

One artist on the seashore – The ION JALEA Museum

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Abstract: *Located on the seashore, near the Casino boardwalk of Constanta, the ION JALEA MUSEUM is one of the few cultural edifices in our country, exclusively dedicated to sculpture. Ion Jalea was born on May 19, 1887 in Casimcea, Tulcea; his bond with the Dobrudjan lands is proven not only by his cultural legacy, but also by a series of small portraits or sculptures, in which the people's features, traditional dress or trades materialize in genuine anthropological studies. Carved from all sorts of materials like: plaster, bronze, stone or marble, his theme cycles include allegorical, religious or mythological, war or work scenes, nudes, portraits, peasant characters, culminating with his monumental works, all of them involving his own trademark that rambles anything simple or hazardous favouring a clear, classicized shape.*

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Located on the seashore, near the Casino boardwalk of Constanta, the *ION JALEA MUSEUM* is one of the few cultural edifices in our country, exclusively dedicated to sculpture. The house belonged to Constantin Pariano, Prefect of Constanta and was designed in national (Neo-Romanian) style by the architect Victor Stephanescu, after the Great War. The building became a museum in 1968, when the sculptor initially donated the house to the city of Constanta. Subsequently, in 1984, when the collection was completed with several other sculptures donated by the family of the artist, it reached a total of 227 works.

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His native land, as well as the memories of his first artistic triumphs made him remain attached to his native land for the rest of his life, as he would himself declare: *My donation to the City of Constanta is the expression of my feelings of love and gratitude to the Dobrudjan land where I was born, in memory of the places which enchanted my childhood and youth. Here in Constanta, during my school years, I have discovered the beauties of the sea and its coasts and also here my drawing teacher, Dimitrie Hârlescu had urged me to embrace art for the first time....It was through him that artists were discovering Dobrudja and it is well known what this age-old land of the sun has meant for the generation of artists between the two world wars....The Modern Art Museum (of Constanta) also retains many of the works of those who lived and created in the area of Constanta. Thus, my collection aims to represent me among them in an art happening dedicated to the people of this place.*

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Although born in a modest family, the sculptor is naturally inclined towards study and is remarked and supported by several contemporary personalities. Thus, as scholarship holder of the *Mircea cel Batran* Middle School for Boys, he was appreciated by the said Art teacher Dimitrie Harlescu, himself a gifted painter and educator, who discovered his talent and directed him towards a career in the field. He continued his studies in Bucharest with the most important sculptures of the time: Dimitrie Paciurea and Frederik Storck and later on he would complete his artistic training in Paris, at the Julian Academy, in the workshop of Antoine Bourdelle, whose influences, next to those belonging to Rodin, can be noticed especially in his works inspired by mythology.

Perhaps the most defining biographical detail is that he joined the army at 30 years old and lost his left arm after one year on the frontline. It might have been his intense love for sculpture and tenacity proven by the most gifted fellows, that had shaped most of his major works in the following years.

The sculptor's efforts and hard work paid off and he was awarded the Grand Prize of the International Exhibitions of Paris and Barcelona, the National Prize for Sculpture (1941), the State Prize (1957) and People's Artist, that same year. In 1956 he became acting Chairman and since 1968, Honorary Chairman of the Union of Fine Artists of Romania and also since 1963 a member of the Romanian Academy.

Carved from all sorts of materials like: plaster, bronze, stone or marble, his theme cycles include allegorical, religious or mythological, war or work scenes, nudes, portraits, peasant characters, culminating with his monumental works, all of them involving his own trademark that rambles anything simple or hazardous favoring a clear, classicized shape. Even though the artist has finite works in most of his sculpture techniques, he is a vocation shaper, worthy of his renowned teachers and his preference for this form of expression is declared by himself in an address to the Romanian Academy: „*There is nothing like a work of art straight out of the hands of an artist, bearing his marks and fingerprints as an unmimickable signature*”. His sculpture, fortunately, blends the picturality of the shaped surface (the lesson of Paciurea and Rodin) with a rigorous spatial formation, dubbed by a careful leaning towards the harmony and balance of shapes, so specific to Bourdelle.

Among his works based on mythology, we mention *Hercule's Fight With the Centaurus* situated in Herăstrău Park, Bucharest (its monumental plaster version is displayed in our museum), *Pegassus*, *Centaurus*, *Centauress*, *Icarus*, *Prometheus* or *Lucifer*. Especially here, in this register, Ion Jalea claims his belonging to a strong set of Classical values, in which the hero has an ethical mission, although he is many times defeated by circumstances, he shows a tenacity which asserts him as standard. Could this be somewhat also a reference to his destiny? What is certain is that mainly here, within his expressive shaping and the daring spatial pieces, where we notice best the lesson of the two French sculptors who have decisively influenced XXth century art.

