Arts in Bucharest: Some Precedents

A private endeavour, the Academy filled a gap in the teaching and displaying of modern applied arts in Bucharest that state-sanctioned institutions had not been able to tackle successfully. The decorative arts became part of official artistic education in Bucharest in 1904 when they were added as a discipline to the curriculum of the state School of Fine Arts, at the same time as the department of architecture became its own separate School.<sup>1</sup> The Paris-trained architect George Sterian was appointed to teach the decorative arts class having had experience in designing furniture, carpets and other applied art objects. In 1906, he was joined by Costin Petrescu, another architect by training, whose specialty was mural painting. Given the prominence of mural decoration in Romanian art prior to the modern period and its link to the Orthodox faith, this was seen as an important branch of the decorative arts that would assure continuity with local artistic traditions. Altogether, the new decorative arts section focused on designing rather than making, with students learning the principles of decoration and creating designs for textiles, murals, stained glass, and more contemporary items such as posters.<sup>2</sup> The decorative arts section expanded further in 1916, when Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck was appointed to teach the discipline within the women's section of the school, who since their admission to the School of Fine Arts in 1895 had attended classes separately from their male peers. A committed pedagogue and forward-thinker, Cuțescu-Storck advanced a memorandum to the Ministry of Arts in 1926, requesting a closer link between the teaching of the decorative arts and their

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of the history of the Bucharest School of Fine Arts see Raoul Șorban, ed., *100 de ani de la înființarea Institutului de Arte Plastice "Nicolae Grigorescu" din București* (București: Meridiane, 1964) and Ioana Beldiman, Nadia Ioan Ficiu, and Oana Marinache, *De la Școala de Belle-Arte la Academia de Arte Frumoase. Artiști la București 1864–1948* (București: UNArte, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Șorban, ed., *100 de ani*, 56–58.

application in industry and bemoaning the lack of graphic design and scenography in the curriculum of the School of Fine Arts, amongst other things.<sup>3</sup>

The limited range and lack of modernity of the curriculum were not the only deficient aspects of state-provided education in the decorative arts. The workshop component had a difficult relationship with the School itself throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. In its first two years of existence, the course only had a classroom component as described above, but in 1906, to ensure a more rounded education, Sterian succeeded in adding a number of workshops where the designs could be realised. The division between the workshops and the design section was nonetheless marked from the very beginning: the former was staffed by female apprentices from several trade schools who were to craft the design projects of the students. Furthermore, working conditions in the workshops were inadequate, leading Sterian to complain to the authorities the following year about the lack of light and space.<sup>4</sup> By 1908, a new entity was created under the directorship of Sterian and the umbrella of the School of Fine Arts, as well as the patronage of Crown Princess Marie, entitled the School of National and Decorative Arts where female students and apprentices were enrolled.<sup>5</sup> This initiative drew the attention of French designer and pedagogue Eugène Grasset who published an account of the “Domnita Maria” school in *Art et Décoration*. He described how after a joint three-year programme that included drawing and painting, anatomy, perspective, art history and so on, offering the basics of an artistic education, some students continued on to the School of Fine Arts, while others joined the workshops of the School of National and Decorative Arts where they produced works based on the Romanian vernacular style.<sup>6</sup> Two decades later, these workshops were still the domain of female apprentices who were not students of the School of National and Decorative Arts itself, but who gained a practical education in textile-based crafts, such as carpet-making, weaving, and embroidery. They worked to order, using designs provided by the School’s students, but it is not certain whether they received any remuneration for this. An internal document from 1928 reveals that the workshops had no real pedagogical programme, offering essentially the same training as an apprenticeship in a trade school or private workshop, and that there

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3 Ibid., 77.

4 Ibid., 67.

5 Ibid., 58. The main decorative arts section continued to function as part of the School of Fine Arts for the male students, focusing on object design and mural decoration. The divisions between Sterian’s two initiatives is difficult to disentangle and has given rise to some confusion in scholarly accounts, further compounded by the fact that the new institution’s association with Crown Princess Marie could not be referenced in Şorban, ed., *100 de ani*, which was published during the communist regime.

6 Eugène Grasset, “L’École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs de Bucarest Domnita Maria,” *Art et Décoration* XXIII, no. 1 (January–June 1908), 125–132.



were no entry requirements. Despite the concerns raised, the workshops continued in this manner until they were eventually closed in 1934.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of state support, the modern applied arts also encountered setbacks within the project of the Romanian National Museum which had been under development since 1906 under the directorship of Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaş. Planned as a repository for Romanian art through the ages, the institution was to be originally named the Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative and Industrial Art and was to be located adjacent to the School of Fine Arts, so that it may provide continuity with contemporary practices. However, according to Tzigara-Samurçaş himself, the Museum's title was successively reduced because "national art included all the others."<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the collections focused only on ecclesiastical and ethnographic art, privileging the country's past traditions rather than its ensuing modernity. Furthermore, as Iulia Pohrib has shown, the discourse changed even further in the light of Greater Romania's newly acquired ethnic diversity:

At the start the National Museum was meant to show 'all native art'; it gathered the artistic productions created on territories inhabited by Romanians and referred to any object that showed the country's culture and civilization. In 1925, in [Tzigara-Samurçaş's] *L'Art du peuple roumain*, the distinction between the art of Romania and the art of the Romanian people appeared for the first time. The former stood for the art of the populations that inhabited or passed through the land defined by the political borders of the Nation-State, whereas the latter was the one made by the people—the peasants, and that was 'the only one that can be called national art.'<sup>9</sup>

The new National Museum thus rejected modernity, urbanity, and cultural diversity, furthermore equating Romanian "national" art with rural art.<sup>10</sup> This policy was applied internationally as well, through travelling exhibitions that focused on

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<sup>7</sup> Şorban, ed., *100 de ani*, 77, 148–149.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaş, *Scrieri despre arta românească* (Bucureşti: Meridiane, 1987), 163. This is a volume of collected writings and the text quoted was originally printed in 1936 in a volume entitled *Muzeografie românească*.

<sup>9</sup> Iulia Pohrib, "Tradition and Ethnographic Display: Defining the National Specificity at the National Art Museum in Romania (1906–1937)," in *Great Narratives of the Past. Traditions and Revisions in National Museums*, vol. 4 (EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Paris: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2011), 317–329, <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/078/020/ecp12078020.pdf>, accessed 7 April 2016, quoting Alexandru Tzigara-Samurçaş, *L'Art du peuple roumain*, exh. cat. (Genève: Musée Rath, 1925).

<sup>10</sup> This has remained the accepted museographic stance even today, with Romanian decorative arts generally equated with folk arts and modern applied arts being comparatively rarely exhibited. Tzigara-Samurçaş's institution is now the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Furthermore, this is reflected in the classifications of items within the national heritage database: Maxy's carpets are classed as "ethnography" rather than "decorative art" as per his other design objects. See the online database for Mobile Cultural Objects Listed in the National Cultural Heritage, accessed 16 May 2019, <http://clasate.cimec.ro/Clasate.asp>.

religious and folk art. Most famously, Romania did not participate in the 1925 Paris International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, choosing instead to curate its own display, the Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Romanian Art (*L'Exposition de l'art roumain ancien et moderne*), whose decorative arts segment was entirely composed of ecclesiastic and ethnographic exhibits.<sup>11</sup> Shona Kallestrup has shown how Tzigara-Samurcaș's rhetoric around this exhibition and a further one organised that same year in Geneva used art historical analysis of ethnographic objects to support Romania's claim to its newly adjoined territories.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the catalogue text of the Romanian exhibition in Paris described cubism as an "anarchism of essentially Slavic quality" that did not match "the spirit of the Romanian people."<sup>13</sup> A thinly veiled reference to the Jewish artists of the avant-garde, this statement reflected the post-unification rhetoric that associated Jews from the new territories with Bolshevism, further fuelling antisemitic attitudes.<sup>14</sup> It was thus in this context, where modern applied arts were viewed with suspicion and had not found state-sanctioned support and an adequate pedagogical infrastructure, that the Academy of Decorative Arts emerged as a result of a private initiative.

## The Academy of Decorative Arts and its Beginnings

The Academy's history has proven difficult to recover, as it has left few traces in Romanian archives. A brief account of its activities was recently compiled by Irina Cărăbaș who found that Fischer-Galați, the Academy's founding patron, did not give any details of the venture in an interview he gave in 1924, the year the school was established.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, only one art critic wrote about the institution in its early days, in an article published in October 1924 in the magazine *Ideea europeană*. The author, Ștefan I. Nenițescu, welcomed this venture although he found it small by Western standards, "a workshop," but a sign of progress nonetheless for modern

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**11** The exhibition was held at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris from May to August 1925.

**12** Shona Kallestrup, "Problematizing Periodization. Folk Art, National Narratives and Cultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Romanian Art History," in *Periodization in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Shona Kallestrup et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 2022).

**13** Jean Cantacuzène, "La Peinture Moderne," in *Exposition de l'art roumain ancien et moderne. Catalogue des œuvres exposées*, exh. cat. (Paris: Georges Petit, 1925), 63–77, 77.

**14** The year before, an article about Victor Brauner in *Contimporanul* revealed the scurrilous rumors that circulated about the artist being an agent of Soviet Union. See "Expoziția Victor Brauner," *Contimporanul*, no. 49 (November 1924): 6.

**15** Irina Cărăbaș, "The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art," in *Dis(Continuities). Fragments of Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 101–142, 127.

decorative arts in Bucharest.<sup>16</sup> The director of the newly formed Academy was named as Andrei Vespremie (1898–1943/4), and his technical skill in metalwork and bookbinding was praised by Nenițescu. In January 1925, the school was also mentioned in the avant-garde magazine *Contimporanul*. A brief unsigned article ascribed the Academy to the new current for bringing art into everyday life, which in Western countries had already led to collaborations between artists and industry. Before this stage could be reached in Romania, “the basis of the new elements” must first be established in schools and workshops like the welcome new venture of Fischer-Galați and Vespremie.<sup>17</sup>

Heinrich Fischer-Galați (1879–1960) was already a well-known philanthropist and collector of works on paper at this time. While his father, Max Fischer, had founded a shoe polish and metal packaging factory in Romania in the late nineteenth century, Fischer-Galați, although an industrialist himself involved in the family business, was more interested in fostering a variety of cultural initiatives. In 1916, he had created the Graphica society with the self-confessed goal of encouraging and popularizing the techniques of etching, engraving, and lithography in Romania. This was done both through exhibitions and through limited edition portfolios available for sale, in the hope that public tastes could be moulded to appreciate the graphic arts. As part of the society’s activities, Fischer-Galați organized Bucharest’s first comprehensive international exhibition of works on paper in 1916. Entitled *The First Retrospective Exhibition of the Art of Engraving from the Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century* (Prima expoziție retrospectivă de arta gravurei din secolul XV până în secolul XX), it contained over 600 engravings, woodcuts, and lithographs by artists from Albrecht Dürer to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Käthe Kollwitz to Hokusai.<sup>18</sup> To achieve this, he gained the support of numerous local collectors, including Romanian politicians and members of the royal family. Nonetheless, Fischer-Galați’s own collection was more comprehensive than most, containing around 15,000 volumes and 4,000 works on paper, as he revealed in a newspaper interview in 1927.<sup>19</sup>

In 1923, one year before the Academy opened, he created the Romanian Bibliophile Society, also known as *Bibliofila*. He expanded his activities into publishing and opened a bookshop in Bucharest where visitors could admire well-crafted books from Romania and abroad. In an interview in 1927, Fischer-Galați emphasised the democratic intentions of the space, which stocked not just luxurious editions for bibliophiles, but also new and inexpensive books for all interests and

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<sup>16</sup> Ștefan I. Nenițescu, “Arta decorativă,” in *Scrieri de istoria artei și de critică plastică*, ed. Adina Nanu (București: Institutul Cultural Român, 2008), 129–130. The article was originally published in *Ideea europeană*, 19–26 October 1924.

<sup>17</sup> “Academia de Arte Decorative,” *Contimporanul*, no. 52 (January 1925): 7.

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition catalogue is part of the Fischer-Galați donation, dossier no. 768, fond Saint Georges, at the Romanian National Library.

<sup>19</sup> Ion Vițianu, “O oră de vorbă cu dirigitorul Bibliofilei H. Fischer-Galați,” *Clipa*, 23 October 1927.

incomes.<sup>20</sup> In order to attract and educate as wide an audience as possible, Bibliofila sold colour reproductions of famous artworks alongside more expensive signed prints and works on paper. The reproductions and graphic works exhibited here were by Old Masters such as Rembrandt, Dürer, or Titian, but also included modern art by Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Vincent van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Franz Marc. While some were available in Romania through black and white reproductions in magazines, Fischer-Galați obtained reproductions that used new and highly accurate colour printing techniques, making these works much more vividly accessible. In order to do this, he collaborated with Florence's Fratelli Alinari photography atelier and with the Marée bibliophile society from Munich, the latter led by Julius Meier-Graefe, an art critic with East European Jewish roots.<sup>21</sup> Fischer-Galați thus contributed to the spread of modern artistic ideas in Bucharest and it is not surprising, in the light of these activities, that he extended his financial support to the Academy of Decorative Arts. The Academy offered everyone the opportunity to engage in making art and design objects through its workshops, and furthermore had a strong bibliophile component that must have attracted Fischer-Galați. Andrei Vespremie, the school's director, had specialised in both graphic arts and bookbinding during his education at the Reimann School in Berlin, and it is possible that Fischer-Galați financially supported his studies abroad.

Receiving the directorship of this new and exciting institution was a promising start for Vespremie, so it is unfortunate that his career in Bucharest became subsequently eclipsed by that of Maxy. For Romanian scholars, Maxy has long been one of the most prominent members of the Bucharest avant-garde, and his subsequent directorship of the Romanian National Art Museum from 1950 to his death in 1971 has ensured his posthumous reputation. Vespremie on the other hand has been a heretofore unknown figure, denied as it transpires not only his real artistic achievements but even his identity.<sup>22</sup> Most recent scholarly accounts give his nationality as Latvian, probably due to his relatively brief presence in Bucharest and departure for Riga in 1927.<sup>23</sup> However,

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**20** Ibid.

**21** Julius Meier-Graefe (1867–1935) was an important contributor to the development of modern art historiography. Born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in Reșița, a town located in present-day Romania), Meier-Graefe came from an assimilated Jewish family, just like Fischer-Galați, and faced antisemitic attitudes in his adopted homeland of Germany. He fled in 1932 and died in Switzerland, foreshadowing also the fate of Fischer-Galați. See Janne Gallen-Kallela-Siren, "German Antisemitism and the Historiography of Modern Art. The Case of Julius Meier-Graefe, 1894–1905," in *Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture. Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long, Matthew Baigell, and Milly Heyd (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 51–76.

**22** The difficulty of tracing his trajectory is compounded by the different spellings of Vespremie's name, from Andor Veszprémi in Hungary to Andrejs Vespremi in Latvia, and several other versions in-between.

**23** See for example Roland Prügel, *Im Zeichen der Stadt. Avantgarde in Rumänien* (Köln: Böhlau, 2008), 76; Ioana Vlasiu, "Idei constructiviste în arta românească a anilor '20: Integralismul," in *Bucharest in*

Vespremie only became a Latvian citizen in 1934, having previously held Romanian nationality. It is quite possible that his perceived “foreignness” has contributed to his marginalisation: his contribution to the Academy is rarely mentioned, or he appears as Maxy’s less significant collaborator. In a further twist of fate, it is material found in Latvian archives that can now restore Vespremie his Romanian citizenship. The documents he submitted over several years to obtain permission to work and live in Latvia can at last provide a clearer picture of Vespremie’s life and work.<sup>24</sup>

Vespremie was born in a Jewish family in 1898 in Covasna, in what had been the Austro-Hungarian province of Transylvania, but became part of Greater Romania in 1918. His secondary education was undertaken in Braşov, and then in Budapest where in June 1915 he graduated from a commercial college. During the First World War, he was active in the Austrian army and received a serious injury that required a lengthy period of recovery.<sup>25</sup> In the aftermath of the unification, Vespremie found himself citizen of a new country and for reasons that are unknown relocated to Bucharest probably sometime between 1918 and 1920.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to the Latvian Ministry of Education, he revealed his hopes at this juncture: “From the beginning of my studies I had the intention, after graduation, to open an arts and crafts school and workshop in Bucharest (my previous permanent residence) and to manage these myself. Therefore, I did not specialise in one area, but I endeavoured to gain a sound, practical education in the most varied branches of the arts and crafts.”<sup>27</sup>

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*the 1920s and 1930s: Between Avant-Garde and Modernism*, ed. Magda Cârnci (Bucureşti: Simetria, 1994), 38–46. Cărbăuş, “The Shadow of the Object,” 127 notes: “[Vespremie] was a Lithuanian (sic) who had settled in Bucharest, but who remains a hazy figure. The circumstances of his emigration to Romania are not known.”

**24** Latvia State Historical Archives: fond 3234, inv. 2, file 25150 (citizenship); fond 3234, inv. 19, file 19384 (work permit); fond 1632, inv. 1, file 23144 (teaching); fond 2996, inv. 20, file 14272 (passport); fond 2942, inv.1, file 2059 (house register). I am indebted to Elvija Pohomova for translating the contents of these files from Latvian.

**25** Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144. Also 3234/ 2/ 25150, where a health inspection certificate for Vepremie’s citizenship application reveals he had a deep scar from an old operation, resulting perhaps from the same injury.

**26** Legislation created in the aftermath of the unification in 1918 gave all inhabitants of the new territories joining Romania the right to Romanian citizenship. However, the legislation of the old Romanian territories did not give Jewish inhabitants the automatic right to citizenship, giving rise to a strangely discriminatory situation. In this case for example, Maxy might not qualify for Romanian citizenship in 1918, but Vespremie would. This situation was rectified in 1919 through new legislation and the right of Jewish inhabitants of Romania to citizenship was recognised by the Constitution of 1923 (although they did have to apply for naturalisation). See Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România 1919–1938. De la emancipare la marginalizare* (Bucureşti: Hasefer, 2000) for more details on citizenship in relation to Romania’s Jewish community during the interwar period.

**27** Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144. This particular document is in German and was translated by the author.

To obtain this education Vespremie departed for Berlin where he took classes at the Schule Reimann, an innovative and highly successful school of art and design, between October 1920 and June 1922. In addition to this, he gained practical experience by working in other institutions: the Staatliche Kunstgewerbeschule, the sculpture workshop of Felix Kupsch, a sign-painting workshop and the workshops of the Reimann itself. By 1924 Vespremie was back in Bucharest as director of the newly opened Academy of Decorative Arts. Whether this really was the realisation of his earlier plans is difficult to know, however it is possible to speculate that the philanthropist Fischer-Galați had supported Vespremie's education in Berlin with this goal in mind, having met him in Bucharest after the war. In the statements made to the Latvian Ministry of Education over the years Vespremie wrote that he "was asked to lead the Academy of Decorative Arts" and that he enjoyed the patronage and "financial support of well-known maecenas Heinrich Fischer-Galați," statements that support the hypothesis of a prior connection that led to the opening of the school.<sup>28</sup> That is further corroborated by the fact that Fischer-Galați (through Bibliofila) financed several bursaries for "poor but gifted students" to attend the Academy's workshops, as revealed by the school's 1924 course brochure.<sup>29</sup>

As well as securing patronage, Vespremie developed links with the Bucharest avant-garde from an early stage, as revealed by the programme for a Festival of Jewish Romanian Writers and Artists taking place on 11 April 1925, thus about half a year or so after the Academy had opened its doors.<sup>30</sup> The festivities included literary, theatrical and musical moments, all listed in the programme opulently designed by the artist Sigismund Maur, with graphic vignettes and gold borders surrounding the text. Many of the vignettes were portraits of the participants by their peers: Maxy sketched the cubist profile of theatre director Sandu Eliad, while Maur preferred a more realist style for his stern Marcel Iancu. Then, facing each other on opposite pages were Maxy's features elongated by caricaturist Jacques Kapralik and Vespremie sketchily drawn in profile by Iancu (Fig. 2).<sup>31</sup> According to the acknowledgements listed on the final page: "The decoration of the theatre hall was executed after the designs of Messrs. Vespremie, Maur and Ross at the Academy of Decorative Arts. The decoration of the cabaret was executed by Messrs. Iancu, Maxy, Brauner and Kapralik."<sup>32</sup>

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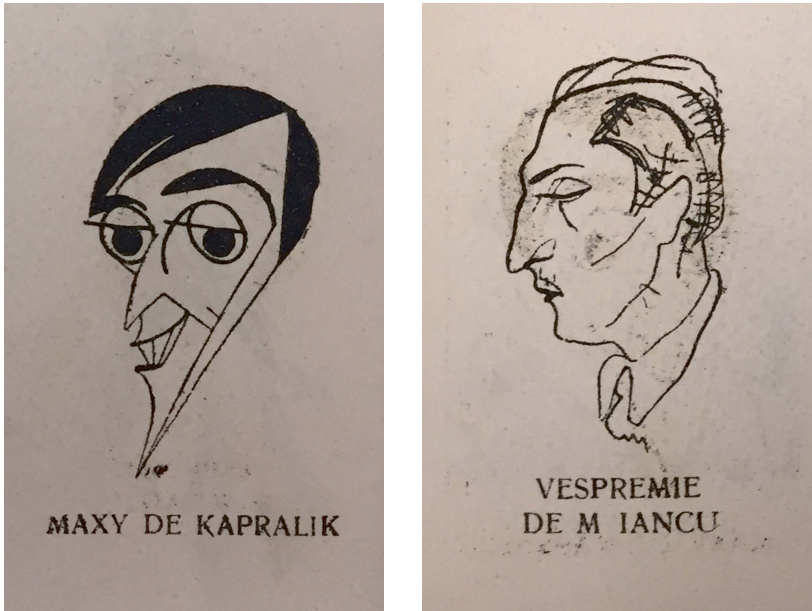
**28** Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.

**29** Ibid. See Appendix A for full English translation.

**30** Harvard Library Judaica Division, Judaica ephemera collection, Theater, series B, collection 1, Romania. According to the magazine *Puntea de fildes* this event was part of an international festival intended to celebrate the opening of the new Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew University in Palestine. Jewish artists and writers around the world were invited to organise their own events taking place simultaneously on 11 April 1925. See "Scriitorii și artiștii evrei...", *Puntea de fildes*, no. 1 (April 1925): 1.

**31** Jacques Kapralik (1906–1960) was a Romanian caricaturist who emigrated to the United States in 1936, becoming a celebrated poster designer and illustrator for Hollywood film studios.

**32** Harvard Library Judaica Division, Judaica ephemera collection. Theater/ B/ 1/ Romania.



**Fig. 2:** The caricatures of M. H. Maxy (by Jacques Kapralik) and Andrei Vespremie (by Marcel Iancu) inside the programme of the Festival of Jewish Romanian Writers and Artists, 11 April 1925. Harvard Library Judaica Division.

Even earlier than this, in January 1925, an advertisement in the avant-garde journal *Punct* suggests that Iancu and Brauner were collaborators in a design venture entitled the Atelier of Constructivist Art which focused on architecture, interiors and furniture.<sup>33</sup> Prospective customers were directed “for plans and execution” to the Academy of Decorative Arts under the directorship of Vespremie. The connections to prominent artists such as Iancu and Brauner and the commissions received for executing decorative projects place Vespremie at the heart of Bucharest’s avant-garde. Such occurrences suggest that he was well integrated within the artistic community and that the Academy had become a welcome and trusted addition to the city’s artistic life less than a year after its opening.

The Atelier for Constructivist Art is not to be confused with the Atelier Integral, Maxy’s own applied arts venture, which had the support of Brauner but not that of Iancu and whose third member was Corneliu Michăilescu. The Atelier Integral was an extension of Maxy’s periodical of the same name that had made its debut in March 1925. Both were located at the same address, Calea Victoriei 79. An advertisement printed in *Integral* in October 1925 suggests that Maxy’s Atelier had a two-pronged approach: a “modern painting workshop” for training students and a studio that took orders

<sup>33</sup> *Punct*, no. 8 (9 January 1925): 4.

for “decors, interiors, carpets, ceramics, theatrical set and costume designs, scenic constructions, cinema and theatre posters.”<sup>34</sup> To what extent this was successful is difficult to determine, however advertisements for a number of businesses, including a law firm and a photography studio, which utilised modern graphics and were the work of the Atelier’s three founders appeared in many of *Integral*’s issues. A year-long interruption in the appearance of *Integral* means that the fate of the Atelier is unclear, especially as the first issue to appear after the hiatus, in December 1926, heavily promoted the Academy of Decorative Arts in which Maxy was now evidently involved.

The disappearance of Atelier *Integral* and the emergence of the Academy within the pages of *Integral* has led many scholars to suppose that they were a continuation of one another under the tutelage of Maxy. Some accounts treat Maxy’s Atelier as the first and better version of the Academy, giving it credit for the wide-ranging applied arts curriculum that Vespremie had in fact established.<sup>35</sup> This misapprehension is sometimes conflated with that of Vespremie’s Baltic origins and with another common misconception repeated by scholars over the years: that Maxy was the originator of the Academy under the influence of the Bauhaus.<sup>36</sup> To unpick this most enduring myth of Romanian design history, it is necessary to examine more closely the period spent in Berlin by Maxy and Vespremie in the early 1920s and the relationship between the Schule Reimann and the Bauhaus.

## Competing Models for the Academy of Decorative Arts: The Schule Reimann and the Bauhaus

Maxy spent a year in Berlin, most likely from June 1922 to June 1923, training in the workshop of Arthur Segal, a Jewish artist of Romanian origin who had become well integrated within the Berlin art world. Maxy’s time in Berlin is poorly documented and has thus been susceptible to myth-making, especially by the artist himself who later in life spoke repeatedly about the influence of this period on his formation, indicating it as a source for his life-long practice.<sup>37</sup> Michael Ilk has been able to identify a number

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<sup>34</sup> *Integral*, no. 6–7 (October 1925): 27.

<sup>35</sup> For example, in “Idei constructiviste,” 42–43, Ioana VlasIU suggests that the name of the institution was subsequently changed so as to sound more traditional, faced as it was with resistance to its constructivist ideas. VlasIU also conflates Maxy’s Atelier with that of Iancu, giving its name as the “Atelier for Constructive Art” (sic).

<sup>36</sup> See for example Petre Oprea, *M. H. Maxy* (București: Arta Grafică, 1974), 5; Radu Stern and Edward van Voolen, eds., *Jewish Avant-Garde Artists from Romania 1910–1938. From Dada to Surrealism* (Amsterdam: Jewish Museum, 2011), 46; VlasIU, “Idei constructiviste,” and many others.

<sup>37</sup> Irina Cârăbaș, “To Germany and Back Again. The Romanian Avant-Garde and Its Forerunners,” *Centropa* 12, no. 1 (September 2012): 253–268, 264. On Maxy in Berlin and his time studying with Arthur Segal, see also Prügell, *Im Zeichen der Stadt*, 81–83.



of key dates relating to Maxy's artistic activity in Berlin, such as his participation in the Juryfreie Kunstschau exhibition in October 1922, a visit to Der Sturm Gallery where he signed the guestbook in January 1923, and his participation in Der Sturm's 118th exhibition in April 1923.<sup>38</sup> It seems that the artist visited Weimar in the summer of 1922, painting the local cityscapes.<sup>39</sup> Maxy's Der Sturm exhibition catalogue lists three paintings of Weimar—*Altes Haus*, *Am Palais* and *Ruheplatz am Liszt-Haus*.<sup>40</sup> Maxy's exposure to the ideas of the Bauhaus was in all likelihood not limited to his visit to Weimar. His mentor Segal hosted monthly gatherings at his home in Berlin where Maxy may have come into contact with, among others, Wassily Kandinsky and László Moholy-Nagy.<sup>41</sup> The latter would only join the Bauhaus in the summer of 1923, whereas Kandinsky arrived in 1922 and immediately began preparing with his students a set of large-scale mural paintings that became the centrepieces of the same edition of the Juryfreie Kunstschau in which Maxy participated.<sup>42</sup>

Whether Vespremie also visited the Bauhaus is impossible to determine with any certainty, however it is certainly plausible considering his professional interest in applied arts education. As previously mentioned, during his time in Berlin he attended the Schule Reimann, established by Jewish couple Albert and Klara Reimann, which had grown from a sculpture workshop in 1902 to a worthy competitor for the Bauhaus. By 1922, the year that Vespremie graduated, it had 754 students and at its peak in 1936 that number had reached 1000.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, the Bauhaus trained around 500 students in total from 1919 to 1933.<sup>44</sup> The Reimann offered a wider range of classes, with the overall focus on modern commercial design and the ambition to provide students with the skills to work in business and industry. It was innovative in its curriculum and introduced classes for poster design in 1911, for theatre design in 1913 and for window display design in 1911. The Reimann's aims, as stated in the school's own magazine *Farbe und Form*, were "to serve craft..., to serve industry..., to serve commerce."<sup>45</sup> From 1904 onwards there was also a Reimann Studio, which offered

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38 Michael Ilk, *Maxy. Der Integrale Künstler* (Ludwigshafen: Michael Ilk, 2003), 24–26.

39 *Ibid.*, 24.

40 Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond M. H. Maxy. The catalogue numbers for these works are 19, 20, and 21. See also Israel Marcus, *Șapte momente din istoria evreilor în România* (Haifa: Glob, 1977), 45, where it is revealed that Maxy was in Weimar during the festivities commemorating 90 years since Goethe's death. This would also indicate 1922 as the year of his visit.

41 Cărăbaș, "To Germany and Back Again," 265; Ilk, *Maxy*, 23.

42 Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, *Bauhaus 1919–1933. Workshops for Modernity* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 122 and 326.

43 Yasuko Suga, "Modernism, Commercialism and Display Design in Britain," *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 2 (2006): 137–154, 140.

44 *Ibid.*, 154.

45 Jeremy Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany: 1890–1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 144. For further information on the Schule Reimann see also Yasuko Suga, *The Reimann School. A Design Diaspora* (London: Artmonsky Arts, 2014) and Swantje Kuhfuss-Wickenheiser, *Die Reimann-*

“a combination of theory and practice [and] where a limited number of approved students worked as salaried assistants upon completion of their studies.”<sup>46</sup> It is here that Vespremie worked after graduating in 1922, which would suggest that he was appreciated by his teachers and sufficiently skilled to undertake such a role.

Vespremie’s report card has survived in the Latvian national archives, revealing that he was a student at the Reimann from 15 October 1920 to 30 June 1922, taking eleven subjects during this time.<sup>47</sup> He excelled at bookbinding, ivory carving, metalwork and ornament, and achieved various levels of proficiency in drawing from life, colour theory, modelling, poster design, etching, and typography. Another previously unexamined document found in Vespremie’s file in the Latvia State Historical Archives reveals the educational programme of the Academy of Decorative Arts as at 1 November 1924, thus shortly after its opening (see Appendix A for English translation). The course catalogue was quite comprehensive even at this early stage, including metalwork, ivory carving, batik, carpet design, bookbinding, typography and ornament, as well as drawing, painting and sculpture. Even a cursory comparison with Vespremie’s report card reveals the highly personal nature of the Academy’s curriculum. Most of the classes offered were in the disciplines he had been trained in at the Reimann, such as life drawing, metalwork, bookbinding, graphic arts and typography. The only exceptions were the textiles classes: carpet making and batik. Of these, the latter also had a strong Reimann connection as the school’s batik workshop was well known, having been set up by Albert Reimann himself in 1908.<sup>48</sup> At the Academy, it was Victoria, Vespremie’s wife, who led this particular course, suggesting perhaps that she was also a Reimann alumna. Furthermore, Albert Reimann had a particular interest in early education, and had organized formal and informal courses for children from the school’s early days, even forming an association named *Kunst in Leben des Kindes* (Art in children’s life).<sup>49</sup> Vespremie may have taken inspiration from this when creating a separate curriculum at the Academy for children from six years of age (Fig. 3), where they could “learn to create their own toys and would be taught the decorative arts in an easy and pleasant manner.”<sup>50</sup>

Comparing this pedagogical offering with that of the Bauhaus, it is evident that the majority of disciplines do not coincide, especially when considering the curriculum available in 1922–1923, the final year of the Weimar period. The core Bauhaus workshops included ceramics, carpentry, glass and wall painting, while

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*Schule in Berlin und London 1902–1943. Ein jüdisches Unternehmen zur Kunst- und Designausbildung internationaler Prägung bis zur Vernichtung durch das Hitlerregime* (Aachen: Shaker Media, 2009).

46 Suga, “Modernism, Commercialism,” 140.

47 Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.

48 Kuhfuss-Wickenheiser, *Die Reimann-Schule*, 143.

49 Dedo von Kerksenbrock-Krosigk, *Modern Art of Metalwork. Bröhan-Museum, State Museum of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Functionalism (1889–1939)* (Berlin: Bröhan Museum, 2001), 278.

50 Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.

ivory carving or batik were never offered, and bookbinding had a very short lifespan. The Academy also offered a course in typography and graphic lettering, something that was not formally taught at the Bauhaus until 1925 but had a long tradition at the Reimann. In October 1926 the Academy expanded its course catalogue (see Appendix B for English translation), now offering seventeen different disciplines available for study (Fig. 4).<sup>51</sup> The main additions were the printing workshop, book illustration, advertising and poster design, decorative painting, religious art, interior design and a course on art history and theory. Several of these, such as book illustration and religious art, find no equivalent in the Bauhaus curriculum, while the “architecture of interior design” course pre-empts the architectural department at Dessau by nearly a year, although the Bauhaus did have a carpentry workshop that engaged in furniture design from 1921.<sup>52</sup>

Whatever Maxy may have seen in Weimar in 1922, it did not directly translate into the organisation of the Academy of Decorative Arts in 1924 and not even in 1926 during the institution’s expansion, thus invalidating the possibility that he was the originator of the Academy under the influence of the Bauhaus. Cărăbaș has traced the origin of this myth back to Maxy himself, suggesting that the artist’s growing prominence later in life led him to overestimate his youthful achievements and his status within the avant-garde.<sup>53</sup> For example, according to the chronology in the catalogue for Maxy’s major 1965 retrospective, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, he is described as taking over the directorship of the Academy in 1924.<sup>54</sup> Equally, in a 1971 interview in the magazine *Arta*, Maxy recalled:

In Germany I went to Dessau. I looked, I inquired, I was shown the way [the Bauhaus] was organised and saw the possibilities of a modern decorative art emerging from the collaboration between artists and craftsmen. Returning from Germany, I had the idea to propose a collaboration to the Vespremie family; my first proposal was in 1925, it included *Integral*, those particular workshops, exhibition spaces, and events.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A detailed list can be found in *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*, exh. cat. (București: Academia Artelor Decorative, 1926).

<sup>52</sup> Whilst Bauhaus literature is plentiful the following works have been most useful with regards to the institution’s pedagogical programme: Bergdoll and Dickerman, *Bauhaus 1919–1933*; Howard Dearstyne, *Inside the Bauhaus* (London: Architectural Press, 1986); Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919–1933* (Köln: Taschen & Bauhaus-Archiv, 2002); Rainer Wick and Gabriele Diana Grawe, *Teaching at the Bauhaus* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000). The original presentation albums of the Weimar Bauhaus, which documented the various workshops, the Haus am Horn and the 1923 exhibition, have also been published: Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, *Bauhaus-Alben*, 4 vols. (Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität, 2006–2009).

<sup>53</sup> Cărăbaș, “The Shadow of the Object,” 130.

<sup>54</sup> *Expoziția retrospectivă M. H. Maxy*, exh. cat. (București: Arta Grafică, 1965).

<sup>55</sup> Mihai Driscu, “Retrospective. M. H. Maxy,” *Arta*, no. 4–5 (1971): 52–54, 53.



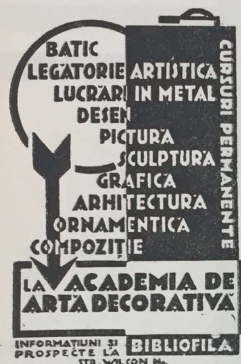
Fig. 3: Brochure of the Academy of Decorative Arts, 1924. Latvia State Historical Archives.

This is mostly untrue. The Bauhaus headquarters were still in Weimar during Maxy's time in Germany and in all likelihood the link between this institution and the Academy "seems to have been made retrospectively," as Cărăbaș also points out.<sup>56</sup> What really is at stake here is the educational aspect of the Academy and its origins, perhaps perceived as being its more innovative and impactful outcome. Maxy is frequently described as having taught at the Academy, or even as having been especially invited by Vespremie to instruct the painting and art theory classes.<sup>57</sup> There is however no real evidence of this and Maxy's name does not appear on any of the Academy's course catalogues of 1924 or 1926, even though quite a number of prominent Romanian arts practitioners were involved, offering a wide range of approaches (see Appendices A and B). For instance, some of the teaching staff were members of the more traditionalist faction of the Romanian arts community, such as sculptor Cornel Medrea, painter Francisc Șirato, classics professor George Murnu, muralist Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck or draughtsman Jean Al. Steriadi. The avant-garde was present with fewer members, the most prominent being Marcel Iancu and graphic designer Sigismund Maur. There is

<sup>56</sup> Cărăbaș, "The Shadow of the Object," 130.

<sup>57</sup> Marcus, *Șapte momente*, 52; Alina-Ruxandra Mircea, "Arhitectura, mașina și interiorul modernist," *Arhitectura*, no. 2 (644) (2013): 42–47, 44.

Academia Artelor Deco-  
rative mutându-și sediul în  
Str. Câmpineanu, 17, mărită și  
reorganizată, a început al 5-lea  
an de activitate la 1 Octombrie  
1926, cu următoarele cursuri, atât  
pentru începători, cât și pentru înaintași :



1. Clasa specială pentru lucrări în Metal.
2. Clasa specială de Legătorie artistică.
3. Clasa de lucrări artistice în Piele.
4. Clasa pentru Covoare.
5. Clasa de Batik și Tesături Pictate.
6. Clasa specială de Grafică:
  - a) Cursuri de Litografie.
  - b) Aqua-forte.
  - c) Cursuri de gravură în lemn.
  - d) Cursuri de tiraje și încercări de presă, cu unelte proprii.
7. Clasa de exerciții Grafice: Ornamentica modernă și scriere artistică.
8. Clasa specială pentru Reclame și Afize.
9. Cartea ilustrată.
10. Clasa specială de Desen și Pictură.
11. Clasa de Pictură Decorativă și Compoziție.
12. Clasa de Sculptură: Modelaj după natură și ornamentică.
13. Sculptură în lemn.
14. Clasa de Sculptură în Fildeş: Modelaj, relief și bijuterie.
15. Artă religioasă: Pictură bisericască și obiecte de cult.
16. Arhitectură de decorarea interiorului: Proiecte pentru mobilier modern și aranjamentul interiorului.
17. Prelegeri despre Istoria Artei și Studiul Stilurilor.
18. Cursuri Speciale pentru Copii și Tineret:

Desen, pictură, modelaj, lucrări artistice în carton, metalo-plastic, ceramică, lucrări în piele, situate, jucării artistice, compoziție, etc.

#### SE EXPUNE :

După schițele D-lui A. Vespremie :  
Obiecte în Metal,  
Cărți legate,  
Lămpi, Lucrări în fildeş etc.

După schițele și proiectele pictorului  
M. H. Maxy :

Mobilă Modernă de Boudoir,  
Perne, Covoare, etc.

Dantelă Modernă de Dagowert-Peche †  
Ceramică Modernă de M. Marigo-Brăila.  
Cristaluri din atelierul „Primavera” Paris.  
Batik D-na Vespremie.

Lucrări în piele de D-na Petrescu.  
Mobilă modernă pentru dormitor și sufragerie,  
după schițele d-lui H. Mandel.

#### Grafica

Litografie, aqua-forte, gravuri în lemn, monotipe,  
de J. Al. Steriadi, C. Cuțescu-Stork, M. Manolescu  
Bruteanu, L. Bălăcescu-Demetriade. S.  
Maur și alții.

Pictură, sculptură, desene și obiecte de artă  
decorativă

de: Nina Arbore, L. Bălăcescu-Demetriade,  
Victor Brauner, Nadia Bulghin-Grossman, E.  
Cuțescu-Stork, Ferikide, Olga Greceanu, P.  
Iorgulescu, M. H. Maxy, Medrea, Corneliu Mi-  
hailescu, Sirova Medrea, S. Maur, Jean Al  
Steriadi, Mattis Teutsch, A. Vespremie și alții

Aranjamentul expoziției după  
schițele pictorului M. H. Maxy.



Fig. 4: Advertisement for the Academy of Decorative Arts in *Integral*, no. 9, December 1926.

less detailed information about teachers in the first course list of 1924, but the names that are mentioned—Janeta Scăeru Teclu and Cornel Medrea—were still with the Academy in 1926. The exception was Milița Petrașcu who only taught sculpture and composition at the newly opened Academy in 1924, having recently returned from her period of study with Constantin Brancusi in Paris. Once more, Vespremie's institution can be seen to be connected to the latest developments in art and design, and perhaps not only that as the special section for children and young people was under the patronage of Isabella Sadoveanu, a progressive pedagogue and feminist.<sup>58</sup>

Maxy himself acknowledged Vespremie's role as the founder of the Academy and highlighted his educational vocation and technical abilities in an article in *Integral* in December 1926:

The exhibition at the Academy of Decorative Arts represents for the general public the manifestation of the activities of Messrs. A. Vespremie and Fischer-Galați, founders of the applied arts teaching institution. The school, which was created in the hope of leading to the results of today, has been functioning continuously through its many classes populated by students and its active workshops. Production is quite abundant and different. The quality of the object emerges from the artisan's technical skill. It is the most important benefit that has been gained; it is first and foremost the accomplishment of Mr. Vespremie.<sup>59</sup>

According to Vespremie himself, he led courses for children aged four and a half to twelve years of age, as well as courses for adults, with the highest number of students reaching 115, quite an achievement for the Academy's brief life.<sup>60</sup> In the memoirs of Liana, Maxy's daughter, the organisational division between the workshops and the exhibition spaces is shown to have existed from the beginning of the collaboration between Maxy and Vespremie. Liana reveals that it was in fact Mela Brun-Maxy, the artist's wife, who contracted an association with Vespremie. Having seen an advertisement for the Academy, she drew up a proposal that involved Vespremie running the educational activities, with Maxy and herself taking over the commercial and administrative aspects. This led to the Academy's move to its new address Str. Câmpineanu 17, which also became the Maxy family home, and to the opening of the commercial section.<sup>61</sup>

Maxy's involvement with the Academy in late 1926 led to *Integral*, his own avant-garde publication, becoming the mouthpiece of the institution. Thus, most of the information about the Academy's programme, staff and output after this date was disseminated through advertising spreads, photographs and articles in *Integral*,

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<sup>58</sup> Cora Barbu, Lenormanda Benari, and Gheorghe Popescu, *Izabela Sadoveanu. Viața și opera* (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1970).

<sup>59</sup> M. H. Maxy, "Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative," *Integral*, no. 9 (December 1926): 14.

<sup>60</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.

<sup>61</sup> Liana Maxy, *Nucleul magic* (Tel Aviv: Integral, 1986), 191–192.

another factor perhaps that has led to Vespremie's contribution being side-lined. In the early months of 1927 advertisements for the Academy continued to be published in *Integral* with the same information about its staff, classes and selling exhibition. In June 1927 however, an advertisement announced that the Academy had passed under Maxy's artistic direction and on 28 July 1927 Maxy officially registered the business under his own name, nearly three years after the Academy's opening in the autumn of 1924.<sup>62</sup> This was the moment when Vespremie decided to leave Bucharest and travel to Latvia.

## Andrei Vespremie in Latvia

Vespremie arrived in Latvia in May or early June 1927, although his motives for leaving Bucharest to settle in Riga remain unclear.<sup>63</sup> His own account to the Latvian authorities cite family reasons.<sup>64</sup> The only other source of information is Liana Maxy, in whose memoirs the narrative acquires some curiously romanticised aspects. Vespremie's departure is blamed on the unfaithfulness of Victoria, his Bessarabian wife, and he is even described as contemplating a crime of passion which Mela Brun-Maxy skilfully averts. According to Liana, the artist was yearning for his hometown Riga and its Baltic shores, which he had supposedly left behind some ten years previously.<sup>65</sup> This is probably the earliest occurrence of Vespremie's perceived "foreignness," and may thus be at the root of this enduring myth, as scholarly accounts that pre-date Liana Maxy's memoirs do not mention his nationality.<sup>66</sup> Liana recounts how the artist wanted to leave quietly on a Riga-bound train when his Romanian friends discovered this and organised a surprise farewell at the station, yet this passage also employs some artistic licence. Vespremie's literary double describes the efforts of Iacob Sternberg in convincing him to remain in Bucharest by reading him a letter from Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff to a friend in Vilnius, describing life for Jewish artists in the Romanian capital in glowing terms.<sup>67</sup> The text of this missive, cited by Liana, is

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<sup>62</sup> Max Herman Maxy registered a business named The Decorative Arts (Artele Decorative) with the Chamber of Commerce on 28 July 1927, registration no. 806, dossier no. 2994/ 927. See *Buletinul Camerei de Comerț și Industrie XXVI*, no. 8 (31 August 1927): 61 and 66.

<sup>63</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, 3234/ 2/ 25150. His Romanian passport was issued on 29 April 1927 and on 8th June he obtained a visa from the Riga prefecture.

<sup>64</sup> In his application to Ministry of Internal Affairs for Latvian citizenship, Vespremie states: "I came to Latvia to visit relatives and friends and I stayed here, as I married a Latvian citizen."

<sup>65</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 203–205.

<sup>66</sup> I could find no other mention of Vespremie as a foreign national before Liana Maxy's account. As Liana was born in 1923 and was only 4 years old when Vespremie left Romania, she must have compiled her account of this period based on information received from her parents or relatives.

<sup>67</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 217–219.

in fact an open letter Buloff had written in 1925 to a Warsaw literary magazine.<sup>68</sup> By 1927 Buloff had already left Bucharest for the United States, finding it difficult to make ends meet in Romania with the Vilna Troupe.

There is nonetheless truth in Liana's statement that no replacement could be found for Vespremie's role as artistic educator, eventually leading the Academy's closure and to the opening of Maxy's new solo venture Studio Maxy in 1929. A comparison of the June 1927 advert in *Integral* with previous promotional materials suggests that the educational dimension of the institution was losing ground. And although Maxy did do some teaching later in his career, most notably supporting young artists during the period of anti-Jewish legislation instituted under Romania's right-wing dictatorship, Vespremie was much more steadfast in his role as an educator.<sup>69</sup> In Riga, he worked as a drawing and applied arts teacher in some of the city's most prominent Jewish gymnasia, teaching up to 1,200 students a year and organising after-school activity groups in multiple disciplines. To advance his career he undertook further training at Riga's Jewish Pedagogical Institute and in 1931 successfully passed exams in pedagogy, psychology and history of pedagogy. In 1937 and 1938, he attended further courses aimed at applied arts teachers, organised by the Latvian Ministry for Education. According to a reference letter dated 1934 from the Ezra Gymnasium, where he had worked since arriving in Latvia in 1927, Vespremie was "a very gifted and diligent pedagogue and professional. Through his work he was able to awaken in the students active interest in his taught subjects and he was able to achieve excellent results not just with gifted students, but also with less gifted students in developing their art and their skills."<sup>70</sup>

At least three photographs of Vespremie with students of various age groups have survived. Images from a 1934 class trip (Fig. 5) and end of the school year celebrations in 1939 can be found in the Yad Vashem archives, while a 1937 class photo from the Ezra Gymnasium is preserved at the Jewish Museum in Latvia. Furthermore, it is due to an account by a former student, the artist Boris Lurie, that we know about

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<sup>68</sup> The whole letter is quoted in Romanian translation in Israil Bercovici, *O sută de ani de teatru evreiesc în România* (București: Integral, 1998), 130–131. The original was published in Warsaw in *Literarische Bleter*, no. 59 (19 June 1925).

<sup>69</sup> Monica Enache and Valentina Iancu, *Destine la răscruce. Artiști evrei în perioada Holocaustului* (București: Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2010), 68–69. Maxy taught at the School of Art for Jews from 1941 to 1944, during the period when antisemitic legislation curtailed the rights of Romania's Jewish population, including access to education. During this time, he had many students that became well-known artists, including his second wife Mimi Șaraga-Maxy. After the Second World War he taught at the Nicolae Grigorescu Fine Art Institute in Bucharest, however his main professional activity was that of museum director.

<sup>70</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.



Vespremie final days and his murder in the Kaiserwald concentration camp, which occurred sometime in 1943–1944.<sup>71</sup>

Lurie[’s] drawing teacher [was] Mr. Vespremi (sic), who he admired as a teacher and a man but thought that he couldn’t be an artist because he was too good a craftsman. When they ran into each other in the Riga Ghetto, Vespremi spoke to the seventeen-year-old Lurie (1941) not as a fellow Jew or fellow prisoner, but as a fellow artist. Lurie found this definition both gratifying and disconcerting... Lurie recounted that Vespremi was later beaten to death in Kaiserwald when, one morning, he was unable to awake on time at reveille.<sup>72</sup>

It is unfortunate that even this moving epitaph questions Vespremie’s artistic abilities, as though these cannot co-exist with technical skill. This appraisal had dogged Vespremie since the beginning of his career, when Nenițescu’s overview of the newly opened Academy praised his metalwork and bookbinding, while at the same time observing that his skill and industry were not matched by artistic value.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Maxy’s own account of the Academy in December 1926 contained some double-edged praise. According to him, although the school had many students, well-run workshops and good production levels, its output was too stylistically diverse and the Academy suffered by following trends, rather than creating them.<sup>74</sup> As we shall see in the following chapter, this statement is particularly problematic when considering the question of influence in the relationship between Maxy and Vespremie. Furthermore, this perception of Vespremie as being technically proficient yet bereft of artistic vision may be at the root of his erasure from the history of art and design, despite his important contribution to the development of applied arts in Romania.

Vespremie continued to pursue an artistic career in Latvia alongside his pedagogical work, as can be gleaned from a small number of sources. According to his own account to the Latvian authorities, he had an exhibition in Riga in 1930 showcasing his graphic works, as well as metal and wood objects.<sup>75</sup> The catalogue of this exhibition was submitted with other paperwork to the Latvian authorities but has unfortunately not been preserved in the archives. A newspaper advertisement shows that the exhibition took place from 1st to 30th November at the E. Ettinger bookshop in Riga.<sup>76</sup> Earlier that year Vespremie had also been commissioned by the

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71 This approximate dating is given in Aleksandrs Feigmanis, *Latvian Jewish Intelligentsia Victims of the Holocaust*, (Riga: Feigmanis, 2006), accessed 22 September 2016, <https://www.jewishgen.org/latvia/latvianIntelligentsia.html>.

72 Igor Satanovsky, ed., *KZ-Kampf-Kunst. Boris Lurie: NO!Art* (Köln: Boris Lurie Art Foundation, 2014), 48–49.

73 Nenițescu, *Scieri din istoria artei*, 129.

74 Maxy, “Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative.”

75 Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/23144.

76 “Ausstellung graphischer Werke von Andor Vespremi,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, 1 November 1930.



**Fig. 5:** Andrei Vespremie with a primary school class on their annual school trip, 1934. Yad Vashem.

Second Riga Tennis Club to decorate the rooms of the Jewish Club for their annual party. Themed “Paris-Montmartre,” the event was inspired by infamous Parisian nightspots such as the Moulin-Rouge or the Jockey Club and guests were promised “two live music bands, lovely dancing girls, and other surprises.”<sup>77</sup> After the festivities a note appeared in the local newspaper acknowledging that Vespremie’s “energetic initiative and elaborate execution” greatly contributed to the success of the evening.<sup>78</sup> His patrons must have been pleased, as Vespremie was also invited to contribute to the 1933 annual party which took place at the Auto-Touring Club and which lured guests with “an American bar, an Eastern café [and] a Russian teahouse.”<sup>79</sup> Perhaps Vespremie’s experience creating decorations for the 1925 Festival of Jewish Romanian Writers and Artists in Bucharest contributed to his success, as well as his time at the Reimann School which was famed for its annual fancy dress parties.<sup>80</sup> In any case, it seems he communicated his enthusiasm for theatrical décor to his pupils. One of his students at the Ezra Gymnasium in the early 1930s was Sara Slovina (née Perlmanis), who later became a prominent choreographer in the Khakas region of the Soviet Union. Alongside her dance training, Slovina developed her interest in stage design in Vespremie’s workshop, as did many of her colleagues. Under Vespremie’s guidance,

<sup>77</sup> “Ritek-Abend in Paris-Montmarte,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, 28 January 1930.

<sup>78</sup> “Das große Berliner Reitturnier,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, 8 February 1930.

<sup>79</sup> “Chacun à son gout!,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, 15 February 1933.

<sup>80</sup> According to Kerssenbrock-Krosigk, *Modern Art of Metalwork*, 278: “The ‘Reimann Balls’ and summer fêtes and, as of 1912, the organised fancy dress parties aroused much attention in the Berlin of the twenties and culminated in 1926 in a fancy-dress ball with around seven thousand people in the Berlin Sportpalast, and a float parade on Unter den Linten in 1928.”



**Fig. 6:** Andrei Vespremie (front row, first from left) with the Latvian Jewish Artists Society, May 1928. Museum of Jews in Latvia.

older students were involved in making decorations for professional theatres in Riga, learning how to create sets and costumes.<sup>81</sup>

Vespremie does not appear to have joined Riga's avant-garde artistic groups and only one piece of evidence has come to light linking Vespremie to such a group. In 1928 the Association of Riga Graphic Artists founded the Free Applied Arts Studios, an endeavour similar to the Academy of Decorative Arts, offering nineteen different disciplines, from etching and woodcuts to poster design, bookbinding and painting on fabric. In a brief newspaper announcement, Vespremie is listed as one of the teachers amongst members of the Latvian avant-garde such as Raimonds Šiško or Sigismunds Vidbergs who was also the Association's president.<sup>82</sup> However, no further information has come to light and Vespremie does not mention his involvement with the Association in his otherwise detailed reports to the Latvian authorities—although he includes information about his membership in the Latvian Fine Artists Trade Union—so it is possible this engagement did not last long. A photograph dated May 1928 from the collection of the Jewish Museum in Riga also shows him in a pensive pose alongside colleagues in rather more performative stances at a gathering of the Latvian Jewish Artists Society (Fig. 6).

