

**Abstract.** A series of paintings made by Octav Băncilă in the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> c. are related to contemporary tragic events in Romanian history: the rebellion of peasants (1907).

**Key words:** romanian art; militant art; historical subjects; 1907.

Octav Băncilă was trained in Jassy School of Fine Arts between 1887-1893 and further in Munich Akademie der Bildende Künste with some interruptions between 1894-1898 following the habitual course for the pupils of Jassy School of Fine Arts. After finishing his artistic education the artist travelled in France and Italy and thereafter he had enlisted to military service.

The Schools of Fine Arts in Jassy and Bucharest have been established in the 1860s by former pupils of art academies in Munich and Paris. In short, at the return in the country, Gheorghe Panaiteanu-Bardasare and Theodor Aman have implemented similar curricula in the institutions they have funded. As a general rule, the students were guided to assimilate gradually the principles of rendering the human body in rest or movement. The practice included the study on Antique but also the study on living models observed in a range of attitudes and expressions, simulations to be integrated in whatever narrative context. Thus, the art practiced ineluctably to a certain standardization of poses, in response to the specific requests of the compositions. Each phase of the artistic education was made in order to achieve the final mastery that is the ability of making impressive historical, mythological and religious compositions. In Munich Băncilă attended the classes of Nikolaos Gysis (Gysis) and Franz von Lenbach.

The academy privileged a hierarchy of genres, placing at the highest level the painting of history with its heroes and outstanding figures of past, mythological scenes and religious subjects and last but

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## REFLECTED HISTORY. OCTAV BĂNCILĂ'S PAINTINGS ON 1907 PEASANTS' REBELLION

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not least, the portrait. All these have a mnemonic dimension, implying a certain degree of taste of archaeology and historical research related to facts and characters.

In his earliest works Băncilă kept staying in a secure zone: the portrait. Among these paintings of youth are *Nostalgia* (1891), *Mrs. Ulrich* (around 1900), and the portrait of the actress *Athena Georgescu* (1899). All three works are conventional effigies painted in the manner apprenticed at school: first of them it's a genre portrait representing a young peasant woman holding a pot, represented *à l'antique*, in a resting pose, meanwhile the other two are contemporary images in common representational formulas. Still, before the judging this youth artistic production we have to bring into discussion a group of paintings realised at almost same period of time: a few feminine portraits and two self-portraits as well. This small group of works enlarges the palette of subjects, revealing artist's particular interest for the *livresque* and artificial symbolist imagery. The symbolist phase was transitory; it ceased quite abruptly after painter's return at home despite there were few similar attempts years afterwards.