The war theme is a delicate one, as the artist's frontline experience is one of the most traumatic experiences people can go through in life. The pathos and movement of characters convey a dynamic, specific to moments of utmost tension, *Monument of Infantry*, *Fallen Horse* or *Soldier Walking*, being an example in this sense. Also, there is information in the monography of Petru Comarnescu of 1963, according to which Ion Jalea would have carved certain works under shell fire, calling them *frontline sketches*, using dingle clay and burning it in Casin or Iasi.

Much like the painter Grigorescu in 1877, the artist records movement in a fast sketch, expressing the powerful emotion of the moment, through the uncut and pictorial shaping when we realize how fragile life is. In fact, the frontline experience would reunite the student Ion Jalea and teacher Dimitrie Harlescu, with some of the important artists of the time: Stefan Dimitrescu, Oscar Han, Cornel Medrea, Camil Ressu, all reunited by the *Order Number 9400 of June 23, 1917 of the General Staff*. By virtue of this order a number of 35 artists who were to capture the bravery exploits of the Romanian military were also mobilized. Once the war was over, this friendly reunion which is joined later on by Nicolae Tonitza and Dimitrie Paciurea (another teacher of the sculptor), was branded a „fraternization” of artists. It would become later on the prestigious group *Arta Romana* (The Romanian Art), joined further by artists like Brancusi, Pallady, Sirato or Iser.

This artistic association that would generate the future *Grupul celor patru* (The Group of Four), was one of the most important of this kind and its echoes can still be traced up to this day. Nicolae Tonitza, one of the founders, has summed up best the aspirations of this “battalion of revolutionaries”, who opposed the obsolete taste imposed by *Tinerimea Artistica* (The Artistic Youth) or the Official Salons: *Their ideal: Art. Their Weapon: Sincerity. Their Tradition: Nature. Their Enemy: Musty Artificiality*.

In an atmosphere of pure emulation, his plastic quests were not restricted merely to historic or mythological themes and his works followed thematic cycles specific to the contemporary artists.

The series of religious works, completed mainly in the first creation period includes large-scale ronde-bosse sculptures but also smaller reliefs. Just like monoliths, the statues of *Saints Peter and Paul*, made of fixed blocks, with obvious monumental qualities, represent the most important Christian Apostles. On the other hand, in the formation of the small bas-reliefs, *John the Evangelist, Icon or Martyr*, we feel the influence of a vein reminiscent of the Byzantine Hierarchy. A work which also captures the attention is *The Madonna Head*, a bronze portrait, combining the veracity of study with a simplification of volumes, specific to modern art.

The connection to the ancient statuary and an invigorating vision of the human body give the sculptor the opportunity for works inspired by the feminine beauty within the cycle of draped nudes and torsos. Shaped carefully, these bodies borrow some of the grace and harmony of Greek representations. Reminiscent of *Menada* by Scopas, *Draped Torso* or *Victory*, they can be definitely exhibited next to the most successful Romanian sculptures. In fact, the author himself emphasized this attachment to Greek art through a series of works: *Nude – Search in Ancient Times*. Either we are facing nude torso fragments or clothing, the light glides on them, more revealing than covering the glorious body, thus vibrating the surface and accentuating its dynamics.

Usually, small in size, the work scenes depict peasants in various positions and they provide the extent of love which Jalea has for plain and simple folk, among whom he himself comes from. The titles of those works are eloquent: *Milkwomen, Hoers, Women Sowing, People Carrying Bags*. The string of figures repeating a rhythm of hard work, are rather symbols than certain persons. With portraits barely sketched and bodies crushed under the burden of labor, they represent a fragment of the Dobrujan people’s harsh life. .

The series of portraits introduces the beholder into a stylistically complex and diversely morphological universe. Either, this is about the figures of peasant women, with

features specific to the geographical realm, as they appear in *A Girl's Portrait*, or this is about a certain introspection, as we observe in his *Self-Portrait*, or features vaguely appearing as in a remembrance, in the portrait of *Mother*, the preoccupation for study and the lack of any artificial idealization, marks the artistic creed of an artist who knows his craft well. Of course, from the gallery of his portraits a series of contemporary or historical personalities, such as: *Decebal*, *Mircea cel Bătrân* (Mircea the Elder), *The Portrait of the Writer Liviu Rebreanu*, *The Portrait of the Painter Theodor Aman*, etc.

Gifted with a wide vision for shape and space, as well as with a special appetite for the human body, Ion Jalea left behind a series of monumental sculptures, such as: *Hercule's Fight With the Centaurus* (unveiled in 1925 in Herăstrău Park), *Spiru Haret* (1935), *George Enescu* (1971) in Bucharest and *Mircea cel Bătrân* (1972) in Tulcea, the recently relocated sculptural ensemble represented by *Queen Carmen Sylva and The Harp Muse*, in the proximity of the museum bearing his name, as well as *Resting Archer* (1926), one of his defining works.

The Ion Jalea Museum has a special quality that of carrying us through the entire sculptor's creation phases, through the favorite themes, thus, shaping an exceptional artistic destiny.

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