<sup>81</sup> “Балетмейстер Словина С.Д.,” accessed 4 November 2021, <https://sites.google.com/site/cultkhakasia/7-kultura-hakasi/muzyka-hakasi/baletmejster-slovina-s-d>. I am grateful to Jeremy Howard for directing me to this information.

<sup>82</sup> “Rīgas grafiķu biedrība...,” *Latvijas Grāmatrūpniecības Apskats*, no. 4 (1 October 1928): 10. I am indebted to Irēna Bužinska from the Latvian National Art Museum for directing me to this article and for translating it. See also Suzanne Pourchier-Plasseraud, *Arts and a Nation. The Role of Visual Arts and Artists in the Making of the Latvian Identity 1905–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 332, on the Association of Riga Graphic Artists.



**Fig. 7:** The memorial wall of the Riga Ghetto Museum, photograph taken April 2017.

Vespremie evidently found some sense of community in Latvia and appears to have settled into his new life both professionally and personally, more so than in the other places he had lived and worked. In May 1931, he was married once more to Gisela Freudenberg, the daughter of a merchant from Kuldiga, and three years later he obtained his Latvian citizenship. By 1932 he was earning 250 lats a month and was considered “capable of supporting himself and his family” by the Latvian authorities.<sup>83</sup> He does not appear to have had children from either his first or his second marriage, and thus no personal archive is known to have survived.<sup>84</sup> Apart from the documents in the Latvian national archives, one of the few traces left by the Vespremie family are the names Andrej and Gisela on the memorial wall of the Riga Ghetto Museum (Fig. 7), alongside a photograph of Vespremie and his fellow teachers at the Ezra Gymnasium, a fitting remembrance for a gifted pedagogue.

<sup>83</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, 3234/ 2 /25150. For comparison, a daily newspaper in Riga in 1932 was priced at about 0.10 lats.

<sup>84</sup> A descendant from another branch of Gisela’s family informed me that neither Gisela nor her sister had any children.



**Fig. 8:** The Academy of Decorative Arts commercial section in *Universul literar* XLII, no. 47, 21 November 1926.



**Fig. 9:** The Academy of Decorative Arts commercial section, 1926. Romanian National Art Museum.



**Fig. 10:** The Academy of Decorative Arts commercial section, 1926. Romanian National Art Museum.



**Fig. 11:** The Academy of Decorative Arts commercial section, 1926. Romanian National Art Museum.

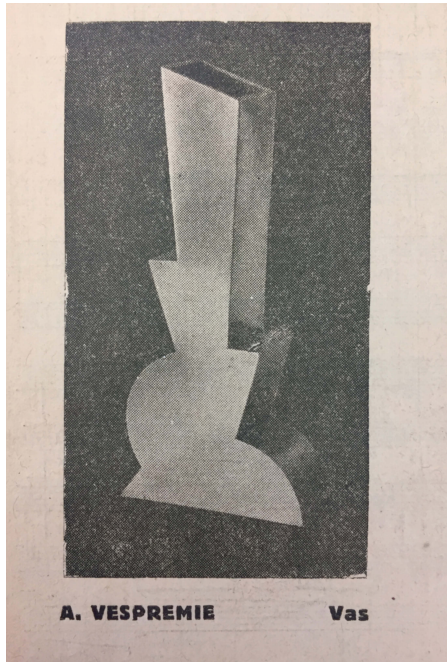
# THE WORKSHOPS OF THE ACADEMY OF DECORATIVE ARTS

While the previous chapter surveyed the careers of Vespremie and Maxy, with their convergences and divergences, the current chapter presents the first in-depth exploration of the work they produced within the sphere of the Academy of Decorative Arts. Although the Academy offered as many as seventeen disciplines for study, according to its 1926 course catalogue, many of these have left few real traces and it is debatable whether they all gathered sufficient numbers of students in order to proceed. However, based on archival images and on items that have survived in various museum and private collections, it is possible to closely examine four of the main workshops, all of which functioned throughout the Academy's entire life and which were closely linked to both Maxy and Vespremie: metalwork, bookbinding, graphic arts, and textiles.

The close reading of these objects is the result of a lengthy research process that involved examining hundreds of issues of newspapers, magazines, and other publications from this period, and tracking down dispersed items, some miscatalogued or misattributed. I discovered that the Academy's visual traces could be found not only in avant-garde magazines such as *Integral*, *Contimporanul*, and *unu*, but also in cultural publications such as *Puntea de fildeș*, *Țiparnița literară* and *Universul literar* (Fig. 8). To my knowledge, the Academy's presence in the latter publication has never been discussed in scholarship, and there may well be other photographs waiting to be uncovered in the period press.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, some of the images in *Universul literar* are already known from the contents of the M. H. Maxy archive at the Romanian National Art Museum, which contains several high-quality photographs of the Academy's commercial section, probably taken in October 1926 (Figs. 9–11). In these images it is possible to distinguish individual objects, as well as observing how they were exhibited together as modern design ensembles (an aspect discussed in detail in the chapter on the Academy's commercial section). The physical output of the Academy has been more challenging to trace, as few museums in Romania contain such items in their collections. Notable exceptions are the M. H. Maxy collection at the Brăila Museum, which contains twenty-three applied art objects by the artist, and the collection of arts patron Ion Minulescu which is still intact as part of his memorial home in Bucharest. Furthermore, I was able to access some items currently held in private collections. Throughout this research process my goal was to gather together a body of works related to the Academy's activities, and to examine the circumstances in which they were produced and by whom. Thus, the approach taken in this chapter is one of close looking rather than a focus on the wider context of the modern applied

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1 The images appear scattered throughout *Universul literar* XLII, no. 47 (21 November 1926).



**Fig. 12:** Andrei Vespremie, vase, illustrated in *Integral*, no. 9, December 1926.



**Fig. 13:** M. H. Maxy, vase, metal (possibly silver-plated), 40 × 5.5 × 23 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

arts at this time. In choosing this approach, my hope is that the objects themselves can act as a tool against historical erasure and make manifest the legacy of the Academy and the contribution of its creator, Andrei Vespremie.

## The Metal Workshop

The metal workshop constitutes one of the most suitable case studies for shedding light on the activities of the Academy including its origins, outputs and legacy. Thanks to their durability, metal objects connected to the Academy have survived in greater numbers than other items and can be found in public and private collections in Romania and abroad. Furthermore, visual material from the period seems to be more plentiful in the case of metal objects, which appear frequently in avant-garde journals and publications.

Similarly to his contribution to the creation of the Academy, Vespremie's metalwork is challenging to recover and to disentangle from that of Maxy. In December 1926, a photograph in *Integral* captioned "A. Vespremie" shows an asymmetric vase constructed from geometric shapes (Fig.12). The combination of sharp angles and





**Fig. 14:** M. H. Maxy, bowl, hammered brass, 15 × 25 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

smooth curves and the verticality of the composition lends it a strongly modernist aesthetic, as does the interplay of light on the reflective metal. The vase also appears on the cover of *Integral*'s ninth issue, in a promotional photograph of the Academy's selling exhibition.<sup>2</sup> Its caption reads: "Modern Interior by M. H. Maxy: Furniture, Cushions, Carpets, Paintings." The authorship of the vase is announced inside the journal, but the cover gives no indication that the Academy's display is a collaborative project containing objects by other artists, a problematic approach that raises questions about artistic autonomy within the institution.

The largest collection of objects by Maxy currently in existence is housed at the Brăila Museum, in the artist's birth town. It was donated to the museum by Mimi Șaraga-Maxy, the artist's second wife who emigrated to Israel in 1982, a decade after Maxy's death.<sup>3</sup> These are the objects that remained in the Maxy household and, as evidenced by the presence of wear and tear, were in frequent use by the family. The direct provenance means that their authorship has never been questioned, and yet, like the cover image of *Integral*, they may conceal unrecognised contributions. No scholar has yet remarked upon the close kinship of a vase from this collection (Fig. 13) with Vespremie's 1926 exhibit (Fig. 12).<sup>4</sup> Although the Brăila object has two containers that unite at the base instead of one, its overall shape exhibits the same combination of jagged and curved edges and the same diagonally-cut rectangular mouth. The Brăila vase is incised with Maxy's signature, discounting a possible misattribution, nonetheless the formal similarities suggest a close connection with Vespremie's work. In the magazine *Tiparnița literară* of January 1929, a further image exists of a Maxy

<sup>2</sup> *Integral*, no. 9 (December 1926).

<sup>3</sup> Alina-Ruxandra Mircea, "Arhitectura, mașina și interiorul modernist," *Arhitectura*, no. 2 (644) (2013): 42–47, 44. Mircea reveals that while the majority of artworks were donated in 1982, four objects had been purchased by the Museum from Șaraga-Maxy in 1978. Two pieces by Maxy also entered the museum's inventory as part of other collections, namely the Hariton Harmina collection (an acquisition from 1981) and the Margareta Sterian collection (a donation from 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Inventory no. 1069, Brăila Museum.



**Fig. 15:** M. H. Maxy, bowl, hammered brass, 15 × 35 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

vase that appears to be from the same series, and which exhibits an even more similar shaping to Vespremie's object.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Maxy's reputation as an innovator in Romanian applied arts, evidence places Vespremie as the originator of this series of objects. Firstly, he received specialist training in metalwork at the Schule Reimann and excelled in this field, according to his report card.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, his skill in metalwork was documented in the contemporary press, both in Ștefan I. Nenițescu's article on the Academy's opening in 1924, and in a review by Petru Comarnescu of the 1926 selling exhibition.<sup>7</sup> The latter article specified that the metal objects on display were "made after the blueprints of Mr. Andrei Vespremie," leaving no doubt about their authorship. Neither Comarnescu nor the 1926 exhibition catalogue (see Appendix B) attributed any metal objects to Maxy at that point in time.<sup>8</sup> Altogether, the above evidence suggests not only that Vespremie designed the first prototypes of this series of objects, but that he may have been instrumental in introducing Maxy to the techniques of modern metalwork.

<sup>5</sup> *Tiparnița literară* I, no. 3 (January 1929): 68.

<sup>6</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, fond 1632, inv. 1, file 23144.

<sup>7</sup> Ștefan I. Nenițescu, "Arta decorativă," in *Scriseri de istoria artei și de critică plastică*, ed. Adina Nanu (București: Institutul Cultural Român, 2008), 129–130 (originally published in *Ideea europeană*, 19–26 October 1924); Petru Comarnescu, "Expoziția Academiei artelor decorative," *Rampa*, 3 November 1926.

<sup>8</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*, exh. cat. (București: Academia Artelor Decorative, 1926).



**Fig. 16:** M. H. Maxy, bowl, hammered brass, 14 × 33.3 cm, undated. Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

This hypothesis can be supported by a further example, involving a different series of metal objects. Several distinctively shaped brass fruit bowls and trays constitute a connecting trail from the metal workshops of the Schule Reimann to the showrooms of the Academy and finally to the home of a collector that has been preserved as a museum until the present day. Perhaps these items were particularly popular, as several are still in existence today and invariably attributed to Maxy. In Romanian public collections there are at least seven such objects: two in the Brăila Museum, one at the Romanian National Art Museum and four in the memorial home of Ion Minulescu, an important patron of the Academy.<sup>9</sup> These items are made of brass and share a similar shaping obtained by combining curved or cylindrical forms and sometimes adopting a stylised floral motif. The two bowls in the Brăila Museum appear to be less accomplished and may thus be the earliest examples of Maxy's metalwork. One item is a very simple construction of one large half-sphere on top of a smaller half-sphere that serves as a base (Fig. 14). The upper section of the second item resembles a flower open in full bloom, with a petal-shaped rim, while the base is also circular but flatter than the first item. Both objects exhibit a certain asymmetry, which may or may not be intentional, as well as evidence of repairs that have been carried out. They have been marked with Maxy's name in a manner that once again suggests an early dating. The flower-shaped bowl lacks the artist's distinctive cursive signature, having been hallmarked with a rectangular struck mark that incorporates the name "M. H. Maxy" in evenly shaped capital letters (Fig. 15).<sup>10</sup> The uncertain craftsmanship of these items entertains the possibility that they were handmade by Maxy, in an

<sup>9</sup> Brăila Museum: inventory nos. 1262, 1263; Romanian National Art Museum: inventory no. 95784/3253; Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum: inventory nos. 302, 303, 304, 305.

<sup>10</sup> This is the most common method for hallmarking metals. The struck mark is made using a metal



**Fig. 17:** M. H. Maxy or Andrei Vespremie, tray, hammered brass, 2.5 × 39.3 cm, undated. Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

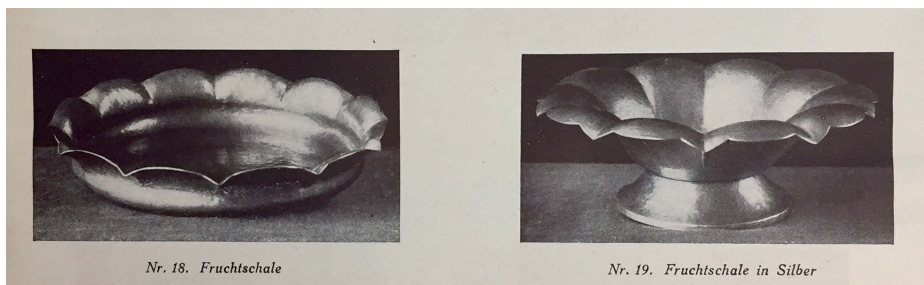
attempt to understand the specificities of metalwork. Although documentation on the Academy’s pedagogical programme and its 1926 exhibition suggest a separation between the design process and the making process, occasional experimentation may have taken place in the workshops. Furthermore, Vespremie himself had worked in the workshops of the Schule Reimann and was versed in both designing and making objects, thus being able to instruct Maxy.

The contrast between the pieces in the Brăila Museum with the metal bowl in the collection of the Romanian National Art Museum is particularly evident. This object is symmetrically and confidently shaped, with fully rounded “petals” that form the rim expanding outwards elegantly. Four other objects in the Ion Minulescu collection are equally accomplished, in particular another bowl with a faceted upper section and a conical base incised with Maxy’s cursive signature (Fig. 16). The other items are two circular trays with decorative rims (Fig. 17) and a matching large wide bowl. None of these items is signed, yet the two trays—but not the large bowl—are attributed to Maxy in the museum’s inventory. The formal vocabulary, materials and techniques used to produce these objects exhibit a certain consistency that might perhaps suggest a single maker.

Nonetheless, photographs from the period raise certain doubts. In one image from the Academy’s 1926 exhibition two similar items appear, high on a shelf in the left-hand corner of the imagined modernist living room (Fig. 9). These are two flower-shaped bowls with conical bases, most similar to the signed bowl from the Minulescu collection (Fig. 16). Careful comparison however reveals that neither of the objects in the photograph can be this particular bowl, especially due to the wider, more robust,

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punch which is hammered into the object. The edges of the punch, which is usually a rectangular shape, thus become a visible part of the hallmark.



**Fig. 18:** Andrei Vespremie (?), tray and bowl illustrated in *Farbe und Form*, November 1921.

bases. Trays with decorative rims can also be glimpsed in pictures of the exhibition—one concealed on a shelf in the lower left-hand corner of an image (Fig. 11), the other taking pride of place atop a small corner bureau together with its matching metal bowl (Fig. 8). As there is no evidence that Maxy exhibited any metal objects in this exhibition, the authorship of the objects in the photographs is not as clear as the surviving items suggest. The decisive piece of evidence comes from the December 1923 issue of the *Schule Reimann* magazine, *Farbe und Form*. In an illustrated spread about the metal workshop, two fruit bowls with unmistakably similar features appear, their faceted spherical containers immediately recognisable.<sup>11</sup> In an earlier *Farbe und Form* spread in November 1921, coinciding with Vespremie's presence at the Reimann, another similar fruit bowl appears, together with a deep circular tray with a lobed rim which strongly resembles one of the items in the Ion Minulescu collection (Fig. 18).<sup>12</sup> While none of the images indicate the identity of the maker or the designer, it may be safely deduced that these items are by Vespremie or, if not, that they at least represent the preferred style of the Reimann metal workshop in the early 1920s. In either case, it was a style that Vespremie was responsible for bringing to Bucharest, proving once more that not only was he the originator of this series of fruit bowls and trays, but that he was also Maxy's instructor in the art of metalwork.

If, so far, careful examination of existing objects and historical sources has shown that the relationship between Vespremie and Maxy needs to be rewritten, another example from the Minulescu museum demonstrates how Maxy's authorship has been attributed even when evidence indicates otherwise. The collection contains a metal tray hallmarked with Vespremie's own name, the only object in existence so far known

<sup>11</sup> "Treibarbeiten aus der Metallwerkstatt der Schule Reimann," *Farbe und Form* (December 1923): 43–46.

<sup>12</sup> "Treibarbeiten aus der Metallwerkstatt der Schule Reimann," *Farbe und Form* (November 1921): 101–108. Furthermore, the metalwork display of the Schule Reimann at a 1924 Frankfurt trade fair, also pictured in the magazine, contained several trays and bowls with the same characteristic design. See *Farbe und Form* (October 1924): 71.



**Fig. 19:** Andrei Vespremie, tray, metal (possibly brass), 2.2 × 47.5 × 47.5 cm, c.1924–1927. Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

known to be undoubtedly by his hand (Fig. 19). Within the museum’s inventory the tray has been attributed to Maxy, despite the hallmark and the uncharacteristic style.<sup>13</sup> Square-shaped and heavy, with a coppery patina, it has the robust quality suggested by period images of Vespremie’s work. The struck mark itself, punched into all four edges underneath the rim, spells “A. Vespremi” in the same graphic style and font as the non-discursive mark found on one of the Maxy items at the Brăila Museum (Fig. 15). This seems to suggest that the Brăila objects are indeed early attempts at designing metalwork by Maxy, probably within the workshops of the Academy, replicating various aspects of Vespremie’s own styling. Such a mark is not known to appear on any other Maxy items in existence, the artist having thereafter developed his own cursive style hallmark that resembled his handwritten signature (Fig. 16).

Vespremie’s skill was in fact remarkably versatile. A series of objects that does not find echo in Maxy’s work can be attributed to Vespremie through a number of period photographs. The December 1923 issue of *Farbe und Form* has an illustration of a nine-branched candelabrum crafted from openwork metal probably depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Fig. 20).<sup>14</sup> A male and a female figure can be distinguished surrounded by luxuriant foliage skilfully fashioned in a stylised manner. Although *Farbe und Form* gives no indication of the authorship of this work, several similar

<sup>13</sup> Inventory no. 562, Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

<sup>14</sup> In Jewish religious practice the menorah is a candelabrum with seven branches. The nine-branch version is known as a Hanukkah menorah or a Chanukkiah and is used during the Hanukkah holiday. A new branch is lit on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, while the ninth branch is used to hold the candle that lights the rest. The illustrations in *Farbe und Form* are captioned with the more generic description “Leuchter” or candelabrum, and I have used this term also.



**Fig. 20:** Andrei Vespremie, openwork candelabrum illustrated in *Farbe und Form*, December 1923.

items appear in photographs of the Academy's 1926 exhibition. A candelabrum fashioned from openwork metal is visible on top of a chest of drawers, decorated with two female figures reclining amongst rich foliage (Fig. 11).<sup>15</sup> This particular object appears to be electric: instead of candles, the supports hold candle shaped light bulbs and a cable is visible coiled up near its base. A further extremely accomplished example was part of a commission from oil magnate Micu Zentler who requested a radiator cover in Vespremie's distinctive openwork design, visible in the centre of another image (Fig. 10). No figures were present in this composition, in which vine leaves, flowers, bunches of grapes and an amphora coiled together gracefully. The connection between the image in the *Schule Reimann* magazine and the photographs of the Academy's exhibition confirm that Vespremie was the author of this series of objects. Further confirmation comes from Nenişescu's 1924 article on the opening of the Academy. He praised Vespremie's metalwork that deftly conjured up "people and animals of all kinds, and birds, and fantastical creatures."<sup>16</sup>

The whereabouts of the items described above are unfortunately not known, but smaller, more delicate openwork items produced at the Academy have survived and are currently part of a private collection. Coincidentally, they represent both the sacred and the profane. A half-nude female figure reclining amongst stylised vegetation was probably intended as a brooch or a similar piece of costume jewellery.

<sup>15</sup> A photograph of this object also appears in the magazine *Puntea de fildeş*, together with an openwork lampshade, both captioned with Vespremie's name. See *Puntea de fildeş*, no. 2 (May 1926): 13 and 27.

<sup>16</sup> Nenişescu, *Scrieri de istoria artei*, 130.



Fig. 21: Andrei Vespremie, openwork jewellery, brass, 7 × 9 cm, c.1924–1927. Private collection.

A modern woman, she has bobbed hair and a garter visible underneath her short flapper-style skirt (Fig. 21). Equally intricate is a miniature openwork menorah which acts as a bookmark for a volume bound in the workshops of the Academy, and which will be shortly discussed in the section on bookbinding. Thoughtfully designed, its seven candle flames join together to create a slit for the ribbon that acts as a page divider. These two items, attributed by Michael Ilk in his monograph to Maxy, are much more likely to be the work of Vespremie, reflecting the style and technique of openwork he produced.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, *Farbe und Form* provides evidence once again, illustrating several items with such delicate openwork in its November 1921 issue.<sup>18</sup> There are small lighting fixtures, jewellery items and even bottle stoppers, as well as an ivory brooch—another material that Vespremie is known to have used—decorated with a similarly shaped reclining nude. The final clue is provided by one of the images of the Academy’s selling exhibition (Fig. 11). At least six small openwork items are exhibited, their hexagonal shape suggesting they might be holders for letters or maybe candles. Although similar in form, they vary in the fantastical landscapes they depict. On the windowsill, one of them is accompanied by a barely legible label, where the

<sup>17</sup> Michael Ilk, *Maxy. Der integrale Künstler* (Ludwigshafen: Michael Ilk, 2003), 194 and 212.

<sup>18</sup> “Treibarbeiten aus der Metallwerkstatt der Schule Reimann,” *Farbe und Form* (November 1921): 101–108.



name Vespremie can be deciphered underneath the word “metal.” Vespremie’s skill with openwork metal thus extended to objects of various sizes, shapes and levels of intricacy.

Both the openwork and the metal dishes discussed above suggest a stylistic link to the work of the Wiener Werkstätte. Bowls, platters and containers with similarly faceted, fluted, and bulbous shapes by Josef Hoffmann appeared in the Kunstschau 1920 exhibition in Vienna, alongside metal and ivory objects decorated with figures and foliage expertly rendered in openwork by Dagobert Peche. The exhibition was held from June to September 1920 at the Austrian Museum for Art and Industry in Vienna and “the arts and crafts section was almost entirely provided by the Wiener Werkstätte and artists closely connected with it.”<sup>19</sup> It is conceivable that Vespremie may have visited this exhibition on his way to Berlin, where he arrived some time before October 1920. Vespremie’s skill in ivory is also documented in his report card from the Schule Reimann and he may well have found inspiration in Peche’s designs for elaborate jewellery. He later included jewellery-making in his ivorywork course at the Academy, and it is perhaps conceivable that he also adapted these intricate and fantastical designs for larger scale metal objects. In any case, the work of the Werkstätte must have been well known to staff at the Schule Reimann, especially as both institutions had been active since the early years of the twentieth century and information circulated through periodicals. For example, in April 1923 the journal *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* included illustrated articles on both the Werkstätte and Peche, showing objects that suggest a close kinship with the work of Maxy and Vespremie.<sup>20</sup> As well as the stylistic similarities, there is an even more secure link. Peche posthumously appeared in the list of exhibitors to the Academy’s 1926 display, his name marked with a cross to indicate his death three years earlier.<sup>21</sup> He is the only exhibitor not connected to the Romanian artistic milieu, and his presence is thus a mystery. In the exhibition catalogue (see Appendix B), he is credited with the “modern lace” on display, which can be glimpsed in some of the photographs, for example amongst the objects displayed on the windowsill of one room (Fig. 11).

In contrast to this more expressionist output, Vespremie also produced objects in a constructivist vein. In July 1926, and thus before the collaboration with Maxy had officially begun, *Contimporanul* printed an image of a “Lamp-Construction” designed by Vespremie (Fig. 22). The photograph shows the multi-functional objects twice: in its compact state, resembling a tall cubist construction, and fully extended, with components such as a clock, an ashtray and an inkwell unfurling out of its vertical

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<sup>19</sup> Werner J. Schweiger, *Wiener Werkstätte. Design in Viena 1903–1932* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 108.

<sup>20</sup> Adolf Vetter, “20 Jahre Wiener Werkstätte,” *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (April 1923): 86–99; Schr., “Dagobert Peche,” *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* (May 1923): 100–105.

<sup>21</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*.

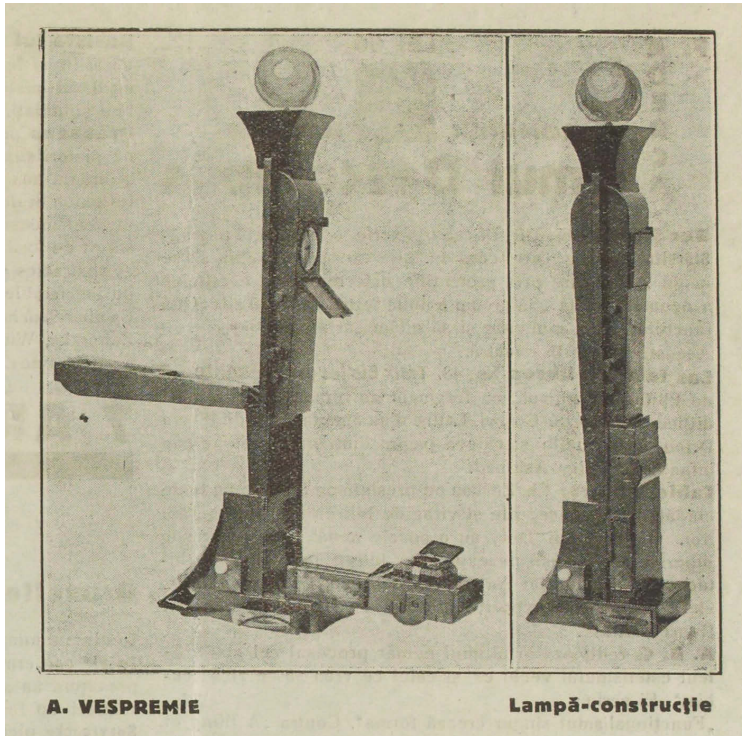


Fig. 22: Andrei Vespremie, multi-functional lamp illustrated in *Contimporanul*, no. 68, July 1926.

frame. The lamp's bulb is not covered by a shade, ensuring maximum light and eschewing an unfunctional decorative touch. Vespremie's lamp was much admired by the reviewer of the newspaper *Dimineața*, who remarked on its "numerous and minuscule compartments" that can hold "all that is necessary for writing," as well as on the virtuosity of the artist's "decorative candelabrum" and a jewellery box that "attracted the attention of fashionable ladies."<sup>22</sup> Vespremie's wide repertoire of forms and styles dates, as we have seen, from his time in Germany. The Schule Reimann's metal workshop was led by Karl Heubler, a former pupil of Peter Behrens, who had been active at the Reimann since 1905.<sup>23</sup> An important part of the school from the beginning, especially as Albert Reimann had an interest in metalwork himself, the department grew in prominence during the 1920s, with classes available six days a week. The output of the workshop also changed stylistically, moving away from an expressionist, decorative vocabulary towards a more functional, clean aesthetic.<sup>24</sup> By

<sup>22</sup> Fulmen, "Deschiderea expoziției de arte decorative," *Dimineața*, 27 October 1926.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Reimann, *25 Jahre Schule Reimann 1902–1927* (Berlin: Farbe und Form, 1927), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Swantje Kuhfuss-Wickenheiser, *Die Reimann-Schule in Berlin und London 1902–1943. Ein jüdisches*

1930, on the occasion of a Schule Reimann exhibition in New York, the *Art Digest* could write that:

The Reimann School of Berlin [is] one of Germany's foremost industrial schools... Although it is a private enterprise, this German school follows the same policy that has made the German Kunst-Gewerbe (sic) school a significant cultural and economic force. The students learn not only the technique and theory of design, but a definite philosophy of life as well, for they are taught to rationalise the modern spirit and apply it to life about them and to sense the aesthetic of the machine age... Copying and adapting period motives is not permissible—they must go to the life about them for ideas... 'Executed by the Reimann School Workshops' has come to be synonymous with a personal interpretation of the modern spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Although Vespremie's period at the Reimann had ended well before 1930, the school's determination to capture the spirit of the time had been part of its ethos from the beginning. Vespremie may have "gone to the life about him" to conceive his multi-functional object, which finds a possible precedent in a wall-mounted lamp by Carl Jacob Jucker presented at the Bauhaus exhibition of 1923. Providing only one function, yet innovative in its streamlined design and enhanced mobility, Jucker's lamp could adapt to the needs of its user just like Vespremie's. Whether Vespremie did go to the exhibition in Weimar—he was probably still in Germany in the autumn of 1923—perhaps with colleagues from the Reimann, is impossible to determine with any certainty. Images did however circulate and may have also provided the inspiration for the photographic treatment of Vespremie's lamp: illustrated in two positions that demonstrate its versatility, it mirrors the image of Jucker's lamp in the Bauhaus exhibition catalogue.<sup>26</sup>

No lamps attributed to Maxy are found in Romanian museums, but two such objects were illustrated in *Tiparnița literară* in late 1928 and early 1929.<sup>27</sup> They do not appear to be multi-functional, but they are certainly sculptural and intricate, containing materials that we have not yet encountered in the context of the Academy, such as wrought iron, parchment and possibly frosted glass. These must have been the objects that Ion Vinea referred to, writing in *Contimporanul* of January 1929, when he observed that in the Academy's workshops "an electric lamp can be a small monument."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, one of the lamps appears to be based on the *Monument to the March Dead* erected by Walter Gropius in the Weimar Central cemetery, which Maxy

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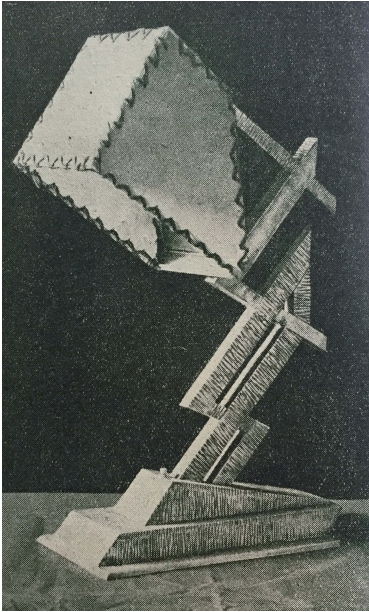
*Unternehmen zur Kunst- und Designausbildung internationaler Prägung bis zur Vernichtung durch das Hitlerregime* (Aachen: Shaker Media, 2009), 269.

<sup>25</sup> Dedo von Kerksenbrock-Krosigk, *Modern Art of Metalwork. Bröhan-Museum, State Museum of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Functionalism (1889–1939)* (Berlin: Bröhan Museum, 2001), 280, quoting *Art Digest*, no. 6 (15 December 1930): 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar 1919–1923*, exh. cat. (Weimar-München: Bauhaus, 1923), 116.

<sup>27</sup> *Tiparnița literară* I, no. 2 (November 1928): 48; *Tiparnița literară* I, no. 3 (January 1929): 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ion Vinea, "Interiorul nou," *Contimporanul*, no. 78 (January 1929): 1.



**Fig. 23:** M. H. Maxy, lamp illustrated in *Tiparnița literară* I, no. 3, January 1929.

had probably seen in 1922 and which had also been illustrated in *Contimporanul* in April 1923. The vertical agglomeration of triangular shapes is unmistakable, as is the pointed upward motion. Maxy added a cubic shape to the wedge-shaped elements, enclosing the light bulb in parchment held together with stitching that is both decorative and functional (Fig. 23).

As these lamps demonstrate, Maxy's own career in the applied arts continued after Vespremie's departure in 1927, although given the scarcity of information about the latter artist's output, it is challenging to separate clearly the objects produced under Vespremie's influence from those that were not. Metal objects produced by Maxy that have at present no equivalent in Vespremie's work include tea services and small containers that display a strongly linear cubist style. The objects appear to be constructed from geometric elements, an aspect that is especially evident where ornament is involved. For example, a small container from the Brăila Museum that might be an ashtray or a sugar container has been decorated with strips of metal arranged in different patterns that complement its collage-like cubist aesthetic (Fig. 24).<sup>29</sup> The object itself, essentially a simple tubular shape, gains interest through an interplay of presence and absence enacted with the surrounding space. Sections have been both cut out and added to the rim and the base of the object, yet its overall shape has been preserved, so that the viewer perceives the object as a recognisable whole whose parts have shifted in a game of hide-and-seek with the surrounding

<sup>29</sup> Inventory no. 1270, Brăila Museum.

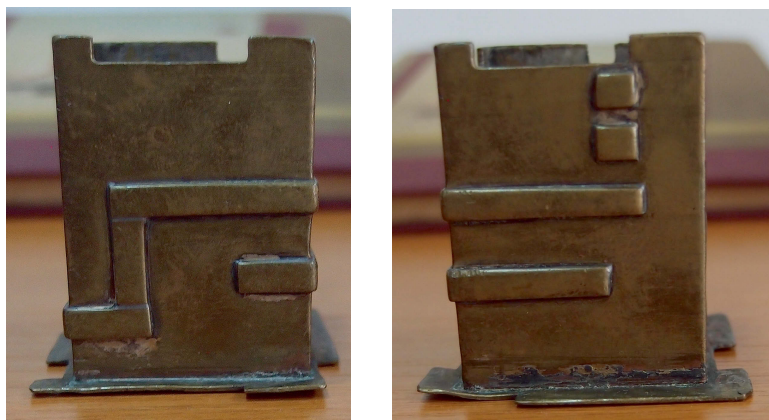


Fig. 24: M. H. Maxy, small container, brass, 4.3 × 4 × 4 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

space. This aspect is shared by other Maxy designs in the Brăila collection: a bookcase and a side table that both contain metal elements within their wooden frames and that re-enact the same withdrawal and expansion within the surrounding space on a larger scale, their corners protruding and retreating in turn.<sup>30</sup> The side table takes this further by incorporating a removable metal tray that leaves behind a gap in the wooden frame when lifted out (Fig. 25). The shape of the metal tray is further mirrored by an ashtray that exhibits the same rectangular yet asymmetric form, revealing a certain unity of design.<sup>31</sup>

Maxy also designed tea accoutrements, even winning a gold medal at the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition for one particular set.<sup>32</sup> Shown in a photograph in *Tiparnița literară*, it consisted of a teapot, milk and sugar pots, sugar tongs and a tray.<sup>33</sup> The three containers are in this case composed of curvilinear elements, the main form being that of a bell shape, in three different sizes, which seamlessly integrates the lid. The teapot's spout displays a decorative flourish of zig-zagging linear elements encased within its curvature. The teapot and the sugar tongs have equivalents in the Brăila collection which were probably earlier incarnations of the object presented in Barcelona.<sup>34</sup> The teapot is not hallmarked and was kept by the Maxy family for regular use as indicated by the limescale deposits inside the spout and the extent to which the silver plating has worn off (Fig. 25). It may have been used in conjunction with the silver-plated sugar tongs in the collection that have also been subjected to wear and tear. The cubist influence is very evident in this object whose

<sup>30</sup> Inventory nos. 1273 and 1274, Brăila Museum.

<sup>31</sup> Inventory no. 1269, Brăila Museum.

<sup>32</sup> Ilk, *Maxy*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Tiparnița literară* I, no. 2 (November 1928): 49.

<sup>34</sup> Inventory nos. 1264 and 1265, Brăila Museum.



**Fig. 25:** M. H. Maxy, table with removable tray and teapot, both undated. Table: wood and metal, 50 × 50 × 35 cm. Teapot: silver plated brass, 18 × 15 × 28 cm. Brăila Museum.



**Fig. 26:** M. H. Maxy, Teapot and sugar tongs, both undated. Teapot: silver-plated brass and wood, 19 × 6.5 × 6.5 cm. Tongs: silver-plated brass, 4 × 14 cm. Brăila Museum.

design suggests a patchwork of geometric elements that have been superimposed to create a shape that fans out elegantly. Both the sugar tongs and a rectangular teapot with a diagonal wooden handle, also in the collection, have been conceived so as to emphasise the combination of different elements from which they are constructed (Fig. 26).<sup>35</sup> Maxy's signature is prominently displayed on both these objects, indicating perhaps that these were items with which he was sufficiently satisfied.

The same playful yet intricate design elements can be seen in a metal box, probably a tobacco container, in the memorial house museum of the writer Liviu Rebreanu (Fig. 27).<sup>36</sup> The apartment neighbouring that of Ion Minulescu belonged to Rebreanu and his family, who preferred a more traditional style of interior decoration. Thus, the presence of Maxy's tobacco box is quite unusual and may conceivably have been a gift, perhaps from Minulescu himself. The object is constructed from a wooden box that has been encased in metal. The lid is reminiscent of a cubist collage and when viewed from above exhibits the same playful spatial interaction evident in the objects from the Brăila Museum. Even the underside of the lid, although undecorated, has been manipulated through the addition of a band of metal to engage asymmetrically with

<sup>35</sup> Inventory no. 1267, Brăila Museum.

<sup>36</sup> Inventory no. 117, Fanny and Liviu Rebreanu Memorial House Museum.



**Fig. 27:** M. H. Maxy, tobacco box, brass and wood, 4.5 × 10.0 × 18.5 cm, undated. Fanny and Liviu Rebreanu Memorial House Museum.

the wood visible underneath. Thin strips of metal have been added to the edges of the box, protruding outwards. Maxy produced other such rectangular boxes decorated with collaged metal shapes, and several survive in private collections. Vespremie's own small containers are distinguishable from those of Maxy. Some had rotund shapes and shiny hammered brass surfaces that rendered them highly tactile, especially as the lids were topped with strange handles shaped like miniature flora and fauna. For instance, two such containers illustrated in the Schule Reimann's magazine *Farbe und Form* were playfully decorated with paw-shaped supports (Fig. 28) and a handle in the form of a toad.<sup>37</sup> A similar item can be glimpsed in the Academy's 1926 exhibition, to the right of Vespremie's multi-functional lamp, on the same display shelf (Fig. 11). Near the top of that same display cabinet, a small square box decorated with a relief of a leaping four-legged animal is another example of Vespremie's work. It finds an equivalent both in the Schule Reimann's magazine (Fig. 28) and in Ion Minulescu's collection, so that this latter item can now emerge from its anonymity (Fig. 29).<sup>38</sup> The style of the relief with its reclined nude figure, as well as the decorative flourishes on the edges of the box's lid are features that link this object with those from the historical images. Embossed on the front of this item is the year 1924, corroborating yet again the possibility that Ion Minulescu was a patron of the Academy long before Maxy's involvement. This metal box can join the other objects in this chapter that form Vespremie's increasing corpus of works. It is now possible, when looking at images of

<sup>37</sup> *Farbe und Form* (November 1921): 104, *Farbe und Form* (December 1923): 46.

<sup>38</sup> Inventory no. 438, Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.



**Fig. 28:** Andrei Vespremie or Schule Reimann workshop, small containers illustrated in *Farbe und Form*, December 1923.

the Academy's 1926 exhibition (Figs. 8–11), to pinpoint Vespremie's distinctive work among the exhibits, no longer subsumed to that of Maxy.

## The Bookbinding Workshop

Like metalwork, bookbinding is another area of the Academy where the boundaries between Vespremie and Maxy are blurred. Vespremie was certainly the initiator of the bookbinding workshop and its activity. According to his Reimann report card, bookbinding was one of the subjects he excelled at during his time at the school. His instructor was Reinhold Maetzke, who had been in charge of this class since 1913.<sup>39</sup> Comparatively little is known about this class and its output was not often celebrated in *Farbe und Form*, as was the case with the metalwork workshop. Nonetheless, bookbinding was one of the courses offered at the Academy from its inception in 1924 and remained one of its main pedagogical offerings after the 1926 restructuring. It was taught by Vespremie with the support of E. Bonyhay, an artisan who led the workshop activities. Bonyhay's name, which indicates a Hungarian origin, also appears in the exhibition listings as the maker of Vespremie's bookbinding designs, but nothing

<sup>39</sup> Reimann, *25 Jahre Schule Reimann*, 11.





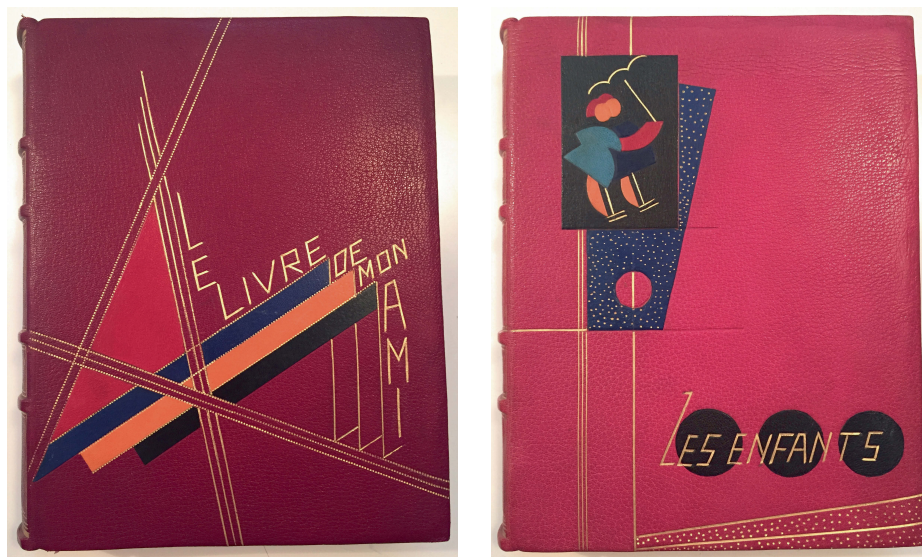
**Fig. 29:** Andrei Vespremie, small container, brass, 5.5 × 8 × 12.5 cm, 1924. Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

else is known about him. The techniques taught in the Academy's bookbinding workshop included use of parchment, leather, cloth, card and decorative paper, as well as gold leaf application. Special classes were available for advanced students or even professional craftsmen, suggesting that a high level of pedagogical skill was on offer.<sup>40</sup>

A significant number of books bound in the Academy's workshops have survived, all of them attributed to Maxy. Yet there is no evidence of Maxy engaging in this activity before 1927. He certainly did not exhibit any bound books in the Academy's debut exhibition in October 1926. He must have found the activity attractive however, as he did metalwork design, learning whatever Vespremie had to teach. By the summer of 1927, the Academy, now under the directorship of Maxy, had done away with its extensive curriculum, keeping only the metalwork and bookbinding workshops which still offered courses "for amateurs and professionals."<sup>41</sup> Maxy signed some of his bookbinding projects, so his authorship can be securely determined for at least

<sup>40</sup> The information on the workshop comes from the Academy's 1924 and 1926 promotional materials (see appendices A and B).

<sup>41</sup> Advertisement in *Integral*, no. 13–14 (June–July 1927): 14.



**Fig. 30:** M. H. Maxy, binding for Anatole France, *Oeuvres complètes: Les désirs de Jean Servien, Le livre de mon ami*, vol. III, and *Oeuvres complètes: Nos enfants, Balthasar*, vol. IV, leather and gold tooling, 26 × 20.5 cm, c.1928–1929. Private collection.

some of the surviving items. This is the case of four bound volumes stamped “Artele Decorative București” on the leather edging of their inside covers, three of which are also signed by Maxy’s hand underneath the stamped word “Proiect,” meaning “project” or design. The books, currently held in a private collection, belong to a series of Anatole France’s complete works that totalled twenty-five volumes and were published between 1925 and 1935 by the French publishing house Calmann-Lévy. This must have been a prestigious and probably expensive commission, not only because of the number of volumes and their size, but also due to the prominent inclusion of the client’s monogram on the spine and on the back cover of each book. The intertwined initials G. L. form the design of each volume’s verso, while the front covers contain compositions in a cubist style made of coloured leather and gold tooling (Fig. 30).<sup>42</sup> Artele Decorative (The Decorative Arts) was the new name for the Academy that Maxy began to use from early 1928, together with the subtitle Academy of Modern Applied Art, in an attempt to stamp his own artistic personality upon the enterprise. An example of bookbinding has also survived from the Studio Maxy period, the business that the artist opened after the closure of the Academy. This binding was made for the poet Ion Minulescu, an assiduous patron of the Academy, for one of his own volumes of poetry entitled *Strofe pentru toată lumea* (Verses for everyone), published in 1930.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> No information has come to light as to what G. L.’s identity might be.

<sup>43</sup> Inventory no. 630, Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

This contains the Studio Maxy stamp on the inside of the front cover, as well as the name of the artisan who made it on the back cover, a certain Kollarik.

In the modern age, the French artist Pierre Legrain (1889–1929) is acknowledged as one of the bookbinding craft's main innovators. As well as adapting the new abstract artistic vocabulary to binding, he began to compose design schemes as a whole rather than collating separate elements such as covers and spines and he also began to integrate the lettering of titles into his compositions rather than relegating them only to the spine. Other innovations included reflecting the book's contents in the design and using new materials such as metal alloys within the binding.<sup>44</sup> A closer look at Maxy's bookbindings discussed above reveals the use of many of these devices. The compositions are geometric, sectioned by straight lines and emulating collage techniques, and the contents of the volumes are often referenced by the bindings. For example, the binding for Minulescu's poetry collection is a patchwork of leather segments in complementary colours that surround the one figurative element, a reproduction of the vignette on the volume's title page by the artist Ioan Alexandru Brătescu-Voinești. The cover for France's *Nos enfants* (Our children) contains another figurative element realised from segments of bright leather, representing two stylised childish figures sheltering together under an umbrella (Fig. 30).<sup>45</sup> The decoration on France's *Le Livre de mon ami* (My friend's book) is an entirely abstract composition that incorporates the words of the title as part of its schematic design, expanding, tilting and shrinking the typeface for maximum effect (Fig. 30). Perhaps not coincidentally, André Bruel, a follower of Legrain, explained the importance of utilising the book's title and contents as part of a holistic approach that echoes the ethos of Integralism: "the bookbinder can use the title to give it the most appropriate form for the spirit of the book, by a juxtaposition of colors, by linear combination, by carefully chosen and appropriate ornament. Synthesis, the aim is always synthesis! It's the sign of our times."<sup>46</sup>

Although none of the surviving volumes has been signed or marked by Vespremie, it is possible that some were in fact designed by him. One such example belongs to the personal library of Ion Minulescu, a volume of his own poems entitled *Romanțe pentru mai târziu* (Songs for later) and published in 1908. The binding, which has been attributed to Maxy within the museum's inventory, exhibits a much more restrained style and palette and an unusual combination of cloth and artificial leather (Fig. 31).<sup>47</sup> The lettering design, both disrupted and shaped by the intersecting blocks of colour,

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<sup>44</sup> Alastair Duncan, Georges de Bartha, and Priscilla Juvelis, *Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding. The French Masterpieces, 1880–1940* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 18–20.

<sup>45</sup> On the front of the binding the title is incorrectly given as *Les enfants*, but on the spine it reverts to *Nos enfants*.

<sup>46</sup> Duncan, de Bartha and Juvelis, *Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Inventory no. 629, Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.



**Fig. 31:** Andrei Vespremie (?), binding for Ion Minulescu, *Romanțe pentru mai târziu*, cloth and artificial leather, 16.5 × 16.5 cm, c. 1924–1927. The Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

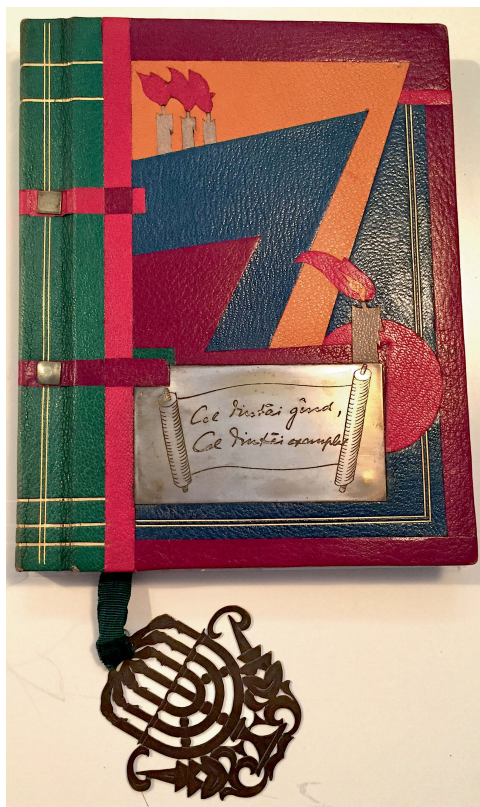
is similar to the logos and letterheads created by Vespremie for the Academy, which are discussed later in this chapter. A second volume of poetry by Minulescu from his own library, entitled *De vorbă cu mine însu-mi* (Conversing with myself), also displays some of the features described above.<sup>48</sup> Two principal shades of blue and cream are used for the design of the binding and whilst the lettering has been replaced by Minulescu's tell-tale circular glasses and cigar, distinctive colour blocking surrounds and disrupts the recognisable shapes. The binding for these volumes was perhaps designed by Vespremie, especially as it has already been shown that Minulescu collected his work.

A third example was either created by Vespremie or was a collaboration between him and Maxy (Fig. 32). It is a collection of short stories about Jewish life in a provincial Moldovan town by A. L. Zissu entitled *Spovendania unui candelabru* (The Confession of a candelabrum) which appeared in 1926 as part of a book series published under the umbrella of *Integral*. The volume has been bound in such a way as to reflect the book's content and title: the covers are decorated with lit candles and a metal plaque with a dedication incised onto a scroll that unfolds, like the Torah.<sup>49</sup> The addition of metal to leather and the insertion of block-coloured strips that traverse the spine to link the two covers demonstrate the makers' familiarity with Legrain's latest innovations of material and form. Furthermore, the volume has been given a metal bookmark in the shape of a menorah, referencing its title.<sup>50</sup> This openwork item was re-attributed to Vespremie earlier in this chapter, but the binding itself is more difficult to assign to one maker. The jutting shapes and the interlocking

<sup>48</sup> Inventory no. 631, Ion Minulescu and Claudia Millian Memorial House Museum.

<sup>49</sup> The dedication reads "Cel dintâi gând, cel dintâi exemplar," meaning "the first thought, the first copy [of the book]."

<sup>50</sup> Or perhaps an amalgamation of two Jewish symbols: the hamsa and the menorah.



**Fig. 32:** M. H. Maxy and Andrei Vespremie, binding and metal bookmark for A. L. Zissu, *Spoventania unui candelabru*, leather and metal, 22 × 18 cm, c.1926–1927. Private collection.

geometries are similar to Maxy's graphics and the autographed bindings we have already examined. There is a particularly strong resemblance to an album binding by Maxy that appeared in *Contimporanul* in January 1929.<sup>51</sup> Yet, there is no equivalent corpus of works by Vespremie to allow an accurate comparison and Maxy is known to have appropriated elements of Vespremie's work. Whether the design for this volume was solely Vespremie's or a collaboration is thus difficult to establish. Nonetheless, this is the only known example of bookbinding that has been stamped with the name of the Academy of Decorative Arts in its original incarnation under the directorship of Vespremie, rather than Maxy's Decorative Arts or Studio Maxy.

Some further examples of bookbindings linked to these ventures exist, even though they are not marked as such. One volume with a cloth binding is another *Integral* production, Ion Călugăru's book of experimental short stories *Paradisul statistic* (The Statistical paradise), which Maxy also illustrated and which was published in 1926.<sup>52</sup> The binding's interlinked geometric elements and the floating

<sup>51</sup> *Contimporanul*, no. 78 (January 1929): 4.

<sup>52</sup> Inventory no. 965, Brăila Museum.



Fig. 33: M. H. Maxy, binding for Maurice Raynal, *Anthologie de la peinture en France de 1906 à nos jours*, leather, 15 × 20 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

leather strips with the book's name and author reflect the aesthetics of the book's five illustrations. Typical of Maxy's graphic work during this period, they are densely composed patchworks of figurative and non-figurative elements, often traversed by linear elements. Another copy of this book, currently in a private collection, is bound in leather and has a metal insert on the cover revealing it was Zissu's own copy with a dedication from Călugăru and Maxy. In this personalised volume, Maxy gave his illustrations a watercolour wash and signed his name, alongside Călugăru, on one of the front pages. These two bindings for *Paradisul statistic*, as well as a third one for an anthology of French painting by Maurice Raynal published in 1927 by Éditions Montaigne (Fig. 33), display completely abstract designs constructed in the manner of a collage, a style comparable to Maxy's textile designs, thus tilting the balance in his favour.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the back cover of Raynal's anthology has a near-identical design to that of the Minulescu poetry volume bound by Studio Maxy in the early 1930s. Comparing the techniques of avant-garde bookbinders such as Pierre Legrain to the work of the Academy, we may conclude that a wide range of modern elements were present in the bindings designed and crafted in the institution's workshop, whether due to Vespremie's training, Maxy's familiarity with the latest artistic trends, or perhaps both.

<sup>53</sup> Inventory no. 967, Brăila Museum.

## The Graphic Arts Workshops

The Academy's curriculum included several aspects of the graphic arts. A course in typographic lettering and ornamentation began in 1924 and was held throughout Vespremie's time at the Academy. In 1926, the curriculum was expanded to include instruction for specific techniques (lithography, etching, woodcut, print-making) and courses for commercial graphics and book illustration. Tracing the outputs of these courses is at present possible only through the visual graphic identity of the Academy itself, which included logos, brochures, letterheads and envelopes designed by Vespremie and Maxy. To begin with, the designs reflected Vespremie's training in this area, thanks to the Schule Reimann's pragmatically-minded curriculum, and later they became Maxy's responsibility, who imbued them with the spirit of avant-garde graphics. Graphic design was an important and highly visible part of both Maxy and Vespremie's careers. Until now, the visual identity of the Academy has been either overlooked or attributed to Maxy, another consequence of the organisation itself being incorrectly associated with him since its inception.<sup>54</sup> However, it is possible to distinguish between the two artists, in particular by examining their training or earlier work.