His turn back to Romania marks a change not only in his artistic views but

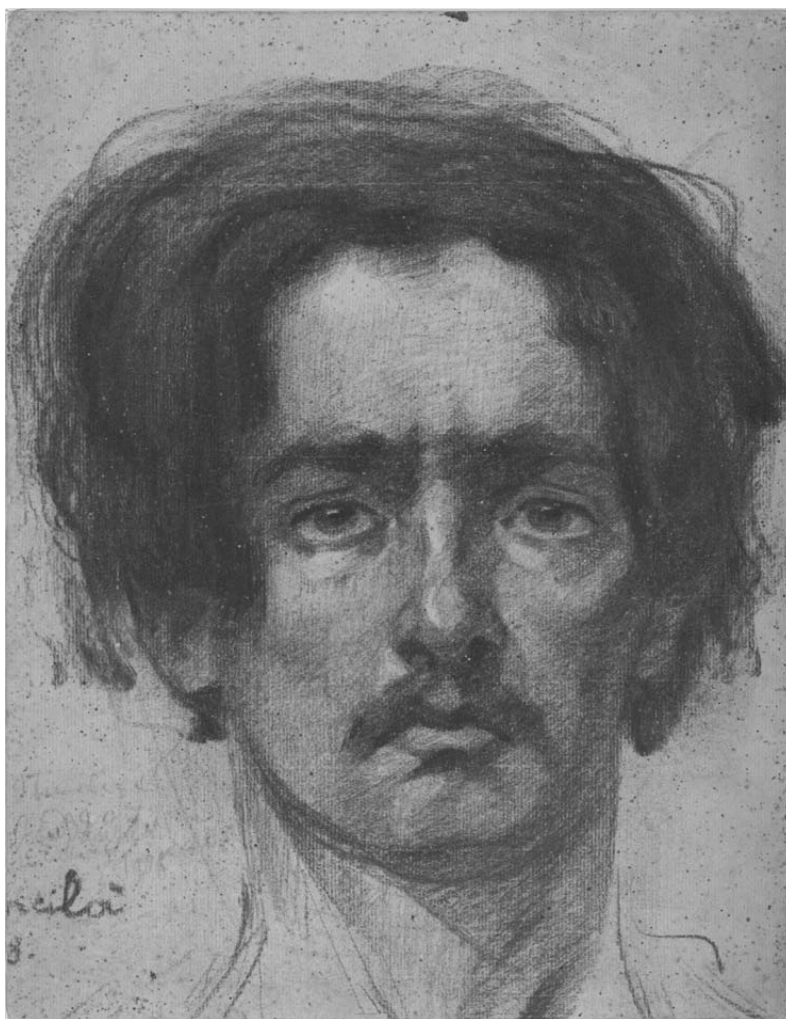


Fig. 1 – *Portrait of peasant (study)*, 1908, charcoal and estompe, Romanian Academy's Library, Department of Prints and Drawings.

also in aspects related to consciousness and moral evolution. Even if the painter occasionally goes back to academic tools and vision, his art moved toward an ideologized meaning. The explanation is given by artist's personal liaisons with a socialist circle. As a result of this contact, he began to pay attention to the obscure and humble side of the world. Genre portraits - figures of poor peasants, small manufacturers, and workers - appeared in his art a short while after 1900. Băncilă wasn't the only Romanian artist that described in his work the life of lower class. Before him or even in parallel, artists like Nicolae Grigorescu, the patriarch of Romanian art who died in 1907, Ștefan Luchian, the leader of the new

generation of artists who painted a bit earlier his famous, symbolic work *La împărțitul porumbului (Distributing the corn)*, Apcar Baltazar, Nicolae Vermont, and so on, commented in their works similar subjects. Every one of them commented in different ways the Romanian reality. Still, the only one who connected explicitly his paintings to 1907 national tragedy was Băncilă. The catastrophic event of the year 1907, the rebellion of peasants, was the starting point for some compositions where the artist indirectly accused the government. The canvases belonging to this mourning iconography are: *Before 1907*, presenting a Christ-like peasant, *1907, The Funeral*, and *The Identification*.

The events that Băncilă evoked in his paintings happened in March and April 1907. In that Spring, in 28 of 32 districts of the country the peasants stood up for a better life. The reasons of this social frustration regarded the lack of land in propriety and the extreme poverty of the lower class. The conflict degenerated and in some cases the authorities repressed violently the rebellion. During the military operations were killed or have been hurt more than 1000 people. Another 3000 have been convicted to prison<sup>1</sup>. Băncilă was born in a small village in the district of Botoșani, one of the areas intensely conflictive during those days. By the consequence, the painter probably felt as personal this attack over the peasants and over his homeland. There's no prove for his participation to the conflict. One of Băncilă's biographers, Anton Coman (the pseudonym of Petru Comarnescu) commented in his monograph<sup>2</sup> that the painter had begun to work at this cycle of paintings in the summer of 1907 and, in December of the same year, two of them were exhibited in the windows of a bookshop at Jassy, the capital city of Moldavia. By exhibiting them publicly, Băncilă claimed his political convictions.

The strategy was to present the consequences of the civil war. In order to describe the tremendous drama the artist used an expressionist technique to emphasize the human sufferance; on the other side, he placed the scene in the very foreground provoking the viewer to see clearly the sinister details of the massacre, clenched fists of the dead people, their rough barefoot legs, the contorted frozen bodies. Nothing idealised, no preoccupation to render the magnificence of heroic death. It was just convulsive emotion, fear, revolt, ugliness and sufferance.