Vespremie's training at the Schule Reimann included classes in typography, lettering and graphic ornamentation under the guidance of Max Hertwig, a well-known graphic designer. Hertwig had been teaching at the school since 1913, developing his commercial practice alongside his pedagogical one. As a young designer, he had worked as assistant to Peter Behrens together with Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, and thereafter had expanded his client portfolio creating visual identities for businesses, as well as posters, advertising, and book and magazine covers.<sup>55</sup> At the Schule Reimann, Hertwig taught his students the building blocks of graphic design "just as a tailor would be taught to sew."<sup>56</sup> These fundamental skills included ornamentation and lettering, the two classes that Vespremie attended. The students practiced by composing letterheads, "small press advertisements and announcements, packaging and business printing, including labels, signets, and trademarks."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See for example the section dedicated to Maxy's graphic design in Ilk, *Maxy*, 174, which includes several items related to the Academy, such as the cover of the 1926 brochure, letterhead paper and an envelope. See also Irina Cărăbaș, "The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art," in *Dis(Continuities). Fragments of Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 101–142, 129, where the author does not discuss the graphics of the Academy's promotional materials, except to suggest that Maxy was probably responsible for the ones published after Vespremie's departure.

<sup>55</sup> C. Arthur Croyle, *Hertwig. The Zelig of Design* (Ames: Culicidae Architectural Press, 2011), 101–103.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany: 1890–1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 114.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*



**Fig. 34:** Andrei Vespremie, design for a brochure advertising the Academy, October 1926. Latvia State Historical Archives.

Vespremie's education under Hertwig thus prepared him for the task of creating his own promotional materials for the newly opened Academy. The small flyer that advertises the classes available in 1924 is thus highly likely to be Vespremie's work, with its distinctive cursive lettering that is both elegant and somewhat playful, highlighting as it does the additional classes for children and young adults (Fig. 3). The comical vignette that accompanies this announcement is eloquent despite its economy of means, showing students of mixed gender rushing through the door of the Academy and straight into a classroom where a drawing lesson is in progress. A more sophisticated advertisement appeared in March 1926 in *Contemporanul*, listing the ten classes that the Academy was offering at this point in time: batik, bookbinding, metalwork, drawing, painting, sculpture, graphic design, architecture, ornamentation, and composition (reprinted in later advertisements, such as the one in Fig. 4). The design of the advert is compact and geometric, juxtaposing simple shapes such as a circle, an arrow and several rectangles, and it utilises the blank space of the page to create shaping and lettering. Vespremie probably learned such techniques at the Schule Reimann, as Hertwig's own logo and trademark designs



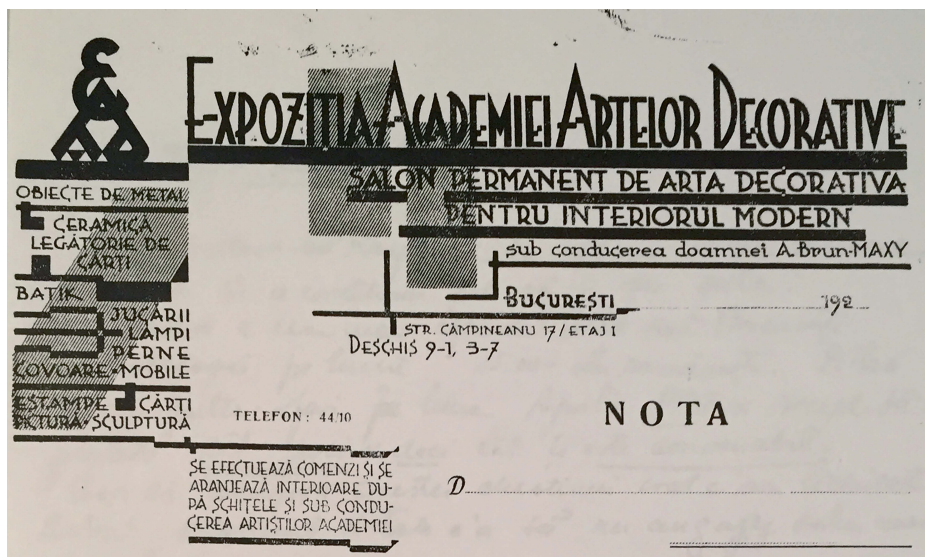


Fig. 35: Andrei Vespremie, letterhead design for the Academy, 1926. Private collection.

often featured “a particularly strong integration of icon, letter, and resultant strong positive and negative forms.”<sup>58</sup>

The Academy’s expansion in the autumn of 1926 necessitated a new visual identity, which included a much more elaborate logo and a number of variations suitable for use on promotional materials, letterheads and envelopes. The logo itself appears in its most complete version on the cover of the brochure that served as catalogue for the opening of the first selling exhibition in October 1926 (Fig. 34).<sup>59</sup> The black and green design integrates the blank space of the page within its composition, a device we have encountered above but which reaches a much greater level of intricacy here. Both the lettering and the surrounding geometric forms crisscross and overlap in a series of dizzying patterns and careful detailing. At least three different types of fonts are used, both serif and sans-serif, all containing playful detailing, such as the fragmentation of every horizontal stroke in the lettering of the main title. The composition itself contains three different registers, elegantly incorporating practical information such as the Academy’s address and opening hours.

The full design has previously been attributed to Maxy, like other Academy outputs, and there is a certain degree of plausibility in this based on Maxy’s championing of the selling exhibition section run by Mela Brun-Maxy. However, the elements of the design point to Vespremie as the author, not least due to the

<sup>58</sup> Croyle, *Hertwig*, 231.

<sup>59</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*.

**ARTELE DECORATIVE**  
 Academie de artă modernă aplicată  
 Str. Câmpineanu No 17  
 Direcțiunea artistică: M. H. MAXY

TELEFON  
44/10

mobile  
perne moderne  
abatjoare plisate  
bibelouri  
ceramică

Cursuri și ateliere proprii de:

Legătorie artistică: legătura simplă  
 legătura de artă  
 mape de piele  
 albume  
 registre, etc. etc.  
 lămpi (după proiecte noi)  
 lămpi de masă

Atelier de metal: cacheradiatoare  
 Serviciuri de birouri  
 Serviciuri de ceai  
 fructiere  
 signeturi  
 sonerii  
 glastre de flori etc.

Fig. 36: M. H. Maxy, advertisement for the Academy in *Integral*, no. 15, April 1928.

intricacies of the composition, which would require a hand well-trained in different types of graphic lettering and logo construction. It was after all Vespremie who taught the Academy's first graphic arts course, which incorporated "modern ornamenting and artistic lettering," as the course catalogue reveals (see Appendix A).<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the shaping is consistent with Vespremie's other outputs: the elaborate yet compact design, as shown above, and the angular forms of his metal vases which are reflected in the abstract composition in the logo's upper register. Furthermore, the ludic use of initials to create distinctive graphic constructions for company logos was one of Hertwig's strengths and one he passed on to his students, judging by the examples printed in *Farbe und Form*. Logo designs by the Schule Reimann's students show lettering being used with ingenuity to form strong graphic compositions.<sup>61</sup>

Other surviving Academy materials reveal the use of the same branding identity on invoices and envelopes. The letterhead based on Vespremie's large logo for the selling exhibition is just as intricate, preserving the same elements but re-arranging them into a composition more suited to the format (Fig. 35). A new element appears underneath the initials, on the left edge of the paper, combining words and graphics to create a list of available merchandise that resembles a vertical wall hanging. The list includes metalwork, ceramics, bookbinding, batik, toys, lamps, cushions, carpets, furniture, works on paper, books, painting, and sculpture, and a further extension of the design towards the centre of the page reveals that the artists of the Academy

<sup>60</sup> Latvia State Historical Archives, 1632/ 1/ 23144.

<sup>61</sup> "Max Hertwig. Schrift, Gebrauchsgraphik und Flächenkunst," *Farbe und Form* (April 1926): 49–57.

are available to execute design commissions and arrange interiors. For envelopes there were at least two different designs: one that replicated the full catalogue cover but in black and white and one plainer version, composed only of the main heading re-arranged for this purpose but with the same playfully fragmented design of the lettering.

Comparing all of these designs with Maxy's graphics of the same period confirms the likelihood of Vespremie's authorship for the Academy's original visual identity. In February 1927, Maxy opened an exhibition of his own paintings on the premises of the Academy, designing invitations and a catalogue. He favoured a much more severe, pared back aesthetic, focusing on linearity and juxtapositions between horizontal and vertical elements, as well the repetition of certain words to create visual patterns. Maxy's own graphics for the Academy after Vespremie's departure utilised similar devices, in particular the use of sans-serif fonts and the preference for words as the building blocks of the composition rather than ornamental shapes. An announcement in *Integral* in the summer of 1927 revealed Maxy's directorship of the Academy using a simple pattern of indented sentences that formed a downward diagonal progression. In a subsequent issue, an advertisement for the institution (Fig. 36) made use of a grid pattern similar to the one present on the cover of Maxy's exhibition catalogue of February 1927. Maxy's own design for letterhead paper from this period preserved all the elements of the advertisement but tilted the grid for added dynamism and added a circular shape, imbuing the whole composition with a somewhat suprematist feel. As with other examples of Academy outputs, differentiating between the work of Maxy and Vespremie is difficult but certainly possible. Most probably, the design of the Academy's graphic identity was undertaken by Vespremie until his departure in mid-1927 and Maxy took over this task only subsequently.

## The Textile Workshops

The Academy offered two types of textile classes from its very inception: batik and carpets. The instructor for the former was Andrei Vespremie's first wife, Victoria. Although no class master is named in the Academy's 1924 course list, Victoria's name appears in the 1926 course catalogue as the instructor for the batik and painted textiles class (see Appendix B).<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, she is credited with making batik items based on designs by Maxy for the Academy's selling exhibition that same year.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that she learned this wax-resist textile dyeing technique at the Schule Reimann, whose own batik workshop had opened as early as 1908 under the supervision of Albert

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<sup>62</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative.*

<sup>63</sup> Perhaps one of these batik fabrics is visible on the table in one of the photographs taken in the Academy's showrooms (Fig. 10), although the pattern is difficult to distinguish.

Reimann himself. His experimentation even led to a patented tool that “facilitate[d] in an astonishing way the difficult method of wax drawing,” according to British applied arts magazine *The Studio*.<sup>64</sup> Reimann’s expertise was such that he was even enlisted to provide private batik tuition to members of the German monarchy and nobility, such as Crown Princess Cecilie and Sophie of Wied.<sup>65</sup> Although no documentation has come to light that confirms Victoria Vespremie’s presence at the Schule Reimann, her knowledge of batik techniques, and her association with Andrei Vespremie suggest that the couple probably met while studying at the school in Berlin. Victoria may have attended the classes of Rose Petzold, the Reimann’s batik instructor from 1921 to 1923.<sup>66</sup> Other than this conjectural account, no other information has survived about the Academy’s batik classes or any of the outputs it produced.

The class on carpets, which was led by Janeta Scăueru Teclu (1896–1978), is somewhat better documented. Now mostly forgotten as an artist, Scăueru Teclu studied the fine arts in Bucharest and Vienna, forging a career as a painter and exhibiting in this capacity throughout her life. She was also a pedagogue, teaching drawing and later history of art.<sup>67</sup> Yet her most notable accomplishment is better known to scholars of ethnography: together with her husband, Scăueru Teclu published the first monographic study dedicated to Romanian carpets in 1938, detailing the techniques used for dyeing and ornamentation.<sup>68</sup> According to Ana Iuga, who writes about the development of ethnography in Romania, Scăueru Teclu’s study formalised the decorative conventions that governed carpet-making in the Romanian territories, as well as establishing a sort of grammar of ornament, complete with 33 colour illustrations.<sup>69</sup> In view of this, it may be presumed that Scăueru Teclu’s class at the Academy covered both design and making, offering a rounded perspective of hand-made carpet production. Maxy’s interest in textiles for the interior, including carpets and cushions, means that a number of items he designed under the umbrella of the Academy have survived and others are documented in period publications. It is not known where this interest stemmed from, however it appears to pre-date Maxy’s involvement with the Academy in 1926, unlike his work in metal or bookbinding for example. An advertisement

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<sup>64</sup> “Studio Talk,” *The Studio* 45, no. 190 (January 1909): 299–324, 314.

<sup>65</sup> Kuhfuss-Wickenheiser, *Die Reimann-Schule in Berlin und London*, 145, based on Albert Reimann’s own recollections.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>67</sup> There are few sources about her artistic career, other than the catalogue of this posthumous retrospective: Sanda Buta, *Liviu Teclu și Janeta Scăueru Teclu*, exh. cat. (Brașov: Muzeul Județean Brașov, 1982).

<sup>68</sup> Janeta Scăueru Teclu and Liviu Teclu, *Studiu asupra covoarelor românești* (Cluj: Editura Autorilor, 1938).

<sup>69</sup> Ana Maria Iuga, “De la etnografie la antropologie. Repere în studierea artei tradiționale române,” *Cercetări etnologice românești contemporane* II, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 66–76, 68.



Fig. 37: M. H. Maxy, carpet, wool and cotton, 86 × 152 cm, c.1926. Brăila Museum.

for *Atelier Integral* which dates from 1925 lists carpets amongst the items on offer.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Maxy contributed several textile items to the Academy's 1926 selling exhibition, as the catalogue reveals (see Appendix B). As well as the batik designs executed by Victoria Vespemie, he exhibited cushions made by a craftswoman named Didina Ștefănescu and carpets, although their maker is not named.<sup>71</sup> One of these carpets acts as a strand that binds together temporal planes and personal stories. In the photographs of the Academy's exhibition, it appears both as a component of the display and as a decorative element for the group photographs taken on the occasion of the grand opening on 23 October 1926 (Figs. 1 and 9). Perhaps it did not find a buyer, or perhaps it became a sentimental keepsake, as it remained within the Maxy family until the early 1980s when it became part of the Brăila Museum donation (Fig. 37).<sup>72</sup> It is still there today looking well-worn and threadbare, much more so than other surviving carpets by Maxy, betraying not only its age but also its first-hand participation in the history of modern Romanian applied arts.

Maxy's output in carpet design seems to have been reasonably prolific, although it is as yet unclear how much of his work survives. The Brăila Museum holds three pieces by the artist and several others are known to exist in private collections, three of which will be discussed here. These are all knotted woollen carpets, and

<sup>70</sup> *Integral*, no. 6–7 (October 1925): 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*.

<sup>72</sup> Inventory no. 693, Brăila Museum.



**Fig. 38:** M. H. Maxy, carpet, wool and cotton, 258 × 344 cm, undated. Brăila Museum.

stylistically they can be split into two overarching categories. The first group of carpets has compositional affinities with Maxy's painting and drawing output, and thus can be dated to the second half of the 1920s when the severe geometries of the earlier part of the decade began tapering towards more fluid lines and patterns. Such is the rug exhibited at the Academy, whose overlapping planes are overlaid and surrounded by irregular wavy lines and dots, its colour palette a muted combination of brown, cream, and blue (Fig. 37). The colouring may have been affected by fading and wear and tear, as has the original fringing which has been lost. Another, much larger carpet in the Brăila Museum exhibits a more vivid colouring, with tones of red, brown and burgundy contrasted with lighter shades of peach and beige (Fig. 38).<sup>73</sup> The composition is abstract whilst ignoring the strictures of geometry, as shapes and patterns appear to freely float and intersect. This carpet is also signed in the bottom left-hand corner, perhaps a marker of Maxy's increasing confidence as carpet designer. Both the existence of the signature, the large size and the style of the composition connect this carpet to one currently held in a private collection which is in very good condition, revealing the subtleties of the colouring and the harmony of the design. Its pattern is extremely similar to a carpet that appears in a promotional image for

<sup>73</sup> Inventory no. 694, Brăila Museum.

Maxy's interior design business in the periodical *Tipariņa literarā* in 1928, suggesting that the artist may have reproduced popular designs with small variations.<sup>74</sup> A fourth carpet, which is part of the Brăila Museum collection, may be a slightly later design, having lost the appearance of collaged shapes, but preserving the free floating, criss-crossing lines and the reddish-brown colour palette.<sup>75</sup>

Although Maxy's interest in carpet design predates his involvement with the Academy, the four carpets that have been examined so far cannot be said to support a link to the aesthetics of the Bauhaus and Maxy's visit to Weimar in the early 1920s. Maxy's textiles do not resemble the early Bauhaus weaving experiments, with their strict geometry and extensive colour palette such as the wall hanging attributed to Else Mögelin and the carpet by Gertrud Arndt that can be glimpsed in Walter Gropius' new Dessau office in a 1923 photograph, or Benita Otte's pile carpet inspired by the work of De Stijl artist Vilmos Huszár.<sup>76</sup> Neither do they recall the carpets produced in later years under the leadership of Gunta Stölzl, who sought to move away from pictorial designs reflective of compositions by Bauhaus masters such as Paul Klee or Wassily Kandinsky towards an understanding of weaving's own material specificity.<sup>77</sup> Maxy's carpets do however recall Stölzl's assessment of the early Bauhaus weaving output as "picture[s] made of wool," their designs complete pictorial compositions that do not feature the split between border and ground present in traditional carpets.<sup>78</sup> They also exhibit a certain collage quality, with overlapping geometric shapes that create a three-dimensional effect, frequently surrounded or overlaid by undulating lines and irregular marks. Such features are most frequently encountered in synthetic cubism and consequently in carpet designs produced in France during the 1920s and 1930s by artists such as Sonia Delaunay and Ivan da Silva Bruhns. In fact, two of Maxy's carpets, both held in private collections, mirror the work of da Silva Bruhns to a problematic extent. One of the most successful designers of modernist carpets active in France from the 1920s onwards, da Silva Bruhns was originally a painter and considered his luxurious carpets works of art. Like other European artists of the period, he appropriated non-European art traditions, basing his designs on African or Aztec motifs, with minimalist compositions and subdued colours.<sup>79</sup> One carpet by Maxy has a simple design composed of blue lines, small circles and squares and chevrons and closely resembles da Silva Bruhns designs from the early 1920s. The second Maxy carpet is more colourful, with overlapping planes in three contrasting

<sup>74</sup> *Tipariņa literarā* I, no. 2 (November 1928): 48.

<sup>75</sup> Inventory no. 1275, Brăila Museum.

<sup>76</sup> Susan Day, *Art Deco and Modernist Carpets* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 99 and 103.

<sup>77</sup> T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xvi.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Susan Day, "Art Deco Masterworks. The Carpets of Ivan da Silva Bruhns," *Hali*, no. 105 (July–August 1999): 78–81, 79.



**Fig. 39:** M. H. Maxy, carpet, wool and cotton, 98 × 194 cm, undated. Private collection.



**Fig. 40:** Ivan da Silva Bruhns, carpet, wool and cotton, 305 × 157 cm, c.1930. Private collection.

shades and zigzags (Fig. 39) and recalls da Silva Bruhns' work from the second half of the 1920s when the influence of synthetic cubism became more patent and when the French designer also abandoned the division between borders and ground in his carpets (Fig. 40).<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps Maxy started by producing copies of carpets he liked for his own use while training himself in the design process, a hypothesis supported by the fact that the rug with overlapping coloured planes, currently in a private collection, was not sold but kept in the Maxy family home. Yet the discussion of the Academy and its outputs so far has revealed Maxy's propensity for appropriation, and with this example the case seems to be strengthened. This behaviour did not escape the attention of contemporary critics. The opening of the Academy's selling exhibition

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 80.



sparked a heated exchange between Maxy and art critic Petru Comarnescu within the pages of the cultural daily *Rampa*. What most angered Maxy was Comarnescu's assessment of his painting as a "perpetual artistic vagabondage" that aligned itself with every novel stylistic development.<sup>81</sup> Maxy's response rejected this imputation and the accusation of harbouring too close an affinity with Picasso, but Comarnescu replied in damning fashion:

Mr. Maxy... copies with much ease the work of Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris (someone else every year)... Maxy's painting, which until this year has willingly complied with Braque's, and has often seemed a poor imitation of Juan Gris, has now progressed. It has reached the master of modern painting, Picasso... Maxy's painting does not present a slight influence, a commonality of feeling, or an aesthetic fraternisation, but a servile imitation, and this is evident to anyone leafing through the Picasso reproductions published by the Librairie Stock within the well-known series *Les Contemporains*. There they will find surprising similarities between Mr. Maxy's guitarist and some of Picasso's canvases.<sup>82</sup>

Comarnescu did make favourable pronouncements with respect to Maxy's textile designs. Regarding the cushions, he observed that "cubism is admirably suited to these useful ornaments," whose colourful geometric designs prove quite striking.<sup>83</sup> Six cushions by Maxy are visible in one of the photographs of the Academy's 1926 selling exhibition (Fig. 9). Their emphatically geometric designs are indeed eye-catching and the forms are varied, from circular and rectangular cushions, to what appears to be a five-cornered shape. Although the photograph is black and white, the crisp delineation of the collage-like patterns suggests that the colours used were probably more contrasting than the muted palettes of the carpets. The materials used are not identifiable from the image, however other cushion covers by Maxy that have survived exhibit various making techniques, such as the use of different embroidery stitches and printed fabric. As revealed by the Academy's exhibition catalogue (see Appendix B), Maxy did not make the items himself, however he seems to have been sensitive to material specificities. Found in a private collection, a printed cotton cushion cover highlights the crisp edges and colour contrasts of the collage-like shapes that form the design, whereas two embroidered covers play with the material's softness and inherent intermingling of forms and colours. In his response to Comarnescu, Maxy had defended his work by emphasising his attention to the materiality of the object:

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**81** Comarnescu, "Expoziția Academiei artelor decorative."

**82** M. H. Maxy, "Scrisoarea unui modernist," *Rampa*, 5 November 1926; Petru Comarnescu, "Răspunsul unui pretins modernist," *Rampa*, 8 November 1926. Comarnescu was referring to a painting by Maxy that appears in a photograph of the Academy of Decorative Arts, and which represents not a guitarist but a *cobza* player (Fig. 9).

**83** Comarnescu, "Expoziția Academiei artelor decorative."

I have never understood... the purpose of painting applied to various objects. A discerning eye would realise immediately that the objects I exhibit are created not through surface application but by respecting the quality of the materials and freely engaging with them within the strictures of their structure. This is why I took close notice of the fabrics that composed the cushions, the quality of the wool for the carpet, the original colour of the wood for the furniture.<sup>84</sup>

Maxy's statement is yet another confirmation of his design capabilities in late 1926: his contribution to the exhibition consisted of cushions, carpets, and furniture, with no mention of metal objects or bookbindings. His emphasis on materiality also brings us back to the goal of this chapter, discussed in the opening paragraphs, namely identifying and examining the physical traces of the Academy of Decorative Arts. The designs created and executed within its metal, bookbinding, textiles and graphic arts workshops reveal the Academy's skilled craftsmanship and reinforce its claim to modernity. This corpus of works positions the Academy as a discrete entity, no longer an elusive presence in the pages of avant-garde magazines, and can hopefully serve as a starting point for further scholarship on modern applied arts in interwar Romania. Furthermore, the objects serve as testimony to the importance of Vespremie for design pedagogy and design history in Romania. Whilst Maxy's own contribution to continuing the work of Vespremie after his departure and advancing the development of modern applied arts in Bucharest should not be diminished, the Academy of Decorative Arts was ultimately a product of the innovative teachings of the Schule Reimann and its gifted student.

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84 Maxy, "Scrisoarea unui modernist."

# THE COMMERCIAL SECTION OF THE ACADEMY OF DECORATIVE ARTS

The Academy's workshops were supported by its promotional and commercial activities. Spearheaded by Mela Brun-Maxy, the Academy's own exhibition spaces opened in October 1926, with the aim of both educating consumers and providing an outlet for the workshops' output. This moment marked the birth of the modern design showroom in Bucharest. Comprising several rooms arranged to resemble comfortable domestic interiors, the space was meant to entice customers to become acquainted with the latest trends in modern art and design. On display were geometric vases, abstract wooden sculptures, cubist paintings, colourful cushions and carpets, and many other items created by Bucharest's artistic avant-garde. The venture has, until now, been attributed by scholarship to M. H. Maxy, however, a careful examination of available sources paints a very different picture, revealing Brun-Maxy as a pioneer of interior decorating in Romania.

## Mela Brun-Maxy, Entrepreneur and Decorator

Much of what is known about Ana-Melania Brun-Maxy (1893–1946) comes from second-hand accounts by her daughter Liana and other external observers, such as members of the Bucharest avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> As a girl, Brun-Maxy (née Iscovici) was sent to study English at a boarding school in Istanbul, with the aim of continuing her higher education in Britain. The death of her father in 1907 made this impossible and the young woman supported her family by teaching English. It was during this time that she changed her surname from Iscovici to Brun, after her mother's maiden name. According to Liana, this was to provide a more "suitable" name for her profession as an English teacher.<sup>2</sup> Brun-Maxy did not remain a teacher for long, however. Around 1911, she became the representative of the British furniture manufacturer Maple & Co in Romania. Based in Bucharest, she liaised with aristocratic clients all around

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<sup>1</sup> To differentiate between Max Herman and Mela in this chapter I am using the composite version of Mela's surname, Brun-Maxy, which also appears on the letterhead of the Academy's commercial section.

<sup>2</sup> Liana Maxy, *Nucleul magic* (Tel Aviv: Integral, 1986), 86. According to Liana, this was done to win the trust of parents who preferred native speakers as teachers. While Brun might plausibly sound more "British" to a Romanian ear, one may speculate whether Iscovici was discarded due to its Russian-sounding quality and the prejudice against Jews from Russian territories in Romania (which intensified after the First World War and ultimately contributed to the magnitude of the Holocaust in Romania).

the country, possibly becoming Romania's first female interior decorator according to Liana's portrayal:

[Brun-Maxy] was asked to advise on the objects that should be ordered, their size, their upholstery and colour. At the same time, she was the one who decided whether the room was best completed by a Chippendale chair, a Regency armchair, an eighteenth-century carpet from Oltenia [a region in Romania], a Biedermeier clock from Vienna, or a glass chandelier from Murano. With her knowledge of English, French, and German, she was able to subscribe to several prestigious interior decoration publications, thus becoming familiar with the latest Western trends. She learned that bringing different styles together was acceptable, as long as the result was harmonious.<sup>3</sup>

Founded in 1841, Maple & Co was a highly successful business, advertising itself as “the largest and most convenient furnishings establishment in the world.”<sup>4</sup> While tracing Brun-Maxy's connection with the firm with precision is difficult, it is certainly plausible that she was engaged as their representative in Romania.<sup>5</sup> Maple & Co advertised themselves as fulfilling orders from aristocratic clients worldwide, including for example the King of Bulgaria, and the royal families of Russia and Austria. The Foreign Section of Maple's Shipping Department handled consignments to a huge range of destinations from Argentina and Egypt to India and Hungary.<sup>6</sup> Maple & Co had branches in Paris, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, alongside their main office in London. According to Liana, Brun-Maxy met a Maple's representative in 1911 in Romania to discuss her appointment.<sup>7</sup> This may have been a certain H. E. King from the Paris office, whose visit was announced in the newspaper *Adevărul* on 1 June 1911. Mr. King was passing through Bucharest and was available to give “indications for decorating projects and furniture.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is possible that Brun-Maxy's connection to Maple & Co was the result of transnational Jewish networks. The furniture trade in London relied heavily on Jewish workers from the city's East End and companies such as Maple & Co obtained much of their stock from Jewish cabinet makers and wholesalers.<sup>9</sup> At least one such producer had come from

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3 Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 96–97.

4 Hugh Barty-King, *Maples Fine Furnishers. A Household Name for 150 Years* (London: Quiller Press, 1992), 97.

5 The surviving business records of Maple & Co are held within the Victoria and Albert Museum's Art and Design Archives in London, however due to the relocation of the archives which is currently in progress they are inaccessible for the foreseeable future.

6 Barty-King, *Maples Fine Furnishers*, 93. For example, on 18 November 1910 two deliveries went to Hungary, but no further data is available regarding potential deliveries to Romania.

7 Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 89.

8 “Casa Hans Herzog & Co...,” *Adevărul*, 1 June 1911.

9 Pat Kirkham, Rodney Mace and Julia Porter, *Furnishing the World. The East London Furniture Trade 1830–1980* (London: Journeyman, 1987), 15, 41.

Romania, a certain Yager or Yagar who owned a factory in Stoke Newington.<sup>10</sup> It is thus possible that the furniture imported by Brun-Maxy from Maple & Co was produced by Jewish makers, just like the objects later created at the Academy of Decorative Arts.

Brun-Maxy's interest in interiors extended beyond her business venture to her own home and it seems she collected antique furniture. While at an auction bidding for an eighteenth-century French cabinet, she met the artist Henri Daniel, a friend and collaborator of M. H. Maxy. It was at the opening of the joint exhibition of Daniel and Maxy, in November 1921, that Brun-Maxy met her future husband. They were married only a few months later, in the spring of 1922 and shortly thereafter left for Berlin. Several sources suggest that Brun-Maxy and her family were supporting Maxy financially during this trip. According to Liana, Brun-Maxy's sister Selma had taken over acting as the Maple & Co Romanian liaison and was forwarding some of the income to Brun-Maxy in Berlin.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Romanian art historian Andrei Pintilie believed that in Berlin Brun-Maxy worked as a representative of several German firms (which presumably traded with Romania).<sup>12</sup> The need for a stable income must have become even more vital as Liana, the couple's first and only child, was born in February 1923. The family returned to Bucharest the summer of that same year, and Brun-Maxy resumed her work for Maple & Co until their association ended in 1926.

## Creating the Commercial Section of the Academy of Decorative Arts

It was at this stage that Brun-Maxy contracted a partnership with Andrei Vespremie's Academy for Decorative Arts, a logical development in light of her previous experience. According to Liana, her mother spotted the opportunity to join forces with Vespremie's educational venture having seen a newspaper advertisement, and she eventually came to direct the Academy's commercial activities and supervise the arrangement of its exhibition space.<sup>13</sup> Liana's account is supported by documentation that has been so far overlooked by scholars.<sup>14</sup> Dated 1 September 1926, the agreement that brought the Academy's commercial section into being was concluded between Mela Brun-Maxy, Vespremie, and Heinrich Fischer-Galați, with no mention of M. H. Maxy. The two-page handwritten document set out the terms of the collaboration

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>11</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 153.

<sup>12</sup> Andrei Pintilie, "Maxy, un clasic al modernismului românesc. Fragment de monografie," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Artă plastică*, no. 44 (1997): 59–70, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 190–195.

<sup>14</sup> I was able to view these documents that are currently held in a private collection. They include the agreement discussed in this paragraph and letterhead paper that names Mela Brun-Maxy as director of the Academy's showroom.

and the various duties involved in running the new venture (see Appendix C for full English translation). Brun-Maxy was contributing a capital of 100,000 Romanian lei, quite a sizeable sum for the time.<sup>15</sup> She was responsible for managing the showroom, ensuring the smooth running of its activities, undertaking “all the duties of a good administrator” and providing reports twice a month to the other partners. A non-compete clause scribbled vertically across the page stated that Mrs. Maxy must not engage in a similar business venture for one year should she decide to leave the partnership. Additional proof of Brun-Maxy’s managerial position also comes from the Academy’s letterhead paper from this period. Vespremie’s design contains the phrase “under the directorship of Mrs. A. Brun-Maxy” (Fig. 35).

This new commercial section, like the Academy itself, has frequently been considered the brainchild of Maxy, and advertisements in *Integral* credited him with the design of this space. Nonetheless, according to the agreement, it was Brun-Maxy who was responsible, together with Vespremie, for selecting the merchandise to be displayed for sale. The majority of items were to come from the Academy’s workshops (the showroom had exclusive right of sale of these), but works by other artists would also be considered as long as they matched the Academy’s aesthetic vision. The Academy’s first selling exhibition, in October 1926, included works by a large number of practitioners in both the applied and the fine arts, some of whom, but not all, were on the Academy’s staff. Although no fully itemised list exists, promotional materials and the exhibition brochure reveal the types of objects submitted by each artist (see Appendix B for the text in full in English translation).<sup>16</sup> Vespremie received top billing for his metal objects, bound books, lamps and ivory carvings. Maxy was listed second, exhibiting modern furniture, cushions, batik and carpets. Both Vespremie and Maxy were credited with the designs, while the execution was ascribed to the workshop staff. The exhibition also included ceramic, crystal, lace and leather items, as well as more traditional sections for painting, sculpture and works on paper.

The emblematic image of the exhibition, showing a living room corner in which geometries harmoniously combine, appeared on the cover of *Integral* in December 1926. Captioned “Modern Interior by M.H. Maxy: Furniture, Cushions, Carpets, Paintings,” the image suggested a single uncontested authorship (Fig. 41). However, not only did the photograph contain items made by other artists, such as the metal vase by Vespremie discussed in the previous chapter, but the ensemble itself probably had substantial input from Brun-Maxy. In her memoirs, Liana described her mother making the final preparations for the opening, which took place on 23 October 1926: after taking one last look at the objects and making some final adjustments, Brun-Maxy

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<sup>15</sup> For comparison, in 1925 the average monthly salary of a workshop foreman was 3,813 lei and that of an architect 5,775 lei. See Gheorghe Iacob and Luminița Iacob, *Modernizare—Europeanism. România de la Cuza Vodă la Carol al II-lea*, vol. 2 (Iași: Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza, 1995), 176–177.

<sup>16</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*, exh. cat. (București: Academia Artelor Decorative, 1926).

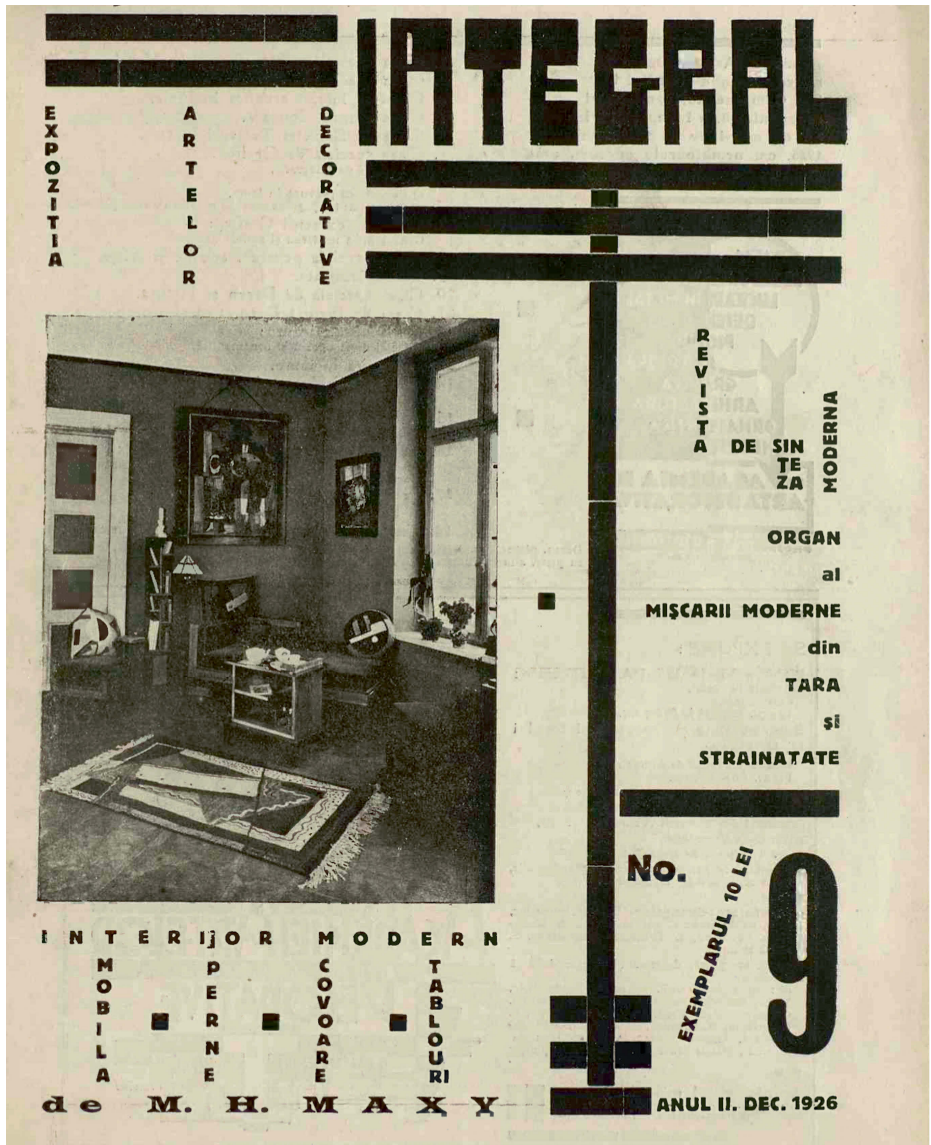


Fig. 41: Cover of *Integral*, no. 9, December 1926.



**Fig. 42:** The patrons and staff of the Academy of Decorative Arts, October 1926. Front row from left to right: M. H. Maxy, Victoria Vespremie, Mela Brun-Maxy, Heinrich Fischer-Galați, Andrei Vespremie, Marcel Iancu and Sigismund Maur. Private collection.

settled down in a modernist armchair to contemplate the display. The next day the doors opened to welcome art critics and collectors ready to buy, as well as the “snobs,” as Liana branded them, and the elegant ladies of Bucharest, alongside journalists, writers, actors and friends from all branches of the arts.<sup>17</sup> Group photographs were taken and Liana sat on Vespremie’s lap between Maxy and Brun-Maxy, surrounded by the Academy’s staff and apprentices (Fig. 1). In another image Mr. Fischer-Galați posed amongst the Academy’s teachers, with Marcel Iancu and Sigismund Maur, as well as the Maxy and Vespremie families (Fig. 42). The group photographs were taken in one of the exhibition rooms, as indicated by the graphic works displayed on the walls and the carpet by Maxy visible on the floor.

<sup>17</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul Magic*, 195.



## Gender Trouble: An “Unacknowledged Modernism”

As was the case of the Maxy family, the matter of which gender was most suited to creating interiors was a fraught one in the interwar period. Professional female interior decorators came to the fore in the early decades of the twentieth century, with many of them also writing manuals for amateur home-makers to use in their own homes. This development was an uneasy one for male architects who had previously been in control of these spaces, and who “dismissed the lady decorators as untrained and working through intuition alone.”<sup>18</sup> As Penny Sparke has observed, this stemmed from architects’ fear that this activity was becoming “feminized,” especially in the wake of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes which took place in Paris in 1925 and popularised what was seen as a soft, feminine, and luxurious aesthetic. Tag Gronberg has examined the deficient treatment afforded to the Paris exhibition within scholarly studies of art and design. The event is rarely considered “as an index of modernity worthy of study in its own right,” instead being criticised for the expensive merchandise on display and unfavourably contrasted to the streamlined modernism of Le Corbusier’s Pavillon de L’Esprit Nouveau, which was also present at the exhibition.<sup>19</sup> Yet Gronberg’s study reveals the problematic ideas that lay beneath these criticisms. Le Corbusier conflated female consumers and designers with an interest in fashionable luxury items and surface decoration, positing his own environments as modern through their rational and masculine attributes, as well as revealing orientalisng tendencies in his treatment of folk objects gathered during his travels in Eastern and Southern Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Le Corbusier’s modern city was ostensibly based on anonymous, unostentatious components, on standardized objects and architecture as embodied by the anonymity of the suited male body... Le Corbusier’s anti-decorative stance in 1925 involved an emphatic rejection of illusionism and theatricality, and in particular... the rejection of visual ostentation and display associated with the female body.<sup>21</sup>

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**18** Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 109.

**19** Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity. Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 16. One of the first works to challenge this dichotomy was Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France. Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1991).

**20** Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity*, Ch. 5. Le Corbusier’s orientalisng gaze also conflated the women he encountered during his travels with the cityscapes he visited in the region: in Bucharest he was captivated by the Roma flower sellers, while the women he encountered in Constantinople “represented the Turkish mystique.” See Christine M. Boyer, *Le Corbusier, Homme de Lettres* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 131 and 140.

**21** Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity*, 41 and 44.

Gronberg questions the acceptance of Le Corbusier’s modernism as the only “real” one and argues instead for legitimising “the ostensibly unacceptable (and indeed largely unacknowledged) modernity staged by the Exhibition.”<sup>22</sup> For Gronberg, this type of modernity was best illustrated by Sonia Delaunay’s participation in the exhibition, which stood in direct contrast to Le Corbusier’s ideas. Located on the Alexander III bridge, Delaunay’s shopfront displayed her colourful geometric fabrics and fashion accessories within a carefully yet opulently crafted window display that illustrated the “visual ostentation” Gronberg refers to above. Advertisements for Delaunay’s business enticed clients with the promise of providing “all the elements of the modern environment where you wish to live” by “introducing living art into everyday life.”<sup>23</sup> This approach was also followed by the commercial section of the Academy of Decorative Arts. A review of the Academy’s opening exhibition remarked precisely on the welcome fact that “all the objects on display are united by the same aesthetic spirit.” Written by the art critic Petru Comarnescu, it continued: “for the individual who has in their home a sofa of one kind, chairs of another, and all manner of objects that contrast garishly with each other, the display of these furnishings with stylistic preoccupations is of great benefit.”<sup>24</sup> As Comarnescu observed, this was unusual in Bucharest, betraying Brun-Maxy’s experience with international commercial practices and her familiarity with the latest interior decoration periodicals.

It also pointed to Maxy’s admiration of Sonia Delaunay’s artistic practice, which he appreciated precisely for its unitary aesthetic. Maxy’s magazine *Integral* published an article by René Crevel that presented Sonia Delaunay’s workshop “as a total artwork in which theatre costumes, furniture and clothes enjoy the same status.”<sup>25</sup> Comparing the Academy’s showroom to Delaunay’s own design ensembles, it becomes clear that the individual items combine into a carefully constructed configuration, with elements such as the paintings, the cushions and the carpet reflecting similar pictorial themes (Fig. 9).<sup>26</sup> Maxy visited Paris sometime in 1926 and he shared a number of acquaintances with Delaunay, in particular Tristan Tzara, who was a frequent guest of Sonia and her husband Robert Delaunay. Although it is not known whether Maxy

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>24</sup> Petru Comarnescu, “Expoziția Academiei artelor decorative,” *Rampa*, 3 November 1926.

<sup>25</sup> Irina Cărăbaș, “The Shadow of the Object. Modernity and Decoration in Romanian Art,” in *Dis(Continuities). Fragments of Romanian Modernity in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Carmen Popescu (Bucharest: Simetria, 2010), 101–142, 118. The article was entitled “La Mode Moderne. Visite à Sonia Delaunay,” published in *Integral*, no. 6–7 (October 1925): 18–19.

<sup>26</sup> It is possible that some inspiration also came from the use of modernist interiors in French cinema, in particular the carefully coordinated designs produced by Sonia Delaunay and Robert Mallet-Stevens for films such as *Le P’tit Parigot* (dir. René Le Somptier) and *Le Vertige* (dir. Marcel l’Herbier), both of 1926. *Integral* often published material on the latest cinematographic trends in France and *Le P’tit Parigot* famously featured Romanian dancer Lizica Codreanu in Sonia Delaunay’s abstract costumes.

ever accompanied him on a visit, it seems that Tzara was willing to introduce Maxy to acquaintances. Tzara even wrote personalised notes to Marc Chagall and Jacques Lipchitz on calling cards asking them to receive Maxy, demonstrating once again how transnational artistic Jewish networks functioned, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and information.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Elana Shapira has linked the rise of unified design environments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the search for a Jewish “self-stylization” as evidenced by Siegfried Bing, Fritz Waerndorfer, and Emil Rathenau through their contribution to three well-known ventures: the Salon de l’Art Nouveau in Paris, the Wiener Werkstätte, and the German firm AEG. Bing “produced interiors as collage artworks,” seeking “perfect homogeneity,” while Rathenau sought to create “the impression of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.”<sup>28</sup> Shapira also highlights Julius Meier-Graefe, a supporter and competitor of Bing, who opened his own Parisian boutique La Maison Moderne in 1899, selling all the accoutrements for the modern home.<sup>29</sup> It is tempting to speculate whether Meier-Graefe’s venture provided some inspiration for Fischer-Galați’s vision of the Academy of Decorative Arts, especially as they later became collaborators, as previously shown.

Whatever the inspiration, there was a concerted effort to position the Academy’s showroom as an ensemble, a total work of art. Whereas some images of single items did appear in the press, most publicity photographs showed items grouped together to create the semblance of an environment. Such images reveal the existence of at least two display spaces, with parquet flooring and large double doors, arranged to resemble functional living areas. The ensembles carefully avoided an overtly commercial look, being constructed as fully-fledged private rooms with plants, plumped cushions and decorative objects dotted around (Figs. 8–11). Almost the only indication that these spaces were not part of an actual modernist home were the discreet labels found next to the objects. Furthermore, the ensembles were carefully staged to appear to their best advantage. In one photograph a tea trolley and stool topped with an abstract-patterned cushion obstructed a doorway in order that they might face the camera, while in another image, which shows a section of the same room, several items were moved to create a more harmonious composition. This latter image was used for the cover of *Integral*, carefully inscribing the space into a matrix of fashionability and modernity through the items chosen for the tea trolley positioned in the centre of the image: a porcelain tea set from the Primavera atelier of the Parisian department store

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<sup>27</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond M. H. Maxy. It is not known whether these visits ever took place.

<sup>28</sup> Elana Shapira, “Jewish Identity, Mass Consumption and Modern Design,” in *Longing, Belonging, and the Making of Jewish Consumer Culture*, ed. Gideon Reuveni and Nils Roemer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 61–90, 69 and 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

Printemps and a book about the cubist painter Georges Braque (Fig. 41). As Sparke has noted, “the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*..., had, by the 1920s, been transformed by store designers into a ‘selling tool’ that was meant to evoke a certain ‘lifestyle.’”<sup>30</sup> By arranging the Academy’s commercial spaces in the guise of fashionable domestic interiors, Brun-Maxy blurred the private and the public spheres, enticing consumers with a vision of what their own homes could aspire to. Christine Frederick, an American theorist of home economics and consumption, explained the benefits of this technique in her 1929 book *Selling Mrs Consumer*: “the more the manufacturer or dealer arranges rooms or representative exhibits, or practices ensemble room selling, the more help and suggestion it will be to the consumer.”<sup>31</sup>

The involvement of Mela Brun-Maxy, the staging of domestic interiors for consumption and the preoccupation with saleable commodities and with publicity, place the Academy’s exhibition section within the realm of this “unacceptable” and “unacknowledged” modernity that Gronberg identifies, whose attributes of theatricality, consumption and female agency are frequently considered incompatible with modernism. The performative aspect of this space was heightened further by the events taking place here, in particular exhibition openings for the Academy’s own displays and for the temporary exhibitions of other artists. Brun-Maxy also hosted regular gatherings for Bucharest’s artists, writers, and actors. In June 1930, the cover of the magazine *unu* showed Brun-Maxy and M. H. Maxy together in one vignette, part of a collage gathering together Bucharest’s vanguard (Fig. 43). In his memoirs, Saşa Pană recalled her “interesting manner of provoking debate and inciting, through dialectic controversies, discussions about current events.”<sup>32</sup> Geo Bogza, another avant-garde writer recalled the “literary club and artistic laboratory, or even salon... where I once had the honour of shaking the hand of Constantin Brancusi... in an ambiance that fused bohemia with learned discussion.”<sup>33</sup> On one occasion, the Academy’s showroom hosted a contemporary dance performance by Paule Sybille, a French émigré who had trained at the school of Jaques Dalcroze and Rudolf Laban and who subsequently opened a studio in Bucharest, instructing the next generation of avant-garde Romanian dancers. The modernity of Sybille’s performance required a suitable backdrop and thus the Academy was chosen specifically for its equally modern aesthetic.<sup>34</sup> The Academy’s exhibition spaces and their manager were thus well attuned to modernity, both intellectual and visual.

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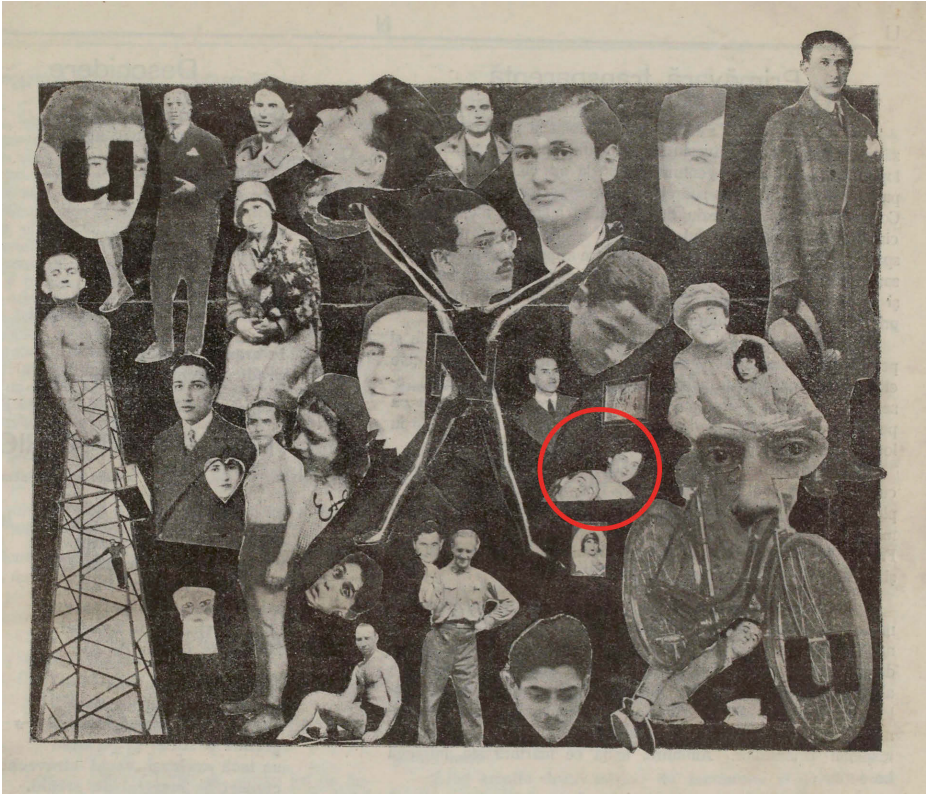
<sup>30</sup> Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Sparke, *The Modern Interior*, 55.

<sup>32</sup> Saşa Pană, *Născut în '02* (Bucureşti: Minerva, 1973), 269.

<sup>33</sup> Geo Bogza, “Destinul unui artist,” *Contemporanul*, 30 July 1971.

<sup>34</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 229. If the interiors of the Academy now appear to some scholars as insufficiently avant-garde, this was clearly not the case during the institution’s existence. As Sabine Wieber has observed, “interiors that do not look modern to our twenty-first century eyes might have had equal stakes in being ‘in the present.’” See Sabine Wieber, “The German Interior at the End of



**Fig. 43:** Collage showing Mela Brun-Maxy and M. H. Maxy amidst other members of the Bucharest avant-garde on the cover of *unu*, no. 26, June 1930.

Despite all this, and even though Brun-Maxy's name was on documentation relating to the Academy's showroom, including its letterhead paper, Maxy ultimately took the credit for the creation of the ensembles. As we have seen, this occurred not only on the cover of *Integral*, but also in advertisements and in the brochure of the inaugural exhibition which stated that "the arrangement of the exhibition follows the designs of the painter M. H. Maxy."<sup>35</sup> Brun-Maxy's contribution to modernism remained "unacknowledged" due to the dichotomy observed by Gronberg, which pits the transitory feminine against the enduring masculine. Writing about her mother's work in running the Academy of Decorative Arts, Liana Maxy made a poignant observation:

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the Nineteenth Century," in *Designing the Modern Interior. From the Victorians to Today*, ed. Penny Sparke, Anne Massey, and Trevor Keeble (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2009), 53–64, 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*.

...obliged at barely 16 years of age to become head of the family and support her mother and sister, and having entered with her head held high into the world of the Romanian aristocracy, of businessmen and art collectors, she had given all this up because her path had crossed that of a young painter... Her intelligence, culture, and work ethic were still useful now, but in a different way. She was no longer interested in shining through her verve and conversation in salons, or in being consulted as a specialist by those who frequented art exhibitions and auctions, she no longer wished to take the leading role in the family... She had taken on all the responsibility of organising the family life, so that he may have the space to create.<sup>36</sup>

Liana's statement is confirmed by the observations of Israel Marcus, a writer who knew the Maxy family and who wrote a short biography of M. H. Maxy based on interviews with the artist. In this text, he acknowledged Brun-Maxy's role in supporting Maxy not only financially, but also by creating various opportunities for him, such as the trip to Berlin, the association with the Academy of Decorative Arts, and the weekly salons that enabled him to meet the most prominent intellectuals of the period. Marcus concluded: "I do not wish to say that Maxy would not have existed without his wife; but thanks to his wife the artist was able to be much more fecund."<sup>37</sup> The use of this final word to refer to Maxy's artistic productivity is a telling one: masculine creation appropriates and eclipses a woman's work.

## Selling Modernism: Design and National Identity

As discussed in the Introduction, in the aftermath of Romania's territorial gains national specificity was sought in cultural, artistic, and commercial production with a view to achieving cultural and social homogeneity across the new state and its ethnically diverse populations. As the number of new consumers and the businesses that catered to them expanded, influential commentators such as the architect Ion D. Trajanescu demanded "Romanian homes, furniture, paintings with Romanian subjects, carpets, sculptures, music, theatre literature."<sup>38</sup> More often than not, this search for a national style looked to Romania's past, its rural inhabitants and their folk crafts for inspiration. Seeking to strengthen this emerging identity, Romania promoted its artisanal traditions, and the consumer goods inspired by them at home and abroad. At its most extreme, this trend led to Romania's absence from the Paris 1925 Exhibition, which celebrated modern decorative arts. Instead, as already mentioned, an alternative exhibition took place at the Musée du Jeu de Paume entitled Romanian Art Ancient and Modern with rooms dedicated to folk art, religious

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<sup>36</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 191–192.

<sup>37</sup> Israel Marcus, *Șapte momente din istoria evreilor în România* (Haifa: Glob, 1977), 55–56.

<sup>38</sup> Carmen Popescu, *Le Style national roumain. Construire une nation à travers l'architecture, 1881–1945* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004), 207. The chapter entitled "Style officiel de la 'grande Roumanie,'" 205–282, discusses the rise of the national style as official policy.

embroidery, religious painting and even an entire iconostasis. In the “Modern Art” section, the largest number of works belonged to Nicolae Grigorescu, the famed Romanian artist, who had been dead since 1907.<sup>39</sup> Although Maxy probably did not see these exhibitions in situ, he expressed his discontent at the lack of a Romanian presence at Paris’s international event in a text that appeared in the Academy’s 1926 brochure (see Appendix B for English translation). Although the text is unsigned, its subject and rhetoric suggest it was written by Maxy. Romania’s absence, he believed, was rooted in the widespread conviction that the country’s only valuable contribution to the decorative arts was the folk art of its rural population: “Romania was not present at the Paris Exhibition. Those responsible for this decision were convinced that other than the simple and instinctive art of the Romanian peasant..., we could have nothing new or interesting to show, as if our urban dwellers do not build their homes, decorate their interiors or clothe their bodies.”<sup>40</sup>

The urban-rural dichotomy that Maxy observed had much more sinister undercurrents. In the aftermath of Romania’s territorial expansion, it became evident that minorities were more actively implicated in the processes of modernity: they tended to live in urban centres and to pursue occupations in commerce, law, medicine, or industry, whereas the ethnic Romanian population had a higher concentration in rural areas and engaged in agrarian activities.<sup>41</sup> The country’s demographics were rapidly instrumentalised by nationalist discourse to construct polarising divisions between urban-rural and local-foreign. In attempting to create an “authentic” Romanian art and culture for the new nation state, the cultural and intellectual sphere was particularly receptive to this idea, looking to village life and customs for guidance and inspiration. The expression of national specificity in art was thus closely linked to the folk art of Romanian peasants and to Orthodoxy, obstructing the participation of artistic practitioners from other backgrounds.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Exposition de l’art roumain ancien et moderne*, exh. cat. (Paris: Georges Petit, 1925).

<sup>40</sup> M. H. Maxy, “Expozițiile permanente ale Academiei Artelor Decorative,” in *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*, exh. cat. (București: Academia Artelor Decorative, 1926).

<sup>41</sup> There were historic reasons for this, for example the fact that, prior to the First World War, Jews in Romania had not been allowed to purchase land or to work in the public sector. Jews represented 4% of Greater Romania’s total population and 13.6% of its urban population. See Lucian Boia, *Capcanele istoriei. Elita intelectuală românească între 1930 și 1950* (București: Humanitas, 2011), 53–54.

<sup>42</sup> While I have tried to sketch out the relationship between the national style, folk art, and modern art movements in Romania, its complexities are beyond the scope of this volume. The work of Shona Kallestrup, Valentina Iancu and Roland Prügel provides a more in-depth analysis. See Shona Kallestrup, *Art and Design in Romania 1866–1927. Local and International Aspects of the Search for National Expression* (Boulder; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Valentina Iancu, “Căutări identitare în spațiul mioritic. Repere tradiționaliste în arta românească,” in *Mitul național. Contribuția artelor la definirea identității românești*, ed. Lucian Boia, Monica Enache, and Valentina Iancu (București: Muzeul Național de Artă al României, 2012), 35–49; Roland Prügel, *Im Zeichen der Stadt. Avantgarde in Rumänien* (Köln: Böhlau, 2008).

The Academy of Decorative Arts was one of the few Bucharest institutions whose aesthetic did not conform to the trend for a national style, carving out a space for artists, designers, and patrons who were not ethnic Romanians. The eclectic stylistic affinities of Vexpremie and Maxy were reflected by the rest of the artists selected to display their work in the Academy's showrooms. While not all of them were Jewish, and some were even well-established within the Romanian artistic milieu, taken as a whole the group was remarkably diverse. Like Vespremie, artists such as Nadia Grossman-Bulyghin, Hans Mattis-Teutsch and Serova Medrea hailed from territories that had become part of Romania only after the First World War. Others were Jews born in Romania, such as Victor Brauner, the graphic designer Sigimund Maur or the ceramicist M. Marigo-Brăila. The names of the craftsmen employed by the Academy, such as E. Bonyhay and N. Ghiulay also suggest they were ethnic minorities (although little is known about them at present). While altogether the works exhibited at the Academy did not present the unified aesthetic we have come to associate with design modernism, they were nonetheless united by a departure from the national style. This call for national specificity was particularly important for the development of the decorative arts in Romania, creating a national artistic lineage through the association with the traditional crafts of Romanian peasants. Many designers and decorators in Romania were thus adopting this stylistic vocabulary. At the Official Salon of Architecture and Decorative Arts, held in Bucharest in 1929 and 1931, the majority of items exhibited revealed the influence of folk and religious arts, both through the themes depicted and the techniques used. Artists and designers exhibited icons, carpets and embroideries with traditional motifs, designs for religious frescoes, and ceramics with rural themes. Maxy participated in 1931 including some tubular metal furniture among his exhibits, perhaps as a deliberate challenge to the status quo.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, it is difficult to assess to what extent the national style affected consumer goods due to a lack of available research on the subject. Traditional wares probably accounted for a large proportion of purchases and were available to buy in market fairs visited by a mixture of social classes, or from street vendors. These included ceramics, wooden objects, and textiles for the home made and sold by the inhabitants of rural areas. Carpet vendors spread their wares picturesquely on the street, even leading Marcel Iancu to seek the equivalent of modernist abstraction in "the geometry of the peasant carpets any citizen of Bucharest could see laid out along Dâmbovița river."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, attempts were made to create contemporary versions of traditional goods. In the early 1920s, the Troița ceramics factory employed well-known Romanian artists to create decorative designs for its products, and many schools and workshops of folk arts and crafts sprung up, catering to an urban

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<sup>43</sup> *Salonul oficial de arhitectură și artă decorativă*, exh. Cat. (București: Luceafărul, 1931).

<sup>44</sup> Ioana Vlasiu, "City Life versus Rural Life in Interwar Romanian Painting," in *Colours of the Avant-Garde. Romanian Art 1910–1950*, ed. Erwin Kessler (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), 21–32, 24.



clientele.<sup>45</sup> To Maxy, these initiatives were a betrayal of both peasant craft and modern design: “the primitive and spontaneous art of the peasant has not been understood by those craftsmen who act more like merchants or those dilettantes who lack artistry... Their present wares... do not represent either the healthy primitive influence of the peasant neither the practical-architectonic tendencies of our time.”<sup>46</sup>

To convert consumers to a new vision of the modern interior, the agreement between Brun-Maxy and her partners established a publicity budget of 36,000 Romanian lei for the first three months of the showroom’s existence, to be used “in newspapers and magazines that will be agreed upon by the three signatories, and through posters.”<sup>47</sup> The array of publications differed quite widely in scope, with references to the Academy found both in avant-garde journals such as *Integral* and in more middlebrow arts publications such as *Universul literar* (The Literary Universe) or *Tipărița literară* (The Literary Printing Press). Information about the opening of the commercial section also appeared in the press. The cultural daily *Rampa* published a short announcement prior to the event on 3 October and a review of the exhibition on 3 November by Comarnescu.<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, he praised the aesthetic unity of the exhibits, a feat that he felt had been lacking in Romanian exhibitions except perhaps those organised by the Contimporanul group. Nonetheless, Comarnescu was ambivalent about Maxy’s work: while the cushions benefited from the application of cubist geometries and striking colours, the furniture was found to be lacking in style and material and his paintings far too eclectic. Vespremie’s metalwork however exhibited “real artistic value” and its “sculptural stylisation” was worthy of admiration. Two candleholders in particular exhibited a well-proportioned linearity. Overall, Comarnescu was impressed with this venture that he hoped would educate the citizens of Bucharest about the importance of tasteful interiors and a unitary style. A review in the daily newspaper *Dimineața* revealed that the opening was a popular affair: a numerous public came to admire the displays and the event lasted for many hours. The reporter noted the drive for “originality” in the Academy’s output, praising its efforts to “leave behind the conventional banalities of yesteryear,” yet stopped short of admiring the avant-garde paintings and sculptures of Mattis-Teutsch and Corneliu Michăilescu, which proved “too advanced” for the reviewer’s tastes.<sup>49</sup>

During this period, Bucharest welcomed a growing number of urban inhabitants, as its surface and population increased exponentially after the First World War.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Iancu, “Căutări identitare în spațiul mioritic,” 46.

<sup>46</sup> Maxy, “Expozițiile permanente.”

<sup>47</sup> Publicity materials included posters announcing the exhibition and a small brochure outlining the artists and designers participating in the venture.

<sup>48</sup> “Vernisajii,” *Rampa*, 3 October 1926; Comarnescu, “Expozitia Academiei artelor decorative.”

<sup>49</sup> Fulmen, “Deschiderea Expoziției de Arte Decorative,” *Dimineața*, 27 October 1926.

<sup>50</sup> According to Luminița Machedon and Ernie Scoffam, *Romanian Modernism. The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 28: “The population of Bucharest grew from

Like Vespremie, many of the country's new and old citizens from less affluent backgrounds came to the capital seeking a better life. Laws passed by the municipality in the early 1920s sought to encourage the construction of new homes and to support those most affected by the conflict in accessing property. An additional law passed in 1927 encouraged the development of collective housing.<sup>51</sup> This led to large numbers of new urban dwellings, whose inhabitants were often experiencing modern living for the first time. In the eyes of Maxy and his avant-garde peers, these new homes sorely lacked the streamlined harmonious aesthetics that should have accompanied the advances made by contemporary architecture. Avant-garde periodicals described them in less than flattering terms, deploring the heavily furnished rooms of a new generation arriving in the capital from the provinces and seeking to exhibit their new status:

When the new gentleman and lady, with their mortgaged bedroom freshly decorated and in it the walnut commode and the lemontree bureau, the *dormeuse* flanked by a bear skin on the floor as seen in the latest sensational movie, when this happy couple looks for something in the same 'style' to decorate their walls, they should not go to Maxy's Studio in the hope of finding clay pots and paintings with ashtrays, cigarettes and every banknote from the National Bank artfully fanned out.<sup>52</sup>

The preferences of these consumers remained wedded to the past, which the avant-garde associated with the rural sensibilities of the national style. Ion Vinea remarked that for Maxy, "the carpet is not a sign of the past, of the orient, and of the village," but a "modern" object of the twentieth century, while for Aderca, Maxy's activities amounted to "a school for public taste" that sought to counteract the "indifference and barbarism" of consumers through an "intellectualisation" of the interior.<sup>53</sup> As for Maxy himself, he felt that only through the collaboration between the Academy's artists and the general public could "a new conjuncture of taste and trends" be brought forth. In his view, the Academy's main aim was "to create and produce decorative arts objects that will replace the quantities still filling shop windows under the label 'artistic', and at the same time to prevent the majority of interiors from becoming true *musées des horreures*."<sup>54</sup>

Similar language was used in a guide to window design published the same year in Germany that berated displays overflowing with assorted cheap goods with the term *Schreckenskammer* or "chamber of horrors."<sup>55</sup> Efforts to educate German

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380,000 in 1918 to 650,000 in 1930 and 870,000 in 1939, and its territory expanded from 5,600 to 7,800 hectares within the same period."

51 Popescu, *Le Style national roumain*, 227.

52 Felix Aderca, "Maxy," *Viața literară*, no. 46–50 (1927): 2.

53 Ion Vinea, "Interiorul nou," *Contemporanul*, nr. 78 (January 1929): 1; Aderca, "Maxy."

54 Maxy, "Expozițiile permanente."

55 Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism. Architecture and the Object in Germany 1900–1933*

consumers had led to an awareness of the function of the shop-window, with the Deutscher Werkbund, an influential association of architects and designers that aimed to link art and industry, taking particular interest in its potential for reform even from before the First World War. In 1910–1911, the Werkbund opened a “school for display window decoration” in collaboration with the Schule Reimann, where the courses were held. The initiative proved popular, boasting twenty-eight instructors by 1914, with modern design luminaries such as Lilly Reich amongst them. Herman Muthesius also became involved, being drafted in to plan a special building for the school, but the war prevented this project from coming to fruition. The school however went from strength to strength, culminating in the organisation of the Leipzig Display Window Exhibition of 1928, where modern life, architecture and design were reflected in the clean, functional displays of contemporary goods.<sup>56</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that Vespremie would have been aware of the activities of the Reimann’s display department, and the importance of commercial display and Maxy certainly seems to be echoing the reformist vocabulary of the Werkbund when describing the Academy’s aims.<sup>57</sup> According to Robin Schuldenfrei, “the desire to develop good taste... was a crucial component of the group’s work,” theorised by many Werkbund members such as Karl Ernst Osthaus and Elisabeth von Stephani-Hahn in relation to shop windows: “the well-designed [display window] was to do much more than simply sell more products, it was to positively educate its receiving viewers in elements of good taste.”<sup>58</sup> In similar fashion, Maxy’s text explicitly positioned the Academy and its displays as an educational aid for the wider public, offering guidance for the creation of tasteful interiors.

The Academy may have even had its own window display, although only one image has survived as evidence of this. It was printed in the avant-garde periodical *unu* in early 1929, just before the institution’s demise (Fig. 44). Interestingly, its contents were not the Academy’s own objects, but photographic equipment, constituting an advertisement for a photography studio named Omnia, located in the near vicinity. The image in *unu* is poor in quality, but a few details can be distinguished, such as the slogan in the top right-hand corner recommending the use of Agfa Film.<sup>59</sup> The display also features some cardboard models, one of which is operating a camera on

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(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 75, quoting Hans Bode, *Ein Schaufensterbilderbuch* (Hanover: S. Hein, 1926), 91.

<sup>56</sup> Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism*, 93–95.

<sup>57</sup> Arguably, the Wiener Werkstätte had initiated the art of commercial display even before the Werkbund, and its work would have also been known to Maxy and Vespremie, as discussed in the previous chapter. For more on the rise of shop-window displays as artistic endeavours see Jean-Paul Bouillon, “The Shop Window,” in *The 1920s. Age of the Metropolis*, ed. Jean Clair and Jeremy Lewison (Montreal: Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 162–181.

<sup>58</sup> Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism*, 66 and 88.

<sup>59</sup> This endorsement can be found in other advertising for Omnia photo studio from this period.



**Fig. 44:** The window display for the Omnia photo studio at the Academy, printed in *unu*, no. 10, February 1929.

a tripod, and a number of framed photographs on the left-hand side. Both the title of the image, “The Modern Shop Window Omnia,” and the clear structure of the display, with stylised figures and goods arranged in orderly, yet asymmetrical fashion, as well as the very technology it advertises, position this display firmly within the parameters of the urban modernity endorsed by the Academy.

## Patronage and the Modern Interior in Bucharest

In comparison to the cluttered interiors typical of Romanian homes at this time the Academy’s showrooms were perfectly restrained and minimalist, the geometries of the objects echoing those of the furniture and paintings. If, as we have seen, Bucharest’s *petite bourgeoisie* had a penchant for heavy furnishings, wealthy Bucharest homes from the early 1920s were not much different, exhibiting a preference for opulence, with busy, highly-decorated interiors and surfaces covered with heavy pile rugs and patterned textiles.<sup>60</sup> The prevalence of this style is evident not only from historical accounts, but also from the contents of today’s museum collections. The Museum of Art Collections is a satellite of the Romanian National Art Museum that preserves over thirty private collections in their entirety, comprising decorative arts, painting and sculpture, amassed during the twentieth century. Hardly any of the collections contain what might be termed modern applied arts objects, gathering instead an eclectic array of Romanian folk art, objects of Middle Eastern and Asian provenance or pre-20th century West European decorative items.

Even more pertinent examples are the memorial homes of writers Liviu Rebreanu and Ion Minulescu, both located in the same early 1930s modernist apartment building

<sup>60</sup> Popescu, *Le Style national roumain*, 233–234.

and containing objects produced in the Academy's workshops. In 1934, Rebreanu bought an apartment in this building for his daughter Puia-Florica. She died in 1995, bequeathing to the state the space and a wide-ranging collection of objects that had belonged to her parents.<sup>61</sup> The Fanny and Liviu Rebreanu memorial house is a good example of a more maximalist approach to interior decoration, with a strong nod to the national style, containing for instance heavily decorated wooden furniture, colourful ceramics and a display of icons that spans an entire wall. In this context a tobacco box by Maxy with a cubist motif, more closely explored in the previous chapter, is an anomaly within the collection. Romanian intellectuals and patrons with more conservative tastes, like Rebreanu, were unlikely to seek out objects aligning with the aesthetics of the artistic avant-garde.

The owner of the neighbouring apartment, Ion Minulescu, is an altogether more complex case. Known mainly as a poet, he was in fact a renaissance man who also wrote prose and theatre plays, and held important public positions, acting as director of the National Theatre (1926) and as Minister for the Arts (1922–1940). He collected both old and new art copiously. His home, although far from Maxy's vision of geometric minimalism, is clearly attuned to the ideas of the artistic avant-garde. The collection includes paintings, works on paper and sculptures by many prominent Romanian artists, from the precursors of the avant-garde such as Iosif Iser or Camil Ressu, to its main proponents such as Maxy, Hans Mattis-Teutsch or Victor Brauner, whose 1924 portrait of Minulescu is today one of the museum's most highly prized pieces. The decorative arts are well represented with an eclectic selection typical of many Romanian collectors, from regional folk art pieces and icons to Greek and Roman artefacts, Spanish polychrome sculptures and a wooden Chinese cabinet.<sup>62</sup> However, the collection does not, like many others, eschew modern applied arts and Minulescu was evidently a committed patron of the Academy of Decorative Arts. Pieces acquired include a selection of metalwork by Maxy and Vespremie, as well as books with colourful cubist covers bound in the Academy's workshops. Nonetheless, even a supporter of avant-garde aesthetics such as Minulescu did not follow the example of the Academy's minimalist exhibit: the metal bowls and trays he had purchased from the Academy were displayed on a wooden sideboard underneath a large, framed icon, together with a samovar and some pottery (Fig. 45).<sup>63</sup>

This intermingling of tradition and modernity seems to have served the Academy well, as Vespremie's eclectic output also demonstrated. Furthermore, despite its

<sup>61</sup> "Casa memorială Liviu și Fanny Rebreanu," Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, accessed 6 March 2018, <http://mnlr.ro/case-memoriale/casa-memoriala-liviu-si-fanny-rebreanu/>.

<sup>62</sup> *Colecția Ion Minulescu* (București: Arta Grafică, 1968). The collection also included a large number of works by contemporary women artists.

<sup>63</sup> This is based on images from the museum's 1968 catalogue, *Colecția Ion Minulescu*. The arrangement aimed to replicate how the house looked during Minulescu's life. The display still follows this arrangement very closely today.



**Fig. 45:** The Ion Minulescu collection, 1960s. In *Colecția Ion Minulescu* (București: Arta Grafică, 1968).

position as a marginal endeavour, some of the Academy's supporters hailed from the upper echelons of Bucharest society. Its main financial backer, as previously mentioned, was Heinrich Fischer-Galați, a wealthy industrialist, bibliophile and passionate supporter of the transnational language of Esperanto. The Academy's two other directors, alongside Fischer-Galați, were Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, professor of decorative arts at the state-run School of Fine Arts and Jean Al. Steriadi, director of the Kalinderu Museum. Both were well-respected artists and took part in the Academy's educational activities. According to its promotional material (see Appendix B), the Academy also counted amongst its patronage committee a banker, senator, member of the Romanian Academy, as well as professors and government ministers, including Minister for the Arts Ion Minulescu.<sup>64</sup> Amongst the more surprising names on this list are Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș, already encountered as a promoter of folk art as national art, and Romulus Voinescu, Minister for State Security and head of the Secret Police. While Voinescu, who was also a writer, did collaborate with Maxy and the Vilna Troupe on one occasion, as shown in the following chapter, there is no corroborative evidence of Tzigara-Samurcaș being involved with the Academy's

<sup>64</sup> *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative.*

activities. It certainly seems that the Academy was aiming to overcome its marginal status and create a network of well-placed supporters, however one is left to wonder to what extent this support materialised in practice.

Furthermore, it is difficult to determine at present how many of these supporters were also clients. In-depth studies into the practice of arts patronage in Romania are rare and even a prominent individual such as Minulescu, who remained popular as a poet after his death in 1944, has not been the subject of a serious study regarding his collecting practices. Names of the Academy's patrons occasionally surface in archival documents, giving a glimpse of who they might have been. Many were wealthy Jewish entrepreneurs, such as Abraham Leib Zissu who also provided financial support to Maxy's avant-garde publication *Integral*, or Micu Zentler, who commissioned metalwork from Vespremie. Zissu, a successful businessman, was also a committed Zionist, a writer and a publicist. In 1928 he commissioned the architect Michael Rachlis to build a luxurious modernist villa in the affluent Grünewald suburb of Berlin. The finished product was widely admired and the magazine *Innendekoration* published an illustrated feature in April 1930 revealing wide open spaces, clean lines and perfectly proportioned geometries in the arrangement of its orderly interiors.<sup>65</sup> Although paintings, murals and decorative objects adorned the rooms, they were judiciously and sparsely displayed, affording each item the space to be appreciated. Some of the metalwork in the art deco bar appears similar to Vespremie and Maxy's output and it is evident that such a habitation was much closer to the aesthetics of the Academy of Decorative Arts than the interiors one might see in Bucharest, even in the homes of progressive intellectuals such as Minulescu. By contrast with Zissu, oil magnate Micu Zentler commissioned architect Cristofi Cerchez known for his use of the Romanian national style, to build him a Bucharest villa in 1911. Zentler commissioned at least one piece of metalwork from Vespremie, as revealed by one of the archival photographs of the Academy's showroom. A label can be glimpsed in the photograph, positioned in front of the piece, which reads "Radiator cover, part of Director M. Zentler's commission" (Fig. 10).<sup>66</sup> If Zentler's house was distinctly neo-Romanian in style, its interior may well have been in a traditional vein too and indeed the Vespremie piece, with its intricate and figurative design, was not amongst the Academy's more daringly minimalist offerings. Nonetheless, some patrons did combine old and new, as exemplified by Tudor Vianu, a well-known literary theoretician and art critic, also of Jewish origin. Reminiscing about his childhood home, his son Ion Vianu, born in

<sup>65</sup> "Ein Landhaus von Michael Rachlis. Haus Gen. Dir. Zissu in Berlin-Grünewald," *Innendekoration* (April 1930): 139–142. See also Heidede Becker, *Villa Zissu—ein Haus der Moderne in Grünewald* (Havelland: Filum Rubrum, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond M. H. Maxy. The caption is hard to make out in copies of the image and even in the original without magnifying equipment. It has been transcribed on the reverse of the photograph, probably by museum staff when cataloguing the image.

1934, described a universe where remnants of Ottoman Bucharest rubbed shoulders with the latest modernist aesthetics: “There are paintings, carpets everywhere, on the floor, on the walls, oriental, but also an avant-garde one, cubist, signed across its width ‘Maxy,’ right by the entrance. There are settees, sofas. The one by the entrance shows the influence of Modern Style and is more comfortable than the wooden bench from the small office.”<sup>67</sup>

The Academy has sometimes been critiqued due the nature of the outputs described above, luxury items handcrafted from expensive materials and produced for wealthy patrons.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps it is the ghost of the Bauhaus that haunts the Academy again, with its archetypal modernity that aimed to generate utilitarian objects for mass-production, no frills German design versus art deco opulence. However, as in the case of the 1925 Paris Exhibition, this myth has recently been challenged by new scholarship. Robin Schuldenfrei has shown how the rhetoric of the German modernists was not matched by reality:

...this study shows that the consumers of modern design objects, and the dwellers who elected to live in modern architecture, ultimately constituted an elite. While modernism was never truly able to reach the masses [in the period under discussion] in the form of either ideas or objects, similarly, the intellectual elite could not become truly proletarian.<sup>69</sup>

As Schuldenfrei demonstrates, even those endeavours that are often held as beacons of modern accessible design, in opposition perhaps to the 1925 Paris display, were in fact unaffordable and unreproducible. Her examination of the objects produced at the Bauhaus is sobering. Marianne Brandt’s teapots, so emblematic for modern design, were handcrafted from expensive materials in the metal workshop and their careful detailing made them unsuitable for mass production. Orders for private patrons produced in the individual workshops constituted the main activity of the Bauhaus for most of the 1920s, and negotiations with industry came to some fruition only under the directorship of Hannes Meyer. Even when the Bauhaus registered as a business, the Bauhaus GmbH in 1924, its catalogue, designed with crisp clarity by László Moholy-Nagy, presented mostly luxury items such as a silver tea service or a chess set.<sup>70</sup> As Schuldenfrei points out “there [were] no Bauhaus forks”: instead of producing ordinary everyday objects, the workshops laboured to provide upper class homes with the paraphernalia of bourgeois comfort, from tea accoutrements to ashtrays and chess sets made of expensive woods. Prices were equally prohibitive,

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<sup>67</sup> Ion Vianu, *Amor intellectualis* (București: Polirom, 2010), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Erwin Kessler has critiqued Maxy’s use of “corporate aesthetics” in order to become “integrated in the market.” See Erwin Kessler, “Retro-Gardes,” in *Colours of the Avant-Garde. Romanian Art 1910–1950*, ed. Erwin Kessler (Rome: Gangemi, 2011), 9–20, 18–19.

<sup>69</sup> Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–140 and 150–153.



with a Bauhaus teapot costing the equivalent of one and a half week's wages for a working-class family.<sup>71</sup>

When evaluated against this description of the Bauhaus's activity, the Academy displays a comparable modernity. It produced hand-crafted objects for a number of relatively wealthy patrons and members of the intellectual elite who evinced an interest in its activities. The objects were generally suited to a middle- or upper-class lifestyle, including such items as silver tea services, fruit bowls, cushions, and leather bookbindings. Although information is not available on the prices charged in the Academy's showrooms, a price list exists for objects exhibited by Maxy at the 1931 Salon for Decorative Arts and Architecture held in Bucharest.<sup>72</sup> A silver-plated brass fruit bowl was 2,000 lei, only slightly less than the average monthly salary of a Romanian factory worker that same year. More expensive items included a tea service for 15,000 lei, a carpet for 20,000 lei and a binding for a limited-edition illustrated book by poet Ion Pillat that cost 25,000 lei. Prices were thus indeed prohibitive, yet questioning the modernity of the Academy and its staff based on this fact is inconsistent with the reality of other modern design ventures. Their objects did not reach a mass audience, but neither did those of the Bauhaus during this period, despite Gropius's rhetoric. As Schuldenfrei notes, "it is very difficult, outside of its own buildings and photographs, to find the products of the Bauhaus in domestic settings."<sup>73</sup> In this respect, the Academy did reasonably well, as demonstrated by the objects that have been preserved in the collections of Bucharest artists and intellectuals, the mentions garnered in memoirs or fiction of the period, and even in the list of items sold by Maxy at the 1931 Salon.<sup>74</sup>

## The Aftermath of the Academy of Decorative Arts

The records of the Bucharest Chamber of Commerce give a snapshot of Maxy's activity in 1931:

Dossier no. 6634/ 932, registered with no. 15103 as at 31 December 1931, Ilfov [the name of the local authority], Max Herman Maxy, naturalised Romanian, born in Brăila on 26 October 1895; commercial business 'Max Herman Maxy', with the trademark 'Studio Maxy', a decorative arts workshop and exhibition of own items; located in Bucharest, Calea Victoriei 77; beginning of commercial activities on 28 July 1927; previous activities: painter and decorator with a business

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 141–143. Income for a working-class family is calculated at 64 marks per week in 1927, while a Bauhaus teapot cost 90 marks and a five-piece tea set 180 marks.

<sup>72</sup> Romanian National Archives, fond 817 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 22/ 1931.

<sup>73</sup> Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism*, 153.

<sup>74</sup> The listings found in the archives only specify prices next to a limited number of objects, and thus it may be inferred that these were the objects sold during the Salon.

registered under the trademark ‘The Decorative Arts: Academy of Modern Applied Art’, Bucharest, Str. Câmpineanu 17.<sup>75</sup>

Multiple things can be gleaned from this dryly bureaucratic list of facts. Maxy’s official involvement with the Academy is shown once again to commence in mid-1927, long after the institution’s 1924 opening and its 1926 expansion. Maxy is then shown to have made changes to the business he had taken over, eventually rebranding it as Studio Maxy. Finally, the listing demonstrates how even before the antisemitic policies of the late 1930s Maxy could not escape his “not quite Romanian” status: he was identified not simply as a Romanian citizen (*naționalitate română*) but as a naturalised Romanian citizen (*naționalitate română-dobândită*).

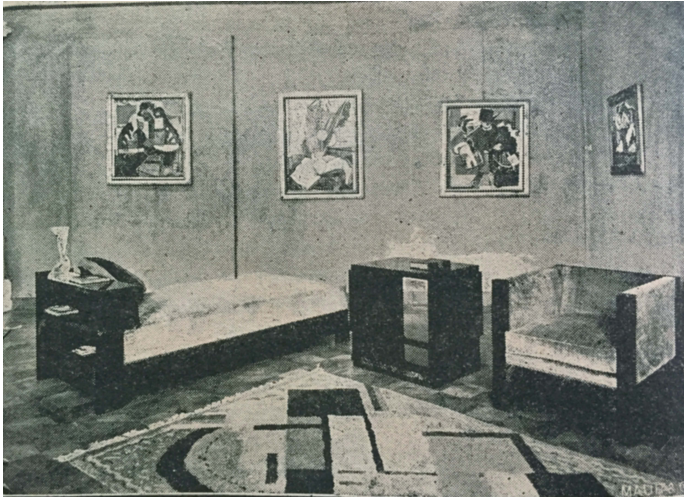
Maxy blamed financial reasons for the closure of the Academy and the opening of his eponymous Studio, but if the 1929 economic downturn doubtlessly played its part, the absence of Vespremie’s pedagogical vision probably did too.<sup>76</sup> As *Integral*’s short-lived run ended in 1928, information about Studio Maxy can only be found scattered in a few other publications of the period. As previously mentioned, *Tiparița literară*, a monthly magazine with the tagline “Criticism—Art—Politics” published between 1928 and 1931, frequently reproduced images of Maxy’s work from this period, yet gave little factual information. In the first issue of the magazine, an advertisement revealed that the Academy was still operating at its usual address Str. Câmpineanu 17, but had been renamed The Decorative Arts: Academy of Modern Applied Art (Artele decorative: academie de artă modernă aplicată), and that Maxy was about to open a new exhibition on 4 November showcasing the modern interior.<sup>77</sup> The following issue contained images of such an interior and several objects by Maxy, probably from the exhibition, although this was not explicitly stated and the images were interspersed amongst poetry and literary criticism.<sup>78</sup> The interior was even more minimalist than the Academy’s 1926 display, containing hardly any curved lines and far fewer objects (Fig. 46). An armchair, a shelving unit, and a chaise-longue with a built-in bookcase bordered the edges of a carpet with a cubist motif. Four paintings, toeing a fine line between the abstract and the figurative, adorned the walls. Decorative objects were sparsely arranged: a vase, a cushion, and a few books, probably bound in leather in the Academy’s workshops. In early 1929, more objects by Maxy were illustrated and another advertisement revealed that the Academy’s exhibition space was being

<sup>75</sup> *Buletinul Camerei de Comerț și Industrie din București* XLI, no. 10 (October 1932): lxxiv–lxxv. So far, I have not been able to locate the records that refer to Andrei Vespremie, Mela Brun-Maxy and Heinrich Fischer-Galați.

<sup>76</sup> M. H. Maxy, “Contribuțiuni sumare la cunoașterea mișcării moderne de la noi,” *unu*, no. 33 (February 1931): 3–4.

<sup>77</sup> *Tiparița literară* I, no. 1 (October 1928): 31.

<sup>78</sup> *Tiparița literară* I, no. 2 (November 1928).



**Fig. 46:** Interior by Maxy in *Tipariņa literară* I, no. 2, November 1928.

used for displays by other artists, perhaps even rented out.<sup>79</sup> It also hosted group exhibitions for Maxy and his peers.<sup>80</sup>

In the autumn of 1929, the first mention of Maxy's new venture finally appeared: "Studio Maxy is the name of the shop-permanent exhibition of objects, furniture and decorations open on Calea Victoriei, across the road from the White Church, by our friend the painter M. H. Maxy."<sup>81</sup> As Liana Maxy reveals, this also meant a move for the family whose home had previously been on the Academy's premises. Their new apartment was not far from the business, in the vicinity of Calea Victoriei, above a hairdresser's. Maxy's financial situation must have been somewhat difficult as the family was forced to downsize: the parental bedroom had to be installed in the salon and the flat was small and gloomy. Nonetheless, Maxy used his decorative nous to improve the situation, having the walls painted with geometrical shapes in pastel shades and displaying his paintings thus.<sup>82</sup>

Maxy also took the opportunity to participate in national and international exhibitions, promoting his work. Romania did have a presence at the 1929 International Exhibition in Barcelona and it included a decorative arts section curated by Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck. The "Maxi Academy of Decorative Arts" (sic) exhibited fifteen items within this section: two examples of leather book bindings and one leather frame, one carpet, two metal vases, two cushions, six metal boxes and a copper

<sup>79</sup> *Tipariņa literară* I, no. 3 (January 1929): 75. The advertisement announces the opening of an exhibition on 5 January with works by Lucia Demetriade-Bălăcescu and Lucian Grigorescu. Similar announcements can be frequently found in *Rampa* during the period 1927–1929.

<sup>80</sup> C. B., "Expoziția dela Artele Decorative," *Tipariņa literară* I, no. 6–7 (April–May 1929): 141. This was the Arta Nouă group that included Marcel Iancu, Victor Brauner and Milița Petrașcu.

<sup>81</sup> "Studio Maxy....," *Tipariņa literară* II, no. 1 (October–November 1929): 13.

<sup>82</sup> Maxy, *Nucleul magic*, 223–224.

tea set.<sup>83</sup> These must have stood out quite distinctively in the Romanian pavilion, whose other sections included folk art, religious art, and ancient art. Furthermore, a visitor may have been hard pressed to tell the decorative arts section apart from these other displays, containing as it did an array of ceramics, floral patterned textiles and stained-glass centrepiece with a religious scene (Fig. 47). A separate display celebrating the production of trade and craft schools included furniture and textiles copied from sixteenth century originals, as well as an array of religious objects. If Maxy was gratified that Romania did have a presence in the exhibition, he was probably less enthusiastic about the objects chosen to decorate the national pavilion, which highlighted the drive towards the national style in the decorative arts. Some consolation may have been provided by the addition of an Official Salon of Architecture and Decorative Arts to the official salons of Romanian art held annually in the capital. As previously mentioned, Maxy participated with twelve objects in 1931, the Salon's final year as it turned out. As well as smaller metal items, leather book bindings and carpets, his contribution included larger pieces of furniture, such as two tables and an armchair with metal and wood components.<sup>84</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the ubiquity of the national style, the new aesthetic envisaged by the Academy of Decorative Arts did eventually gain some foothold in the lives of Romanian consumers. By the mid-1930s, women's magazines such as *Eva modernă* (Modern Eve) and *Pentru dumneavoastră doamnă* (For You Madam) were offering crafty readers "modern" or "cubist" patterns for cushions and carpets, catch-all terms that referred to geometric designs. Likewise, furniture in the modern style had become popular with urban consumers, as revealed by the success of the Székely & Réti manufacturing firm which advertised widely in popular periodicals and opened a glass-fronted showroom on Bucharest's most modern central boulevard in the 1930s, displaying full room ensembles.<sup>85</sup> The Academy of Decorative Arts even gained long-lasting fame immortalised through a classic of Romanian literature. In Camil Petrescu's *The Bed of Proustes*, published in 1933, the heroine Madam T. opens a shop dedicated to interiors "in the new cubist style."<sup>86</sup> Madame T. and her shop are usually thought to have been inspired by Maxy's endeavours in the decorative arts, but given the new facts that have come to light Brun-Maxy is a more likely candidate. Madame T., having returned from Berlin with progressive ideas about art and architecture, opens a shop called Decorative Art, which sells: "beds... with geometric storage chests at one end, ready to hold modern vases and stylised statues,

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**83** *La Roumanie à l'Exposition Internationale de Barcelone 1929*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: J. Horta, 1929), 24. Although present in the exhibition, Maxy's work does not appear to be in any of the photographs in this publication.

**84** *Salonul oficial de arhitectură și arte decorative*, 22.

**85** Vasile Sandor, *Fabrica de mobile ardeleană Székely & Réti S.A. Târgu-Mureș. De la Austro-Ungaria la România totalitară* (Târgu-Mureș: Editura Universității Petru Maior, 2015), 46–47.

**86** Camil Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust* (Timișoara: Facla, 1973), 267.



**Fig. 47:** The decorative arts section in the Romanian pavilion at the Barcelona International Exhibition, 1929. In *La Roumanie à l'Exposition Internationale de Barcelone 1929*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: J. Horta, 1929).

and inside bedsheets, ...armchairs like hollowed-out cubes, ...ceiling lamps instead of chandeliers, with large, matt, glass containers, ...colourful carpets with geometric and asymmetric patterns.”<sup>87</sup>

The book's hero visits the shop and delights in having his entire apartment decorated in this minimalist style. As he recalls these moments some years later, he opines that although cubist furnishings have become more widespread in Bucharest, he had been ahead of the trend.<sup>88</sup> According to Ion Vianu, whatever interest there was did not last for very long. Even in the Vianu residence, with its Maxy carpet and Modern Style sofa, the passing of time saw “the cubist furniture, with smooth asymmetrical surfaces” replaced by “a more classic style.”<sup>89</sup> This return to order also prefaced the closure of Maxy's business in the late 1930s, signalling a transition period in his artistic career amid violent political upheavals.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>89</sup> Vianu, *Amor intellectualis*, 28.

# INTERMISSION: PERFORMING MODERNISM

Shortly after the opening of the Academy's inaugural exhibition in late 1926, Maxy designed theatre sets for a play entitled *The Sentimental Mannequin* written by Ion Minulescu, a patron of the Academy. According to Minulescu's stage directions, the play was to be performed through a shop window, obscured by a blind in-between scenes as though closed for business, and framed by shop signage. The play's scenes were called "vitrines" instead of acts, with the characters in the guise of the titular shop-window dummies.<sup>1</sup> *The Sentimental Mannequin* thus provided a commentary on the performative potential of domestic interiors, which were much more than a backdrop, becoming a reflection of the characters that inhabited them. According to Minulescu, the first "vitrine" was to show the garret room of a young ambitious playwright, decorated with good taste, yet exhibiting a bohemian disarray, while the next two acts were to take place in the luxuriously modern dwelling of a high-society lady. In his design for the playwright's room, Maxy envisioned an uncluttered space in a muted colour palette, with a few pieces of geometric furniture and a functional wall niche, suggesting that he was perhaps using the opportunity to educate the public about the clean lines of modern interior design. Archival records from this period, such as those of the Romanian National Theatre, reveal that costumes and props for productions were frequently bought from domestic suppliers, and so spectators were faced with a rendering of themselves but perhaps in a more fashionable or aspirational incarnation.<sup>2</sup>

Maxy's design for the next act created an even more complex interplay between the spectators, their fashionable aspirations, and the theatre stage by inviting the audience to voyeuristically peer through the make-belief glass of a shop window framed by a sign inscribed "La Dernière Mode pour Dames et Messieurs. Confections, Opinions, Sentiments" (The latest fashions for men and women. Garments, opinions, feelings) (Fig. 48).<sup>3</sup> Acting as both a looking-glass and a window into a new world of modern design, Maxy's theatre set gave spectators the opportunity to envisage a stylish new urban identity for themselves. It also indicated how they may attain it, as behind the imaginary shop window was a luxurious showroom full of modernist accessories. Their distinctive shapes recalled the sharply geometric vases designed by Vespremie and Maxy available for sale at the Academy, and immediately recognisable as the inspiration behind the objects on stage. Whether the items in *The Sentimental Mannequin* were simply props made in the image of modern design objects or whether they were the Academy's actual output, Maxy's gesture, or perhaps Mela Brun-Maxy's, reveals their commercial acumen coupled with a desire to educate the

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1 Ion Minulescu, *Manechinul Sentimental* (București: Cultura națională, 1926), 9–10.

2 Romanian National Archives, fond 2354 Teatrul National București.

3 The wording of the sign itself was specified in Minulescu's stage directions.

wider public about the modern interior. Maxy's on-stage composition also evoked the cover of *Integral's* December 1926 issue, in which the elegant assemblage of objects in the Academy's showroom could be seen above the caption "Modern Interior by M. H. Maxy: Furniture, Cushions, Carpets, Paintings" (Fig. 41). Although this particular sign did not say "La Dernière Mode," it certainly implied it.

As the previous chapters revealed, the Academy of Decorative Arts frequently engaged in this type of staged and consumable modernity. Further obscured by its "peripheral" location, how can it stake its claim to a place in histories of the avant-garde? Modernism and performance have a famously fraught relationship. Scholars working on modernist and avant-garde performance have pondered the existence of this "antiperformative bias" encountered in existing art historical and literary methodologies, often pinning the blame on well-known theorists of modernism such as Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg.<sup>4</sup> Some, like Martin Puchner, equate this with a wider "antitheatrical prejudice" extant in all cultures, a notion developed in the early 1980s by theatre scholar Jonas Barish.<sup>5</sup> In this context, theatre is judged as an act intended to deceive and to court public attention. As Puchner observes, Fried's own stance relied on associating theatricality with artificiality and superficiality: "'theatrical' paintings or sculptures... are 'aware' of the audience and thus lose their self-sufficient unity and integrity, in the process of which they start to resemble vain human actors pandering to the audience."<sup>6</sup> Although Fried's derogatory assessment was construed in a very particular context (relating to the minimalist art of the 1960s), he is by no means unique in using the theatrical as pejorative. Other critics have been even more explicitly anti-performative, often referring to the theatrical to mean something superficial, like surface decoration, essentially form empty of content. Benjamin Buchloh pinpointed the avant-garde's dissolution to the moment when "paintings start[ed] looking like shop windows," becoming a "carnival of eclecticism, [a] theatrical spectacle, [a] window dressing of self-quotation."<sup>7</sup> It was at this moment

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4 James M. Harding and John Rouse, "Introduction," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde. The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1–17, 1. Fried and Greenberg are frequently critiqued in performance studies scholarship, see for example Alan L. Ackerman and Martin Puchner, "Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality," in *Against Theatre. Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. Alan L. Ackerman and Martin Puchner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–17; Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).

5 Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 1, referring to Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

6 Puchner, *Stage Fright*, 3.

7 Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981): 39–68, 53–54.



Fig. 48: M. H. Maxy, Set design for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Act II, pencil, ink and watercolour, 21 × 25 cm, undated. Romanian National Art Museum.

that painting lost its higher purpose and joined “the categories of decoration, fashion, and objets d’art.”<sup>8</sup>

What happens however if we recalibrate “the avant-garde gesture as first and foremost a performative act,” as James M. Harding and John Rouse have proposed?<sup>9</sup> Recognising that many prominent theories of the avant-garde have failed to acknowledge the importance of performance, Harding and Rouse propose that what is needed is not “a separate theory of avant-garde performance” but “a rethinking of the avant-garde that gives central prominence to... performative practices.”<sup>10</sup> Maxy and his avant-garde peers in Bucharest were part of a wider conversation between modern art and design and a developing urban consumer culture, which incorporated performative practices. From the Deutscher Werkbund’s crusade for reforming shop

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>9</sup> Harding and Rouse, ‘Introduction’, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



window displays, to Frederick Kiesler transitioning from designing constructivist stage sets in Berlin to guiding American department stores on how to “dramatize [their] merchandise,” and to Sonia and Robert Delaunay’s moving vitrine displays for modern textiles, such convergences were commonplace.<sup>11</sup> Encapsulating this new urban vision, Fernand Léger acknowledged the rise of the “object-spectacle,” with its roots in the shop display-window, as the direct competitor of artistic practice.<sup>12</sup> To rise to the challenge, artists had to interpret the world “in the sense of a spectacle.”<sup>13</sup>

Maxy’s interest in the performative went beyond the theatre stage to incorporate theoretical writings about commercial display techniques in connection to modern design. Like Kiesler, who had once mused “Why doesn’t the show window hold instead of a display—a play?”, Maxy aimed to connect art, merchandise, and performance.<sup>14</sup> In 1929, he published an article in the trade journal *Reclama* (The Advertisement), written in his capacity as director of the Academy of Decorative Arts.<sup>15</sup> Linking the rise of modern display techniques to the 1925 Paris Exhibition, he advocated for the creation of “practical, hygienic, and economic” objects that must be exhibited according to meticulous and precise scientific methods. He emphasised the incompatibility of modern goods, giving the example of automobiles, with the spaces in which they were being displayed in Bucharest. Streamlined machines were surrounded by stucco or wrought iron decorations and displayed in stultifying salons. To determine vendors to change their approach, Maxy continued by providing some ground-rules for modern display, in particular the way in which a shop’s interior, furnishings, and lighting must not overpower the merchandise itself. He also distinguished between two types of shop windows. The first approach would entail considering the shop window as part and parcel of the shop interior, guiding the eye of the passer-by to the goods inside, whereas in the second case, the shop window would become a separate composition, taking on the qualities of a painting or a theatre stage set, artistic practices that Maxy was very familiar with.

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11 Frederick Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* (New York: Brentano’s, 1930), 110. Robert Delaunay invented a roller device to exhibit Sonia Delaunay’s fabrics in motion at the 1924 Salon d’Automne.

12 Fernand Léger, “Le Spectacle: Lumière, Couleurs, Image Mobile, Objet-Spectacle (1924),” in *Fonctions de la Peinture* (Paris: Editions Gonthier, 1965), 132–133.

13 Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low. Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 249.

14 Cynthia Goodman, “The Art of Revolutionary Display Techniques,” in *Frederick Kiesler, 1890–1965*, ed. Lisa Phillips (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), 57–84, 60, quoting Frederick Kiesler, “Merchandise that puts you on the spot—Some notes on show windows,” undated typescript from the Kiesler Estate Archives. Kiesler’s 1930 book *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* included examples of show window designs from the Schule Reimann, providing another connection with the Academy of Decorative Arts.

15 M. H. Maxy, “Arta decorativă și arhitectura în șlujba reclamei,” *Reclama*, no. 1 (1929): 8–10.

When later that year Maxy opened his own decorative arts business, Studio Maxy, advertised as a “shop—permanent exhibition of objects, furniture, and decorations,” the exterior of this shop appeared in *Reclama*’s final issue in 1929 as an example of good display practices (Fig. 49).<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to garner from the grainy photograph what objects were being displayed—a lamp and a metal platter are distinguishable based on other images of Maxy’s decorative arts objects—but the sparseness of the display is quite evident. There was also a nod to modernist typography in the lettering on the window that spelled out Studio Maxy, above what was probably a list of the services and products offered, with the added emphasis of a floating geometric shape. The somewhat Dadaist appearance of a notice declaring that this is a one-way road was revealed by the text in the magazine to be not an artistic intervention but an actual traffic sign. The anonymous writer (probably Maxy himself) lamented the constant inability of the Bucharest city authorities to consider the aesthetics of the urban space. By contrast, the writer continued, Studio Maxy was a beacon for what modern commercial display and façade architecture should aspire to, and a model for other Bucharest businesses. Some years later, in 1933, another trade journal entitled *Publicitatea* (Advertising) recalled the shockwaves produced by Maxy’s daring shop front: “Under the bewildered gaze of his contemporaries, instead of resorting to the special talents of a sign painter to adorn his façade with tin shutters painted with calligraphic letters, he dared to place a large glass vitrine within a plain wall topped only by ten zinc letters: Studio Maxy.”<sup>17</sup>

In his sketches for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Maxy had had the opportunity to test out some of these ideas some years earlier. He presented the entire façade of the imaginary shop, framed by signage that reflected new typographic techniques and neon lighting (Fig. 48). Another production of the play staged earlier that year and designed by the scenographer of the National Theatre in Bucharest presented quite a different vision of the shop sign, perhaps more akin to the signage employed by the knick-knack emporiums targeted by the Werkbund’s campaign against poor display practices.<sup>18</sup> Cursive lettering framed the “shop window” in symmetrical fashion, recalling the decorative calligraphy of traditional hand-painted shop signs. By contrast, Maxy’s sans serif lettering changes size and form to create an eye-catching composition, as well as playing with light and dark in a manner that suggests electric lighting, thus incorporating modern technologies of shop signage. In Maxy’s sketch, the entrance to the shop is replete with modernist architectural detail, comprising a metal frame with rectangular patterns and a cubist-inspired door

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement for Studio Maxy in *Tiparița literară* II, no. 1 (1929): 13; “Din cele bune,” *Reclama*, no. 4 (1929): 75.

<sup>17</sup> Roland Pava, “Bucureștiul publicitar,” *Publicitatea* III, no. 9–14 (1933): 2–9, 4.

<sup>18</sup> This production was designed by Traian Cornescu and is discussed and illustrated in the following chapter.



Fig. 49: The exterior of Studio Maxy shown in *Reclama*, no. 4, 1929.

handle. The inspiration probably came from Sonia Delaunay’s boutique at the 1925 Paris Exhibition. The signage of the store on the Pont Alexandre III combined similar vertical and horizontal sans serif lettering above a doorway positioned, just like Maxy’s, on the right-hand side of the shop window and divided into equal segments by its metal frame (Fig. 50).

More recently, the widely used survey volume *Art Since 1900* terms the 1925 Paris Exhibition “the birth of modern kitsch,” furthermore disparagingly describing it as “department-store modernism,” a perfect storm of theatricality and commerce.<sup>19</sup> This echoes Le Corbusier’s own critique of the event, which also utilised theatricality as a derogatory metaphor, as Tag Gronberg has pointed out. He declared that “his Pavillon de L’Esprit Nouveau... was built ‘for real’ in pointed contrast to the surrounding ‘plaster palaces writhing with decoration.’”<sup>20</sup> As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, these statements betray a gendered vision of modernism in which a

<sup>19</sup> Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity. Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 16, quoting Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, translated and introduced by James I. Dunnett (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), xiv and 139.

simple, streamlined aesthetic is associated with the male body, while the female body becomes a site of dissimulation and deception. This binary division then expands beyond the physical body to confer essentialising feminine (weakness/deception) and masculine (strength/authenticity) qualities to other contexts and interactions. Such was the belief that “a masculine elite” must lead the reform of art and design practices in order to guide “a feminized public” that was “economically or aesthetically powerless” and thus susceptible to the lure of the spectacle of commodity culture.<sup>21</sup> A further iteration of this binary bestowed feminine qualities on Jews in order to decry the “Judaization and feminization of... culture,” a link most apparent in the much maligned department store, which functioned as a site of both Jewish ownership and female autonomy, thus incorporating a double threat to the status quo.<sup>22</sup> As Elana Shapira points out: “conservatives, provincials, and antisemites perceived the department store as a symbol of a cultural conflict between Christians and Jews, between ‘old’ and ‘new’ value systems.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, when encountering critiques of consumer culture and its spectacular aspect, it is worth considering the historical and socio-political context from which they emerge. Certainly, for the avant-garde in Romania there was no choice but to embrace change in the (sadly unrealised) hope for better future that would displace the unwelcoming past and present. For them, as for Léger, “spectacular promotions, from department stores to billboards to fairground towers, were an arena of invention from which art could learn, a way to shake off the old, fix the mind on the present, and summon the imagination of the future. [This] response was not a simple, naïve assent, but a choice among conflicting options. New things, after all, can displace or destroy old things.”<sup>24</sup> By assisting urban dwellers to, as Maxy declared, “build their homes, decorate their interiors [and] clothe their

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21 Marjorie A. Beale, *The Modernist Enterprise. French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 34. Andreas Huyssen, who coined the term “the Great Divide” to refer to the perceived division between “high” art and “low” culture, also observed that “mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men.” See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47. Interestingly, W. J. T. Mitchell also pointed out how antitheatricality could be construed in gendered terms in relation to Michael Fried’s approach: “The whole antitheatrical tradition reminds one again of the default feminization of the picture, which is treated as something that must awaken desire in the beholder while not disclosing any signs of desire or even awareness it is being beheld.” See W. J. T. Mitchell, “What Do Pictures Really Want,” *October*, no. 77 (Summer 1996): 71–82, 80.

22 Elana Shapira, *Style and Seduction. Jewish Patrons, Architecture, and Design in Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), 14, citing Alison Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

23 Elana Shapira, “Jewish Identity, Mass Consumption and Modern Design,” in *Longing, Belonging, and the Making of Jewish Consumer Culture*, ed. Gideon Reuveni and Nils Roemer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 61–90, 63.

24 Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, 249.



**Fig. 50:** Sonia Delaunay's boutique on Pont Alexandre III during the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, Paris, 1925. In René Herbst, *Devantures, vitrines, installations de magasins a l'Exposition Internationale des Arts décoratifs Paris 1925* (Paris: C. H. Moreau, 1925).

bodies” avant-garde artists were constructing the Romania they wanted to be part of.<sup>25</sup>

We may thus construe the spectacular urban landscape as giving agency to marginalised groups. Similarly, recent scholarship reframes performance as a means of “learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge” that has been side-lined within logocentric Western epistemologies.<sup>26</sup> Performance becomes a form of embodied knowledge that is as equally valid as the tangible and written form of the archive, giving a voice to marginalised communities. As Diana Taylor writes: “debates about the ‘ephemerality’ of performance are, of course, profoundly political. Whose

<sup>25</sup> M. H. Maxy, “Expozițiile permanente ale Academiei Artelor Decorative,” in *Expoziția Academiei Artelor Decorative*, exh. cat. (București: Academia Artelor Decorative, 1926).