In the painting titled *1907*, the natural frame of composition is a plain landscape which vanishes in a red line horizon that alluded to the burned cities and villages. In order to exalt the intensity of the episode, Băncilă focused on the running man silhouette stepping among cadavers and

agonizing people. In the other two paintings, *The Funeral* and *The Identification* both composed in a landscape format, the artist adopted a similar strategy to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian mannerists paintings, by accelerating the perspective and concentrating the mass of bodies in the foreground. Băncilă probably had seen a number of mannerist works during his voyage in Italy and got some spatial solutions for these compositions.

Besides, the contact with the contemporary German and Swiss art gave him some ideas about characters, maybe about a formal ideal or character's placement into the frame, and the characters' movement. Băncilă's compositions are not far enough from certain compositions of Ferdinand Hodler. The name of Hodler, an well-known Swiss artist, whose art was popular in Germany, was already mentioned in a chronical published in 1897 in the Romanian magazine *Literatură și artă română*.<sup>3</sup>

Still, Băncilă's painting oriented the pictorial discourse toward the opposite direction. The atmosphere in Holder's paintings is an escapist one, he depicted a world of dreams and fantasy while Băncilă stayed connected to real history, to concrete facts. Hodler's images are rooted in the academist vision adapted to modern sensibility and aesthetics. Băncilă's paintings presented a different point of view. He composed two montages inspired by the real events adding realistic features and expressionist notes to emphasize the tragic dimension of the event. Băncilă's biographer Anton Coman (Petru Comarnescu) confirmed that the artist worked hardly for documentation, reading the press and searching testimonies from the participants in rebellion, portraying some of them. Vasile Rășcanu, and old friend and comrade of Băncilă confessed that in 1906 a group of socialist students, members of the Socialist Circle led by Paul Bujor, sometime joined by Octav Băncilă, visited some villages in Moldavia (Jassy, Vaslui and Botoșani counties) under the pretext of a social-medical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> They were deeply impressed by the poverty of the peasants and these emotions and

impressions were transferred on the canvas *Before 1907*, the first piece of the cycle. Rășcanu also claimed that at group's turn back at Jassy, the project of this cycle was debated at a socialist meeting and they established the number, order and name of the paintings.

In 1909 Băncilă painted *Lecture of journal The Propagandist – 1907* (70 x 99 cm, oil on canvas, The Art Museum, Jassy)<sup>5</sup>. The painting is an academic composition with characters displayed in a theatrical scheme,

a kneeling man in the left side in a posture usually used in religious scenes while a masculine central figure, listening attentively, dominates the image. For the final version Băncilă realised a number of preparatory sketches - portraits that have been integrated in the final composition<sup>6</sup> (il.1). The emotion and the passion of the prior works just vanished... the voice of narrator turned into conventional; the scene leaves the mark of a persuasive, pedagogical intention.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See *Frământări și răscoale țărănești la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului al XX-lea. Consecințe*. in Gheorghe Platon (coord.), *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VII, tom II, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2003, p. 97-102.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Coman, *Octav, Băncilă*, Editura de Stat Pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1954.

<sup>3</sup> H. Strâmbulescu – *Din Munich. Expoziția de pictură și sculptură din 1897*, in *Literatură și artă română*, II, 1897, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup> Vasile Rășcanu, in *Expoziția Octav Băncilă 1872-1944*, Muzeul de Artă Iași, martie-aprilie 1968 (cat.)

<sup>5</sup> Geta Pascal, *Pictori moldoveni din perioada interbelică în patrimoniul Muzeului de artă Iași*, Editura DANA ART, Iași, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Cătălina Macovei, Natalia Bangălă, Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Studii de atelier la Școala de Belle-Arte* (cat.), Biblioteca Academiei Române, București, 2014.