<sup>26</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?”<sup>27</sup> In the chapters that follow, fragments of Yiddish performance in Bucharest re-emerge through photographs, drawings, and the memories of those who participated in them. The process of recovery could not rely completely on embodied (some of these works are no longer performed), nor on logocentric (the account relies on both written and visual material) knowledge, and the result is of course imperfect. Yet these performances were a vital part of avant-garde artistic practices in Romania and much further afield, as we shall see. The many gaps in the archives and the absence of these performances from narratives about the Romanian and European avant-gardes point to their marginalisation: they function outside of national frameworks and modernist parameters. The Bucharest vanguard’s embrace of performativity in the city, in the home, or on the stage functioned as an alternative means of resistance, indicating that avant-garde movements can include a wide array of artistic practices beyond those of canonical figures and locations.

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27 Ibid., 5.

# THE VILNA TROUPE IN ROMANIA: RECONSTRUCTING AVANT-GARDE PERFORMANCE

There are few accounts of avant-garde theatre in Romania, and those that do exist are mostly in agreement that truly experimental theatre had no significant presence in the country.<sup>1</sup> Artists such as Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu, who were at the forefront of avant-garde performative practices abroad, are perhaps seen as blueprints for what experimental theatre should look like, seeking to shock and awe its audiences with Dadaist abandon. In Bucharest, however, the goal of those involved in rejuvenating theatre was to create rather than destroy, to attract spectators rather than *épater la bourgeoisie*. This was true especially in the case of the Vilna Troupe, an itinerant ensemble that depended on its audiences for survival and that nonetheless brought a new vision of theatre through its radical productions during its time in Romania from 1923 to 1927. The Vilna Troupe collaborated with local artists and directors to develop its wide-ranging repertoire and to foster visual experimentation. During the years 1925 and 1926, Maxy became one of their foremost collaborators, producing stage designs and promotional materials for the troupe. His work in the theatrical realm was closely interconnected with his other activities during this period, including his collaboration with the Academy of Decorative Arts. This chapter examines Maxy's collaborations with the Vilna Troupe in an attempt to reconstitute for the first time this entire series of productions. The group's transnational trajectory, the ephemerality of performative practices, and an often monolithic understanding of what constitutes avant-garde theatre have combined to erase the Vilna Troupe's contributions to cultural experimentation in interwar Bucharest. This account of its activities comes in response to such lacunae and uses material gathered from a wide range of sources in Romania and abroad.

## The Vilna Troupe and Experimental Theatre in Romania

The Vilna Troupe was a theatrical ensemble formed in Vilnius in 1915, which forged an international reputation due to its innovative Yiddish-language productions.<sup>2</sup> Referring to the rapid rise of the ensemble, Debra Caplan writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Among Romanian scholars, Paul Cernat posited that “the attempts of the Romanian avant-gardes to revolutionise theatre in the 1920s remained only a good intention,” while Ion Cazaban concluded that the Romanian avant-garde’s rhetoric with regards to new theatrical practices, as seen in their periodicals for example, remained only a theoretical debate. See Paul Cernat, *Avangarda românească și complexul periferiei* (București: Cartea Românească, 2007), 269 and Ion Cazaban, “Futurismul ca model teatral,” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei: Artă plastică*, număr special (2010): 33–45.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Vilna Troupe’s international history, see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish*



**Fig. 51:** The Vilna Troupe in Bucharest, 1923. Luba Kadison is centre foreground, with Alexander Stein and Chanah Kadison behind her, and Joseph Buloff is far left in the back row, with Leib Kadison in front of him. Private collection.

Within a year, they are the most famous Jewish theatre company in Eastern Europe, and their productions are frequently reviewed by the Polish, Russian, and German press. In five years, they have become a global sensation, drawing the attention of prominent Jewish and non-Jewish theatre artists, politicians, and intellectuals from across Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, and beyond. They are widely regarded as one of the foremost avant-garde theatre companies in the world.<sup>3</sup>

At the ensemble's core was the Kadison family, whose Vilnius apartment had been the Vilna Troupe's first rehearsal space. Leib Kadison was the troupe's de-facto leader, as well as being its main director and sometime-actor. His wife Chanah provided home-cooked meals and moral support, as well as acting in the plays. The Kadisons had three children, of whom only Luba, the youngest, joined the troupe as an actor. Around 1918, while the Kadisons were based in Warsaw, the troupe was joined by young actors Joseph Buloff and Alexander Stein, who were soon to be competing for creative control (Fig. 51).<sup>4</sup> The ensemble had already engendered a splinter group that retained the now familiar Vilna Troupe name. This was to happen multiple times in

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*Empire. The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018) and "Nomadic Chutzpah: The Vilna Troupe's Transnational Yiddish Theatre Paradigm, 1915–1935," *Theatre Survey*, vol. 55 (September 2014): 296–317.

<sup>3</sup> Caplan, "Nomadic Chutzpah," 296.

<sup>4</sup> Biographical details from Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage. Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, 1992).



later years, with the Vilna Troupe eventually “encompassing nine distinct companies, hundreds of actors, and dozens of directors and designers across five continents at the height of its influence.”<sup>5</sup>

After touring Poland and Galicia and performing in Vienna, the original Vilna Troupe, managed by impresario Mordechai Mazo, arrived in Romania in 1923 and remained in the country until 1927 (albeit not always in the same configuration), having received a warm welcome from the public and critics.<sup>6</sup> Few scholarly accounts exist of the Vilna Troupe’s time in Bucharest. One of the more comprehensive is the section dedicated to the troupe by Israel Bercovici in his history of Jewish theatre in Romania.<sup>7</sup> According to Bercovici, the ensemble’s first two seasons in Bucharest drew large crowds, including actors from the local theatres and even members of the Romanian royal family, and received glowing reviews. The newspaper *Adevărul* considered its productions “worthy of being seen even by those who do not understand the language.”<sup>8</sup> Its greatest Romanian success came in early 1925 with a production of Osip Dymov’s *The Singer of His Sorrow* (*Cântărețul tristeții sale*) which was so popular that it ran for over 150 performances.<sup>9</sup> In an open letter to the Yiddish-language Warsaw magazine *Literarische Bleter*, Buloff—by now one of the ensemble’s most prominent members—described this triumph and the troupe’s reception in Bucharest:

The stalls in front of the stage with its canvas curtain have been filled by spectators wearing tailcoats and monocles, tens of artists, professors, ministers, clapping wildly... From the evening when automobiles with the royal coat of arms appeared on the dirty streets of the ghetto, ...a theatrical frenzy started which lasted 76 days—a legendary number not just for a Jewish theatre, but for Romanian theatre too... From the lowliest writer to the greatest poet or artist, all feel the need to express in public their admiration for Jewish art and the Yiddish language.<sup>10</sup>

Naturally, Buloff had every reason to boast to his erstwhile friends and acquaintances in Warsaw, and when Luba Kadison was interviewed in 1980 by Irving Genn, who

5 Caplan, “Nomadic Chutzpah,” 298.

6 According to Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 9, Mazo had joined the company in around 1916 as managing director.

7 Israil Bercovici, *O sută de ani de teatru evreiesc în România* (București: Editura Integral, 1998), 125–146.

8 *Ibid.*, 127.

9 Camelia Crăciun, “Bucureștii interbelic, centru emergent de cultura idiș,” *Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, no. 1 (16–17) (2016): 65–81, 75. Osip Dymov (1878–1950) was a writer and playwright born in Białystok and active in Russia, Germany and the United States. One of his most popular works was *Yoshke muzikant* (Yoshke the Musician), also known as *Der zinger fun zayn troyer* (The Singer of His Sorrow), which Dymov wrote in 1914.

10 The whole letter is quoted in Romanian translation in Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 130–131. The original was published in Warsaw in *Literarische Bleter*, no. 59 (19 June 1925).

ghost-wrote her memoirs, he also seemed diplomatically dubious about some of these claims, such as the presence of the King of Greece in the audience.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, this was entirely true. King George II of Greece had been exiled from his home country in 1923 and was at the time living in Bucharest with his wife Princess Elizabeth of Romania. According to a report in the newspaper *Curierul israelit*, the King came to see *The Singer of His Sorrow* accompanied by his adjutant and his secretary and stayed until the very end.<sup>12</sup> As well as Romanian royalty, represented by Prince Carol and his controversial mistress Magda Lupescu, the play's audience included the local aristocrats, as indicated by the carte de visite of Constanța Cantacuzino, a pianist and high-society lady from the inner circle of Queen Marie of Romania, located in one of the Buloff archives.<sup>13</sup> The hand-written text reads: "Please reserve a good box for today's performance of *The Singer of His Sorrow*," with the word "good" underlined for emphasis.

Despite this great commercial and critical success, the Vilna Troupe has made few appearances in scholarly accounts on theatrical life in Romania. The existence of a certain narrative regarding the "acceptable" influence being that of West European culture means that some theatrical visits have acquired a larger body of scholarship than others, as is the case with French troupes, such as that of Georges Pitoëff, or with German theatre director Karlheinz Martin.<sup>14</sup> The legacy of such visiting theatrical luminaries is frequently acknowledged, whereas that of the Vilna Troupe's productions is not, despite accounts that describe local cultural figures attending their performances with enthusiasm. Nonetheless contemporary commentators recognised their value, acknowledging that the Vilna Troupe's performances were "a revelation for our theatre" and "a school for the new generation of actors."<sup>15</sup> According to Buloff, even Eugène Ionesco, the prominent modernist playwright, was inspired by the performances he witnessed in Bucharest. Years later, when Ionesco had made his name as a pioneer of the Theatre of the Absurd, Buloff recalled having received an enthusiastic phone call from the unknown young playwright some years before.<sup>16</sup>

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**11** The full recordings of the working sessions for *On Stage, Off Stage* are part of the Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive at Harvard University. In the recording, in response to Luba Kadison's remark about the King of Greece, Irving Genn affects incredulity and focuses instead on the Romanian royalty's interest in the Vilna Troupe.

**12** M. Schweig, "Trupa din Vilna (II)," *Curierul israelit*, 15 March 1925.

**13** Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison collection, RG1146, series VIII Publicity & Reviews, file 192.

**14** Vera Molea, "Actori și trupe de teatru franceze la București (1830–1940)," *Lettre Internationale*, no. 88 (Winter 2013–2014): 9–15; Ion Cazaban, *Scena românească și expresionismul* (București: Cheiron, 2012).

**15** Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 144–145, quoting an article from the newspaper *Clipa*, 18 September 1927.

**16** Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 54.

The success of *The Singer of His Sorrow* was due in part to the introduction of local collaborators. Whilst the troupe had been self-sufficient in its tentative first season in Romania, it now turned to Bucharest's artistic world for inspiration. As well as the talents of stage designer George Löwendal, the play also benefited from the directorial nous of Iacob Sternberg. A poet and writer born in Bessarabia, Sternberg was also one of the most innovative theatre directors in Romania during his time in the country between 1913 and 1940. Another neglected figure, like Vespremie, his theatrical activity forms a pendant to that of Maxy and is woven into the account that follows in this chapter and even more so in the subsequent one. Sternberg combined his knowledge of the traditions of Yiddish theatre with an interest in popular culture—in particular revue theatre—as well as a thorough understanding of contemporary theatrical developments. Furthermore, he frequently presented his observations and theorised his work in the press of the period and within the playbills of the theatrical performances he directed or supported.

In 1925 the Vilna troupe became part of the local landscape even further, reforming as a local ensemble and changing its name to Tragedy and Comedy (*Dramă și Comedie*) in an attempt to escape the crippling taxes imposed on foreign troupes.<sup>17</sup> It was during this period that Maxy's activity in the theatre began, as well his collaboration with the troupe. According to the programme drafted by Sternberg (see Appendix D for English translation), the troupe's new artistic director, the goal was to create "an avant-garde theatre, a theatre of synthesis, which will aim to imbue acting, direction and text with the rhythm of contemporary innovation."<sup>18</sup> This was to involve a number of local artistic collaborators, such as Maxy, although the main curtain was made after the sketches of Ernst Stern, a Romanian émigré who had found fame abroad as Max Reinhardt's preferred designer.

Maxy's first theatrical project was not such a departure from his previous artistic work. He designed a poster announcing the opening, on 1 October 1925, of the troupe's forthcoming season on the premises of the Central Theatre (Fig. 52).<sup>19</sup> The geometric composition with overlapping shapes is characteristic of Maxy's work from this period and represents a theatre stage whose curtain swings aside to reveal four tiny figurines about to take a bow. On the other side of the stage is a cluster of tall modernist buildings that could be part of a constructivist set or a representation of modern life claiming its place on stage, or perhaps both. The planes slope and slide creating a sense of drama and dynamism. The proscenium swings upwards while the buildings lean to the right and the stage is angled in the opposite direction. The

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<sup>17</sup> Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 131–132. I chose to translate the Romanian word *dramă* as "tragedy" rather than the more neutral term "drama" to reflect the iconography of the promotional materials created by Maxy for the troupe, which depict the masks of tragedy and comedy.

<sup>18</sup> Romanian National Archives, fond 652 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 13/1925.

<sup>19</sup> The troupe had previously performed at the Jignița Theatre.



Fig. 52: M. H. Maxy, Sketch for a poster design for the Tragedy and Comedy troupe, ink, pencil and watercolour, 20 × 15 cm, 1925. Romanian National Art Museum.

different sections of the composition serve different functions indicated by scribbled titles. The repertoire, in the yellow space above the stage, is divided into Yiddish, German, Romanian and Russian plays, with the premieres listed in the orange area next to the curtains, while the shape beneath the stage is intended to separately list the names of the troupe's male and female actors. Viewed as a whole, the allusion to the urban environment, as well as the dynamism of the sloping planes and the mobile proscenium, suggest that the swinging curtain uncovers much more than just a theatrical stage: a vision of modernity perhaps.

No evidence exists as to whether the poster ever became more than a prototype, however further material located in the Romanian National Archives suggests Maxy designed other promotional materials for the troupe. A printed brochure, probably submitted by Sternberg to support his application, was attached to an official letter from the Ministry of the Interior granting the troupe approval to perform in Bucharest.<sup>20</sup> The brochure contains Sternberg's programmatic intentions for the

<sup>20</sup> Romanian National Archives, 652/ 13/ 1925.

troupe (see Appendix D). It is square in format and has a purple cover. Aligned with the lower edge of the paper is the name of the troupe, “Drama și Comedie,” underscored by its former incarnation as the Vilna Troupe. In the centre, a logo reconfigures the visual tropes of comedy and tragedy into a graphic construction contained within the troupe’s initials, D and C. Although the designer of the brochure is not acknowledged, the design of the logo can be closely linked to the graphic compositions produced by Maxy during this period and printed in the avant-garde periodicals *Integral* and *Contimporanul*. Furthermore, the final page of the brochure is given over to two portraits of the troupe’s artistic directors, Sternberg and Mazo, signed by Maxy and demonstrating the same controlled equilibrium between the figurative and the abstract (Fig. 53). The sketches display the jagged lines and mask-like faces that Maxy was experimenting with in his theatrical designs, as the next section reveals.

## **Saul**

In March 1925, the first issue of *Integral* announced:

The group INTEGRAL, which does not have the means at present to manifest itself independently and on its own terrain, is undertaking its first [theatrical] experiment at the Central Theatre of the Vilna Troupe with a production of *Saul* by André Gide directed by I. M. Daniel, with décor and costumes by M. H. Maxy. The event must be emphasised: these are the first scenic constructions in our country.<sup>21</sup>

The following month, the second issue of the magazine printed three images relating to the play. These are Maxy’s designs for six costumes and for the set. Of the production itself there was no written account however and the images accompanied an article by Maxy on modernism in theatre in France, Germany and Russia.<sup>22</sup> French theatre was judged to have fallen behind, as German and Russian practitioners were bringing an increasing number of innovations. According to Maxy, Germany had taken the lead in scenic inventions, bringing new technologies to the stage, as well as the concept of the “scenic cube,” which incorporated the actors and the décor into one “plastic image” that could be manipulated according to dramatic requirements. In Russia on the other hand, it was the actor who took primacy through Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanics and the stage environment was changing to accommodate the three-dimensionality of the new dynamic body.

Despite the lack of a textual link between these affirmations and the accompanying reproductions by Maxy, the idea of the “scenic cube” is visibly translated into the stage designs for *Saul*. The set is fashioned from interconnected geometric elements

<sup>21</sup> *Integral*, no. 1 (1 March 1925): 16.

<sup>22</sup> M. H. Maxy, “Regia scenică—decor—costum,” *Integral*, no. 2 (1 April 1925): 4–5.

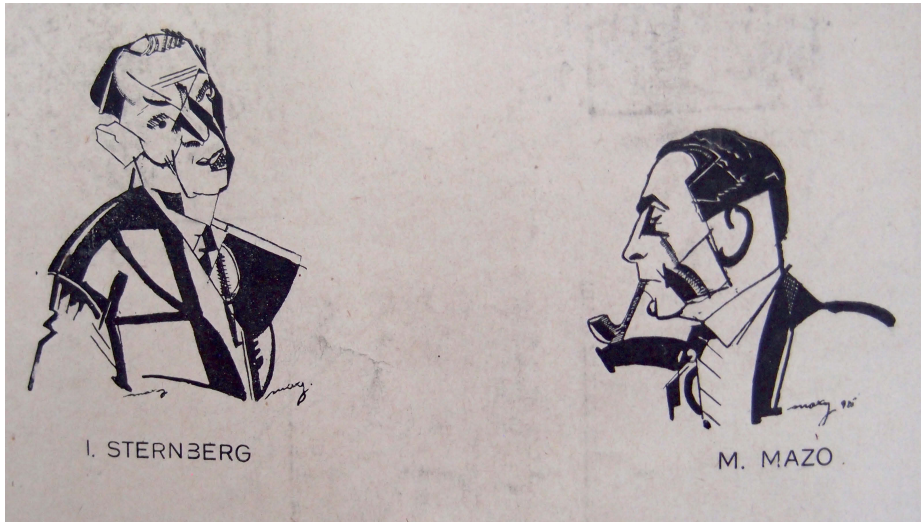


Fig. 53: M. H. Maxy, Graphic vignettes representing Iacob Sternberg and Mordechai Mazo in the prospectus for the Tragedy and Comedy troupe, 1925. National Archives of Romania.

grouped around a multi-level podium that may well form a mechanised assemblage. The geometric rigidity of the set is mirrored by the costume compositions, for the characters of Saul, David, Johel and three Devils, which reconfigure the same shapes into human form (Fig. 54). Nonetheless these do not appear to be practical designs—the figures lack sections of various limbs—but the pictorial representation of a mechanical union between actor and stage, as well as a rejection of theatrical naturalism. The lack of concern for feasibility in these sketches and the lack of information about the production in the press of the period corroborate a later account that reveals *Saul* never actually made it to the stage.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, *Saul* was planned for inclusion in the Vilna Troupe’s repertoire, as it was listed alongside about twenty-five other plays envisaged for Tragedy and

<sup>23</sup> Israel Marcus, *Șapte momente din istoria evreilor în România* (Haifa: Glob, 1977), 54. The author spent several months interviewing Maxy in later life and claimed the artist checked the manuscript for accuracy shortly before he died. The fact that *Saul* was never staged is unclear from scholarly accounts of Maxy’s career, as well as from studies of avant-garde theatre in Romania, which frequently rely on avant-garde periodicals as their main printed sources from the period. See for example Magda Cârneci, ed., *Rădăcini și ecouri ale avangardei în colecțiile de grafică ale Bibliotecii Academiei Române* (București: Academia Română, 2011), 16; Michael Ilk, *Maxy. Der integrale Künstler* (Ludwigshafen: Michael Ilk, 2003), 44 and 176; Andrei Pintilie, “Considerations sur le mouvement roumain d’avant-garde,” *Revue roumaine d’histoire de l’art*, no. XXIV (1987): 49–58, 54. This misrepresentation may also stem from Maxy’s own accounts of his career, as is the case with the chronology of his 1965 retrospective where the designs for *Saul* appear under his activities for the year 1926: *Expoziția retrospectivă M. H. Maxy*, exh. cat. (București: Arta Grafică, 1965).

Comedy's 1925–1926 season.<sup>24</sup> Sternberg's list, printed in the prospectus designed by Maxy, was part of his manifesto for a theatre of synthesis that would tackle a repertoire both classical and modernist. This ambitious plan was realised only in part, with some projected productions, such as *A Night in the Old Marketplace* or *The Bewitched Tailor*, seeing the light of stage only several years later, as discussed in the following chapter. The choice of *Saul* was probably determined by its subject matter and its modernist pedigree. One of Gide's first plays, written in 1897–1898 and published in 1903, it recounts the biblical tale of Saul, the first king of Israel, and his troubled relationship with David, his rival and eventually his successor. The political and possibly amorous entanglements between Saul, David and Saul's son Jonathan are observed by the Devils, who gradually impel the king towards his downfall and finally his demise at the hands of the servant Johel. Gide's play was staged for the first time in 1922 by Jacques Copeau at his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, and perhaps it was this association with contemporary theatrical developments that attracted the attention of Sternberg and the Vilna Troupe.<sup>25</sup>

Maxy's stage and costume designs for the Vilna Troupe have been preserved not only in the pages of *Integral*, but also within several Romanian public collections.<sup>26</sup> Prepared on the same type of paper and in the same style, several such works are signed and dated and contain information about the productions they represent. They are highly finished and do not appear to be working sketches. It is thus likely that they are later recreations of working designs, perhaps for an exhibition, despite being dated with the actual year of the individual productions. Such a possibility is all the more plausible as Irina Cărăbaș has found further instances of Maxy recreating earlier works probably for his 1965 retrospective, including a 1925 portrait of actor Florentina Ciricleanu.<sup>27</sup> Organised during a period of ideological thaw, the exhibition was an important moment of validation from the communist regime for Maxy's entire artistic career and thus the inclusion of avant-garde works was important. It seems

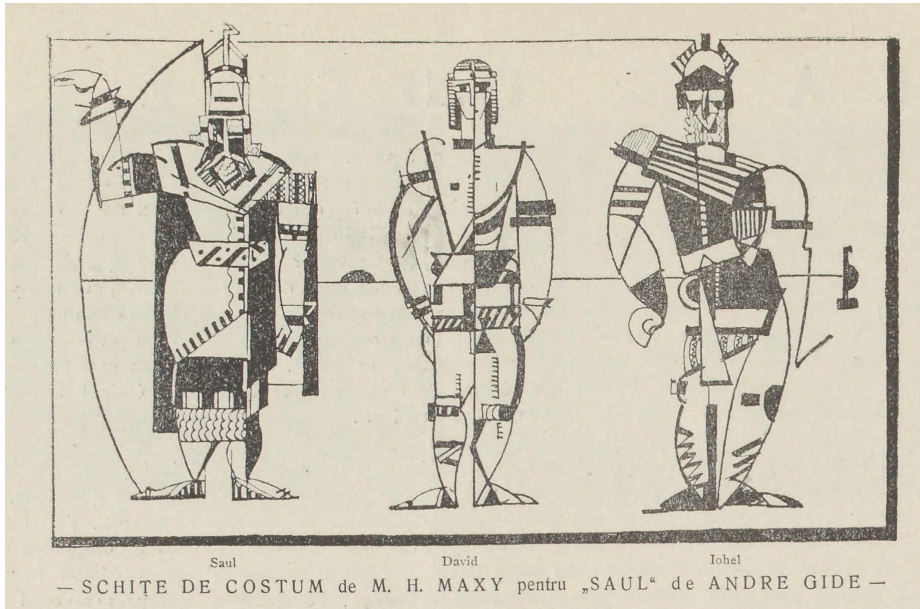
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<sup>24</sup> Romanian National Archives, 652/ 13/ 1925.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the play see D. M. Church, "Structure and Dramatic Technique in Gide's Saül and Le Roi Candaule," *PMLA* 84, no. 6 (1969): 1639–1643 and Karine Germoni, "Saül ou la réécriture gidienne du mythe biblique," *Bulletin des amis d'André Gide* 31, no. 140 (2003): 485–501.

<sup>26</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Graphic Arts collection, fond M. H. Maxy; Romanian Academy Library, Graphic Arts collection, fond M. H. Maxy.

<sup>27</sup> Irina Cărăbaș, "Avangarda românească în viața de dincolo. M. H. Maxy—pictor comunist," in *Arta în România între anii 1945–2000. O analiză din perspectiva prezentului*, ed. Dan Călin, Iosif Király, Anca Oroveanu and Magda Radu (București: UNArte, 2016), 36–51, 37 and 48–49. According to Cărăbaș, Michael Ilk was the first Maxy scholar to draw attention to the differences between two portraits of Tristan Tzara and Florentina Ciricleanu currently in the collection of the Romanian National Art Museum and their period reproductions from *Integral* and *Contemporanul*. In 2019, following technical analysis, the Museum concluded that Maxy did not paint Tzara's portrait anew, but repainted sections of the portrait throughout the years. The portrait of Ciricleanu has not yet been examined, however its composition seems considerably different from the reproduction in *Integral*.



**Fig. 54:** M. H. Maxy, Costume designs for Saul, David, Iohel in *Saul*, illustrated in *Integral*, no. 2, April 1925.

likely that the stage designs were also recreated for this purpose, especially as they do not appear in other previous exhibition catalogues, but they were included in the retrospective.

Within this group of works on paper two are related to *Saul* and to the prints that appeared in *Integral* in 1925. The set design, which closely resembles the version printed in *Integral*, is dated 1924, although as shown above it may have been created at a later date (Fig. 55). Unlike the other drawings in the group, it is not annotated with the name of the director or the theatrical ensemble, thus confirming the fact that this production never took place. It reveals a constructivist stage with three distinguishable elements: a backdrop with a geometric composition dominated by a half-moon shape; the stage-side tormentors with jagged zig-zag designs; and a multi-level podium topped by a rectangular contraption from which two beams reach out to the two sides of the stage. Perhaps Maxy envisioned the elements to be mechanised or to serve as acrobatic supports for a new breed of biomechanical actors. The actors themselves are imagined by Maxy in a second highly finished work on paper. This is a version of the print representing the three Devils in *Integral* and the disjointed bodies, made up of primary-coloured geometric shapes and robotic elements, are even more evident in this drawing (Fig. 56). One character is missing its arms, while another seems to have had them replaced by chevron-shaped springs. Like the set designs, the costumes are a futuristic flight of fancy that could not be realised and which may well have proven a step too far even for the ground-breaking Vilna Troupe. These were





**Fig. 55:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *Saul*, pencil, watercolour, ink and gouache, 16.5 × 20.5 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.

by far Maxy's most severely avant-garde designs, eschewing all naturalistic elements and fully embracing constructivist aesthetics on stage. Thus, this particular vision remained only an imagined space and Maxy's engagement with the theatrical continued to unfold in two dimensions. The portrait of Ciricleanu, typical of Maxy's brightly coloured cubist paintings of this period, was entitled *Electric Madonna* when reproduced in *Integral* in November 1925 in the section dedicated to film reviews (Fig. 57). Both this placement and its subject, a theatre performer, suggested that the stage and screen had replaced religion as a source of awe and wonder for the modern world. With bobbed hair and striking make-up, Ciricleanu's head hovers monumentally above the audience—whose presence is suggested by the rows of sketchily drawn theatre seats—and is illuminated by an electric bulb. In *Integral*, the background appears to be a theatrical stage with constructivist elements, such as a ladder and multiple levels. By contrast, in the painting of Ciricleanu currently on display in the Romanian National Art Museum some of the more avant-garde elements have been removed, so that the background is just a theatre curtain and the audience has been sketched in. Ciricleanu does not appear to have been involved with any of the Jewish theatre companies active in the mid-1920s and in



Fig. 56: M. H. Maxy, Costume designs for the Devils in *Saul*, pencil, ink and gouache, 22 × 38 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.

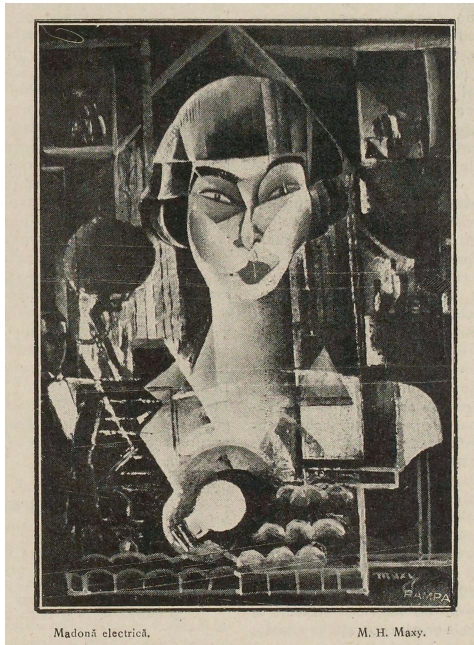
September 1926 was recorded as working for the National Theatre, an institution with a much more traditional outlook.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Ciricleanu does not seem to have been a particularly prominent actor, at least during the 1920s and early 1930s, as she makes hardly any appearances in the press—avant-garde, cultural, or otherwise—and is also absent from theatrical avant-garde happenings, such as those described below. She may have been a friend and sometimes model for the avant-garde group, as Michael Ilk has unearthed photographs of her together with the Maxy family and with other contributors to *Integral*.<sup>29</sup> It is thus intriguing to note that Maxy’s depiction of a modern, performative Madonna was not based on one of the more prominent figures of Jewish or Romanian theatre, but on a relatively anonymous supporting actor.

Maxy’s engagement with the theatre and its practices is further evidenced by a series of graphic vignettes representing well-known personalities. The catalogue for the 1965 retrospective lists a number of such works, some originals executed in black ink and some reproductions from various issues of *Integral*.<sup>30</sup> Amongst those represented are Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, Alexander Tairov and Jacques Copeau, as well as Romanian director Sandu Eliad, and the poet and playwright

<sup>28</sup> According to a listing of theatrical productions in the cultural daily *Rampa* of 19 September 1926, she had a supporting role in *Aesop* by Théodore de Banville.

<sup>29</sup> See Ilk, *Maxy*, 47 and 49. Ciricleanu is also known to have modelled for other artists, such as Petru Iorgulescu-Yor and Corneliu Michăilescu.

<sup>30</sup> *Expoziția retrospectivă M. H. Maxy*.



**Fig. 57:** M. H. Maxy, *Electric Madonna*, illustrated in *Integral*, no. 8, November–December 1925.

Abraham Goldfaden, who popularised Yiddish theatre in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> As is the case with Maxy’s graphic work from the mid-1920s, these portraits are highly schematic, resembling technical drawings composed of multiple elements, some recalling mechanical parts. These assemblages incorporate elements relating to the sitter and their work, with one well-known example being Maxy’s portrait of Constantin Brancusi, in which the sculptor merges with his work. Likewise, Maxy’s theatrical personalities of the modern stage are fragmented, mechanical and occasionally masked, reflecting their approaches. They resemble the characters from *Saul*, themselves seemingly assembled from interchangeable parts and perhaps not entirely human. Puppets, marionettes and their contemporary incarnation, robots, were at the root of modernist performance and its relationship with the actor, and the theories of Edward Gordon Craig were well-known in Romania.<sup>32</sup> In Camil Petrescu’s 1933 novel *The Bed of Proustes*, which as we have seen fictionalised Bucharest’s modernist intelligentsia, a character writes in a letter to his lover:

<sup>31</sup> Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908) was the creator of the world’s first professional Yiddish theatre troupe in 1876 in the Romanian city of Iași. See Anca Mocanu, *Avram Goldfaden și teatrul ca identitate* (București: Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Liliana Alexandrescu, “Echoes of Gordon Craig in the Romania of the 1930s and 40s,” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, muzică, cinematografie*, no. 5–6 (49–50) (2011–2012): 137–145.

Dearest..., we've decided to make a theatre group, we'll call it 'Proscenium.' A young director, who studied in Berlin with Karl Heinz Martin, will do the *mise-en-scène*. Before the play we will hold lectures explaining what we want. There are great hopes that we will completely revolutionise outdated Romanian theatre, which still holds onto cheap, vulgar forms. The first play we'll do will be Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, in a single stage setting, with modernist lighting and props... One of our best known authorities will speak on Tolstoy and Gordon Craig's directing.<sup>33</sup>

Petrescu was probably gently satirising some of the short-lived avant-garde theatrical groups that aspired to transform the Romanian stage, such as the Island (*Insula*) group active between 1922 and 1923. One of its leaders, Benjamin Fundoianu, was later involved with *Integral* and the remarks he made in the Island's programme notes may have struck a chord with Maxy. Fundoianu advocated for a scenography stripped to its bare essentials and for costumes made of paper that could transform the actors into "singing, mechanical marionettes, grotesquely idyllic, as dreamt up by Gordon Craig."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Maxy may have had his first taste of theatre design during two avant-garde events that took place in the spring of 1925, at the same time that his sketches for *Saul* were published in *Integral*. The Festival of Jewish Writers and Artists, on 11 April of that year, has already been discussed in relation to Vespremie's involvement. It is worth returning to it here to examine its content. As well as classical music by Mendelssohn, Chopin and others, and readings of new prose, the evening also included a cabaret with twelve different acts. Maxy designed a fantastical, elaborate playbill for the cabaret whose cover is an intricate collage of forms, fonts, and textures and which includes graphic vignettes that spell the title of each act, connected together like a geometrical spiderweb (Fig. 58).<sup>35</sup> Stacked rectangular shapes explode with fonts that shrink or expand, turn upside down, and move in every direction, including diagonally. Perhaps this exuberance matched the contents of the cabaret itself: some of the acts are quite cryptic and one wonders what the "Salade Russe" or the "Kubik Box" entailed. What is clear however is that members of the Vilna Troupe bookended the performances, with Joseph Kamen (Alexander Stein's brother) starting the proceedings and Joseph Buloff rounding them off.

The Festival was thus an occasion for the Vilna Troupe actors to share the stage with the local theatrical avant-garde, as the evening also included a production of Nikolai Evreinov's *The Merry Death* (1909), a modern take on *commedia dell'arte*, directed by Sandu Eliad and designed by Marcel Iancu. Although some of the illustrations in the Festival's programme are not signed, they represent all five of the play's characters (Harlequin, Pierrot, Columbine, the Doctor and Death) and are thus probably by Iancu. This is also the case of the final drawing, which represents a constructivist staging of the play, with jagged corners and multi-level ramps,

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in English translation in Alexandrescu, "Echoes of Gordon Craig," 137.

<sup>34</sup> Ion Cazaban, "Scenografi ai teatrului românesc interbelic (III)," *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, muzică, cinematografie*, no. 42 (1995): 55–64, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond M. H. Maxy.

recognisable by the oversize clock that is crucial to the plot. A photograph of the staging was also published in *Contimporanul* in May 1925, when the performance was repeated as part of a two-evening happening entitled “Demonstrations of New Art” in which music, dance and poetry readings prefaced Evreinov’s play (Fig. 59).<sup>36</sup> The photograph, although showing a more modest endeavour than that suggested by the drawing, reveals a strikingly geometric stage with stacked platforms mostly devoid of props. There is a certain resemblance between this image and Maxy’s design for *Saul*, including the circular shapes in the background, the pyramidal outline of the multi-level structure and the use of steps. Iancu’s costumes however are distinctly less experimental than Maxy’s, even as sketches, perhaps because they were designed with specific performers in mind or perhaps due to the influence of Eliad, whose philosophy lay in liberating actors from conventions and restrictions, both old and new.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the fact that the “first scenic constructions” Maxy imagined for *Saul* failed to become reality was perhaps to be expected if even avant-garde performances eschewed the purely mechanical stage. In Romania, set design had been primarily developed by several Italian artists who worked in Bucharest during the second half of the nineteenth century. Elaborate, yet generic and interchangeable painted décor was the norm. The 1889 obituary of Gaetano Labo, the most prominent of these artists, specifically referred to the complex skill required to obtain the correct perspective in painted backdrops.<sup>38</sup> The first truly modern stage design was seen in Bucharest only in 1922 when Karlheinz Martin, a disciple of Max Reinhardt, came from Berlin to direct four plays at the Bulandra Theatre.<sup>39</sup> His theatrical aesthetic was sparse, with monochrome backdrops and a limited number of essential props, relying on lighting to create the desired atmosphere, as described by one reviewer who witnessed Martin’s Bucharest production of Osip Dymov’s *Nju*: “In one corner of the scene, a sofa, a table lamp; in the other, a table with four chairs; in the background, a podium. The lamp is turned off. Only one bright beam coming from above lights the corner of the sofa.”<sup>40</sup>

Although innovative in their sparseness, the sets still had some semblance of reality, with domestic objects used to suggest an interior. What had previously been a two-dimensional fantasy brought to life through the illusion of perspective could now be seen on stage, albeit in a more pared-back version. Maxy’s and Iancu’s scenic

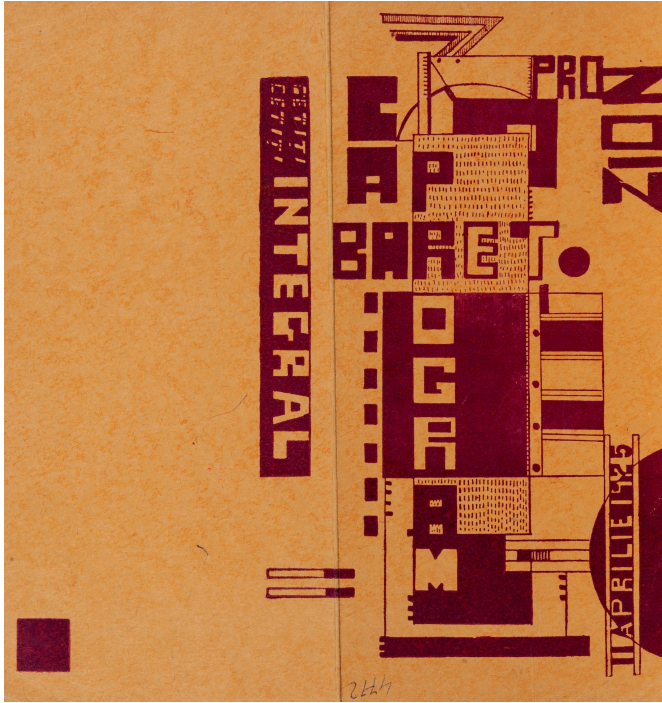
<sup>36</sup> “Program al Demonstrațiilor de Artă Nouă din 28 și 29 mai 1925,” *Contimporanul*, no. 59 (28 May 1925): 6–7.

<sup>37</sup> Sandu Eliad, “Vorbe de după culise” in the Festival’s brochure, Harvard Library Judaica Division, Judaica ephemera collection, Theater, series B, collection 1, Romania. Text reprinted in *Contimporanul*, no. 59 (28 May 1925): 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ana Traci, “Pictori scenografi în secolul al XIX-lea la Teatrul cel Mare din București,” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, muzică, cinematografie*, no. 7–9 (51–53) (2013–2015): 3–23, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Cazaban, *Scena românească*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, quoting the newspaper *Rampa*, 8 March 1922.



**Fig. 58:** M. H. Maxy, Programme for the Cabaret at The Festival of Jewish Writers and Artists, 11 April 1925. Romanian National Art Museum.

constructions made the leap much further, to a stage that resembled nothing familiar, except perhaps an abstract painting. As Eliad wrote, the new theatrical stage must have “a floor fragmented into planes that correspond to the movements of the characters, [and] panels that frame it spatially not pictorially.”<sup>41</sup> In his writings, Maxy also mused on the need for removing painterly illusion in favour of the three-dimensionality of the “scenic cube,” and increasingly strove to replace the pictorial with the spatial in his theatre designs, as this chapter reveals.<sup>42</sup> Another endeavour of theatrical constructivism was mechanisation that could go further than expressionism’s use of lighting technology, for example by employing multi-level platforms and moving elements on stage, as Meyerhold had attempted.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps Maxy intended for his stage design to include such elements, especially when considering his robot-inspired vision for the actors’ costumes. However, this might have been challenging to achieve in reality, particularly in the context of Romanian theatre which tended towards the static despite having a tradition of technical trickeries and illusions that delighted nineteenth century audiences.<sup>44</sup>

Although Maxy’s ambitious vision did not see the stage that year, debates about modern performance continued to take place within the pages of *Integral*. Furthermore, it was in an interview with Luigi Pirandello that Maxy’s colleague Mihail Cosma provided the definition of Integralism that has been critiqued for its eclectic inclinations: “a scientific and objective synthesis of all the aesthetic pursuits we have witnessed so far (futurism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, etc.), all combined on constructivist foundations.”<sup>45</sup> If his definition, together with *Integral*’s own subtitle “A Review of Modern Synthesis,” implies a pick-and-mix approach towards different modernist currents, a closer look in conjunction with aspects of performance reveals a number of complexities. The terms “synthesis” and “synthetic” had a number of uses in a theatrical context during this period. As early as 1915, Marinetti had written an article, together with two collaborators, on “The Futurist Synthetic Theatre.” In this context, the concept of fusion was to be applied to theatre so as to make it “extremely compact, compressing ‘into a few minutes, in a few words and gestures innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts, and symbols.’”<sup>46</sup> Marinetti’s theatre was not a synthesis of the arts, in the sense of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but a condensed version of traditional theatre in which every element becomes simultaneous, like a

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41 Eliad, “Vorbe de după culise.”

42 Maxy, “Regia scenică,” 4.

43 There are many studies of Meyerhold and his theatrical innovations, but amongst the most comprehensive are Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Meyerhold, the Director* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981) and Edward Braun, *Meyerhold. A Revolution in Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1998).

44 Traci, “Pictori scenografi,” 6–7.

45 Mihail Cosma, “De vorbă cu Luigi Pirandello,” *Integral*, no. 8 (December 1925): 2–3.

46 Marvin A. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre. A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 342, quoting Marinetti’s article.



**Fig. 59:** Marcel Iancu, Stage set for Nikolai Evreinov's *The Merry Death*. Illustration from *Contimporanul*, no. 59, 25 May 1925.

Futurist painting brought to the stage. By contrast, the Wagnerian sense of the term was closer to Fyodor Komissarzhevsky's definition of synthetic theatre, which he envisioned as a union of all the arts on stage.<sup>47</sup> Tairov took this even further, calling not just for an integration of various artistic forms—including those theretofore considered low-brow, such the music hall and the circus—but also for an integration of the totality of the stage space.<sup>48</sup>

In November 1925, the Vilna Troupe, in its incarnation as the Tragedy and Comedy ensemble, presented a “synthetic” production of Nikolai Gogol's *Marriage* (1842) that was evidently inspired by recent theatrical development, and in particular Tairov's ideas. Sternberg, who was the director, explained his understanding of the term as applied to theatre as a “synthesis of the whole theatrical evolution,” a definition that mirrored Maxy's description of Integralism as a movement that united the latest artistic advances. Synthetic theatre, Sternberg continued, presented that which is “typical and eternal,” eschewing references to the past or the present and capitalising

<sup>47</sup> Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 325.

<sup>48</sup> James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre. From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 27.



on Gogol's preference for "pantomime, grotesque, silent scenes."<sup>49</sup> A belligerent reviewer described the performance as follows:

Last night's synthetic theatre was understood by no-one, because it is absurd to do away with actors, to do away with walls, to do away with doors, in order to introduce characters through chimneys or flying trapezes, and to do away with furniture in order to replace it with ropes... The cubist mask, the mask presented in profile, the facial triangle covered by a layer of green, red, lilac paint...<sup>50</sup>

The designer was George Löwendal, who had also collaborated with the Vilna Troupe on the celebrated production of *The Singer of His Sorrows*, however he is not mentioned in the article about *Marriage* published in *Integral*, perhaps because Maxy viewed him as a rival. *Integral's* anonymous reviewer defended Sternberg's production and praised the few cultural personalities who wrote about it in positive terms. The article did however contain the assertion, in italics, that *Marriage* "did not attempt to be, and was not constructivist. It was only synthetic...."<sup>51</sup> At fault was the text, which limited the potential for a truly modern performance. This assessment suggests that the writer may be Barbu Florian, one of the regular contributors to Maxy's magazine, who in an earlier issue had declared that theatre cannot be "integral" without "new text."<sup>52</sup> In this context synthetic theatre is seen as not being sufficiently avant-garde and thus not fully aligned with the concept of synthesis as used by the Integralist group. Barbu's colleague, Mihail Cosma, defended the eclecticism that led to the creation of Integralism by claiming that all the previous movements lacked a powerful pluralist vision—"the power of synthesis"—that could unite them into a coherent whole. This vision should be built in "four dimensions": "The material of our creations? Anything. Wood, word, sound, steel, colour, sensation, idea. The field of our creations? Everywhere. Factory, street, brothel, man, society."<sup>53</sup>

This multiplicity of spaces and materials gave Integralism a distinctive vision that made it more than the sum of the movements it incorporated. There were elements of constructivist thinking in the expansion of the artist's portfolio into the realm of applied arts and design, but there was also a practical understanding of how this expansion required different skills. "The set is not the scaled-up version of a painting-sketch, but a decorative creation in which the optical illusion of the aerial perspective is removed" wrote Maxy, referring to the "scenic cube."<sup>54</sup> *Saul* may have remained in the realm of the "painting-sketch," but it also represented the first step in a process

<sup>49</sup> Rep., "Căsătoria lui Gogol la Teatrul Central. De vorbă cu d. Iacob Sternberg," *Rampa*, 8 November 1925.

<sup>50</sup> Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 138, quoting an article from the newspaper *Lupta*, 22 November 1925.

<sup>51</sup> "Căsătoria la Teatrul Central și constructivismul," *Integral*, no. 8 (November–December 1925): 14.

<sup>52</sup> Barbu Florian, "Teatru și cinematograful," *Integral*, no. 2 (1 April 1925): 13.

<sup>53</sup> Mihail Cosma, "De la futurism la integralism," *Integral*, no. 6–7 (October 1925): 8–9.

<sup>54</sup> Maxy, "Regia scenică," 4.

of experimentation that sought to test the possibilities of the new theatrical stage. As 1925 drew to a close, financial difficulties and the departure of some of its actors led to the dissolution of the Tragedy and Comedy ensemble. The Vilna Troupe regrouped and returned to its old name, heralding also several fruitful collaborations with Maxy.

## **Shabse Tsvi**

The very first production with designs by Maxy to see the stage was *Shabse Tsvi*, which premiered on 24 February 1926 at the Vilna Troupe's now permanent location, the Central Theatre.<sup>55</sup> The production was an amalgamation of dramas by Jewish writer Sholem Asch and Polish intellectual Jerzy Żuławski, and it recounted the exploits of the eponymous historical figure who abjured his faith in front of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet IV, thus proving to be a false messiah.<sup>56</sup> The production enjoyed a great success: the newspaper *Rampa* quoted positive reviews from eight other publications.<sup>57</sup> The reviewers were unanimous in their praise of the four scenes that made up the production which were “grandiose,” “breath-taking” and “a delight for the eye.” The design of the sets and costumes, “superbly coloured and harmonious, is proof they were arranged and executed by an artist,” and the first act in particular was “a true poem of light and colour.”

Until recently, it might have been difficult to imagine what this performance really looked like. The surviving designs by Maxy have not been very widely discussed or reproduced, compared to *Saul* for example.<sup>58</sup> *Shabse Tsvi* was not mentioned in *Integral* (which only had one issue in 1926) and has thus escaped the attention of scholars of the Romanian avant-garde. The three designs are part of the same group of highly finished works on paper discussed earlier and are thus more likely to date from the 1960s rather than being contemporaneous with the production. Nonetheless

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55 A. Sch., “Premiere de astă seară. Teatrul Central,” *Rampa*, 24 February 1926. The spelling of the play's title varies even within the same article in the period press, so I have chosen the version used by the Harvard Library Judaica Division and the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project.

56 Sholem Asch (1880–1957) is one of the best-known writers in modern Yiddish-language literature. His three-act poetic drama *Shabse Tsvi* was first published in 1908 in a Vilnius periodical. Polish writer Jerzy Żuławski (1874–1915) may have been inspired by it when he wrote *The End of the Messiah*, a four-act play about the same subject first published in 1911. The Bucharest performance was adapted by Joseph Buloff from both of these works. See also Krzysztof Niweliński, “Shabbetai Sevi on Stage: Literary, Theatrical and Operatic Creations of the Messiah,” *El Prezente. Journal for Sephardic Studies* 10 (December 2016): 55–69.

57 “Cronica dramatică despre Sapsay Zwi cu Trupa din Vilna,” *Rampa*, 6 March 1926.

58 They are part of the graphic arts collection of the Romanian Academy Library. They are briefly discussed in Ion Cazaban, “Scenografi ai teatrului românesc interbelic (I),” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, muzică, cinematografie*, no. 40 (1993): 55–62, 61, and illustrated in Cârneli, ed., *Rădăcini și ecouri ale avangardei*.

they provide an important visual clue to what the production looked like on stage, especially when examined alongside a group of period photographs that have emerged during my research. Unconnected to Maxy's name, the images have been part of the Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive housed by the Judaica Division at Harvard's Widener Library since 1987 when they were bequeathed by his wife Luba Kadison and their daughter Barbara. The collection documents Buloff and Kadison's international career and their life after settling in the United States, as well as holding many clues to the Vilna Troupe's time in Romania. The images of *Shabse Tsvi* were taken by one of Bucharest's most prominent photographers of the period, Iosif Berman, indicating the prestige afforded to the Vilna Troupe's performances.<sup>59</sup> The photographs and the designs can now present a much more accurate account of the production than what has been previously thought possible.

A four-page promotional leaflet announced the premiere of *Shabse Tsvi* to Bucharest audiences, with Buloff and Stein sharing the title role.<sup>60</sup> The pamphlet revealed that the Vilna Troupe was trialling a new subscription system for faithful spectators, hoping for a more secure income stream and that this was the third premiere of the season. The text continued with a very loose synopsis of the play which mused philosophically about the importance of the historical figure of Shabse Tsvi for the Jewish faith. The final paragraph revealed that Buloff was the director of this production and that the décor and the costumes were by Maxy. According to Luba Kadison: "the sets were designed by Maxim (sic), a renowned Rumanian painter, who brought the leading personalities of Bucharest to see this highly stylized, surreal production that took the Vilna Troupe still further away from its earlier realistic style. The response was overwhelming."<sup>61</sup>

The surviving visual material reveals three very different scenes that hover between the abstract and the figurative.<sup>62</sup> In Act I, the hero stands on a pedestal outside the gates of a city, as his followers prostrate themselves.<sup>63</sup> The cubo-futurist outlines of the metropolis rise up behind him, juxtaposing historicist and

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<sup>59</sup> The photographs are stamped on reverse "J. Berman, Fotograf, București, Calea Șerban Vodă 143." Iosif Berman (1892–1941) was one Romania's best known and most prolific photographers, specialising in photo reportage. He collaborated with numerous national and international publications (*National Geographic* and *New York Times*), was recruited by the ethnographer Dimitrie Gusti for his extensive study of Romania's rural areas, and served as official photographer for Romania's royal family.

<sup>60</sup> "Către vizitatorii noștri." Yivo Institute for Jewish Reserch, Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison collection, RG1146, series VIII Publicity & Reviews, file 187.

<sup>61</sup> Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 53.

<sup>62</sup> According to the programme of the Chicago revival in 1928, the play's structure was: Prologue, Act I, Act II Scene I and Act II Scene II. However, Maxy's drawings and the Romanian press review refer to Acts I, II and III, so I will use this terminology. The Chicago Prologue was probably a later addition by Buloff.

<sup>63</sup> Żuławski's play is "set in Ottoman Adrianople, today's Turkish city of Edirne, about mid-September 1666" according to Niweliński, "Shabbetai Sevi on Stage," 58.

contemporary architectural forms (Figs. 60 and 61). The stylised turrets of a tower rub shoulders with what appears to be a multi-storey modernist apartment building with a flat roof. Its porthole-shaped windows contrast with latticed shapes that evoke medieval portcullises. The overlapping shapes, with shadows sketched in, do create a sense of relief, but the *mise-en-scène* seems relatively two-dimensional and stylised palm trees guard the flat representation of the city. In this sense, the staging still follows the theatrical convention of the painted backdrop, even though it has renounced all attempts at an illusionistic effect. The set's flatly sparse yet monumental quality, reinforced by the manner in which the upper edges of the city also escape the photographs, serves to emphasise the action taking place on the stage in front of it. Reflecting the tenets of modern theatrical innovation, in particular those of Meyerhold, it is the actors that provide the set with contrast, structure and volume through collective movements and configurations, emphasised by their costumes. In one image, groups of supporters in monochromatic outfits surround Shabse Tsvi from all sides, using a ramp in front of the backdrop to arrange themselves into a highly effective symmetrical composition. Thus illustrated, Shabse Tsvi's claim of being the new messiah of the Jewish people sets in motion the play's main conflict between the protagonist and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, whose throne he wishes to usurp.

In Act II, Maxy's sketch displays a riot of primary colours that suggest the sumptuous setting of the Sultan's court, yet they are tempered by geometrical shapes and patterns, rejecting the fashion for unbridled theatrical orientalism exemplified by ensembles such as the Ballet Russes (Fig. 62). The Sultan and his two attendants form a symmetrical group wearing lavish, yet crisply abstract, garments. The potentiality of the stage space is once again carefully considered: there are curtains, steps and multi-level platforms in Maxy's sketch drawn according to perspectival conventions, including shading on the pyramidal shape, in contrast to the flat background. Photographs show how the design was used in practice during different scenes in the play's narrative. In one image Shabse Tsvi can be seen in combat with the Sultan's Janissaries, wearing his messianic crown (Fig. 63), while two other photographs show him being captured and paying obeisance to the Ottoman ruler. All of these scenes make full use of the set's dynamic structure: Shabse Tsvi's downfall is mirrored by this descent from the pyramidal podium to its base and the Sultan's underlings gather in compact formations, using the stepped platforms to create diagonal lines that frame the action. Maxy's costume designs can be seen quite clearly. The striped garments of the guards alternate with patches of plain colour, whilst Shabse Tsvi is set apart by his white robes. The Sultan's costume is the most elaborate, consisting of a robe with an abstract asymmetrical composition and a turban topped with geometric patterns. The Sultan's oversized headgear and his bulging belly turn him into an antagonist that is



**Fig. 60:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *Shabse Tsvi*, Act I, ink and ink wash, silver, pencil, watercolour, gouache, 24.5 × 23.5 cm, 1960s. Romanian Academy Library.



**Fig. 61:** The Vilna Troupe in *Shabse Tsvi*, Act I, photograph by Iosif Berman, 1926. Harvard Library Judaica Division.

perhaps too comical to be effective—a critique brought also by the Romanian press—yet Żuławski did mean to portray him as a weak and ineffectual ruler.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, *Shabse Tsvi*'s battle is with his own self, as the production's concluding act suggests. Maxy's design for this scene makes its visual impact though arresting simplicity, with an elongated pentagon shape emerging out of the darkness of the stage to enclose a pyramid of steps on which the protagonist stands, a barely human figure composed of interlocking geometric shapes (Fig. 64). The photographs show that the luminous pentagon was created through the use of curtains, bunched together to expose an area symbolic of the throne that *Shabse Tsvi* has reneged (Fig. 65). Having lost his white messianic robes, he is juxtaposed on stage with his temptress Sarah, his position uncertain, hovering somewhere between heaven and earth. As Luba Kadison later revealed, Sarah's white dress was Buloff's means of signalling that she "symbolized the false messiah's alter-ego" and thus his struggle with his own nature rather than a physical being.<sup>65</sup> For one reviewer, this last scene

<sup>64</sup> J. Blumberg, "Sabetai Zwi. Câteva observațiuni cu ocazia Jubileului de 25 reprezentații a piesei *Sapsay-Zwi*," *Renașterea*, 27 March 1926. Niweliński, "Shabbetai Sevi on Stage," 60.

<sup>65</sup> Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 70.



**Fig. 62:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *Shabse Tsvi*, Act II, ink, silver, pencil, gouache, 22 × 22 cm, 1960s. Romanian Academy Library.

was truly memorable and offered “a majestic simplicity in its decorative concept and an impressive stylisation in the acting. *Shabse Tsvi* rise is swift but brief, as he encounters the capital sin with the aid of a woman, and we witness a lugubrious descent of bodies, plunging down the steps and into the abyss of immorality.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> L.B. Wechsler, “Cronica dramatică. Trupa din Vilna. Sabsay Zwi. Mister în 3 acte de Schalom Asch prelucrat de J. Jurlowsky,” *Renașterea*, 27 February 1926.



**Fig. 63:** The Vilna Troupe in *Shabse Tsvi*, Act II, photograph by Iosif Berman, 1926. Harvard Library Judaica Division.

*Shabse Tsvi* was one of the Vilna Troupe's most notable successes in Bucharest, after their first triumph with *The Singer of His Sorrows* in 1924. *Lupta* reported that during the premiere the audience was completely enraptured and there was great acclaim as the curtain went down on the play's first act.<sup>67</sup> The mise-en-scène was reputed to be the most sumptuous the Central Theatre had ever seen, weaving together "décor, lights, apparitions, tempo, [and] acting" into one inspired performance, akin to the experiments of influential theatre director Max Reinhardt whom the Vilna Troupe had met in Berlin.<sup>68</sup> Maxy's work had "great artistic value" and "Romanian theatre [could] count on him as a craftsman of admirable talent."<sup>69</sup> For some commentators, the scenography was almost a victim of its own success, eclipsing the action on stage.

<sup>67</sup> "Teatru. Dela Teatrul Central," *Lupta*, 26 February 1926.

<sup>68</sup> Sch., "Premiere de astă seară;" Sing., "Cronica dramatică. Sapsay Zwi la Trupa din Wilna," *Hasmonaea* VIII, no. 9 (February 1926): 39–41, 40. It is not clear what "apparitions" ("aparițiuni" in the original) refers to exactly. Most likely, it refers to the section of the play in which Shabse Tsvi performs a number of miracles, such as raising the dead, which may have required a certain amount of on-stage trickery.

<sup>69</sup> Wechsler, "Cronica dramatică."





**Fig. 64:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *Shabse Tsvi*, Act III, ink and ink wash, silver, pencil, watercolour, 20 × 17.5 cm, 1960s. Romanian Academy Library.

“The theatrical overshadowed the intellectual and the emotional!” wrote one critic in *Lupta*, whilst another reiterated: “it has been said before and we repeat it here that Maxy’s splendid decoration distracts the attention of the spectator” as “the wonderful exterior setting stifles the inner narrative.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps Maxy had been overzealous in fulfilling his first theatrical design commission, but his notoriety was now certainly assured. One month after the premiere, an article in *Renasterea* celebrated the play’s 25th performance and several newspapers ran serialised accounts of Shabse Tsvi’s life.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Int., “Teatrul Central. Sapsay Zwi, mister dramatic prelucrat după Schalom Asch de Julavsky,” *Lupta*, 26 February 1926; Blumberg, “Sabetai Zwi. Câteva observațiuni.”

<sup>71</sup> Blumberg, “Sabetai Zwi. Câteva observațiuni.” See for example the serialisation of “Sabetay Zewi” by Israel Zangwil in *Renasterea*, starting on 13 March 1926.



**Fig. 65:** The Vilna Troupe in *Shabse Tsvi*, Act III, photograph by Iosif Berman, 1926. Harvard Library Judaica Division.

The production was so popular that it was chosen to open the autumn-winter season at the Central Theatre that same year.<sup>72</sup> However, much had changed in the intervening months. Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison, who had been married the previous year, were considering whether to follow Luba's parents to New York and forge a new life in the United States, joining the company of Maurice Schwartz. Buloff wrote to Leib and Chanah:

Dear Parents,

Yesterday I got a letter; today a telegram. The contract has been signed. I felt a pang in my heart. Yes, and then no. Conflict.

The productions of *The Singer of His Sorrow* and *Sabbatai Zvi* have raised me to the top. Now I hold the reins of power and Alexander Stein is in the opposition. But the opposition is weak.

[Schwartz doesn't know that] I have my own conception of theatre. Since I fought here to have it recognized, I must naturally bring it to America. But if my approach is not the right one for America, it might be a mistake to import it.

<sup>72</sup> Rep., "Deschiderea stagiunei Teatrului Central. Sabetay Zwy," *Rampa*, 15 October 1926.

Here, by contrast, the entire field is mine. Here, I am recognised as the only man who can say something and prove it... the Vilna Troupe is planning to return to Warsaw with *The Singer* and *Sabbatai Zvi*.

We are now on our way to Transylvania to perform for six weeks, whereupon we can leave—which will probably be on July 25.<sup>73</sup>

*Shabse Tsvi* had evidently propelled Buloff to critical and popular acclaim, as well as ensuring his de-facto leadership of the Vilna Troupe following Leib's departure a year earlier. His faith in the production was such that he would have liked to take it on tour outside the borders of Romania, back to Warsaw, the troupe's previous theatrical base. However, the Transylvanian tour did not go according to plan, perhaps swaying the Buloffs' final decision. They found the audiences in the region less responsive than those in Bucharest and one of the main players, Judith Lares—who had created a sensation with her performance in *The Singer of His Sorrows*—collapsed on stage and died of peritonitis. Mazo and the other actors buried her in the Transylvanian town of Arad, emblazoning the Vilna Troupe's logo large on her gravestones, in the hope of preserving some fleeting remembrance.<sup>74</sup>

The Buloffs thus embarked on the journey to New York, leaving Stein to take the creative reigns of the troupe in Bucharest. Although, according to Buloff, Stein was his rival and opponent, change did not come so swiftly. Stein, perhaps aware of the popularity of *Shabse Tsvi* and wary of the perils of his new position, opted to start the season with it rather than a new production. In mid-October 1926 *Shabse Tsvi* was back on stage at the Central Theatre, with Maxy's decors and costumes enjoying a second outing. Having already reviewed this production, the press only ran short announcements about its revival, and thus, there is not sufficient information to compare Stein's vision with that of Buloff. However, considering that the one lengthier article about the Stein production printed in *Rampa* reproduced exactly the text of the review that had appeared several months earlier for Buloff's performance, it may be deduced that the differences were scarce.<sup>75</sup>

This was not the end of *Shabse Tsvi*, which enjoyed a transnational afterlife. After a year in the United States, Buloff opted to leave Maurice Schwartz's troupe in order to become art director of the Chicago Dramatische Gesellschaft, a Yiddish amateur theatre group. Buloff's decision stemmed from his frustration with the New York theatre scene and his desire to return to more experimental work.<sup>76</sup> He thus chose to undertake

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<sup>73</sup> Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 59–60. Although in the couple's memoirs the letter is dated 1927, it was actually written during the summer of 1926. The dating in the memoirs is not very accurate, for example the Bucharest production of *Shabse Tsvi* is described as taking place in 1924 instead of 1926.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.

<sup>75</sup> Scarlat Froda, "Cronica dramatică. Teatrul Central, Deschiderea stagiunei. Sapsay Zwi," *Rampa*, 17 October 1926.

<sup>76</sup> Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 58–59.

a revival of *Shabse Tsvi* on the stage of the Jewish People's Institute in Chicago in the autumn of 1927.<sup>77</sup> According to a letter Buloff sent to writer and journalist Yankev Botoshansky: "*Sabbatai Zvi* was our first production. As you know, I had done it earlier with the Vilner in Bucharest. Returning to the same story, I now re-kneaded it and baked it fresh. As a result, the play scored 100 percent—fifty percent old, fifty percent new."<sup>78</sup>

Included in the "fifty percent old" was Maxy's scenography, which Buloff elected to keep, crediting its maker in the play's programme. It was re-created anew by Buloff and the troupe, as they could not afford extensive professional services.<sup>79</sup> The costumes, for example, were made by a woman named Sarah Patt, who also acted in the play's prologue as one of the "shadows of long past messiahs."<sup>80</sup> Press reviews lauded the production as "an artistic triumph of the first order... upon a stage lit up with scenic wonder" and "a revelation" with "enchanted music and... fantastic, almost bizarre, scenery."<sup>81</sup> According Chicago reporter Meyer Levin:

The play was staged in the 'modern way.' The scenery was in sections and parcels of color that suggested the forms of actual things. There were platforms and steps for the actors to group upon, there were costumes that moved as part of the scenery... As the scene opens, there are in the foreground stone stairs and a ledge, in the background a design of grays and blacks, indicating a city of low hovels.<sup>82</sup>

Levin reported in detail about the drama unfolding on stage, providing some clues that are absent from the Romanian press reviews. He reveals for instance that the Sultan's dais was a multi-functional component of the scenography, turning to reveal the staircase that prefaces Shabse Tsvi's downfall. Furthermore, Levin makes explicit the symbolic implications of the sets and costumes that signal the characters' paths, such as the use of black and white ensembles for Shabse Tsvi or the multi-level platforms that allow the hero and his antagonists, the Sultan and Sarah, to switch places both physically and metaphorically. It also becomes apparent that Buloff introduced new elements, such as a prologue in which "Shadows of long past messiahs" appear,

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<sup>77</sup> According to Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 70, this happened in 1928, however the period press indicates the production took place the previous year. See for example "The Chicago Dramatic Society to Present Sabati Zvi," *The Sentinel*, 4 November 1927.

<sup>78</sup> Kadison and Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage*, 75.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 72: "for each offering, we build and paint new scenery and make our own costumes." Buloff also kept the musical score created for the Bucharest production by W. Schwartzman.

<sup>80</sup> Harvard Library Judaica Division, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Programmes, collection 1, folder 8; Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum collection, RG8.

<sup>81</sup> Clippings from unidentified publications found in Scrapbook 2, Harvard Library Judaica Division, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbooks.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* It was most likely taken from *The Chicago Daily News*, where Levin, later a prominent novelist, worked as a reporter until 1928.

played by six of the company's female actors, foreshadowing Sarah's depiction as Shabse Tsvi's alter-ego in the final scene of the play.

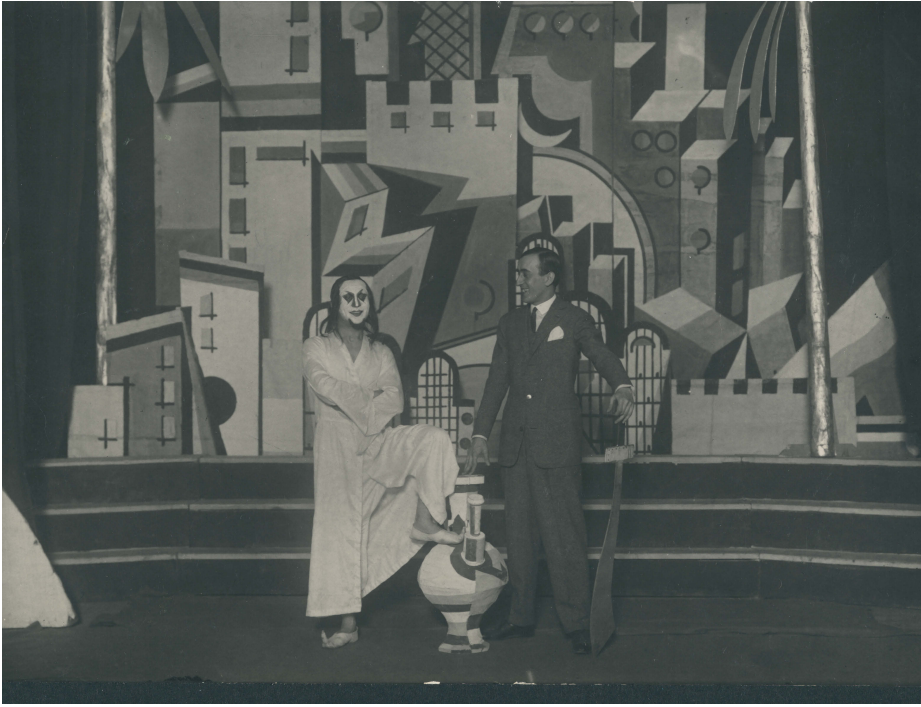
Although no photographs of this production on stage are known to exist, Buloff did use the opportunity to have portraits taken of himself and Luba Kadison in character, perhaps in order to establish a portfolio for their newly independent acting career.<sup>83</sup> These images reveal in close-up the costumes and dramatic, mask-like make-up used in the play. Buloff appears in a variety of different poses, from supplicant to crowned hero, while Kadison performs an elegantly choreographed stance. The costumes had remained largely the same as the ones in Bucharest, following Maxy's designs. Shabse Tsvi's spectacular openwork crown, with its Star of David pattern, appeared in both productions, as did the white robes with fluted sleeves, shalwar-style trousers and pointed slippers. A striking black trouser suit, perhaps made of silk, may have been a new addition by Buloff to give visual emphasis to the character's conflicted nature.<sup>84</sup>

Comparing the physical manifestations of *Shabse Tsvi* with the prototypes for *Saul*, it becomes clear that although the strict, strongly utopian constructivism of the latter was unrealisable, aspects of it did inform the former. The mask-like make-up, the multi-functional set with its ramps and stairs, the flatness of the backdrops infused with cubist shapes and echoes of modernist architecture, all echoed contemporary developments in stage design and performance. If some conventions were preserved, such as the backcloth, illusionistic effects were discarded as were any aspirations of mimicking reality. The play's success abroad may have stemmed from this easily transmutable vision, as well as from its conciliation of the traditional and the avant-garde, which is also visible in an intriguing photograph of the play's lead actor and designer standing in front of the Act I backdrop (Fig. 66). Buloff, in full costume and make up, strikes a pose next to what is probably the Sultan's hookah pipe, visible in the sketch for Act II (Fig. 62). Tall and elegantly dressed, Maxy stands next to Buloff holding another prop from the same act, a henchman's sword. Together they sartorially encapsulate the entwined historicist and modernist aspects of the metropolis behind them, which exists somewhere between Buloff's upturned Turkish slippers and Maxy's dapper suit, rather like Bucharest itself. Perhaps Maxy was already musing about this dichotomy that was soon to inform his interior design work and his campaign against the city's lingering preference for the remnants of Ottoman style. In his sketch for Act II (Fig. 62), the Sultan's hookah pipe unmistakably recalls the shape of the vases produced at the Academy of Decorative Arts (Figs. 12 and 13), which Maxy

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<sup>83</sup> Harvard Library Judaica Division, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Photographs; Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison collection, RG1146, series X Photographs.

<sup>84</sup> "There stands Messiah, robed in black silk" according to one of the newspaper clippings from unidentified publications found in Scrapbook 2, Harvard Library, Judaica Division, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbooks.



**Fig. 66:** Joseph Buloff and M. H. Maxy on the set of *Shabse Tsvi*, photograph by Iosif Berman, February 1926. Behind them is the décor for Act I. Harvard Library Judaica Division.

was to join later that same year. This raises some problems. As the photograph shows, the prop was not in fact designed in this manner and its shaping was rather more conventional, despite the abstract motif that decorated its exterior. Furthermore, if Maxy had already designed such an object in February 1926, this would place him ahead of *Vespremie*, whose vase first appeared illustrated in *Integral* in December of that year.<sup>85</sup> If Maxy was attempting to overestimate his role at the Academy later in life, this discovery adds substance to the claim that his theatrical sketches date from the period immediately prior to his seventieth birthday retrospective. Adding this recognisable shape to his recreation of the *Shabse Tsvi* designs could establish both his authorship of the vases and his pre-eminence in the field. Furthermore, Maxy's next theatrical project hinged on his developing relationship with the Academy of Decorative Arts even more conspicuously.

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<sup>85</sup> *Integral*, no. 9 (December 1926): 14.

## *The Sentimental Mannequin*

The last few months of 1926 were rich in further collaborations between Maxy and the Vilna Troupe: as well as Stein's revival of *Shabse Tsvi*, several new productions designed by the artist opened between October and December 1926. One of these premieres also represented a new step for the ensemble, by exploring contemporary Romanian dramaturgy. On 3 November a new double-bill opened at the Central Theatre, presented by the Vilna Troupe. It began with a short comedy entitled *The Detective* (Detectivul) by Romulus Voinescu and continued with *The Sentimental Mannequin* (Manechinul sentimental), a three-act play by Ion Minulescu. Both Minulescu, whom we have already encountered, and Voinescu, who oversaw Romania's intelligence and security services, were highly placed government officials as well as patrons of the Academy of Decorative Arts and they both nursed literary inclinations. Maxy's collaboration with the Vilna Troupe thus seems to converge with his recent involvement with the Academy and it would not be implausible to speculate that he had a hand in selecting this repertoire. After all, the benefits would be manifold, from honouring the Academy's patrons to extending their benefaction to the Vilna Troupe and Stein's new artistic directorship.

Both of these plays had made their debut earlier that same year at Bucharest's National Theatre. *The Sentimental Mannequin* was a Pirandellian play-within-a-play that charted the attempts of a dramatist to find inspiration for his forthcoming oeuvre. Minulescu wrote it as a vehicle for Marioara Voiculescu, the famed Romanian thespian, and the play enjoyed considerable success before its run was halted due to the conflict of interest engendered by Minulescu's appointment as interim director of the National Theatre in April 1926.<sup>86</sup> After its premiere on 8 January, the play, which ran at about 45 minutes, was considered too brief to be shown on its own and several attempts at finding a suitable complement ensued.<sup>87</sup> In March, it was joined by *The Detective*, Voinescu's one act comedy about a private eye hired by several parties involved in the same love triangle.<sup>88</sup> This light-hearted and highly contemporary double-bill was an uncharacteristic choice for the Vilna Troupe and perhaps also a brave one, providing as it did the theatre going public with a very recent comparison

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<sup>86</sup> "Premiera Manechinul sentimental. Reintrarea d-nei Marioara Voiculescu," *Dimineața*, 9 January 1926; "Literatura românească în idiș. Manechinul Sentimental și Detectivul," *Rampa*, 4 November 1926. Documentation confirming Minulescu's appointment is located in the Romanian National Archives, fond 652 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 1/ 1926.

<sup>87</sup> A. de Herz, "Cronica Teatrală. Teatrul Național, Striana, comedie eroică în două acte," *Dimineața*, 18 January 1926.

<sup>88</sup> Information on the scheduling of the plays comes from the Bucharest National Theatre 1925–1926 register of performances, Romanian National Archives, fond 2345 Teatrul Național București, files 62/ 1925 and 2/ 1925.

on a mainstream stage. Interviewed in *Rampa*, both Minulescu and Voinescu declared themselves flattered to see their creations onstage in Yiddish translation.<sup>89</sup>

Although Maxy designed sets for both of the productions, no visual material or detailed descriptions about *The Detective* have come to light, but *The Sentimental Mannequin* is better documented. The National Theatre production was also documented through photographs and illustrations and can serve as a comparison with mainstream Romanian theatre during this period. The designer of this production was Traian Cornescu (1885–1965), who had been the National Theatre’s main scenographer since 1919. Trained in Munich and Paris, Cornescu was skilled if not innovative and his main quality seems to have been adaptability. Working with a wide range of directors, he was able to adjust his execution and techniques to individual creative visions.<sup>90</sup> In the case of *The Sentimental Mannequin*, it was perhaps Minulescu’s vision he was accommodating, as the playwright included detailed stage directions in his script. Furthermore, a selection of Cornescu’s designs served as illustrations in the published version of *The Sentimental Mannequin*, which was bound inextricably with the National Theatre production. Dedicated by Minulescu to Marioara Voiculescu, the volume included details of the premiere, including the cast and the director, veteran theatre professional Paul Gusti.<sup>91</sup>

Minulescu’s wish was for the play to resemble a puppet show. The characters were described as “mannequins” exposed in displays that reflected Romania’s then-present-day social classes, and included a young and ambitious playwright, a high-society dame and her ageing millionaire husband. As already discussed, the play was performed through a make-believe shop window framed by a sign inscribed “La Dernière Mode pour Dames et Messieurs. Confections, Opinions, Sentiments” and the play’s scenes were called “vitrines” instead of acts.<sup>92</sup> *The Sentimental Mannequin* was thus a clear product of its age, reflecting both contemporary social mores and current theories of experimental theatre, including an interest in marionettes and an emphasis on the illusory quality of the stage.

The first “vitrine” introduces the playwright Radu Cartian in his bohemian garret room. In Maxy’s vision, Radu’s dwelling is full of jagged edges, geometric furniture and curious angles (Fig. 67). The walls slope in different directions and a latticed triangular shape hovers over the room. If in *Shabse Tsvi* the traditional theatrical backdrop was still employed, albeit with a near-abstract design, in *The Sentimental Mannequin* Maxy seems to have done away with it altogether utilising the three-dimensional potential of the stage space. The interplay of surfaces that are both

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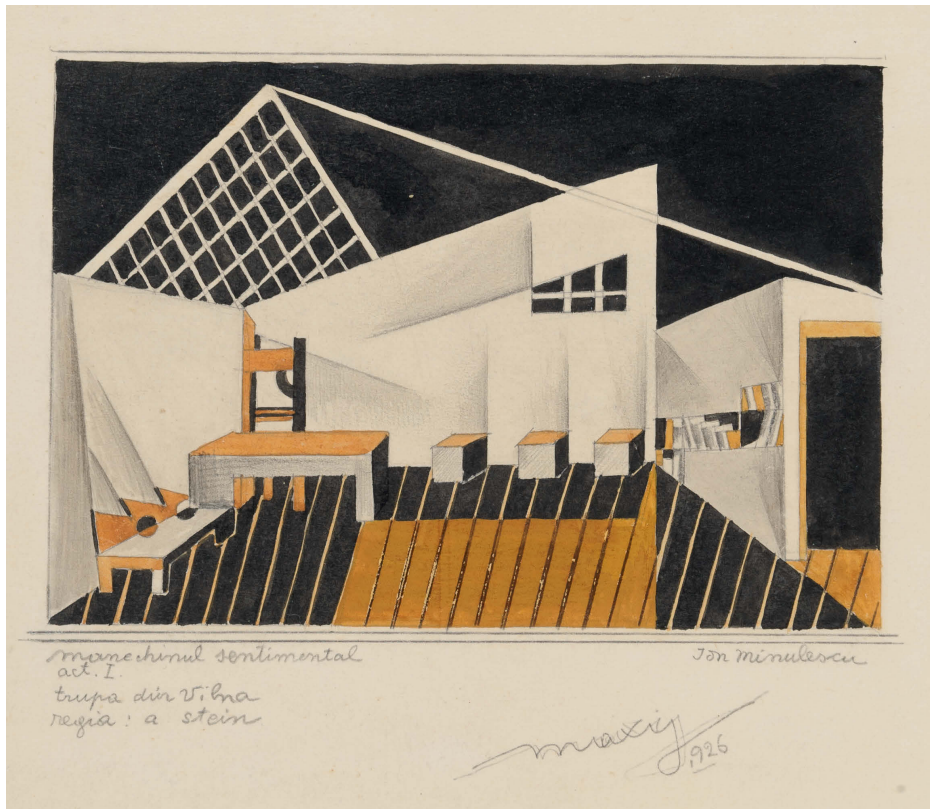
<sup>89</sup> “Literatura românească în idiș.”

<sup>90</sup> Ion Cazaban, “Scenografi ai teatrului românesc interbelic (II),” *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Teatru, muzică, cinematografie*, no. 41 (1994): 77–86.

<sup>91</sup> Ion Minulescu, *Manechinul sentimental* (București: Cultura națională, 1926).

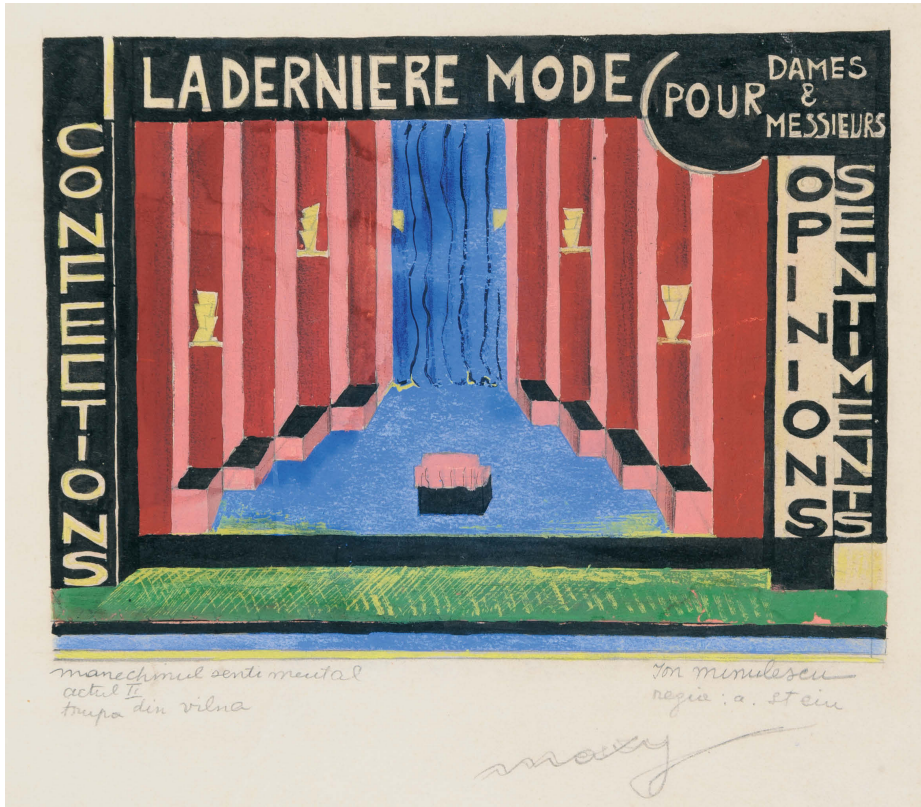
<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.





**Fig. 67:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Act I, pencil, ink and watercolour, 14 × 20 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.

solid and transparent render Cartian's home spatially plausible, yet also evidently illusory. The lines that dissect the floor and the walls recall a perspectival grid, yet they lead the eye in strange and disorienting directions. By contrast, Cornescu's design for the same scene carefully replicates a self-contained puppet theatre stage where the fourth wall is clearly in place. The characters are standing in recognisably realistic living room with contemporary furniture and colourful posters and paintings decorating the walls. Minulescu's shop sign slogans surround this tableau, allowing the audience to gaze through the make-believe glass in the guise of voyeuristic passers-by. If in Cornescu's vision this environment appears contained and stable, Maxy's interpretation distorts it like a carnival mirror with the walls and the furniture spouting strange jagged excrescences and lop-sided edges. Disregarding Minulescu's instructions, Maxy does away with the shop sign framing and the bold colours, opting instead for a plain colour palette. Furthermore, together with the geometric furniture, the functional wall niche and uncluttered space, this suggests that perhaps the artist was using the opportunity to introduce the public to his vision of modern interior



**Fig. 68:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Act II, pencil, gouache, watercolour and ink, 17.5 × 23 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.

design. After all, the selling exhibition of the Academy of Decorative Arts had only just opened in October 1926 under the directorship of Mela Brun-Maxy.

If Maxy dispensed with the shop window framing in first act, in the second “vitrine” he boldly turned the entire stage into a stylish boutique with flowing curtains and constructivist home accessories seem from “outside” its window. The two surviving designs may have been produced at different times.<sup>93</sup> One is part of the series of highly finished works on paper that Maxy probably produced in the 1960s for his retrospective (Fig. 68). The other however is much more plausible as a sketch made for the production itself (Fig. 48). The pencil underdrawing is visible and the light ink wash has been loosely applied, in contrast to the opaque, well-defined colouring of other Maxy theatre sketches. The lettering visible on the small plinths that frame the stage resembles the Yiddish alphabet but forms no meaningful words,

<sup>93</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Graphic Arts collection, fond M. H. Maxy.

a puzzling anomaly for a play with Yiddish-speaking actors ostensibly directed at Yiddish-speaking audiences.<sup>94</sup> It reveals Maxy's own unfamiliarity with the language, despite his longstanding collaboration with the Vilna Troupe. Perhaps the lettering was corrected for the on-stage backdrop, or perhaps its cryptic quality heightened the illusory quality of the stage set.

The objects dotted around this theatrical display would not be easily identifiable—they could be construed as abstract sculptures perhaps—if they did not resemble objects available for sale at the Academy of Decorative Arts, namely the distinctively geometric vases designed first by Vespremie and subsequently by Maxy (Figs. 12 and 13). As in the case of Maxy's sketch for Act II of *Shabse Tsvi*, this may be a retrospective attempt to appropriate the design of these items. However, given the date of this production in November 1926, that is to say several months later than *Shabse Tsvi*, and post-dating Maxy's involvement with the Academy, the appearance of Vespremie's vases in the play itself is more plausible. After all, Vespremie had been commissioned to work on the decoration of the 1925 Festival of Jewish Romanian Writers and Artists and those particular designs had been executed in the studios of the Academy.<sup>95</sup> The use of these items as props in *The Sentimental Mannequin* reveals not just a knowledge of modern commercial practices, as already argued, but also a willingness to embrace the concept of synthesis in every possible manner. The stage set thus becomes both a real and a fictitious shop window, mirroring the Academy's newly opened showroom, and both of these interiors fulfil an openly performative function rather than a private one.

This section of the play is set in the living room of socialite Jeana Ionescu-Potopeni, the woman whom Cartian wishes to use as inspiration for the leading lady in his new play. According to Minulescu, it should be “a luxurious room with few pieces of furniture in a pure style,” perhaps an antithesis to the cluttered interiors of Bucharest's dwellers.<sup>96</sup> In Cornescu's scenography, preserved in a period photograph, the walls of the living room resemble a folding screen with abstract patterns that delineates the space where the action is taking place (Fig. 69).<sup>97</sup> Wearing contemporary dress, the actors portraying Radu and Jeana face each other on a stage that is largely devoid of props, with the exception of a few pieces of art deco furniture. Although the staging might not be termed exactly avant-garde, it was certainly a departure from recent National Theatre productions such as *Anuța*, directed by Gusti only three months

<sup>94</sup> Some of the characters are even incorrectly written. I am grateful to Sean Martin for this information.

<sup>95</sup> As documented in the programme for the Festival of Jewish Romanian Writers and Artists, 11 April 1925, held at the Harvard Library Judaica Division, Judaica ephemera collection, Theater/B/1/Romania.

<sup>96</sup> Minulescu, *Manechinul sentimental*, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Album of stage designs, National Theatre, 1925–1926 theatrical season. Archives of the National Theatre Museum, Bucharest.



**Fig. 69:** Traian Cornescu, Set for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Act II, January 1926. National Theatre Museum.

earlier, in November 1925.<sup>98</sup> In *Anuța* the stage space was virtually undistinguishable from an upper-class Bucharest dwelling, with heavy wooden furniture, oriental-style carpets, an oversized chandelier and even a glimpse into a dining room ready to welcome guests. In this respect, Cornescu's depiction of a contemporary living room for *The Sentimental Mannequin* probably chimed quite closely with Maxy's vision.

Nonetheless, whereas Minulescu and Cornescu only alluded to the modernist intersection between the theatrical stage and the shop window, Maxy created a literal depiction of this phenomenon. The construction of both theatrical and domestic spaces was now observing the same Integralist parameters, and in a strange blurring of art and life the stage design for *The Sentimental Mannequin*, which took place in the fictitious living room of a society lady, resembled a stylish boutique, whereas the

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. *Anuța* (1925) is a morality play by Lucreția Petrescu in which the innocent daughter of a kept woman is introduced to her mother's environment but succeeds in escaping the same fate. The play's main dichotomy is between the urban and the rural: *Anuța* was brought up in the countryside and returns there to live a 'pure' life, whereas her mother has been corrupted by Bucharest's bourgeois urbanity.

commercial space of the Academy was staged so as to perform the role of a domestic interior.

### ***The Neophyte and The Thought***

Although no photographs are known to exist of the Vilna Troupe's *The Sentimental Mannequin*, its claim to theatrical modernity can be discerned from other contemporary sources, as we have seen. Some of Maxy collaborations with the Yiddish ensemble have proven even more difficult to recover, however. They are mentioned here as an antidote to the ephemerality that has affected the Vilna Troupe's Bucharest sojourn. The first of these plays was *The Neophyte* (Neofitul), a title coined for the Romanian premiere of Alter-Sholem Kacyzne's *Dukus* (1925).<sup>99</sup> It was the opening performance of the short-lived season during which the troupe was known as Tragedy and Comedy, in the autumn of 1925. For this run of performances the sets were designed by Arthur Kolnik, another artist who collaborated with the troupe. His decors were judged to be the only positive aspect of the performance, which failed to find critical acclaim.<sup>100</sup> An article in *Rampa* looking back over the theatrical year, qualified it "a disaster without precedent."<sup>101</sup> Reviews suggest this was mainly due to the play itself, criticised for being over long, rambling and confusing, and failing to meaningfully explore its main theme, the conflict between individual and community.<sup>102</sup> In *Contimporanul*, Sergiu Milorian took the opportunity to bemoan the state of stage design in Romania which in his view had fallen behind Western developments since the departure for Paris of Russian émigré artist George Pogedaieff in 1922.<sup>103</sup> Cornescu, the National Theatre's designer, although versatile, was not an innovator. In Milorian's view, the art of scenography had now been transformed into "a science," better described as "scenic architecture," and Kolnik had proven his credentials through this project. In *Renașterea*, L. B. Wechsler agreed that Kolnik's decors showed potential and posited that it was the first time a play with a completely expressionist mise-en-scène had

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**99** Alter-Sholem Kacyzne (1885–1941) was a writer and photographer from Vilnius, whose work depicted and documented the life of European Jewry. His play *Dukus* was first performed in Warsaw in 1925 and published the following year.

**100** Sergiu Milorian, "Neofitul și Kolnik," *Contimporanul*, no. 62 (October 1926): 7–8. According to Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 134, it lasted for only ten performances.

**101** Scarlat Froda, "Anul teatral 1925," *Rampa*, 2 January 1926.

**102** L.B. Wechsler, "Societatea de Dramă și Comedie. Ansamblul Trupeii din Wilna. Neofitul de A. Katzisne," *Renașterea*, 10 October 1925.

**103** Milorian, "Neofitul și Kolnik." George Pogedaieff (c.1897–1971) was an artist and theatre designer who left Russia in the early 1920s. In Bucharest, Pogedaieff worked for the National Theatre during the

graced Bucharest's theatrical stages.<sup>104</sup> This seems an odd assertion, as the Vilna Troupe had been in Romania since 1923 and expressionism was their trademark style before they began to integrate constructivist elements into their productions. Unfortunately, no visual evidence of Kolnik's *Neophyte* has emerged to provide a clue to its stylistic kinship and when the play was revived the following year, it returned to the stage with decors by Maxy.<sup>105</sup> Its premiere on 19 October 1926 must have been underwhelming, as reviews in the period press are conspicuous by their absence and no visual material has yet come to light.

The second play that has left very little evidence is a staging of Russian writer Leonid Adreyev's 1902 short story *The Thought* (Gândul), in which a doctor simulates madness to absolve himself of murder, but discovers he can no longer distinguish between his two states of mind.<sup>106</sup> Premiering on 6 December 1926, less than a week before the more prominent production of Pirandello's *Man, Beast and Virtue*, *The Thought* may have found itself overshadowed.<sup>107</sup> In an interview given prior to the opening by Alexander Stein, the director and protagonist of the play, Maxy's name is not mentioned. According to Stein, "the sets and the whole mise-en-scène will provide strictly the support necessary for the action, without distracting the spectators with exterior details."<sup>108</sup> Perhaps this was Stein's reluctance to allow set design to take centre-stage, so to speak, in yet another production, as had been the case with *Shabse Tsvi*. Furthermore, after languishing in Buloff's shadow since joining the troupe, Stein was now finally its de-facto leader and took the opportunity to raise his own profile, giving interviews to local newspapers and revealing plans to open an acting school.<sup>109</sup> His performance in *The Thought* was well received, with reviews focusing on Stein to the exclusion of the other actors or the play's designer, yet the production had a short run. Maxy's next collaboration with the Vilna Troupe placed him back in the limelight, however.

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1921–1922 season, designing sets for productions such as Hugo von Hofmannstahl's *Elektra* or Victor Eftimiu's *Înșir-te mărgărite*.

**104** Wechsler, "Societatea de Dramă și Comedie."

**105** "Neofitul la Teatrul Central," *Rampa*, 18 October 1926.

**106** Leonid Adreyev (1871–1919) was a Russian writer, particularly known for his short stories. The Vilna Troupe's repertoire also included his 1914 play *He Who Gets Slapped*, in which Stein played the protagonist.

**107** "Gândul la Teatrul Central," *Rampa*, 6 December 1926.

**108** Rep., "Gândul de Andreiev la Teatrul Central," *Rampa*, 25 November 1926.

**109** M. Schweig, "Trupa din Vilna. De vorbă cu Alexe Stein," *Curierul israelit*, 17 October 1926.

## *Man, Beast and Virtue*

The production that caused a stir was Luigi Pirandello's *Man, Beast and Virtue* which premiered on 11 December 1926. The Italian playwright was an important figure for the Romanian avant-garde and had been interviewed in *Integral* in November 1925 by Maxy's colleague, Mihail Cosma.<sup>110</sup> According to Pirandello, his ultimate goal was to uncover the scenic potential in any situation, transforming "any street corner" into a theatrical stage and any passers-by into "characters in search of an author." Pirandello's wish for a closer collaboration between the arts sparked Cosma's infamous definition of Integralism as a synthesis of art movements past and present, which he offered to the playwright as a solution. Pirandello elegantly declared himself against rules or demarcations of any kind in art, thus avoiding aligning himself with Integralism, whilst appreciating its attempt to crystallise the spirit of the age in order to surpass it. Despite Pirandello's reputation, his plays had not been widely performed in Romania and the Vilna Troupe's production was only the third work by the playwright to see the light of the stage in Bucharest.<sup>111</sup> *Man, Beast and Virtue*, Pirandello's so called "tragi-farce," was first published in 1919, and has a simple plot: Signora Perella, the wife of a sea-captain, falls for Paolino, her son's tutor. She becomes pregnant and conspires with her lover to make the husband believe the child is his. There is only one problem: the sea-captain prefers to avoid his wife even on the rare occasions when he is ashore. Thus, the scheming couple have only a small window of opportunity to induce the captain to accept his wife's amorous advances.

Perhaps due to its subsequent success, *Man, Beast and Virtue* is one of Maxy's better documented stage designs. As well as a front cover and feature in *Integral's* January 1927 issue, there are also surviving photographs and two set designs from the same group of highly finished works on paper by Maxy that probably date from the 1960s.<sup>112</sup> The sketch for Act I (Fig. 70) reveals a domestic interior similar to the opening scene of *The Sentimental Mannequin*. Maxy went one step further in this case, dispensing with walls altogether, and opting instead for a structure so permeable that the latticed panels edging one side seem almost compact by comparison. The interior is sparsely decorated with bookshelves, a table, chair and carpet, elements common to both productions, as are the jagged edges and the underwhelming colour palette. The juxtaposition of flat and three-dimensional elements positions this space, like that of Act I in *The Sentimental Mannequin*, somewhere between the real and the illusory. Furthermore, the uncanny proportions of the objects in this sketch—the chair towering over the table and the oversized plant pot—propel this further into

<sup>110</sup> Cosma, "De vorbă cu Luigi Pirandello."

<sup>111</sup> "O piesă de Pirandello la Teatrul Central," *Rampa*, 2 December 1926.

<sup>112</sup> Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond M. H. Maxy and Graphic Arts collection, fond M. H. Maxy.

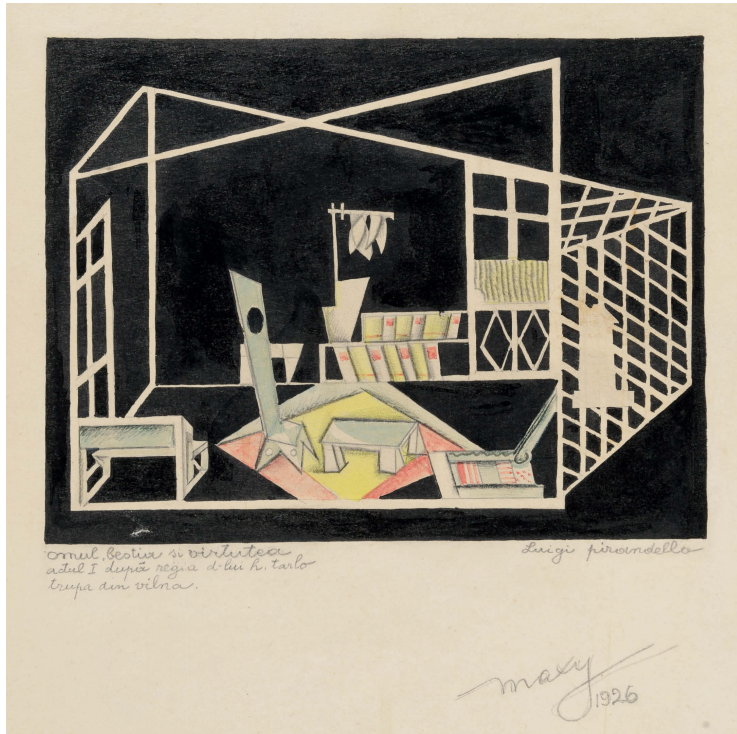
the realm of the surreal. The existence of photographs in the case of *Man, Beast and Virtue* reveals how such a design was translated into reality (Fig. 71). Maxy placed the characters in a simulacrum of a home with walls that were present yet invisible, so that their trials and tribulations, though contained within, were visible for all to see. The structures that sketched out the walls, although geometric, were uneven, creating a disorienting, distorted perspective that mirrored both the naval theme of the play and its moral morass. The front “wall” sloped upwards while the back “wall” sloped downwards, as did the latticed door attached to it, a device Maxy had previously experimented with in *The Sentimental Mannequin*, but which evidently came to fruition in the structurally lighter design for *Man, Beast and Virtue*.

In the design for Act II a second interior was sketched out with beams forming an octagonal shape that enclosed a table with four chairs, a shelving unit for dishes and several potted plants (Fig. 72). According to *Integral*'s reviewer, “the sea captain's room is constructed from naval elements: the table slopes like the crest of a wave, the chairs are capped by anchors, the lamp is an anchor, the shelves are made from the sterns and prows of ships.”<sup>113</sup> The same spatial instability is present in this second *mise-en-scène*, with surfaces that slope when they should be balanced and walls that are permeable when they should be solid. Although Maxy's sketch suggests that the view from the sitting room towards the zig-zagging surface of the sea could be a painted backdrop, photographs reveal this was not the case (Fig. 73). The latticed balcony doors and the anchor-shaped chandelier were free-standing elements of the décor, while a small rectangular panel with abstract shapes—barely visible behind the actors on stage—was perhaps suggestive of the water's turbulent surface. As with *The Sentimental Mannequin*, Maxy's sets were fully transitioning into the realm of the three-dimensional, yet nonetheless producing disorienting illusions of reality that slipped away from spectators just like the mirage of a painted backcloth. A review of the play published in *Rampa* praised the “bizarre cubist-expressionist” *mise-en-scène*, as well as explaining the presence of the flower pots with their stylised blooms attached to grid-like structures.<sup>114</sup> Signora Perella was to move the five plants from one window to another as a signal to her lover that their stratagem has succeeded. In one archival photograph, she stands on a stool in the pose of a mock Madonna between her husband and the tutor Paolino, who is offering her one of the plants as tribute (Fig. 73). The potted plants, or rather the pots, hold further significance. Like the mystery objects in *The Sentimental Mannequin*, they are the product of the Academy of Decorative Arts and appear, holding real plants, in the images of the institution's selling exhibition. Most likely these are not the same items—the ones in the play have a more rudimentary, satirical aspect—but they are clearly linked. They were made by Vespremie, as indicated by a promotional photograph in *Universul literar* which

113 Gheorghe Dinu, “Teatrul Central. Încenări moderne,” *Integral*, no. 10 (January 1927): 5.

114 Scarlat Froda, “Cronica dramatică. Omul, bestia și virtutea,” *Rampa*, 16 December 1926.





**Fig. 70:** M. H. Maxy, Set design for the *Man, Beast and Virtue*, Act I, pencil, ink and watercolour, 18 x 23 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.

shows a close-up of a metal pot with a collage-like pattern made of asymmetric metal strips.<sup>115</sup> In one of the images of the Academy's 1926 exhibition a "sold" sign can be seen in a similar flower pot on the right-hand side windowsill (Fig. 9) suggesting that these commercial strategies worked and the items were popular with the Academy's patrons.

The interaction between Signora Perella and the potted flowers advanced the action of the play in a physical sense: her movements and by extension that of the plants signalled both a change in the spatial relationships between the objects on stage and in the psychological relationship between the characters of the play. This recalls a concept that we have previously encountered in Maxy's writings in *Integral*, namely that in a successful scenic construction the sets and the actors merge together, becoming part of the same dynamic mechanism that conveys the drama.<sup>116</sup> According to an article in *Rampa* that outlined preparations for the production, the props used

<sup>115</sup> *Universul literar* XLII, no. 47 (21 November 1926): 11.

<sup>116</sup> Maxy, "Regia scenică."



Fig. 71: The Vilna Troupe in *Man, Beast and Virtue*, Act I, 1926. Private collection.

to furnish the play's interiors were not there simply for ambiance, but to purposely re-enforce the dramatic action and constitute a "continuation" of the actors' hands.<sup>117</sup> The article, reporting a conversation between the writer and Maxy, also revealed that wooden beams were being used to construct the see-through structures. These would ensure that "the movement of the actors is visible to the public at all times, and the room resembles a bird cage in which the poor beings move according to Pirandello's plan and sense of irony." A later review in *Integral*, although largely a paean devoted to Pirandello, made some further comments concerning Maxy's decors. Emphasising their spatial innovation, the reviewer observed that the on-stage rooms "do not have three walls, but four" that being "schematic, transvisible" are not an obstacle to the spectator who becomes privy to Maxy's "Roentgen eye."<sup>118</sup> The constructions so plastically described were illustrated by two photographs that demonstrated how the play's environments were present on-stage only through their outlines, so that the actors operated inside transparent structures populated by equally sketchy and geometric props. The Vilna Troupe, concluded the article, was the only ensemble experimenting locally with the new trends in stage design.

<sup>117</sup> "O piesă de Pirandello la Teatrul Central."

<sup>118</sup> Dinu, "Teatrul Central. Încenări moderne."



Fig. 72: M. H. Maxy, Set design for *Man, Beast and Virtue*, Act II, pencil, ink and watercolour, 24 × 18.5 cm, 1960s. Romanian National Art Museum.



Fig. 73: The Vilna Troupe in *Man, Beast and Virtue*, Act II, 1926. Romanian National Art Museum.

In a second version of the sketch for Act II, which exists only in an undated archival photograph, the sloping table and the anchor-capped chairs are placed on a circular carpet exhibiting the markings of a compass. The illusory space of the theatrical stage thus expands outwards to encompass the realities of geographical space, in a manner reminiscent of *Shabse Tsvi* and its representation of urban architectural ambiguities. It is a concern articulated by Maxy himself to *Rampa's* reporter. Discussing an upcoming production of Charles Dickens's 1845 novella "The Cricket on the Hearth," he describes how the modest dwelling of Caleb the toymaker would be contrasted on stage with the "sky-scraper factory" of his employer Mr. Tackleton.<sup>119</sup> His description of the set includes the intriguing detail that the wooden beams would be coloured, although this practice is not evident from the visual materials related to *The Sentimental Mannequin* and *Man, Beast and Virtue*. A further paragraph linked Maxy's interest in constructivism with his work in the theatre:

Constructivism can be perfectly achieved through the techniques of stage design, destroying the visual illusion of objects heretofore represented through pictorial imitations. The planar architectonic is animated solely through a balance of colour that can be organically transmitted

119 "O piesă de Pirandello la Teatrul Central."

to the spectator. The expanding field of scenic possibilities is gradually transforming the use of the stage.<sup>120</sup>

Although “The Cricket on the Hearth” was never transformed into a Vilna Troupe production, Maxy’s musings were evidently already informing his work for the theatrical stage. The final section of the article dealt with the rise of cinema and its potential for technical innovation that theatre would never be able to match. Accepting this would lead theatre towards a new practice of “pure” manifestations, emptied of unnecessary content. Perhaps this realisation guided Maxy in his route from the technically unrealisable *Saul*, to the trickery of *Shabse Tsvi* and finally to the complete transparency of *Man, Beast and Virtue*. Nonetheless, an interest in new technologies was an important element of modernism and a closer look at *Integral*’s fifteen issues reveals several articles that ponder the relationship between film and theatre. Most of them, published in *Integral*’s issues from 1925, were written by Maxy’s colleague Barbu Florian. The author was critical of theatre, which he repeatedly termed “unilateral,” that is to say incapable of capturing the fullness of modern human experience and implicitly the opposite of “integral,” and we might add “synthetic.”<sup>121</sup> Cinema could fulfil this remit, he believed, but after its early days when it successfully exploited its defining feature, namely the technology of movement, it has recently developed an over-reliance on the human element. According to Florian, the importance of the “star” performer or director harked back to the age of theatre, diluting the strength of the cinematographic medium which should be “collective and anonymous.”<sup>122</sup> Despite his misgivings, he reviewed a number of such “star” vehicles, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the name of Hollywood leading man Douglas Fairbanks appeared in the pages of *Integral* more often than that of say, Picasso, Marinetti or Tairov.

Amongst the films discussed were those of French director Marcel L’Herbier, whose calling card were the modernist set designs created by artists such as Sonia Delaunay, Alberto Cavalcanti or Fernand Léger. L’Herbier’s 1924 film *L’Inhumaine*, one of the earliest to espouse this aesthetics, was mentioned in two issues of *Integral*, with Florian revealing that it was being shown in Bucharest cinemas. The distinctive sets by Cavalcanti culminated in a scene where the heroine held a banquet in her living room, sitting her guests at an island-like table in the middle of a pool of water. Her high-backed chair was capped by a pointed triangle shape. As well as the evident aquatic parallels of interiors that appear to be “at sea,” the chair’s distinctive shape has a direct correspondent in Act I of *Man, Beast and Virtue*. In Maxy’s sketch, the back of the chair has one sloping edge and a circular cut-out (Fig. 70), but the final

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120 Ibid.

121 Florian, “Teatru și cinematograf.”

122 Barbu Florian, “Cinematograful,” *Integral*, no. 3 (1 May 1925): 13.

version visible in archival photographs is much more sharply angular: the backrest is pointed with two cut-out diamond shapes (Fig. 71), having seemingly borrowed something of the anchor-topped chairs from Act II. Such cinematic inspiration was not limited to the sets for *Man, Beast and Virtue* and, for example the multi-layered geometric shapes and structures of *Shabse Tsvi* mirrored the designs of Léger for *L'Inhumaine*, while the selling exhibition of the Academy was probably indebted to Sonia Delaunay's interiors in L'Herbier's 1926 film *Le Vertige*. But whereas the gaze of the camera could give the viewer the illusion of being immersed in a certain space, the theatrical stage traditionally separated the audience from the action happening in front of them. Nonetheless, Maxy's "Roentgen eye," as termed by *Integral's* reviewer, attempted to dissolve this barrier, literally removing walls and replacing them with transparent structures that furthermore suggest the even vaster landscapes stretching outside the theatrical realm. Together with the unitary aesthetics of Maxy's design, this practice, based on modern technological advances, created an immersive effect that perfectly illustrated the synthetic nature of Integralism.

As the 1927 theatrical season drew to a close, the Vilna Troupe left its Romanian base, gravitating towards Poland. It continued to tour extensively under the management of Mordechai Mazo until 1935, although its make-up changed with great frequency. Alexander Stein for example left to form his own troupe which performed to some acclaim in Vienna and Berlin in the early 1930s, frequently repurposing earlier productions such as *The Singer of His Sorrows*, the Vilna Troupe's famous Bucharest success.<sup>123</sup> A revival of this same play was the centrepiece of Joseph Buloff's own return to the Romanian capital in 1931, with Luba and Leib Kadison as part of his troupe.<sup>124</sup> This was only a brief tour however, the Buloffs having made their permanent home in the United States. Bucharest was thus in need of some new theatrical experimentation.

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<sup>123</sup> Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 202–204, 209.

<sup>124</sup> Buloff's Bucharest tour was the subject of a special issue of *Cronica teatrală*, 9 July 1931.

# BETWEEN THE MAGICAL AND THE MECHANICAL: THE THEATRE COMPANIES OF DIDA SOLOMON AND IACOB STERNBERG

The departure of the Vilna Troupe from Romania gave rise to local initiatives that continued their theatrical legacy. Maxy engaged in collaborations with two of the driving forces behind these initiatives, Dida Solomon-Callimachi and Iacob Sternberg, producing set designs and graphic identities for them. The performances Maxy designed took place over a number of years, from 1927 to 1934, and ranged from oppressive Strindbergian dramas to Yiddish classics and contemporary revues. If Maxy's collaboration with the Vilna Troupe has been discussed in scholarship, albeit sparsely and erroneously, his theatrical activity after its departure is almost entirely absent. This is thus the first attempt to reconstitute these productions and the circumstances in which they were created, and it does so with various degrees of success. At the very least it is now possible to bring to the fore the achievements of Solomon and Sternberg, who have been too seldom present in accounts of the avant-garde in Romania, theatrical or otherwise. Furthermore, it becomes evident from this analysis that avant-garde theatre in Bucharest continued to exist and to develop after the departure of the Vilna Troupe, engendering new and fruitful artistic experimentation.

## Dida Solomon and the Caragiale Theatre

Maxy's first theatrical collaboration after the departure of the Vilna Troupe was in the autumn of 1927 with Dida Solomon-Callimachi (1898–1974) (Fig. 74), whose fame rested on her 1922 debut as the titular character in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* at the National Theatre in Bucharest.<sup>1</sup> Solomon was a close collaborator and friend of the Bucharest avant-garde, joining the experimental Insula theatre group (see previous chapter) and publishing graphic works and poems in *Contimporanul* and *Punct*, the latter edited by her husband, the writer and anti-fascist activist Scarlat Callimachi. Yet she is rarely mentioned in the context of the Romanian avant-garde, being considered primarily an actor and sometimes muse, the subject of portraits by Victor Brauner and Marcel Iancu. Solomon participated in the landmark *Contimporanul* exhibition of 1924 with three dolls (or perhaps puppets), although little is known beyond the brief list of exhibits. Listed next to a section called "Asian and Ceylonese art," which included items such as idols and masks without mentioning their maker, Solomon and the anonymous artists hovered on the margins of the avant-garde as purveyors

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1 Dida Solomon, *Amintirile domnişoarei Iulia* (Bucureşti: Cartea Românească, 1974), 53.

of an “instinctive” aesthetic. About the exhibition, Scarlat Callimachi wrote: “Dida Solomon exhibits her uncanny dolls captured from some charming territory in her rich subconscious: naive, free, and colourful verve, as we wish unto more professors at the [fine arts] academy, but in vain.”<sup>2</sup>

In the theatrical realm, Solomon’s fortunes declined after her highly acclaimed debut and she was given insignificant roles. Writing in *Punct* in 1924, Ilarie Voronca surmised that the National Theatre was purposely side-lining Solomon in favour of mediocre actors who were ethnic Romanians. He concluded: “antisemitism is unbearable in any context, but even more so in the case of intelligence and art.”<sup>3</sup> Seeking better opportunities and creative freedom, Solomon took the initiative of setting up her own organisation in 1927. She named it the Caragiale Theatre (Teatrul Caragiale) after Romania’s most prominent nineteenth century dramaturge. From the very beginning, she drew her collaborators from the ranks of the avant-garde. Marcel Iancu undertook the refurbishment of the auditorium and the stage, which had previously housed the Alhambra revue theatre.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the troupe’s first production reunited the team that had given *The Merry Death* a modern re-imagining in 1925: Sandu Eliad as director and Iancu as designer.<sup>5</sup> The “stylised stage sets, with doorless thresholds and ceilingless rooms” were judged to be unsuited to the Caragiale Theatre’s first play, a contemporary political satire by Romanian playwright Gheorghe Brăescu entitled *The Minister* (Ministrul).<sup>6</sup> The production flopped and was hastily replaced by *Miss Julie*, Solomon’s star vehicle, in an attempt to plug the gap in the troupe’s repertoire.<sup>7</sup> Many years later Eliad recalled the subversive intentions of *The Minister*, which probably led to its downfall. Not only did it court political controversy, but it also employed the type of sparse design seen in Maxy’s own productions, as well as referencing the freeze-frame potential of modern photography:

I would have liked to direct the play in a setting representing the Triumphal Arch as it was then—a wretched construction, unfinished, supported for years by some rotting scaffolding.<sup>8</sup> The author had feared, however, that the production would be censored. Therefore, together with the architect Marcel Iancu I created a fixed structure crowned by slogans which framed a series of alternating background panels that set the scene. Critics at the time found this too

2 Scarlat Callimachi, “Expoziția Contimporanul,” *Punct*, no. 3 (6 December 1924): 3.

3 Ilarie Voronca, “Constatări,” *Punct*, no. 3 (6 December 1924): 2.

4 Sandu Eliad, “Un teatru Caragiale în 1927,” *Teatrul XVII*, no. 11 (November 1972): 59–61, 60.

5 “Știri artistice,” *Dimineața*, 2 September 1927.

6 Scarlat Froda, “Teatrul Carageale. Ministrul,” *Rampa*, 21 September 1927.

7 Scarlat Froda, “Cronica dramatică,” *Rampa*, 26 September 1927.

8 Bucharest’s Triumphal Arch had its origin in the celebrations that followed the end of the First World War and the creation of Greater Romania. The structure was not a sturdy one however and it soon began to deteriorate. Eliad’s statement can thus be construed as a critique of Romania’s post-war government, equated with the crumbling monument.





**Fig. 74:** Dida Solomon in the late 1920s. In Dida Solomon, *Amințirile domnișoarei Iulia* (București: Cartea Românească, 1974).

‘modernist;’ the panels had only empty spaces in the place of windows and doors, and the actors paused at certain moments, as if their actions were being captured by the camera lens.<sup>9</sup>

The next premiere, which took place in October 1927, was August Strindberg’s *Comrades* (*Camarazii*), for which Solomon collaborated with Sternberg and Maxy. The play, supposedly selected by Sternberg, was a somewhat odd choice.<sup>10</sup> Published in 1888, it was considered by critics as one of Strindberg’s weakest works, as well as being vitriolically misogynistic in its portrayal of an artist couple in which the emancipated yet talentless woman exploits her more gifted partner for money and professional success. Reviewers in the Romanian press objected to this subject matter and to the play itself, heavily criticising the production.<sup>11</sup> In *Rampa*, Scarlat Froda expressed concerns about the Caragiale Theatre’s progress so far and its choice of repertoire, having initially been supportive of Solomon’s new venture.<sup>12</sup> Some of his

<sup>9</sup> Eliad, “Un teatru Caragiale în 1927,” 60.

<sup>10</sup> Solomon, *Amințirile domnișoarei Iulia*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> A. de Herz, “Cronica teatrală. Teatrul Caragiale. Camarazii, piesă în 4 acte de Strindberg,” *Dimineața*, 14 October 1927; Scarlat Froda, “Cronica dramatică,” *Rampa*, 14 October 1927.

<sup>12</sup> Froda, “Cronica dramatică,” 14 October 1927.

hostility however was directed towards Sternberg's theatrical approach. Recalling his 1925 staging of Gogol's *Marriage* with the Vilna Troupe, Froda balked at the way in which actors had been lowered onto the stage from above, harnesses attached "above the coccyx," whilst the backdrop spun around like a fairground wheel. For *Comrades*, Sternberg had toned down his vision, yet Froda still objected to the minimalist wooden slats that constituted the set's background, whose permeability threatened the audience's suspension of disbelief.<sup>13</sup> In this, the contribution of Maxy is detectable if not explicit, his interest in on-stage transparency having reached its peak in the 1926 production of *Man, Beast and Virtue* with its skeletal house sketched in with wooden beams. For *Comrades*, no photographs or detailed descriptions of the sets have emerged and Maxy is credited as the production's "painter" in Froda's review. The only other tantalising information comes from a pre-premiere announcement in *Dimineața* stating that the "furniture and décor" for *Comrades* were in preparation in the studios of the Caragiale Theatre under the supervision of Maxy.<sup>14</sup>

Savaged by critics, the play did not survive for more than a handful of performances despite Sternberg's direction being described by Solomon in her memoirs as moving and masterful.<sup>15</sup> By now, the troupe's financial situation was so dire that one morning the cashier had barely enough change for Sternberg to buy a cup of tea.<sup>16</sup> A new production was needed and Solomon chose French dramatist Henri-René Lenormand's *The Failures* (*Ratații*), a 1920 play about struggling artists.<sup>17</sup> The production was directed by Eliad and designed by Maxy, who had to contend with some technical difficulties. Lenormand's drama required eleven scene changes, but the Caragiale Theatre lacked the mechanical wherewithal and the backstage space that would allow a seamless interchange. The solution was a stage set composed from a small number of stylised architectural elements that could be easily manipulated between scene changes.<sup>18</sup> *The Failures* opened in early November and was the Caragiale Theatre's much needed first success. Eliad's approach was praised for its light touch, unlike Sternberg's distinctive vision, and Maxy's sets were described as "simplified with great scenic effect."<sup>19</sup> In his review, the writer A. De Hertz went as far as to draw comparisons with Karlheinz Martin's production of Osip Dymov's *Nju*, which had taken Bucharest's theatre world by storm in 1922 with its pared-back

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13 Ibid.

14 "Știri artistice," *Dimineața*, 3 October 1927.

15 Solomon, *Amintirile domnișoarei Iulia*, 87.

16 Ibid., 89.

17 Henri-René Lenormand (1882–1951) was a playwright interested in the human subconscious. *Les Ratés* (The Failures) became his best-known work.

18 Eliad, "Un teatru Caragiale în 1927," 61.

19 Scarlat Froda, "Cronica dramatică," *Rampa*, 4 November 1927; A. de Herz, "Cronica teatrală. Teatrul Caragiale. Ratații, dramă în 11 tablouri de H. R. Lenormand," *Dimineața*, 5 November 1927.

approach.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it was not only the reviewers who approved of *The Failures*, as the production found favour with the general public. Performances were sold out and drew lengthy and enthusiastic applause every night.<sup>21</sup>

Although visual evidence is lacking also for this production, Maxy's collaboration with the Caragiale Theatre may have left its mark in a different context. As with the Vilna Troupe, he seems to have offered his design services not only on stage, but also in the creation of a visual identity for the troupe. Solomon's correspondence with the Arts Ministry has survived in the Romanian National Archives and it is topped with a distinctive monochromatic letterhead (Fig. 75).<sup>22</sup> The interplay between the negative and positive spaces of the design, the flash of jagged edges, and the repetition of simplified masks representing tragedy and comedy are devices used by Maxy in his graphic work, such as the Cabaret programme and Vilna Troupe programme from 1925, indicating him as the likely author. In this more elaborate design, a theatre's façade is suggested through the horizontal elements, whilst the vertical column of faces and the lightning-bolt shape recall the night-time draw of the neon sign. It is a motif that evokes the performative potential of urban spaces and modern advertising utilised by Maxy so successfully in *The Sentimental Mannequin*. The same graphic identity was used for the theatre's programme cover.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Maxy's attractive graphics and the success of Lenormand's play, the Caragiale Theatre did not survive beyond November 1927. The debts incurred during the troupe's disastrous first two months could not be met and Solomon and her husband were faced with multiple legal actions and even the threat of their home being repossessed.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the potential of a home-grown initiative that gathered together Bucharest's avant-garde theatre proponents was never fulfilled. Amongst Solomon's plans that never came to fruition was a collaboration with expressionist director Karlheinz Martin and a production of Sholem Asch's scandalous play *The God of Vengeance*.<sup>25</sup> Solomon's vision for a more audacious local theatre stemmed not only from her association with Bucharest's avant-garde but also her travels. Before setting up the Caragiale Theatre she had travelled to Hungary, Austria and France, meeting Max Reinhardt and Arthur Schnitzler, among others, and witnessing the Habima Theatre's first European tour and its famed production of *The Dybbuk* in

**20** de Herz, "Cronica teatrală. Teatrul Caragiale. Ratații."

**21** "Știri artistice," *Dimineața*, 11 November 1927; "Știri artistice," *Dimineața*, 17 November 1927.

**22** Romanian National Archives, fond 652 Direcția Generală a Artelor, dosar 38/ 1927.

**23** The cover image can be seen in Michael Ilk, *Maxy. Der integrale Künstler* (Ludwigshafen: Michael Ilk, 2003), 173, but the location of the programme itself is unknown.

**24** Solomon, *Amintirile domnișoarei Iulia*, 92.

**25** "Ultimele informațiuni. Teatrul Caragiale," *Rampa*, 23 October 1927; "Ultimele informațiuni. Teatrul Caragiale," *Rampa*, 13 October 1927.



Fig. 75: M. H. Maxy, Letterhead for Dida Solomon's Caragiale Theatre, 1927. National Archives of Romania.

Paris.<sup>26</sup> After her project's demise, Solomon returned to Paris where she impressed Lenormand by showing him Maxy's set designs for *The Failures*, and also met Simon Gantillon, whose play *Maya* became her next undertaking.<sup>27</sup>

First staged in Paris in 1924 by director Gaston Baty, *Maya* had grown into an international, if somewhat controversial, success. The tale of a Toulon prostitute and the clients who found in her *la femme universelle* had been translated into more than sixteen languages and performed across Europe and the United States, occasionally being banned for indecency.<sup>28</sup> Unable to find a theatre in Bucharest willing to stage the play, Solomon created her own troupe once more and premiered *Maya* on 22 April 1932. The set designs were created by Maxy and the play was staged and directed based

<sup>26</sup> "Cu Dida Solomon-Calimachi despre ea și despre alții," *Rampa*, 13 May 1932; S. D., "Paris! D-lă Scarlat Calimachi ne povestește impresiile sale," *Rampa*, 17 September 1926.

<sup>27</sup> "Cu Dida Solomon-Calimachi." Simon Gantillon (1887–1961) was a French playwright and screenwriter.

<sup>28</sup> *Maya* was banned in the United Kingdom in 1927 and in the United States in 1928.

on the detailed instructions given to Solomon by Gantillon and Baty in Paris.<sup>29</sup> *Maya* was a success and ran for more than 25 performances until the middle of May, with a re-run planned for the autumn season.<sup>30</sup> Maxy's sets were described as "admirable," the interior of Maya's room "realistic and evocative," with a maritime backdrop suggestive of the sea and ship's sails.<sup>31</sup> Visual material has not come to light, but the set's description and even the amorous plot recall the Vilna Troupe's *Man, Beast and Virtue*.<sup>32</sup> Maxy's sets for that 1926 production could not be described as realistic, so a change had evidently ensued, however the juxtaposition of an interior with a naval background glimpsed through a window must have been a familiar challenge for the artist.

Maxy's three collaborations with Dida Solomon are amongst the least well documented of his theatrical endeavours. They do however provide evidence of his continued involvement with the proponents of avant-garde theatre in Bucharest, not only as decorator but also as graphic designer. His approach continued to use elements developed during his collaboration with the Vilna Troupe, such as an interest in transparency and a talent for illustrating domestic and naval themes. A newly found preoccupation with realism may also be glimpsed not only in *Maya*, but also in *The Failures* where the comparison with Martin's production of *Nju* suggests simplicity but not necessarily stylisation.

## Iacob Sternberg and the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio (BITS)

According to Camelia Crăciun, who has written about the development of Yiddish culture in interwar Romanian, Iacob Sternberg was one of its most active promoters and a central figure of Yiddish intellectual life in Bucharest.<sup>33</sup> Born in Bessarabia in 1890, he came to Bucharest before the unification, in 1913, and remained until the outbreak of the Second World War. He wrote poetry, prose, and journalism and began to experiment with theatrical forms in the years of the First World War. Inspired by the nineteenth century theatre-maker Abraham Goldfaden who created the world's first professional Yiddish theatre in Romania, Sternberg worked tirelessly throughout

<sup>29</sup> "Vineri Maya la Teatrul Liber," *Rampa*, 19 April 1932; "Repetițiile piesei Maya la Teatrul Liber," *Rampa*, 14 April 1932.

<sup>30</sup> "Cu Dida Solomon-Calimachi;" "Maya de Simon Gantillon la Teatrul Liber," *Dimineața*, 5 May 1932. The revival never took place, however.

<sup>31</sup> A. Munte, "Cronica teatrală. Teatrul Liber. Maya de d. Simon Gantillon," *Dimineața*, 27 April 1932.

<sup>32</sup> In her autobiography, published in 1974, Solomon mentions that Maxy's original designs had been lost and her only souvenir of this performance was a programme that survived in the possession of Mme Gantillon who gifted it to Solomon in 1964. See Solomon, *Amintirile domnișoarei Iulia*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Camelia Crăciun, "Bucureștiul interbelic, centru emergent de cultură idiș," *Revista de istorie a evreilor din România*, no. 1 (16–17) (2016): 65–81, 72.

the interwar period to set up a permanent organisation dedicated to the development of Jewish theatre in the country. His efforts to make Bucharest the Vilna Troupe's permanent home failed, as shown in the previous chapter. In 1930, Sternberg made yet another attempt: under the umbrella of an association entitled Jüdische Volksbühne, Sternberg created the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio, known as BITS.<sup>34</sup>

A brochure which presents Sternberg's goals and *raison d'être* for the Jüdische Volksbühne can be found in the Romanian National Archives (see Appendix E for English translation). It accompanies a number of requests, such as tax reliefs or approval to perform throughout the Romanian territories, made by Sternberg to the local authorities to facilitate the association's activities.<sup>35</sup> This pamphlet was certainly designed by Maxy using a similar format to a 1925 publication created for Tragedy and Comedy (Drama și Comedie), the Vilna Troupe's short lived Romanian branch. The two brochures share the same square shape and cover layout. The space is mostly blank, except for one vignette that enlivens the page and whose design contains the initials of the organisation in question: D and C in one case, and three Hebrew characters that denote the words "Jüdische Volksbühne" in the other. Furthermore, the text of the 1930 brochure is in fact an updated version of the 1925 text, both containing the manifest intention to position the organisation in question as the latest venture in a long line of exceptional Jewish theatrical initiatives taking place on Romanian territories (see Appendices D and E). A mark of the success, cultural if not financial, of the 1925–1926 Vilna Troupe season, is its inclusion in the 1930 brochure, having now become part and parcel of this lineage. Maxy himself had now become integral to this heritage: in the 1925 text he is listed as one of a number of "painters-decorators" who was to bring a fresh aesthetic to the productions; in the 1930 text "the decorative creations" of Maxy are described as "not only a local chapter in the achievements of this ensemble [the Vilna Troupe], but a defining moment for its subsequent evolution" in other countries such as Poland.

Sternberg's 1930 initiative was to be unfortunately short-lived, particularly as he was unable to obtain financial support from the Romanian authorities, but it did engender two innovative productions directed by Sternberg and designed by Maxy.

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<sup>34</sup> In the contemporary press and even within its own documentation, the Studio is sometimes titled "Judische" instead of "Idische" and the spelling of its entire name can vary depending on the source. Sternberg's concept was based on the German Volksbühne movement, which functioned through a membership system and aimed to bring theatre to the working classes. See Cecil Davies, *The Volksbühne Movement. A History* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> Romanian National Archives, fond 817 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 4/ 1930. Some of these documents are discussed in Anca Mocanu, *Avram Goldfaden și teatrul ca identitate* (București: Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, 2012), 100-101.

## *A Night in the Old Marketplace*

BITS debuted in late January 1930 with the premiere of *A Night in the Old Marketplace* (Noaptea în târgul vechi).<sup>36</sup> According to Yiddish theatre scholar Debra Caplan, I. L. Peretz's 1907 play had only been staged twice before this date: "in 1925 by the Moscow Yiddish Art Theatre [and], in 1928 by the Vilna Troupe" in Warsaw.<sup>37</sup> The Bucharest production is thus a significant moment in theatrical history, joining the small number of attempts to bring Peretz's drama to the stage. As Caplan explains:

*At Night in the Old Marketplace* was difficult to produce, and so rarely was. Even with double- or triple-casting, dozens of actors would still be required. Peretz also called for an enormous and exceedingly complex set that included eight shape-shifting buildings (stable enough for actors to climb upon), a hidden catapult, giant movable tombstones, a floating cemetery that emerges in mid-air, and a remote-controlled mechanical rooster.

Interviewed in the newspaper *Dimineața* for the launch of BITS, Sternberg also listed the two productions of the previous decade and positioned his own interpretation as "a new type of staging." According to him, *A Night* was such a rare presence on stage because it did not suit the trend for theatrical realism, however it would be well-served by a "synthetic" staging such as that proposed by BITS.<sup>38</sup> The production was extensively photographed. The avant-garde periodical *Adam* dedicated its February 1930 issue to the production, printing three photographs alongside a host of articles praising the innovative staging, and further images exist in various museum and archive collections.<sup>39</sup> One of these has a stamp on the reverse revealing that its author was the prominent interwar photographer Iosif Berman, who had also immortalised the Vilna Troupe's performances. Both the number of extant images, and the interest of a well-known figure such as Berman, indicate the importance of this production.

<sup>36</sup> The title of this work is sometimes translated from Yiddish as *At Night in the Old Marketplace*. I have used the text, and thus the title, of the Hillel Halkin translation: I. L. Peretz and Hillel Halkin, "A Night in the Old Marketplace," *Prooftexts* 12, no. 1 (January 1992): 1–70.

<sup>37</sup> Debra Caplan, "Love Letter to the Yiddish Stage: Peretz's *At Night in the Old Marketplace*, Reconsidered," *PaknTreger*, no. 72 (Winter 2015), accessed 26 June 2017, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/love-letter-yiddish-stage-peretz-night-old-marketplace>. I. L. Peretz (1852–1915) was one of the most prominent Yiddish literary figures, championing the Yiddish language as a vehicle for modern literature.

<sup>38</sup> Rep., "Inaugurararea studio-ului evreesc. De vorbă cu regisorul I. Sternberg," *Dimineața*, 31 January 1930.

<sup>39</sup> *Adam* I, no. 16 (1 February 1930). Photographs of this production can be found in the collections of the Romanian National Art Museum, the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, and the Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

The ten images can be divided into two groups. The first group of photographs have a certain work-in-progress quality (Figs. 78–80). The lighting is uniform and natural and cropping has not been applied to the composition, so that the theatrical illusion is shattered. Advertising banners are visible above the stage, as is the orchestra pit with chairs for the musicians and a sheet music stand. The second group of photographs focus closely on the action and employ dramatic lighting effects (Figs. 76, 77 and 81), perhaps unsurprisingly as several of them are published in print. The confirmed authorship of Iosif Berman of one of the photographs from this group (Fig. 76), raises the possibility that he may have taken some of the others, perhaps the images published in *Adam*. Furthermore, compositional similarities exist across a number of the images, some suggesting that the work-in-progress photographs could be preparatory studies for the more intricate shots. For example, the cover of *Adam* is held by a striking image in which two characters face the half-drawn stage curtains whilst a beam of light dissects the space behind them, highlighting two strange glowing shapes (Fig. 77). A second photograph of this scene, which lacks the close cropping and chiaroscuro shading, reveals these shapes to be a lamp and the upper body of a man carrying it (Fig. 78). The Berman photograph also displays a compositional focus and judicious use of lighting that underscore the dramatic gestural ballet on stage (Fig. 76). Its unattributed pendant from the Yivo collection appears to show the same scene and almost the same gestures but without these finishing touches. Thus, although the Berman authorship of all the photographs may not be established with any certainty, they may show the working process behind a single photographic portfolio. Furthermore, what is evident from all existing images is the desire to emphasise the radical aesthetics of the production beyond the stationary design elements, through the dynamism of the actors' movements and the use of modern stage lighting techniques.

In a further departure from theatrical traditions the set itself is simple, allowing these human and technical elements to establish their domination over the stage. The images reveal a base structure that remains on stage throughout the production. It is the titular “old marketplace,” edged on both sides by hollow structures stacked in irregular fashion to suggest the buildings surrounding it. A slatted balcony, a streetlamp and a trade sign add to the illusion, while in the background two further buildings—a church and a synagogue—are sketched out naively in white as though on a blackboard. The entire structure appears haphazard and lopsided. The edges curve or slide, the balcony slats are bent, the sketched buildings lean forward as though wishing to meet in the middle. This clearly is part of the illusion, as the set is vigorously put through its paces in the photographs, with actors scaling its various structures.





**Fig. 76:** The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, photograph by Iosif Berman, 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

The stage design, attributed to Maxy by existing literature, was most likely a collaborative product.<sup>40</sup> The overall vision and direction of the production appear to have been Sternberg's, a fact acknowledged by the contemporary press. In fact, Maxy's name was conspicuous by its absence, both in press reviews and in the special issue of *Adam* dedicated to the performance. According to A. Toma, it was Sternberg who "spatially project[ed] the author's vision," while Tudor Arghezi praised the director's "theatrical constructions" and visually arresting scenic tableaux.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a flyer advertising the company on tour in June 1930 announced that "the sets, costumes, music and dances [for *A Night* were] created by the Studio [i.e. BITS]," while at the same time crediting Maxy with the sets for *The Bewitched Tailor*.<sup>42</sup> This may simply mean that creative control over the design of the latter play was solely

<sup>40</sup> See for instance the list of theatrical productions in Ilk, *Maxy*, 176. It is also listed in Petre Oprea, *M. H. Maxy*, București: Meridiane, 1974, 30 and Israel Marcus, *Șapte momente din istoria evreilor în România*, Haifa: Glob, 1977, 54 but in both of these the year given for the production is incorrect. In 1970 Maxy did work on a revival of *A Night in the Old Marketplace* at the Jewish State Theatre in Bucharest.

<sup>41</sup> A. Toma, "Însuflețitorul," 1–2 and Tudor Arghezi, "Studio Teatrul Idiș, din București," 4–6, in *Adam* I, no. 16 (1 February 1930).

<sup>42</sup> Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum collection, RG8.

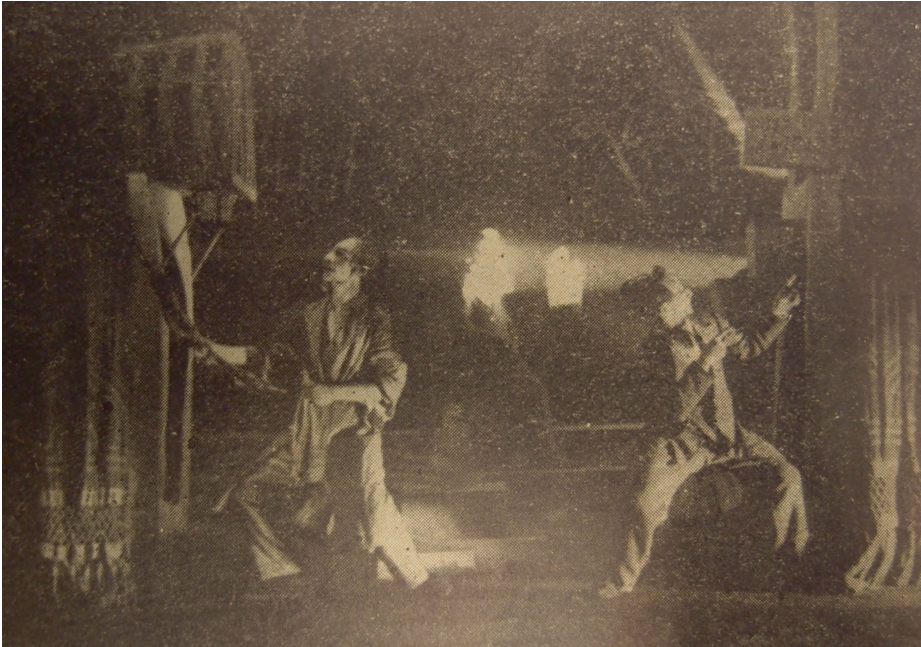


Fig. 77: The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, illustrated in *Adam*, no. 16, February 1930.

Maxy's while that of *A Night* was distributed amongst the members of BITS, however further scholarly accounts must now treat Maxy's involvement in this production with caution. Maxy's overall involvement in the BITS project is nonetheless supported by other evidence, such as the graphics for the company's prospectus, his designs for the subsequent production of *The Bewitched Tailor*, and his presence at the mock trial debating *A Night*, discussed below.

Other factors that determined the conception of the staging were Peretz himself, who had included very detailed stage directions in his text, and in all likelihood, the two previous productions.<sup>43</sup> The 1928 Warsaw production contained a set built from similar structures with curved openings and ramps, steps and even a balcony that was similarly positioned, itself inspired by the constructivist aesthetics that had first segmented the stage space through the use of platforms, ladders and modular frameworks or similarly arched apertures.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in the Warsaw staging the

<sup>43</sup> Peretz and Hillel, "A Night," 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> See for example Vladimir Tatlin's *Zangezi* (1923), Liubov Popova's *Romeo and Juliet* (1921) or Alexandra Exter's designs for the film *Aelita* (1924). For a more comprehensive discussion of constructivism in the context of Jewish theatre see Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed., *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2008).



**Fig. 78:** The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, photograph by Iosif Berman (?), 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

church and the synagogue were also two-dimensional presences in the background, lopsidedly positioned, and the dynamic contortions of the actors filled the stage.<sup>45</sup> It is certain that Sternberg was familiar with the Vilna Troupe's earlier effort, especially that at least two of the actors from the Warsaw performance were directly involved in his own staging: the names of Ruth Taru and David Licht can be found in the cast lists for both the Warsaw and the Bucharest productions of *A Night*.<sup>46</sup> A portrait photograph of David Licht in character, taken at a Bucharest photographic studio, shows his costume, face painting, and prosthetic nose.<sup>47</sup> Although clearly inspired by the Warsaw production, Sternberg took his experimentation further, eschewing the traditional costumes and decorative painterly touches favoured by director David Herman.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Images of this production are held in the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Yiddish Theater Photographs collection RG119.

<sup>46</sup> Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum collection RG8. It should be noted however that this branch of the Vilna Troupe did not have the same composition as the one that had been active in Bucharest a few years earlier, although Mordechai Mazo was still its manager.

<sup>47</sup> Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Yiddish Theater Photographs collection RG119.

<sup>48</sup> The team for the Warsaw production included Herman as director, Władysław Weintraub as designer and Lea Rotbaumowna as choreographer. For more information about the Vilna Troupe's

A *Night* does not have a clear narrative structure and thus the sequence of the existing photographs is more difficult to decipher than in the case of *The Bewitched Tailor* below. The play is an ensemble piece that follows a string of nocturnal activities in an atemporal marketplace where the worlds of the living and the dead collide. The prologue reveals that we are watching a play within a play, as several theatre staff appear at work on an imminent production, its set obscured by “a scrim of black gauze.”<sup>49</sup> Soon however the fictional world takes over the ostensibly “real” one and the audience is plunged into the action, together with the make-believe Theatre Director and Stage Manager. A further playfully surreal dimension is revealed in a photograph where Sternberg, the genuine theatre director, stands on stage next to the drama that unfolds (Fig. 79). This may well be a promotional photograph, or he may be on stage playing Peretz’s fictional “real” Theatre Director, however no complete cast sheet has yet come to light that confirms such a conjecture. Sternberg is joined on stage by three characters, two of whom appear recurrently in the existent images. They are two of the *dramatis personae* that frame and reflect on the action, perhaps the Jester, the Wanderer or the Narrator.<sup>50</sup> In many images, they also provide a physical frame, standing on opposite sides of the stage. The centrepiece of the narrative and of the physical space of the marketplace itself is the well, sometimes topped by an abstract sculptural form representing the Gargoyle, which acts as a mystical catalyst for the nocturnal exploits.

The simple modular structure of the set served as a background for the intricate movement patterns created by the actors. Several photographs show the ensemble cast in carefully constructed formations. Peretz’s abundance of characters that fleetingly flood the marketplace makes it difficult to identify with any certainty the figures on stage, aside perhaps from the Musicians (Fig. 80). The original victims of the magical Gargoyle, they join the ranks of the “Souls from Purgatory,” according to the list of *dramatis personae*. A drummer and a fiddle player perform led by a bowler-hatted bassist whose stringless instrument displays human features.<sup>51</sup> Around them female characters, living or dead, appear to be dancing. This human composition that appears in the unedited image—with glimpses of an advertising hoarding above the stage—was cropped, streamlined and dramatically lit for the version that was published in *Adam*.

The emergence of the dead from their graves and their subsequently frenzied *dance macabre* must have been amongst the most dramatic scenes that the audience encountered. In one image from *Adam* hands rise up from behind a parapet

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Warsaw production see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire. The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 181–186.

49 Peretz and Hillel, “A Night,” 5.

50 One of these is played by David Licht, as evidenced by the studio portrait previously mentioned.

51 The actual music would have come from the orchestra in the pit which is visible in some images.



**Fig. 79:** The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, photograph by Iosif Berman (?), 1930. Iacob Sternberg is on the far right. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

framed by two beams of light engaging in a gestural ballet whose shadows fall, ghostly, upon the backdrop (Fig. 81). The dance scenes, as pictured by Berman, have the linear progression of a Futurist painting in which the eye is drawn across the canvas at breakneck speed, with movements blurring and succeeding each other. The dance makes bodies merge and contort, leaning and arching in gravity-defying fashion (Fig. 76). According to contemporary reviews, the ingenious use of movement was one of the main innovations of the production. In *Adam*, A. Toma wrote that Sternberg's "great magic resides in his understanding of the fact that the characters are ghosts, schemas and symbols, and thus in his ability to confer upon them the automatism of puppets, and in that automatism, the whole plastic eurhythmics, typical and essential of the symbol they embody for a moment."<sup>52</sup>

In Toma's view, the actors are like robots because they embody a bleak vision of the world in which humankind has no agency. Yet the man as machine and by extension the mechanical actor had frequently been an aspiration of the artistic avant-gardes. Maxy himself envisaged this in an article already mentioned, published five years earlier in *Integral*, in which he outlined the tenets of constructivist theatre, singling out the ideas of Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meyerhold.<sup>53</sup> He discussed the mobility of the actor, who must interact with the set in almost acrobatic fashion, and how the set itself must be suited to this by presenting a multi-level, three-dimensional environment. Furthermore, rhythm, dance and movement were to become an essential part of the collective performance. Sternberg shared Maxy's

<sup>52</sup> Toma, "Însuflețitorul."

<sup>53</sup> M. H. Maxy, "Regia scenică—decor—costum," *Integral*, no. 2 (April 1925): 4–5.



**Fig. 80:** The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, photograph by Iosif Berman (?), 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

admiration for the two Russian directors and the staging of *A Night* may well have been one of the most decisively constructivist productions in Romanian theatrical history.<sup>54</sup> According to Toma, Sternberg tamed Peretz's chaotic vision through stylised gestures and architectonic on-stage formations.<sup>55</sup> These, as the photographs also suggest, are reminiscent of Meyerhold's biomechanics, a technique that enabled "harmonic interaction of large groups" so that "instead of individual actors on stage, the audience saw two-bodied, three-bodied, and multiple-bodied characters."<sup>56</sup> As well as the dance images already discussed, this technique was used by Sternberg in his other ensemble scenes, where actors merged together, moving in unison as a many-bodied, gesturing creature.

Sternberg's approach cultivated not just a blending of actors' bodies, but also of other branches of the arts. Prior to the official opening of BITS, probably in order to create anticipation and bring in income, he had organised a series of staged readings. These took place in the autumn of 1929 and included texts by Aleichem

<sup>54</sup> He writes about their modern methods in a 1929 article quoted in Israil Bercovici, *O sută de ani de teatru evreiesc în România* (București: Integral, 1998), 149–150.

<sup>55</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of what constitutes constructivist performance, in particular in terms of movement, see also Alexandra Chiriac, "Fedor Lopukhov and The Bolt," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 36, no. 3 (2016): 242–256.

<sup>56</sup> Mikhail Kolesnikov, "The Russian Avant-Garde and the Theatre of the Artist," in *Theatre in Revolution. Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design 1913–1935*, ed. Nancy van Norman Baer (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 84–95, 90. Meyerhold's first production to incorporate his new actor-training techniques was *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), see Alma H. Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics. Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia* (Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, 2012), 42.



**Fig. 81:** The BITS production of *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, illustrated in *Adam*, no. 16, February 1930.

and Peretz, one of them being *A Night in the Old Marketplace*. The expressive interpretation of the readings was reinforced through judicious use of repetition and musical accompaniment, including choral passages, and was received with enthusiasm by the public and critics alike.<sup>57</sup> The full staging of *A Night* which included specially composed music, choreography, lighting, costumes, make-up, and décor, all interacting harmoniously, left an indelible impression on many contemporary commentators. The theatre reviewer of *Curierul israelit* recounted being profoundly moved along with the rest of the audience who could not bring themselves to leave after the curtain fell, sitting silently together. He described the performative melding together of “plastic arts, décor, gesture” in which “music was words, words were music, dance was both words and music.”<sup>58</sup> A more pragmatic commentator observed that the impression of “harmony, unity, and rhythm” was achieved despite the limited scenic, and one might add financial, means available to Sternberg.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Gab. Sch., “Cronica teatrală. Studioul de la Central,” *Curierul israelit*, 3 November 1929; Ury Benador, “Sternberg,” *Adam* I, no.16 (1 February 1930): 2.

<sup>58</sup> Gab. Sch., “Cronica teatrală. Un triumf artistic,” *Curierul israelit*, 2 February 1930.

<sup>59</sup> I. H., “Bukarester Idischer Studietheater. *Noaptea în târgul vechi* de I. L. Peretz,” *Hasmonaea* XII, no. 9–10 (February–March 1930): 42.

In mid-February the production stopped due to a prior engagement of the space they had been renting in the Lipscani Theatre.<sup>60</sup> In the meantime, there was a mock literary trial to debate the merits of the production and its critical reception at the Baraşeum theatre on 2 March. This was a prominent event, attended by numerous artistic personalities and requiring the actors to be on hand to re-create parts of the play. An article in *Dimineața* on 5 March described the proceedings, which were said to resemble an authentic jury trial.<sup>61</sup> The plaintiffs were Camil Petrescu, Barbu Lăzăreanu and Mișu Weissman.<sup>62</sup> Of the three, Lăzăreanu made the most impassioned and relevant plea, if a little surreal, accusing Sternberg of “altering Peretz’s work through an orgy of ossified horrors and monosyllables that created a continuous impression of the lugubrious and the hyper-transcendental.” Petrescu and Weissman criticised the modernist influences that, according to them, made the play incomprehensible. As the reporter observed, the defence did not have a difficult task in responding to such a weakly presented case. Maxy, together with Ilarie Voronca and Sandu Tudor, vigorously “defended [Sternberg’s] considerable effort of synthesis and vision.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, the accused himself spoke, making the case for a modern theatrical vision aligned with modern life itself. The jury absolved Sternberg of all accusations and encouraged the theatre-going public to support this worthwhile venture in expectation of other such performances.

## **The Bewitched Tailor**

*A Night* did return for a further run in the spring of 1930, but BITS also introduced a new production. Adapted by Sternberg for the stage from a short story by Sholem Aleichem, *The Bewitched Tailor* (Croitorul fermecat) premiered in mid-April 1930.<sup>64</sup> Although it left a lesser mark than *A Night* in the contemporary press, it was an equally impressive production.

The newspaper *Dimineața* billed the play as a comedy, although its ends poorly for the titular character.<sup>65</sup> Aleichem’s fable, based originally on a folk tale, recounts

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<sup>60</sup> “Știri artistice,” *Dimineața*, 21 February 1930.

<sup>61</sup> G. Miror, “Un interesant proces literar,” *Dimineața*, 5 March 1930.

<sup>62</sup> Barbu Lăzăreanu was a Jewish left-wing writer and literary critic, while Mișu Weissman was a lawyer and politician, and a member of the Jewish Party of Romania.

<sup>63</sup> Sandu Tudor was a poet and literary theorist who became an Orthodox monk. In the 1920s he was a contributor to *Contimporanul*.

<sup>64</sup> Sholem Aleichem was the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitz (1859–1916), a prolific chronicler of Jewish shtetl life and one of the creators of modern Yiddish literature. His stories about Tevye the Dairyman were later adapted into the well-known musical *The Fiddler on the Roof*.

<sup>65</sup> “Croitorul fermecat la studioul din Lipscani,” *Dimineața*, 18 April 1930.



the journeys made by a tailor goaded by his spouse into purchasing a nanny goat from the neighbouring village. The owner of the animal is the local teacher, but it is his wife who conducts the transaction. The tailor and his new animal make the return journey, stopping on the way at the tavern that lies mid-way between the two villages. However, when the tailor finally reaches his home, it transpires that he has received a billy goat and thus no milk is to be had for the family. To rectify the situation, he travels back to the neighbouring village and seeks judgement before the rabbi. As the villagers assemble for the verdict, the teacher's wife successfully milks the animal, now evidently a nanny goat. The tailor barely escapes the angry villagers and returns to his home, stopping at the tavern on the way. Once again, in the tailor's backyard, the troublesome creature is revealed to be a billy goat and the whole village, led by the rabbi, enters into the dispute with their neighbours. As the situation escalates towards imminent violence, one thing saves the day: the goat runs away, thus denying everyone the evidence to try the case. The tailor, tormented by the idea that supernatural forces are at work, descends into a feverish state and dies.

Part fable, part comedy of errors, the story was adapted by Sternberg using thoroughly modern means. One commentator observed the "almost cinematic" series of images, the specially composed soundtrack based on Jewish folklore, as well as the introduction of two compères who announced and narrated the scenes.<sup>66</sup> The production was thus more reminiscent of revue theatre than traditional theatre, a form of performance in which Sternberg was well versed, and to which he would return before long.<sup>67</sup> Like in the case of *A Night*, the décor did not change between scenes. Sternberg and Maxy, who in this case is recorded as the play's set designer, opted for a simultaneous presentation of all the geographical and temporal planes of the narrative. The dwellings of the tailor and the teacher stand on opposite sides of the stage, their interiors obscured between scenes by curtains bearing the names of the rival villages. Above the sloping roofs of the two households, a medley of geometric shapes rises, jutting corners pointed in every direction, painted with near-abstract forms hinting at chimneys, windows, fields, clouds and what appears to be an enormous celestial body with a swirling polygonal shape—perhaps a signifier for the all-encompassing temporal framework—all tumbling vigorously across the stage. Between the two villages thus imagined, diagonal ramps construct the winding path travelled by the tailor, a space that is rendered both borderline and central by the play's narrative.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> In 1917–1918 Sternberg produced a number of cabaret and music hall performances as part of his first forays into Yiddish theatre in Bucharest. See Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 117–119 and Crăciun, "Bucureștiul interbelic," 73–74.

Surviving images capture Maxy's and Sternberg's vision and several key moments from the play.<sup>68</sup> In what might be one of the first scenes of the production, a musical number appears to be taking place in which the narrators reveal the premise of the plot: on the right the tailor's wife is flanked by her two hungry offspring, whilst on the left a curtain rises to reveal the goat in the teacher's house beyond the path. A studio portrait of David Licht shows him in the guise of the tailor, collar slightly askew, wearing a mask that extends upwards, giving his head a bulbous appearance, and sporting a naively benevolent smile.<sup>69</sup> In the next photograph he appears at the top of the path, on his way to buy the goat (Fig. 82). Behind him some broken windows and a smirking man may well represent the down-at-heel ale house and its wily owner, who may or may not be the play's culprit. The modernity of the staging is very evident in this image, with ramps, ladders and sloping planes constructing the kind of multi-level performative space first developed by Meyerhold and Liubov Popova in their 1922 production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Furthermore, the two suited and bowler-hatted narrators sheltering under an umbrella bring an element of the cabaret to the stage, as well as recalling the similar narrative and physical framing device used in *A Night*. In the next image the tailor is leading the goat away, as the teacher's wife clutches her earnings (Fig. 83). Here the set shows its full potential, as our hero, his troublesome animal, its former owner, and the two narrators, form an upward moving human construction, while the left curtain is raised to reveal the teacher, his home, and two curious pupils who are seemingly suspended in mid-air. Next comes the play's most crucial moment: the teacher's wife milks the goat in front of the rabbi and the assembled villagers, thus proving it is indeed a nanny goat, while the tailor recoils in dismay (Fig. 84). Like a pair of magicians, the teacher and his wife gesticulate towards the audience, who find themselves faced, as though in a mirror, with ascending rows of curious spectators. The ramp has been transformed into a rudimentary auditorium for the goat's trial. The final photograph shows the tailor surrounded by three women who form a threatening pyramid around him and the goat, pointing and staring, while sleeping or drunken men are slumped all around the different levels of the stage. This may be the scene of the tailor's decent into madness. Having heard a supernatural tale from the landlady of the village pub, he wanders the streets, imagining that he is chased by malevolent spirits.

Reviews in the contemporary press highlighted the elements that differentiated Sternberg's vision from traditional theatre, in particular the expert melding of art forms that was also evident in *A Night*. In the Yiddish-language Warsaw magazine *Literarische Bleter*, Shlomo Bikel described the "plastic" movements and "flexibility" of the actors, as well as praising the harmonious combination of prose, poetry, and

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<sup>68</sup> These are held at the Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania, Photography collection and Romanian National Art Museum, Documentation department, fond Maxy.

<sup>69</sup> Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Yiddish Theater Photographs collection RG119.



**Fig. 82:** The BITS production of *The Bewitched Tailor*, 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

song. *Dimineața* noted the use of “d décor, lights, and music” that set the performance aside from banal theatrical productions, as well as the dream-like atmosphere populated by “hallucinating and hallucinated figures.”<sup>70</sup> As in the case of *A Night*, a realist approach was considered unfitting for purveying the spirit of Aleichem’s story, with Sternberg’s “synthetic” staging deftly bringing out its every nuance.<sup>71</sup> According to Gheorghe Dinu, writing in the avant-garde magazine *unu*, Sternberg achieved an “almost cinematographic synthesis” through a “succession of images and ideas” imbued with a burlesque atmosphere.<sup>72</sup> Dinu’s verdict on Maxy’s sets was not as enthusiastic however, suggesting the designer may have been hindered by the dimensions of the stage:

In his work Sternberg was helped by the stage sets of M. H. Maxy, which were perhaps somewhat dissonant in places with the essence of the play. Perhaps Maxy was restrained in this respect by the insufficient dimensions of the stage. He was obliged to synthesise the multiple fields of vision, leaving scarce space for the actors’ expansive and acrobatic performance. The decors of M. H. Maxy are admirable on paper and would have been equal to the director’s vision on an appropriate stage...<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Both articles are quoted in Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 151.

<sup>71</sup> “Croitorul fermecat la studioul din Lipscaeni.”

<sup>72</sup> Gheorghe Dinu, “Studioul Teatrului de artă evreiesc. Croitorul fermecat,” *unu*, no. 25 (May 1930): 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*



**Fig. 83:** The BITS production of *The Bewitched Tailor*, 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

The reviewer of the magazine *Hasmonaea* however suggested this cramped aesthetic may have a particular intent, as “there is nothing more Jewish than this congestion of people, dwellings, and objects” where free space is limited to a bare minimum and movements are stunted. Men, women, children and make-believe animals, as well as “two villages and the road in-between, a hill, and an inn [have been] thrown together with the most natural air on a stage not bigger than a handful of square meters.”<sup>74</sup> Maxy and Sternberg were no strangers to economy of means in a visual sense, such as their minimalist staging of Strindberg’s *Comrades* critiqued for its pared-back aspect. The cramped, higgledy-piggledy agglomeration in *The Bewitched Tailor* with its stage space filled to the brim from side to side and top to bottom must have been a conscious artistic decision, albeit one prompted by practical constraints.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, constructing the progression of the narrative not through a succession of changing backdrops, but through the manipulation of a multi-functional set already on stage and the movements of the performers themselves who became an extension of that set, interacting with its every surface, was the theatrical future envisaged by Maxy in his 1925 article.<sup>76</sup> The montage of scenes thus created hovered, like *A Night*,

<sup>74</sup> H. Herscorici, “Croitorul fermecat la Bukarester Idische Theater Studie,” *Hasmonaea* XII, no. 11 (April 1930): 27–28.

<sup>75</sup> Moreover, this was probably the same stage that had been used for *A Night in the Old Marketplace* as both productions took place in the Lipscani Theatre.

<sup>76</sup> Maxy, “Regia scenică.”



**Fig. 84:** The BITS production of *The Bewitched Tailor*, 1930. Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania.

somewhere between the magical and the mechanical, bodies and ramps precisely aligned, yet narrating a dream-like fable whose multiple temporal and geographical planes coexisted side-by-side.

Although the two productions were critically acclaimed and attracted much attention, this did not make them profitable. In May 1930 Sternberg petitioned the authorities for financial support to continue his innovative theatrical programme, enclosing a balance sheet that revealed a sizeable deficit. The response was a regretful no, despite the artistic quality of the productions, as subsidies were only available for Romanian state theatres.<sup>77</sup> In October 1930, while the troupe was on tour, a fire destroyed their sets, costumes and light equipment in the town of Buhuși, in north-east Romania. A short article in *Dimineața* does not indicate any suspicion of wrongdoing, but it does paint a bleak picture for the future of the company.<sup>78</sup> The artists, writes Adrian Maniu, were hoping to raise sufficient funds during the tour to return with further innovatively designed productions. However, the fire scuppered their plans and left them in a difficult financial situation. Maniu hoped that some

<sup>77</sup> Romanian National Archives, 817/ 4/ 1930. Sternberg petitioned the Minister for Labour, Health and Social Welfare, Department for the People's Education (Ministerul Muncii, Sănătății și Ocrotirilor Sociale, Direcția Educația Poporului).

<sup>78</sup> Adrian Maniu, "Focul din târgul vechi," *Dimineața*, 25 October 1930.

fund-raising initiative might be organised so that the troupe might continue their work. Unfortunately, this was not to be and the activity of BITS ceased after this first and only season. Although BITS was short-lived and its two most elaborate productions saw the light of stage for a few brief months in 1930, the echo they created in the contemporary press is proof of their impact on the Romanian artistic community. Sternberg's repertoire choices were ambitious—*A Night* is still considered a difficult play to stage—and his productions pioneering despite the limited means.<sup>79</sup>

## Two Theatrical Revues

After the demise of BITS, Maxy and Sternberg worked together on two further productions, bearing the hallmarks of their innovative partnership in design, movement and sound. These were a new direction for the partnership: not plays from the international theatrical repertoire, but revues written by Sternberg in collaboration with writer Moyshe Altman.<sup>80</sup> If experimental theatre in Romania has been insufficiently examined by scholarship, the musical revue genre has been almost entirely neglected, perhaps from a misguided judgement regarding its artistic value. Yet, during the interwar period, this vibrant and ephemeral art form brought on-stage innovation to the masses with greater success than the theatrical experimentation of the avant-garde. Sternberg was aware of the radical potential of revue theatre, having begun his exploration of the genre as early as 1917 when creating a string of productions in partnership with the writer Yankev Botoshansky.<sup>81</sup> Sternberg later recalled this important moment in his career:

I understood that the only means of attracting the Jewish masses was a traditional-cultural theatre. Not a literary theatre, even though I was its proponent at that time. That is why I created a social-political theatre, a revue theatre, which I think was the first such theatre in the Yiddish language at the time. This theatre born in Bucharest on the eve of the October

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<sup>79</sup> *A Night in the Old Marketplace* has been most recently adapted for the stage by composer Frank London, writer Glen Berger and dramaturge Alexandra Aron, whose 2007 New York production made use of similar theatrical devices to those of Sternberg, such as cabaret influences, a specially composed score that combines klezmer with jazz, and modern technologies (video projections in this case). In 2017 the production was revived for an international tour.

<sup>80</sup> Moyshe Altman (1890–1981) was a Yiddish language writer and poet who was based in Romania during the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>81</sup> See Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 117–119 and Crăciun, “Bucureștiul interbelic,” 73–74. Botoshansky (c.1895–1964) was a writer and playwright who shared Sternberg's socialist sympathies. He was based in Romania between 1914 and 1926. See Camelia Crăciun, “Virtually *ex nihilo*. The Emergence of Yiddish Bucharest during the Interwar Period” in *Catastrophe and Utopia: Jewish Intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s*, ed. Ferenc Laczó and Joachim von Puttkamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 133–152, 144–145.

Revolution consciously contained ideologically militant tendencies. On the stage, we... fought for a progressive Jewish culture, for the emancipation of Jews, for their civil rights...<sup>82</sup>

Although the ideological bent of this interview is clear, having been given in 1956 when Sternberg was a staunch supporter of the communist regime, it is also possible to establish the reasoning behind his interest in an apparently frivolous theatrical genre: the potential to bring up-to-the-minute social and political issues to the fore to a large captive audience, something difficult to achieve through traditional literary theatre. Thus, following the demise of BITS Sternberg returned to revue theatre. In this he did not abandon his ambitions for experimentation, enlisting an eclectic roster of collaborators alongside Maxy himself.

For the first production, entitled *Skotzl Kimt*, Sternberg chose choreographer Floria Capsali, composer Max Halm and the vaudeville troupe of Maurice Siegler. The revue opened in the summer of 1933 at the Jignița open air theatre, a location with a long tradition of Yiddish performance, as well as the place where ten years earlier the Vilna Troupe had started their Bucharest career.<sup>83</sup> A surviving programme provides a rare opportunity to examine the contents of the revue which had a prologue and two acts divided into a string of comedic sketches and musical numbers.<sup>84</sup> As well as more generic acts such as a “Dance for the Moon,” the production included commentary on contemporary events with a lengthy number on the economic crisis, an imagined dialogue about antisemitism with Albert Einstein, sketches featuring well-known figures from Bucharest’s Jewish community, and even a skit in which Lady Chatterley converts to Judaism. The revue also tackled Hitler’s recent appointment as Chancellor of Germany through a satirical number entitled “Beautiful Adolf” in which the character of Hitler wore increasingly ridiculous masks and was eventually vanquished by Charlie Chaplin in a reiteration of the parable of David and Goliath.<sup>85</sup>

The production was a huge success, drawing crowds every night with memorable musical and comedic creations. Max Halm’s tango-infused numbers launched the career of Sevilla Pastor, one of the Siegler daughters, who performed as Greta Gabroveni and the Blonde Vice, characters inspired by contemporary cinema culture.<sup>86</sup> Their apparent levity was underscored by sombre social commentary, with the Blonde Vice turning out to be a destitute peanut seller, highlighting the

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<sup>82</sup> Interview given by Sternberg in 1956 to the Parisian Yiddish newspaper *La Presse nouvelle*, quoted in Israil Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 118.

<sup>83</sup> Vera Molea. *Hai, nene, la Iunion! Teatrele din grădinile de vară ale Bucureștilor de altădată*. (București: Vremea, 2014), 82.

<sup>84</sup> Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum collection, RG8.

<sup>85</sup> G. D., “Note teatrale. Revista Skotzl Kimt la Teatrul Jignița,” *Dimineața*, 16 September 1932. Such content suggests the revue’s title might have also been political. The Yiddish term “shkotzim” has a pejorative connotation and can refer to insolent persons who are also non-believers. *Skotzl Kimt* or “skotzl is coming” could thus have been a reference to the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

<sup>86</sup> Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 158. Greta Gabroveni is a play on Greta Garbo, substituting the star’s

economic hardship haunting the streets of Bucharest, as one reviewer observed.<sup>87</sup> This social and political dimension explains why the magazine *Hasmonaea*, which as the mouthpiece of Romania's Society of Zionist Students might have been expected to eschew frivolous entertainment, dedicated a glowing full page review to *Skotzl Kimt*.<sup>88</sup> Regretfully recalling the demise of BITS and the innovations of Sternberg's *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, the reviewer nonetheless acknowledged that such high-brow productions had appealed to relatively limited audiences. By contrast, the revue genre had delivered Sternberg's greatest victory yet, offering him a large and receptive public. The magazine *Adam* was equally enthusiastic, hoping that *Skotzl Kimt* heralded a revival for Jewish cultural life in Bucharest.<sup>89</sup> The production did indeed enjoy a long run, with performances still taking place in the second half of September 1933.<sup>90</sup>

As no photographic evidence or comprehensive descriptions of the sets have yet come to light, one can only wonder whether Maxy made any allowances for his expanding audience. A revue in an open-air theatre required popular appeal and avant-garde design was perhaps too opaque for this purpose. On the other hand, the audiences of a summer-time revue may have been more accepting of visual innovation: there were precedents for audacious on-stage experimentation and the expectations that imbued literary theatre were absent. The caricaturist Dor immortalised a scene from *Skotzl Kimt* for the cover of *Adam*, which suggests that Maxy took the latter approach (Fig. 85). In the foreground stands a duo, perhaps Sevilla Pastor as Greta Gabroveni forlornly puffing on a cigarette and her husband Moshe Pastor as the King of Hunger.<sup>91</sup> They are framed by a circular border dissected by a geometric construction which hovers above Sevilla's head, mirroring the curvilinear structure of her hat. The background verges on the abstract, yet there is also the suggestion of neon signage previously encountered in the design for Dida Solomon's theatre. Although the meaning of the letters is not clear, they could represent both product advertising—appropriate in a sketch on the state of the economy—and cinema signage, in tune with Greta's character. The horizontal lines of the backdrop could indicate the type of slatted structure Maxy has previously used, in Dida Solomon's *Comrades* for example, yet the wavy line that seals the lower part of the drawing suggests a painted cloth backdrop. Either way, the overall composition of the set is most reminiscent of *The Bewitched Tailor's* overlapping geometric construction.

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surname for the name of an area in Bucharest's old town centre. Originally an eighteenth-century inn, Gabroveni became a hub for Jewish commerce and banking in the early years of the twentieth century.  
**87** G. D., "Note teatrale."

**88** L. Adrian, "Skotzl Kimt," *Hasmonaea* XV, no. 1–2 (July–August 1933): 36.

**89** "S Kotzl Kimt," *Adam* V, no. 63 (15 August 1933): 15.

**90** "Skotzl Kimt," *Rampa*, 18 September 1933.

**91** The number on the economic crisis included a duo between Greta Gabroveni and the King of Hunger set to waltz music by Max Halm.



If Sternberg's collaboration with Maxy was to be expected, the involvement of Floria Capsali (1900–1982) was in some ways unusual. Capsali, who had studied in Paris with Ballets Russes ballet masters Enrico Checchetti and Nicolas Legat, had opened her own Bucharest dance studio in 1924.<sup>92</sup> She was particularly interested in Romanian classical composers and traditional Romanian dance and had gathered choreographic data during the ethnographic campaigns of the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti, which resulted in the first modern corpus of studies on Romania's rural culture. Based on her field research, Capsali choreographed dances based on Byzantine iconography and folk dance patterns, aiming to develop a national style for modern choreography akin to similar movements in the visual or literary arts.<sup>93</sup> Her interest in Romanian national narratives, as well as her high profile recitals—in the same year as *Skotzl Kimt* for instance she performed at the Romanian Opera—might not herald an involvement in popular entertainment, especially one drawn from a minority culture.<sup>94</sup> Yet between the years 1931 and 1938 Capsali had a steady flow of work in the revue genre, collaborating with Romania's best known music hall impresario, Constantin Tănase and with the Alhambra, a revue theatre in Bucharest.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, Capsali already knew Sternberg and his colleagues, performing at a festival he had organised in February 1931: she provided a “rhythmic interpretation” of a Tudor Arghezi poem read by Sandu Eliad.<sup>96</sup> Capsali was equally well-versed in collaborating with visual artists to create on-stage performances. As a young student in Paris she had witnessed the complexity of Ballet Russes productions and subsequently she worked together with her husband, the sculptor Mac Constantinescu, to design costumes for her shows.<sup>97</sup>

The collaborative creation of *Skotzl Kimt* was a natural progression from the melding of art forms that Stenberg had employed during the existence of BITS and the modernity and flexibility of the revue genre was the perfect platform for such experimentation. The following summer, in August 1934, Sternberg premiered a new revue, *Rojinkes mit Mandlen*.<sup>98</sup> Billed as an “art revue” (“revistă de artă”), it was another collaboration with Altman, Halm and Maxy, as well as new recruit composer

<sup>92</sup> Tilde Urseanu, Ion Ianegic, and Liviu Ionescu, *Istoria baletului* (București: Editura Muzicală, 1967), 292; Al. Robot, “Cu Floria Capsali despre ea și despre alții,” *Rampa*, 22 May 1933.

<sup>93</sup> Rep., “Floria Capsali despre stilul coreografic românesc,” *Rampa*, 4 April 1930.

<sup>94</sup> Al. Robot, “Cronica spectacolelor. Opera Româna. Recital Floria Capsali și Gabriel Negry,” *Rampa*, 4 May 1933.

<sup>95</sup> Mitiță Dumitrescu, *Amintiri despre Floria Capsali* (București: Editura Muzicală, 1985), 22 and 27.

<sup>96</sup> Sașa Pană, “Acvarium. La Festivalul...,” *unu*, no. 34 (March 1931): 12.

<sup>97</sup> Dumitrescu, *Amintiri despre Floria Capsali*, 16–17.

<sup>98</sup> Like *Skotzl Kimt*, the title remained in the original Yiddish in all references to the production. The expression, which is translated as “raisins with almonds,” is the Romanian transliteration of the title of a well-known Yiddish folk song first popularised by Abraham Goldfaden in the 1880s.



Fig. 85: Dor, A scene from the revue *Skotzl Kimt*, illustrated in *Adam*, no. 64, October 1933.

Elly Roman, but without the Sieglers or Capsali.<sup>99</sup> Although few details about the production have come to light, a short description in *Rampa* offers a glimpse of how Sternberg's collaborations functioned: "the music of Messrs. Elly Roman and Max Halm and the plastic art of Mr. M. H. Maxy bring rhythm and harmony to a performance in which the director's approach achieves balance between word, light, melody, and colour."<sup>100</sup> This sense of harmony and balance between the different elements of the production—textual, visual, and musical—was becoming a trademark for Sternberg's productions. *Rampa* reported that the production had attracted the curiosity of the capital's art lovers and art makers due to the literary quality of its text and the "Sternbergian vision" of the stage direction, which veered away from the usual formulas.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps the musical talents of Halm and Roman, whose compositions were extremely popular at the time, sweetened the experimental nature of Sternberg's direction and his more high-brow texts, or perhaps Bucharest's revue audiences were

<sup>99</sup> "Spectacolele Capitalei. Teatrul Nou," *Rampa*, 5 August 1934.

<sup>100</sup> "Teatrele. Nou," *Rampa*, 5 August 1934.

<sup>101</sup> "Teatrele. Nou," *Rampa*, 13 August 1934.

becoming more discerning. Either way, the production was considered by critics the best revue on stage during the summer of 1934.<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps this was a fitting swan song for Maxy's involvement in the music hall, as well as in the theatre, at least for a while. For the rest of the decade he did not undertake any theatrical projects. In the early 1940s, under the fascist regime led by Ion Antonescu, Jewish staff and performers were removed from Romanian theatres, but were permitted to create their own organisation. Maxy joined a group of over two hundred artists and intellectuals in setting up a Jewish theatre in Bucharest. The Barașeum Theatre opened its doors in March 1941 and Maxy's return to set design and his collaboration with this institution continued sporadically until the end of his life.<sup>103</sup> Paradoxically perhaps, the Barașeum Theatre fulfilled Sternberg's earlier dream of a permanent organisation to support Jewish theatre, and still does, being one of the last remaining professional Yiddish-language theatres in Europe at present.<sup>104</sup> As for Sternberg himself, he continued to produce notable theatrical performances until the late 1930s when he emigrated to the Soviet Union. Not long before his departure, in 1938, the theatrical community celebrated his twenty-year career in Romania. In his speech, Sternberg concluded that his time in Romania was "not simply a cultural battle between influencing or being influenced, but a mutual exchange."<sup>105</sup>

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**102** Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 159.

**103** *Ibid.*, 174–179; Ilk, *Maxy*, 176.

**104** Kit Gillet, "Keeping Alive a Haven for Yiddish Culture in Modern Romania," 15 January 2017, *New York Times*, accessed 24 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/world/europe/romania-jewish-theater-bucharest.html>.

**105** Quoted in Bercovici, *O sută de ani*, 171.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concept for this study started out rooted in the prospect of carving a space for Romanian modernism within histories of design and performance and in revealing M. H. Maxy's importance as a member of the European avant-gardes. As my research progressed, I began to understand the flaws in this plan, in particular the limiting use of national perspectives and the dangers of misplaced hubris in one's research subjects. I thus allowed the research to be shaped instead by the narratives that emerged, crossing continents and disciplines, and revealing unexpected protagonists, events and connections. Most of all, I tried to suspend the art historian's impulse to weigh, measure and pass judgement upon artworks and artists. Increasingly, parameters such as "originality," "influence," "autonomy" or "aesthetics" are being contested by new approaches in the discipline and I wanted to assess the potential of flexibility, especially when research findings lead to the downfall of one's prized protagonists. In short, I wanted to avoid what Jeremy Howard has identified as "the hidebound myopia" extant within the art historical discipline "which has diminished our ability to grasp the wider picture" and is derived "from contrived notions of fixedness and hierarchy."<sup>1</sup> Thus, although the so-called Romanian avant-garde was the point of departure, I chose to follow the trajectories of border-crossing artists and artworks outside national and disciplinary boundaries.

In the case of the Academy of Decorative Arts, such an approach resulted in its most comprehensive history to date. Previously, the presumed "foreignness" of Andrei Vespremie and the supposed association with the modernist stalwart that is the Bauhaus, had given rise to a truncated and largely inaccurate account of the Bucharest institution. Instead, as this study shows, the Academy was created by Vespremie based on the curriculum of the Schule Reimann, which he had attended in Berlin. Worthy of a separate study itself, the Reimann was a large and successful institution that focused on the commercial aspects of design, amongst other achievements pioneering the field of window display design in collaboration with the German Werkbund. Vespremie's link to the Reimann, the founding of the Bucharest Academy and his subsequent pedagogical career in Riga, were revealed for the first time in this book largely as a result of documents preserved in the Latvia State Historical Archives. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that Vespremie was a well-respected member of avant-garde circles in Bucharest and that he not only influenced Maxy, one of its core members, but also introduced him to a number of design techniques and materials that became an integral part of his artistic oeuvre. This was shown through a thorough investigation of the Academy's outputs and by identifying and closely examining surviving objects in museum and private collections. One hopes this is a

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1 Jeremy Howard, *East European Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–2.

first step towards recovering the history of modern design in Romania, an area that at present is seldom touched upon in existing scholarship and in local museums.

The Academy's history was explored not only through its pedagogical activities and artistic outputs, but also through its commercial endeavours. The connection between theatricality, commerce, and modern design was apparent to Vespremie and Maxy's contemporaries. Figures such as Sonia Delaunay and institutions such as the German Werkbund or the Bauhaus, successfully utilised and embraced this connectivity, which was judged unbecoming to modernism only in later scholarship. This study (re)placed the Academy within this context of interwar urban modernity, revealing an interest in contemporary advertising and display practices under the watchful eye of Mela Brun-Maxy, a heretofore unacknowledged contributor to the venture. Other frequently unacknowledged participants were the Academy's clients and supporters, such as A. L. Zissu, Heinrich Fischer-Galați or Ion Minulescu, and in the absence of a history of collecting in Romania, this study hopes to instigate further explorations of their activities and influence.

The performative aspect of modern design is also found on the theatrical stage and once again it entails collaboration. Following the trail of Maxy's artistic partnerships, this book highlighted Yiddish theatre practitioners whose contributions to the European interwar avant-garde have been obscured by the gaps between disciplines or national narratives. In as much as possible, performances were reconstructed from contemporary accounts, photographs, ephemera, press articles and reviews. The case studies shaped around these plays challenged previously accepted narratives. *Saul* was revealed to be an ambitious avant-garde project that did not make it to the stage, questioning the over-reliance of scholarship on avant-garde periodicals as source material. *Shabse Tsvi*, the production that crossed the Atlantic, demonstrated the importance of following artists, artworks and archives across borders in order to fully capture their histories. *The Sentimental Mannequin* explored the interconnectivity between the design showroom and the theatre stage, joining together the two halves of this book. The short interlude about *The Neophyte* and *The Thought* raised the issue of ephemerality in researching and documenting performance. Finally, *Man, Beast and Virtue* re-iterated the modernity of these theatrical productions through their affinity with scientific advances and with the cinema screen. Altogether, the Vilna Troupe's collaborations with Maxy were shown to be resolutely modern, from their potential for cross-continental itinerancy to their reflection of contemporary artistic and technological developments.

Following the Vilna Troupe's departure, the book highlighted further bursts of theatrical innovation that have been overlooked. In particular, Dida Solomon's contribution to Bucharest's avant-garde has been long overdue for assessment. Perhaps this book will inspire other researchers to take up the task beyond the present case study of the Caragiale Theatre, whose short existence was nonetheless one of the few truly homegrown theatrical avant-garde initiatives. Memoirs, press reports and the recovery of Maxy's designs for a modern graphic identity contributed

to the fullest analysis of this institution to date, despite the fact that visual material of its performances is still sorely lacking. In this respect, the work of Iacob Sternberg fared better, with the discovery of several unpublished photographs in the archives of the Centre for the Study of Jewish History in Romania during the research for this study and further ephemera at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research. Sternberg was shown to be an innovative and influential maker of theatre, whose connection to the Yiddish stage and revue theatre has probably impeded the recognition he deserves as an important contributor to the avant-garde. Sternberg's projects of the early 1930s, some of which were designed by Maxy, built upon the experimentation of the Vilna Troupe, taking avant-garde theatre in Bucharest to new heights.

While the protagonists of this book were all Jewish, their artistic practices and trajectories differed widely and my intention was not to provide some kind of unifying account of their avant-garde activities. At the same time, none of these initiatives could have come into being without the visible and, sometimes invisible, support of transnational Jewish networks and communities. Jewish benefactors supported the Academy of Decorative Arts and Jewish spectators made the Vilna Troupe a success, while Jewish artistic connections stretched, as we have seen, from Paris and Berlin to Riga and Chicago. It was thus these multiple, temporary encounters that interested me, converging upon Bucharest during a transformative decade and then diverging again, for better or for worse. The book brought to light this rich artistic life of modern Bucharest and its Jewish avant-garde, a heretofore peripheral story in histories of art, design, and performance. It has shown the importance of widening parameters in order to reveal untapped potential outside main narratives of modernism, advocating for a more inclusive approach that eschews binaries and normalises liminality and transitional states.

Throughout this study, the performative has been utilised as a framework not only in the literal sense of the theatrical stage, but also in the inherent performativity of other aspects of modernism such as the urban commercial display. It was the very act of performing, much maligned by narratives of canonical modernism, that offered a space for these artists to thrive and create in Bucharest for a brief period, as we saw in the case of both the Academy of Decorative Arts and the theatrical initiatives discussed in this book. As Iacob Sternberg wrote about interwar Yiddish theatre:

[It] became a significant cultural factor not only for the Jewish community but also for the Romanian society, prov[ing] that modern Jewish art is... one of the strongest weapons for the Jewish masses in their struggle for affirmation. Although national in expression, we are universal in sense. Over the political aspersions of the day, we represent the connecting bridge between two populations, the Jewish one and the Romanian one....<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Prospectus for the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio, Romanian National Archives, fond 817 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 4/ 1930 (see Appendix E).

The fluidity of performance and its collaborative aspects can unsettle national narratives. Transnational practitioners or itinerant ensembles have often been exiled to a scholarly no-man's-land, and important segments of the history of the international avant-gardes have thus been obscured. Throughout this book, the recuperation of visual and textual material relating to such artists and their collaborative ventures has revealed a vibrant array of artistic experiments, heretofore concealed both by the ephemerality of the performative and by the fluidity of their border-crossing narratives. While such an approach can raise problems of a practical kind, as materials are dispersed geographically and come in many different languages, it is a task worth undertaking and one that may well lead to more inclusive and collaborative scholarship. As this book has advocated, by accepting cross-media and cross-cultural slippages as an integral part of avant-garde narratives and practices, the result is not a weaker modernism, but an infinitely more enriching and exciting one.

# BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

These biographical notes provide brief introductions to the figures discussed in this book, as well as listing the names and pseudonyms they used.

**Victor Brauner** (b.1903, Piatra-Neamț – d.1966, Paris) was a painter and surrealist poet. After attending lessons at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest, he made his debut in 1924 with a personal exhibition in Bucharest. The same year he published the magazine *75HP* with Ilarie Voronca and Stephan Roll, one of the key works of the avant-garde in Romania due to its graphic conception and the invention of “pictopoetry.” He continued to collaborate with other Bucharest avant-garde printed periodicals throughout the 1920s. In 1930, he moved to Paris where he joined the surrealist group and presented his first exhibition in the city in 1933 with the support of André Breton. During the last decades of his life he lived and worked in various locations in France, becoming increasingly interested in mythology and ritual.

**Joseph Buloff** (b.1899, Vilnius – d.1985, New York) was an actor and theatre director. He became a member of the original Vilna Troupe in 1917 and played an instrumental role in its early European tours, being part of extremely popular productions such as *The Dybbuk* (1920) and *The Singer of His Sorrows* (1925). In 1926, he emigrated to the USA together with his wife **Luba Kadison** (b.1906, Vilnius – d.2006, New York), also a member of the Vilna Troupe. They had many successes on and off-Broadway, including the first Yiddish-language production of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in the 1950s.

**Ion Călugaru** or **Ștrul Leiba Croitoru** (b.1902, Dorohoi – d.1956, Bucharest) was a writer and journalist. He collaborated with the journals *Contimporanul*, *unu*, and *Integral*. In the 1920s he published short stories, including his 1926 volume *Paradisul Statistic* (The Statistical Paradise) under the imprint of *Integral*.

**Mihail Cosma** or **Claude Sernet** or **Ernest Spirt** (b.1902, Târgu-Ocna – d.1968, Paris) was a writer. He collaborated with the periodicals *Punct*, *unu*, and *Integral*, most famously interviewing Luigi Pirandello in 1925 and discussing the definition of Integralism with him. In 1928 he relocated to Paris where he remained until the end of his life, continuing to publish his poems and writings.

**Sandu Eliad** (b.1899, Botoșani – d.1979, Bucharest) was an actor, theatre director and theorist. He was active in several short-lived theatrical collaborations of the Bucharest avant-garde, including the group *Insula* (The Island, 1922–1923) and the *Contimporanul* Demonstrations of New Art in 1925. He collaborated as director with Dida Solomon’s Caragiale Theatre in 1927 and worked alongside M. H. Maxy at the Barașeum Jewish Theatre from the 1940s until the end of his life. He also had a prolific career as a journalist.

**Heinrich Fischer-Galați** (b.1879, Galați – d.1960, La Tour de Peilz) was an industrialist and philanthropist. He was particularly interested in fostering graphic and applied arts initiatives. In the mid-1910s in Bucharest he created the societies *Graphica* and *Bibliofila*, which were joined by many Romanian artists and which promoted the graphic arts with exhibitions, a library, and other resources. He was the main financial supporter of the Academy of Decorative Arts. His other interest lay in popularising Esperanto in Romania and he founded several societies to this effect throughout



the years. During the Second World War, he escaped from Romania together with his wife and relocated to Switzerland with help from the Esperanto community. He died there in poverty and it is not known what happened to his important graphic art collection.

**Benjamin Fundoianu** or **Fondane** (b.1898, Iași – d.1944, Birkenau) was a Romanian writer, poet and philosopher. He was a supporter of the Bucharest avant-garde and a leader of the short-lived theatrical group *Insula* (The Island), active between 1922 and 1923 in Bucharest. After moving to Paris in 1923, he continued to collaborate with Romanian avant-garde journals, in particular *Contimporanul*, *Integral*, and *unu*.

**Marcel Iancu** or **Janco** (b.1895, Bucharest – d.1984, Ein Hod) was an artist and architect. Together with Tristan Tzara and Ion Vinea he collaborated on short lived symbolist magazines *Simbolul* (1912) and *Chemarea* (1915). During the First World War he relocated to Zürich where he became one of the founders of Dada, frequenting the Cabaret Voltaire with Tzara. In 1922 he returned to Romania and became a prominent member of the Bucharest avant-garde. He edited the periodical *Contimporanul* and organised the *Contimporanul* international avant-garde exhibition in 1924 alongside M. H. Maxy. In 1927 he completed his first architectural project in the modernist style in Bucharest, one of many buildings he created in the city. He fled Romania for Palestine in 1941, continuing his artistic work.

**George Löwendal** (b.1897, St. Petersburg – d. 1964, București) was a Russian-born painter and stage designer who settled in Romania after 1921. His most experimental work was conducted during his time as designer of the National Theatre in Cernăuți between 1926 and 1934, which at the time was located in the Romanian territories. He also collaborated with the Vilna Troupe and Iacob Sternberg in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Second World War, he continued to work and teach in Romania.

**Arthur Kolnik** (b.1890, Stanislawow – d.1972, Paris) was an artist and illustrator. He trained at the School of Fine Arts in Krakow under Jacek Malczewski and Józef Mehoffer. Between 1919 and 1931 he was based in Cernăuți, at this time located in Romania. During this period, he also travelled to New York where he exhibited his work and gained the support of Alfred Stieglitz. Subsequently he emigrated to Paris, which remained his base for the rest of his life, although he travelled extensively for work.

**Hans** or **János Mattis-Teutsch** (b.1884, Brașov – d.1960, Brașov) was a painter, sculptor and graphic artist. After training in Budapest, Munich and Paris, he settled in Brașov. He participated in exhibitions all around Europe and collaborated with many avant-garde magazines, including *MA*, *Der Sturm*, *Das Ziel* and *Punct*. He exhibited at the Academy of Decorative Arts and sold his applied art objects there. He published the volume *Kunstideologie. Stabilität und Aktivität im Kunstwerk* (Potsdam: Müller u.J. Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1931), outlining his theoretical standpoint.

**Sigismund Maur** (b.1894 – d.1965) was an artist and graphic designer. He was based in Germany and Romania, but few details about his life are known. Based on the Romanian interwar press, he appears to have had a prolific career as a designer of advertisements for Bucharest businesses. He was also frequently responsible for producing reproductions of artistic works to be included in print periodicals. He taught at the Academy of Decorative Arts.

**M. H.** or **Max Herman Maxy** (b.1895, Brăila – d.1971, Bucharest) was an artist, designer and museum director. He trained in Bucharest and then in Berlin, exhibiting at *Der Sturm* gallery and becoming a member of *Novembergruppe* in 1922–1923. On his return to Romania he curated the 1924 *Contimporanul* exhibition with Marcel Iancu and published the periodical *Integral* (1925–1928).

In 1926 he became involved with the Academy of Decorative Arts and subsequently took over its leadership from Andrei Vespremie. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he ran his own design business under the name Studio Maxy. During the period 1941–44, when Jewish professionals were excluded from Romanian state institutions, he contributed to the newly formed Jewish theatre and Jewish art school. From 1950 until his death he held the directorship of the Romanian National Art Museum, being especially instrumental for the creation of the Romanian modern art gallery.

**Mela** or **Ana Melania Maxy**, née **Iscovici**, changed to **Brun** (b.1893, Câmpina – d.1946, Bucharest) was an arts manager and salon host. She married M. H. Maxy in 1922 and accompanied him to Berlin where their daughter Liana was born in 1923. On returning to Bucharest, she collaborated with Andrei Vespremie and Heinrich Fischer-Galați to create the commercial section of the Academy of Decorative Arts, which she managed from 1926 to the Academy's closure in 1929. She hosted a weekly artistic salon in the Maxy household in Bucharest throughout the 1920s and 1930s, visited by the local avant-garde and by guests such as Constantin Brancusi and Joseph Buloff.

**Ion Minulescu** (b.1881, Bucharest – d.1944, Bucharest) was a writer, poet and government official. Best remembered as a symbolist poet, Minulescu was also a highly successful novelist. He published the symbolist magazines *Revista celorlalți* (1908) and *Insula* (1912). From the 1920s onwards he held many posts in the Romanian government, including Minister for the Arts (1922–1940) and director of the National Theatre in Bucharest (1926). He was a supporter and patron of the Romanian avant-garde and amassed a vast art collection that is currently on display in his memorial house museum in Bucharest.

**Sașa Pană** or **Alexandru Binder** (b.1902, Bucharest – d.1981, Bucharest) was a writer and memorialist. Trained as a military doctor, he chose to focus on literature instead and his first volume of poetry was published in 1926. He was the creator of the magazine *unu* (1928–1932) and alongside developed an imprint for publishing the work of other avant-garde writers. In 1973 he published *Născut în '02* (Born in '02), a 700-page memoir of his life amongst Bucharest's vanguard artists.

**Milița Petrașcu** or **Militza Pătrașcu** (b.1892, Chișinău – d.1976, Bucharest) was a sculptor. She trained in Moscow and Munich, subsequently joining the studios of Henri Matisse and Antoine Bourdelle in Paris. In 1919 she met Constantin Brancusi who became her mentor. From 1925 onwards she settled in Bucharest, joining the ranks of the avant-garde and exhibiting widely. In the 1930s, she became a highly sought-after portraitist.

**Stephan Roll** or **Gheorghe Dinu** (b.1904, Florina – d.1974, Bucharest) was a poet and journalist. Alongside Victor Brauner and Ilarie Voronca he published the avant-garde magazine *75HP*, and was a constant collaborator of vanguard publications, including *Punct*, *Integral*, and *unu*.

**Dida Solomon** or **Solomon-Callimachi** (b.1898 – d.1974, Bucharest) was an actor, artist and theatre producer. She was closely connected to the Bucharest avant-garde and participated in the 1924 *Contimporanul* exhibition, as well as publishing graphic works and poems in *Contimporanul* and *Punct*. The latter was edited by her husband **Scarlat Callimachi** (b.1896, Bucharest – d.1975, Bucharest), a writer, journalist and anti-fascist activist. Solomon's debut in 1922 as the titular character in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* at the National Theatre in Bucharest was a great success, but she subsequently struggled in her theatrical career due to her Jewish origins and political activism. In 1927, she created the experimental Caragiale Theatre in collaboration with members of the avant-garde such as Sandu Eliad, Marcel Ianu, Iacob Sternberg, and M. H. Maxy.

**Alexander or Alex Stein** (b. ?, Vilnius – d. 1940s, Soviet Union) was an actor and theatre director. Having joined the original Vilna Troupe in 1917, he travelled with them around Europe in the early 1920s. During the ensemble's time in Romania, he became its star actor and director after the departure of Joseph Buloff and the Kadison family. In 1930, he created his own branch of the Vilna Troupe which successfully toured Berlin, Vienna, and Prague until 1933.

**Iacob Sternberg or Jacob or Yankev Shternberg** (b. 1890, Lipcani – d. 1973, Moscow) was a poet, writer, and theatre professional. Based in Romania between 1913 and 1939, he shaped the Yiddish theatre scene in the country. In the 1920s he became artistic director of the Vilna Troupe and in 1930 created his own troupe, the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio. His most famous productions were modern reinterpretations of Yiddish literary classics, however he was equally interested in the potential of popular culture and revue theatre to raise awareness of social and political issues. He emigrated to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Second World War, continuing his career in both literature and theatre, but was sent to a labour camp in 1949 for five years.

**Ion Vinea or Ion Eugen Iovanaki** (b. 1895, Giurgiu – d. 1964, Bucharest) was a poet and editor of avant-garde publications. Together with Marcel Iancu and Tristan Tzara he created the short-lived publication *Simbolul* (1912). Subsequently trained as a lawyer, he never practiced, choosing to become a poet instead. He was the editor of the long-running periodical *Contimporanul* (1922–1932), which connected the Bucharest avant-garde to the vast network of European vanguard print culture.

**Ilarie Voronca or Eduard Marcus** (b. 1903, Brăila – d. 1946, Paris) was a poet and collaborator of the avant-garde. He published his work in the magazines *Contimporanul*, *Integral* and *Punct*. In 1924, together with Victor Brauner and Stephan Roll, he published the single-issue publication *75HP*, a landmark for Bucharest's avant-garde movement. He published his poetry in France from the mid-1920s onwards, collaborating with artists such as Robert Delaunay who illustrated his works. In 1933 he relocated to Paris and continued to publish prolifically.

**Andrei Vespremie or Andor Veszprémi** (b. 1898, Covasna – d. 1943/4, Kaiserwald) was a designer and pedagogue. Trained at the Schule Reimann in Berlin (1920–1922), he utilised his experience with German design education to open the Academy of Decorative Arts (1924–1929) in Bucharest under the financial patronage of Heinrich Fischer-Galați. The Academy was the first institution in Bucharest to offer a modern design education, with classes in both making and designing objects. In 1927, Vespremie left Bucharest for Riga, where he continued to teach, design and exhibit his work. In 1934 he became a Latvian citizen. During the Second World War, he was held in the Riga Ghetto and subsequently moved to the Kaiserwald concentration camp where he was murdered.

**Abraham Leib or A. L. Zissu** (b. 1888, Piatra Neamț – d. 1956, Tel Aviv) was a writer, industrialist and Zionist activist. He used his personal wealth, which came from the sugar industry, to fund and run a number of publications with Zionist agendas. He was also a frequent collaborator of avant-garde and cultural publications of the 1910s and 1920s and published several works of fiction, including his 1926 novel *Spovedania unui candelabru* (Confession of a Candelabrum) first issued under the *Integral* imprint and then translated into French by Benjamin Fondane. He was a supporter and patron of the Bucharest avant-garde, and in the late 1920s he also commissioned architect Michael Rachlis to build him a modernist mansion in Berlin. During the communist period he was repeatedly arrested and jailed, until being allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1956, but died a few weeks later.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: Brochure of the Academy of Decorative Arts, 1924 (English translation)

Source: Latvia State Historical Archives, f. 1623, inv. 1, file 23144.

### Recto

The timetable as at 1 November 1924:

Monday: Metalwork

Tuesday: Metalwork, Batik, Ivorywork, Drawing from life

Wednesday: Metalwork, Drawing and painting, Graphic exercises (ornament), Graphic exercises (lettering)

Thursday: Bookbinding

Friday: Bookbinding, Batik, Drawing from life

Saturday: Bookbinding

Additions to the programme. The following courses have also been convened:

Decorative sculpture—the sculptor Medrea

Sculpture and composition—Mrs. M. Petrașcu

Graphic exercises (ornament, artistic lettering)—Andrei Vespremie

Carpets—Mrs. Jeanette Scăueru-Teclu

Based on further students registering, additional courses may begin to run.

Eight bursaries offered by the Bibliofila Society and Mr. A. C.-B. will be made available to poor but gifted students.

### Verso

Under the patronage of Mrs. Isabella Sadoveanu, Director of the “Elena Doamna” School for Girls and under the direction of: Mrs. S. Șerbănescu-Șăineanu, teacher at the “Regina Maria” High School, Mr. A. Vespremie, Director of the Academy of Decorative Arts, and with the support of: Mrs. M. Petrașcu, sculptor; Mrs. Harriet Follender, painter; Mrs. Jeanette Scăueru-Teclu; Mr. A. R. Pawlovitz, former teacher at the Academy of Decorative Arts in Vienna; and C. Jankowski, teacher at the Academy of Decorative Arts, will be open as of 1 November:

The Classes for Children and Young People, in drawing, painting, modelling, artistic work in pasteboard, metaloplastics, ceramics, leather, silhouette, artistic toys, composition etc.

Under the caring supervision of these artists, children will learn to create their own toys, and will be taught the decorative arts in an easy and pleasant manner, which will develop their taste and understanding for beauty. During the classes, once the artists have become familiar with the students, each child will be treated as an individual, their personal aptitudes will be cultivated, and they will be guided towards the craft in which they can excel. The goal is to prepare each child thoroughly, so that they may later join a suitable adult class at the Academy.

Children from 6 years of age may be enrolled. Children will be taught in similar age groups. The length of the courses is flexible.

The committee for supervision of the children: Mrs. Clara Dan, Mrs. Victoria Vespremie.

## APPENDIX B: Brochure of the Academy of Decorative Arts, 1926 (English translation)

Source: Latvia State Historical Archives, f. 1623, inv. 1, file 23144.

### Exhibition catalogue

The exhibition includes:

After the designs of Mr A. Vespremie:

Metal objects, made in the workshops of the Academy, under the supervision of master B.

Cofariu

Bound books, master E. Bonyhay

Lamps, ivory objects, etc.

After the designs of painter M. H. Maxy:

Modern boudoir furniture, made by master carpenter M. Dumitrescu

Cushions, made by master Didina Ștefănescu

Batik, made by Mrs. A. Vespremie.

Modern lace, by Dagobert Peche.

Modern ceramics, by M. Marigo-Brăila.

Crystal, from the Primavera atelier in Paris.

Leatherwork, by Mrs. Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu.

Modern furniture for the bedroom and drawing room, after the designs of Mr. H. Mandel.

Graphic arts: lithographs, etchings, woodcuts, monotypes by J. Al. Steriadi, C. Cuțescu-Storck, M.

Manolescu-Bruteanu, L. Bălăcescu-Demetriade, S. Maur, and others.

Paintings, sculptures, drawings and decorative arts objects by: Nina Arbore, L. Bălăcescu-

Demetriade, Victor Brauner, architect W. Beck, E. (sic) Cuțescu-Storck, Olga Greceanu, M. H.

Maxy, Medrea, Corneliu Mihăilescu (sic), Sirova Medrea, S. Maur, architect Nămescu, N.

Pfeiffer, Merica Râmniceanu, Jean Al. Steriadi, Mattis Teutsch, A. Vespremie, and others.

Exhibition displays after the designs of painter M. H. Maxy.

### Patrons of the Academy

Directors: H. Fischer-Galați; C. Cuțescu-Storck, Professor of Decorative Arts at the School of Fine Arts; Jean Al. Steriadi, painter, Director of Kalinderu Museum.

Patrons: Artistide Blank; Ion Minulescu, General Director of Arts; Gh. Murnu, university professor, member of the Romanian Academy; Ion Pillat, Member of Parliament, writer; Mrs. Isabella

Sadoveanu; Gr. Trancu-Iași, Minister for Labour; Alex. Tzigara-Samurcaș, university professor;

Jean Vasilescu-Valjean; Romulus Voinescu, Minister for State Security.

Acting director: Andrei Vespremie.

## Course catalogue

The Academy of Decorative Arts, expanded and reorganised, has moved its premises to Str. Ion Câmpineanu 17 and has begun its third year of activity on 1 October 1926, offering the following courses for everyone from beginners to advanced learners.

1. The special class for metalwork  
Making artistic objects of a practical and decorative nature, from brass, iron or precious metals.  
Instructor: A. Vespremie, Workshop master: B. Cofariu.
2. The special class for artistic binding  
Binding in vellum, leather, cloth and decorative paper. Works in pasteboard etc. Hand-applied gold decoration. Special classes for advanced students and craftsmen. Instructor: A. Vespremie, Workshop master: E. Bonyhay.
3. The class for artistic leatherwork  
Instructor: Mrs. Stella Şerbănescu-Şăineanu.
4. The class for carpets  
Instructor: Mrs. Scaeru-Teclu (sic).
5. The class for batik and painted textiles  
Instructor: Mrs. V. Vespremie.
6. The special class for graphic arts
  - a) lithography. Instructor: Jean Al. Steriadi.
  - b) etching. Instructor: Canisius.
  - c) woodcut. Instructor: Mrs. M. Manolescu-Bruteanu.
  - d) print-making with own tools. Instructor: S. Maur.
7. The class for graphic exercises  
Modern ornamenting and artistic lettering. Instructor: A. Vespremie.
8. The special class for poster and advertising graphics  
Instructor: S. Maur.
9. Book illustration  
Instructors: Gh. Murnu, Ioan Al. Popa.
10. The special class for drawing and painting  
Portrait, life drawing, still-life. Instructors: Marcel Iancu, Fr. Şirato.
11. The class for decorative painting and composition  
Instructor: C. Cuţescu-Storck, Professor at the School of Fine Arts.
12. The class for sculpture  
Modelling from nature and ornamental work. Instructor: Medrea, sculptor.
13. Woodcarving  
Instructor: G. Mănescu.
14. The class for ivorywork  
Modelling, relief, and jewellery. Instructor: A. Vespremie.
15. Religious art  
Church painting and religious objects. Instructor: M. Gheorghiu.
16. The architecture of interior design  
Projects for modern furniture and decorating the interior. Instructors-architects: M. Iancu, W. Beck.
17. Lectures on art history and artistic styles.  
Instructor: Gh. Murnu, university professor, member of the Romanian Academy.

## 18. Special classes for children and young people

Under the supervision of Mrs. S. Șerbănescu-Șăineanu and Mr. A. Vespremie. Drawing, painting, modelling, artistic work in pasteboard, metaloplastics, ceramics, leather, silhouette, artistic toys, composition etc.

**“The permanent exhibition of the Academy of Decorative Arts,” text attributed to M. H. Maxy**

It has been two years since the Academy of Decorative Arts, founded by a group of artists and dilettantes, started its activity. A large number of students—far exceeding our expectations—have gathered around the initiators and have collaborated zealously to reach the Academy’s goals, namely: to create and produce decorative arts objects that will replace the quantities still filling shop windows under the label “artistic,” and at the same time to prevent the majority of interiors from becoming true *musées des horreures*.

Last year in Paris the great artistic event that was the Exhibition of Decorative Arts took place, where all peoples showed how they understand the application of new artistic trends to everyday objects of necessity, from the saltcellar and the teapot to drawing room furniture, from cushions and curtains to carpets and wallpaper for the bedroom.

Spectators from the whole world understood, from the work and efforts of the artists who made this enormous exhibition, that the man of our time, who has created a new art, also feels the need for a new architecture, a new interior, new household goods and even new decorations.

Romania was not present at the Paris Exhibition. Those responsible for this decision were convinced that other than the simple and instinctive art of the Romanian peasant (such as their carpets, textiles, work tools, clothing, wooden furniture, dowries) we could have nothing new or interesting to show, as if our urban dwellers do not build their homes, decorate their interiors or clothe their bodies.

Those of our representatives responsible for this decision have ignored and continue to ignore in their official policies urbanism and the decorative arts.

Furthermore, the primitive and spontaneous art of the peasant has not been understood by those craftsmen who act more like merchants or those dilettantes who lack artistry, with their wares in “pink and blue” lacquer, their pyrography imitations garnished with traces of bronze, which represent neither the healthy primitive influence of the peasant nor the practical-architectonic tendencies of our time.

This state of affairs cannot continue.

In moments of financial crisis, when the economy plays the most important role, decorative artists have understood that their outputs must take one thing into account: obtain maximum practical and aesthetic results with minimum means and materials.

For the layperson interested in this, we lacked a guide.

The Academy of Decorative Arts aims to fill this role.

In its permanent and temporary exhibitions, the general public will be able to find a new harmony for the home, a harmony that stems from a thoughtfully constructed assemblage that includes the colour of the walls, the shape of the lamps, the style of the furniture, the design of the carpet and the

patterns on cushions, the form of the flower vases and the craftsmanship of items for the dinner table or the toilette, the binding of the books in the library, the folder on the desk, the child's toy, or the bibelot, the adult's toy. Here, they will find advice and guidance, they will find the most suitable gift, one that is not only an obligation fulfilled, but an object that reflects the personality of the receiver and even that of the giver.

As well as the objects on display, which have been designed for the general public, the artists and the students of the Academy are available for personalised plans and designs. As in other eras of artistic flowering, when the craftsman was not a mechanical producer but an artistic maker, both the artisan who follows the Academy's classes and its artists-instructors wish to offer the art-lover and the aesthete the opportunity of finding or commissioning items that correspond to their personalities and that will be hard to find in the window displays of shops and the banal stacks of standardised objects.

From the regular encounter of the artists-instructors of the Academy of Decorative Arts and the interested public, from this continuous contact and permanent transformation, new tastes and trends will be born. From such developments, brought forth by the results obtained by us—from the enhancement of our exteriors and interiors and the objects created for everyday needs—consistent with the atmosphere of our times and mirroring the soul of our country and its current generation, a new artistic expression for Romanian decorative arts will materialise.

## **APPENDIX C: Document setting out the terms of the agreement between Mela Brun-Maxy, Andrei Vespremie, and Heinrich Fischer-Galați, September 1926 (English translation)**

Source: Private collection.

Bucharest, 1 September 1926

To Mrs. A. M. Maxy

Bucharest, Calea Victoriei, nr. [blank]

The present document acts as an agreement, until such a date that a more detailed document will be drawn up, between the undersigned Andrei Vespremie and H. Fischer-Galați on one side, and Mrs. [Maxy] on the other, confirming that as of today the below comes into force and is valid for ten years [from the present date]:

A new section for "Permanent Exhibitions" is heretofore added to the Academy of Decorative Arts established by Andrei Vespremie and H. Fischer-Galați. This section will be responsible for the display and sale of products made within the Academy of Decorative Arts, and all other decorative arts objects that fit within the scope of the Academy, such as furniture, metalwork, crystal, ceramics, textiles and embroideries, batik, leatherwork, bookbinding, works on paper, rare books, painting and sculpture etc. etc.

The choice of objects that will be ordered, bought, or displayed will be decided between Mrs. Maxy and Mr. Vespremie. In case of disagreement, Mr. Fischer-Galați will decide.



The exhibitions section has exclusive right of sale for the products of the Academy, which may not be sold elsewhere. The exception is constituted by the works of Mr. Vespremie for his own personal exhibition which will take place at most once a year.

The Academy provides the exhibitions section with two rooms and the shared vestibule near building A of the apartment it occupies within the buildings at Str. Câmpineanu 17, or an equivalent space in case of relocation with a value of a quarter of the annual rent of the entire apartment which up to 26 October of the current year amounts to 15,000 lei, and from that date forward according to the contract signed with Mrs. Piteșteanu 87,500 lei, representing a quarter of 350,000 lei.

This rental amount is advanced by the Academy and will be repaid from the revenues of the exhibitions section. The Academy also advances the necessary amount for running expenses such as lighting, heating, service charges, taxes, telephone costs, and for the preparation of the spaces for this purpose.

Likewise, the Academy will advance the necessary amounts to advertise for three months in newspapers and magazines that will be agreed upon by the three signatories, and through posters, up to the sum of 36,000 lei.

Mrs. Maxy brings a capital of 100,000 lei which will serve to supply the exhibitions section with items for sale and to provide the Academy with materials for the making of items commissioned by the exhibitions section. This amount will be made gradually available as required until 15 November of the current year at the latest.

The Academy provides the new section with the objects made or commissioned for prices that are to be agreed between the parties and as the items begin to sell the exhibitions section will pay the Academy on the first and fifteenth day of every month the amounts due according to the invoices drawn up.

The profits that result, that is to say the difference between the total sales made and the commissions executed or between the revenues of the exhibitions section and its expenses, be they materials, man-hours or general expenses, shall be divided equally (50% each) between the Academy and Mrs. Maxy. Such profits will be added to the working capital, or used for purchases and preparing the exhibition space, until the parties will jointly consent to sharing out the profits. When such profits reach the sum invested by Mrs. Maxy plus the amounts advanced by the Academy, then any of the parties can ask for the surplus to be divided out.

In case of liquidation, revenues will be equally split as discussed, and any losses will be covered by the parties in equal proportion to the amounts invested.

In case of disagreement between the parties, it is hereby agreed that a mediation be made by two chosen individuals, one chosen by Mrs. Maxy and the other chosen by Mr. Vespremie or Mr. Fischer-Galați. In case of further disagreement, the chosen mediators will select a third person whose decision will be final as hereby agreed by both parties.

In case of dissolution of the Academy for whatever reason, and without it being maintained by the current parties under another designation, the current agreement will be liquidated.

The directorship of the exhibitions section belongs to Mrs. Maxy, who will take on the duties of a good administrator, presenting the section's activities on the first and fifteenth day of each month, and keeping records of all the operations made in the common interest.

With kind regards,  
H. Fischer-Galați and A. Vespremie

Note 1: We ask that you confirm receipt and agreement of the present document. At the same time, we are amenable to discussing and including your suggestions in case of any omissions.

Note 2: Mrs. Maxy has the right to withdraw from this agreement three months before the current contract expires and the lease for the exhibition space is renewed (the current one expiring on the feast day of St Dimitrie 1928), by giving notice through recommended letter. Mrs. Maxy must however agree not to participate directly or indirectly in another similar venture for the period of one year.

## **APPENDIX D: Prospectus for the Tragedy and Comedy ensemble, 1925, text attributed to Iacob Sternberg (English translation).**

Source: Romanian National Archives, fond 652 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 13/ 1925.

[...]

The theatrical productions of the Vilna Troupe have revealed to us an unexpected path, through the echoes they have awoken in the spectators who resonated with them: it is possible to offer simultaneously to the masses and to the intelligentsia a cultural institution that meets their preferences without succumbing at all to vulgar instincts.

We are ready not only to platonically accept this idea, but to realise it through practical means. The support given with some reluctance to the Vilna Troupe over the past two years that they have spent here has proven insufficient. A cultural institution must find a permanent place; not be a nomad's tent that is put up and taken down according to circumstance. We therefore need: a people's theatre guided, supported, led by the Jewish society itself through its most eloquent personalities; we need an organisation able to undertake the tasks of artistic and administrative leadership.

This is the origin of the society:

TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

Its programme?

It is in fact the collective instinct that guides our path. Our society has come up to the surface like an island rising from the ferment of the ocean.

Although national in expression, we are universal in sense.

Therefore, over the political aspersions of the day, we represent the connecting bridge between two populations that have different spirits but thanks to their creative essence can live together in an ideal equilibrium.

Our society proposes not only to support an itinerant ensemble, but to build our own venue.

The need is clear and evident for the Jewish population. As long as a theatre building is lacking, there remains a question mark raised by political, social, and ethical matters. But above the impetus

of the present, our artistic conscience dictates to us a certain architectonic. Art must be situated in space in order to flourish.

However, a theatre building being only the ark in which the sacred scrolls are deposited—as it requires time and effort—we have begun by creating a theatre of pure spiritual value. We have kept in the country the Vilna Troupe's array of subtle artists, which we have refreshed and will refresh with new creative forces, with affinities to and in the spirit of the modern Jewish genius. We think of inspirations such as: the director David Herman; the great actors Barattoff, Morewski, Granach, and other glories of the Jewish scene whom we will endeavour to bring amongst us.

The current ensemble is composed of Mmes. Ana Bras, Luba Kadison, Judith Lares, Noemi Natan, Miriam Orleska, Jochevet Weislitz, etc. and Messrs. Joseph Buloff, Joseph Kamen, Samuel Iris, Simon Natan, Alexe Stein, Henry Tarlo, Jacob Weislitz, Jehuda Ehrenkrantz, Samuel Scheftel, Shalom Schonbaum, Simi Weinstock, etc.

The administrative and artistic directorship has been given to Messrs. Mordechai Mazo and Iacob Sternberg.

An artistic committee will select the repertoire, and their ideal will be to offer performances of pure art: the stage turned into a pulpit.

The two extreme poles of our artistic belief are classicism and modernism. We consider Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz most representative for Jewish dramaturgy and we will experiment with contemporary Yiddish works that follow this evolving trail of collective comedies and mysteries started by great precursors; and within the universal repertoire we will be guided by Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Goethe.

It will be an avant-garde theatre, a theatre of synthesis, which will aim to imbue acting, direction and text with the rhythm of contemporary innovation. There will be no tasteless compromise, nor any compromise in bad taste.

[...]

We will call upon all the bright forces and intelligence of this country to support us in counsel and deed.

Tragedy and Comedy, although an avant-garde theatre, does not wish to be a clique. And most of all does not wish to be only a theatre for the capital; the goal is to be a theatre for the whole country. Therefore, we will strive to connect all the provinces with the cerebral centre not only through touring, which merely represents a sort of excursion, but through a perpetual exchange of values.

We have gathered around us until now a group of painters-decorators like Marcel Iancu, M. H. Maxy, Arthur Kolnik, Z. Rubin, the Baron Löwendal etc. We will likewise gather the modern Jewish composers from the country and from abroad, and in general all the intelligentsia of good taste.

The curtain of our theatre is made after the sketches of the famous painter-decorator Ernst Stern; we are also in possession of a great stock of decorations and theatrical supplies that we will continue to add to.

For our programme to become a reality we call for the intelligentsia to collaborate with us and the masses to give us their support.

The Tragedy and Comedy Society

## APPENDIX E: Prospectus for the Bukarester Idishe Theater Studio (BITS), 1930, text attributed to Iacob Sternberg (English translation)

Source: Romanian National Archives, fond 817 Direcția Generală a Artelor, file 4/ 1930.

[...]

The theatrical productions of the Jewish art troupes have revealed to us a truth and a path: that it is possible to offer simultaneously to the masses and to the intelligentsia a cultural institution that meets their preferences without succumbing at all to vulgar instincts.

The first points of reference for the introduction of a pure theatrical concept in the Jewish theatre in Romania were the revues of Messrs. Sternberg and Botoshansky; which occurred during a period when even the most talented and dynamic actors such as Leopold Kanner, Goldenberg, Bergher, Segalescu could not rid themselves of the tenebrous atmosphere typical of the post-Goldfaden period.

Once the pioneers of Jewish theatre in Romania deployed the slogans of modern art, there followed the live and illustrative demonstrations of the Fitzjohn and Baratoff troupes and the Vilna ensemble.

At the same time as these artistic manifestations, which brought to us the echo of a European inspiration, an appropriate public was also formed.

And the exponents of such a public are represented by the societies that were formed such as Our Theatre, The Friends of Jewish Theatre, and Tragedy and Comedy, societies that had as aim the creation of a permanent Jewish theatre in this country.

Here, we must emphasise the fact that not only did we retain the Vilna Troupe here for several years (which at the start nourished us with its own repertoire and style), but we also succeeded in integrating it within the rhythm of our own artistic movements.

The contribution of our artists, such as Iacob Sternberg's production of Osip Dymov's *The Singer of His Sorrow*, or his staging of *Marriage*, one of the most daring experiments in modern theatre direction that occurred here, and his continuous collaboration with the Vilna Troupe, as well as the decorative creations of the painters Maxy, Kolnik, etc. were not only a local chapter in the achievements of this ensemble, but a defining moment for its subsequent evolution: a new artistic content that they are now successfully presenting in the most important Jewish cultural centres in Poland.

"The second overwhelming production I have seen in Poland. This and nothing less: the first, the Habima troupe's *Dybbuk* and the second, *The Singer* produced by Sternberg and the Vilna Troupe. A masterpiece of the 1924–1925 season in Romania. A landmark in the history of Jewish modern theatre." M. Bordersohn, *Neuer Volksblatt*, Łódź.

Quotes such as this from Jewish theatre critics abroad establish Romania not only as "the cradle of Jewish theatre" (as it has been considered until now) but also as a country with creative possibilities capable of bringing an original contribution.

These are the circumstances that surround the creation of our society: JÜDISCHE VOLKSBÜHNE (The Jewish People's Theatre).

Our programme:

To resume and further the interrupted thread of the experiments of the past few years, in order to create a permanent Jewish art theatre in Romania.

If in the past we addressed only a limited social category—that which of its own accord offered its contribution to the realisation of some extraordinary productions—today we call upon all social classes.

Taking as our example the popular theatre movements of Germany and Czechoslovakia we attempt to gather the masses around us, offering everyone the possibility of becoming members of our society.

Aside from the larger donations given by private patrons or institutions, the financial base of our society will remain the required monthly subscription given by our members.

The idea we are proposing deserves to become a mass movement.

The Vilna Troupe, which became a significant cultural factor not only for the Jewish community but also for the Romanian society, proves that modern Jewish art is at present one of the strongest weapons for the Jewish masses in their struggle for affirmation.

Although national in expression, we are universal in sense.

Over the political aspersions of the day, we represent the connecting bridge between two populations, the Jewish one and the Romanian one, who embody two different spirits and who, thanks to their creative essence, can live together in an ideal equilibrium.

But art must be situated in space in order to flourish. Our society proposes to build our own venue.

However, a theatre building being only the ark in which the sacred scrolls are deposited—as it requires time and effort—we have begun by creating a theatre of pure spiritual value.

We have organised the Bukarester Judische Theater Studio that, as well as representing a hothouse for the young local artistic elements, must also be from the very beginning a theatre that produces shows.

As everywhere around us, we have chosen a youthful and flexible body of actors. Instead of professional routine creative ardour, idealism, extasy: the stage turned into a pulpit.

The leadership of the Studio, which will soon inaugurate its first season with a grandiose production, has been entrusted to Mr. Jacob Sternberg.

We have gathered around us the most notable poets, painters and musicians in this country.

The Studio will soon publish its artistic manifesto and will announce its repertoire.

For our programme to become a reality we call for the intelligentsia and the masses to collaborate with us and to give us all their support.

The Jewish People's Theatre Society

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