

V A R I A

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Social Activism in Romanian Painting in the Early 20th Century: Reading Octav Băncilă through the lens of T. J. Clark

Abstract: The paper intends to complexify the classical marxist accounts of Octav Băncilă's socially engaged paintings offered in Romanian historiography of art by employing a reading inspired by T. J. Clark's social history of art. The subsequent analyses are focusing not only on the explicit iconography of the oppressed and of marginal social groups, but also on the representational features and techniques through which, in the wake of Clark's ideas, formalism may be mobilized as critical artistic agency, as well as on more subtle ways in which popular taste is being offered a distinct representation.

Keywords: social art history, Marxism, Octav Băncilă, T. J. Clark, realism.

1. Methodological Issues: Social Art history and the Romanian Art Historiography

The term “new art history” has become common at the middle of the eighties in the English and American academic discourse, designating “a series of developments of the disciplinary methods, theories and objects of study” in art history (Harris 2001, 7). It was also called radical or critical historiography, alternative terms that initially designated forms of historical analysis, description and evaluation related to manifestations of social activism and political criticism outside the academia. The “critical” aspect indicates a type of analysis oriented towards the inquiry of its own methodological premises and the search for explanations (Harris 2001, 6-9), unlike the “dominant” historiography at that time, limited to formal, descriptive and, at its best, iconographic description of the artworks. Thus, the “new art history” assumed an interdisciplinary character. These developments in the field of art included the following: (a) historical, social and political theory; (b) feminist critiques of patriarchy and of the place of the woman in historical and contemporary societies (c) psychoanalytical interpretations of visual representations and their role in constructing social

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and sexual identity and (d) semiotic, structuralist și post-structuralist concepts and analyses of signs and meaning (Harris 2001, 7-13).

Among these, social art history concerns the social and political action of artworks. It relates to the artwork's particular discursive structure and its relations with a precise ideological configuration. In other words, social art history no longer analyses artworks chronologically, but it focuses on a relatively short time-span, practicing a so-called "conjunctural" analysis (Harris 2001, 65). The latter designates an analysis of the relations between artists, artistic practices, artworks, institutions and political and social circumstances in a given historical moment. The specificity of these relations distinguishes social history from the traditional Marxist approaches according to which art passively reflects a certain social configuration (Minor 2001).

Generally, the term "social art history" refers to a certain engagement in researching art as a cultural practice, poetics and politics inextricably linked to other cultural and material practices. That is why social art history can be related, on the one hand, to visual studies, sharing a profound interest in researching artistic imagery in conjunction to those from popular culture, as well as with media and discourses in the broader visual culture that are not traditionally associated with art, such as journalism, advertising, fashion industry etc. On the other hand, it is similar to material history, as opposed to intellectual history, without being entirely subsumed to this type of narrative. It studies the concrete framework for the production of art: commercial and symbolic exchanges, institutions, patronage, commissioners, exhibitions and collections (Nae 2017, 102-105). However, social art history distinguishes itself from visual studies as it bestows a special status on artistic representations, considered to be more able to act critically in society than images circulated in popular culture.

It is well known that, given T. J. Clark's writings in the 70's and 80's, the relation between art and society has been radically reconceived. Far from regarding art as a mere reflection of dominant ideology, or as a mere consequence of the material and economic transformations in a given social configuration, as it was described by Arnold Hauser, the author of a famous *Social art history* published in 1951, Clark considered that art has to be granted an active role in culture and political life:

The making of an work of art is a historical process among other acts, events and structures – it constitutes a series of actions in but also on history. It may become intelligible only within the context of given and imposed structures of meaning; But, in its turn, it can alter and even fracture those structures. A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology. (Clark 1982, 15)

The very term ideology is not understood by Clark as “false consciousness”, but rather as an involuntary, spontaneous (that is, uncritical) adherence to a set of culturally shared values and principles that appear to be naturalized (Nae 2015). Thus, social art history does not regard artistic image as being fully determined by superstructures (that is, ideologies) situated outside its own field, but as being critical to these ideas. Instead of the old Marxist relation base-superstructure in which art is regarded as a mere passive instrument of the ruling power, Clark considers that art can intervene in social life by altering the structures of thought that offered stability to the representations of a certain social class such as the modern bourgeoisie analysed by the British author. For Clark, art resists power most efficiently not by direct opposition, but rather by subverting those structures of thinking that support the operations of power (Wright 2013, 164-175).

Alastair Wright noted that, according to Clark, ideologies (and not the apolitical pictorial schemes advanced by authors such as Ernst Gombrich) are those limiting the vision of an artist and his representational possibilities. Some things exist, but, since they have a low social status, are pushed towards the periphery of vision and are simply not represented on the canvas, due to the cultural representations they are associated with (Wright 2013, 166). Consequently art history must be not only a history of what we see, but also a history of “blindness”, of what is not represented, of the invisible in visual arts. It would be fair to state that social art history is mostly interested in figuration and iconography, favouring representational content over stylistic features, although the latter are not deemed irrelevant, especially the inherited representational conventions, since the latter become the subject of active artistic critique, thus challenging social discriminations embedded in these visual configurations (Nae 2017, 102-103). Clark is also challenging the ordinary notions of ideology and social class. For Clark, there is more than a homogenous social class to whom a certain artist can belong to and that a certain artistic representation can address (Wright 2013, 167). Therefore, it is important to understand not only the initial position of the artist (and the commissioner), but also the oscillations between the possible class positions in the social field.

These transformations in relation to both traditional Marxism and formal art history are key issues in analysing the emergence of a new subject in historical painting in Romanian modern art: the peasant and the worker, as well as of the representations of class struggle. However, my hypothesis is that, while these subjects of representation have been already subjected to scrutiny by various Romanian art historians such as Coman (1954) and Comarnescu (1972), social art history has also been abused in Romanian historiography attached to classical Marxism. Thus, T. J. Clark’s more innovative approach of the relation between society and art, which is not one of simple subordination, but rather of active engagement and

contestation achieved at the level of representational techniques and patterns, was missing from the interpretations of socially engaged modern art painting.

In the present paper, I attempt to fill in the gap and propose a new line of interpretation influenced by Clark's strand of social art history by taking as a case study the socially engaged works of Octav Băncilă. First, I will attempt to reconstruct some historical facts concerning the social transformations in the second part of the 19th century Romania in order to situate Băncilă's historical painting in this context in relation to his own social condition and political views. Second, I analyse the iconography of social life and the critique of power based on two major iconographic themes: representations of the peasant's revolutionary impetus and representations of individuals from the social classes such as the worker and the soldier. These analyses are meant to reveal the change in attitude which questions Băncilă's interplay with the notion of pictorial realism. In the last part of the paper, I expand Clark's ideas that it is the disturbance of representational techniques and patterns which may be considered as a more subtle critical approach of the social conditions the paintings encapsulate and critically reflect at the same time.

2. The social context of Romanian modern painting. Some historical facts

Important transformations and a massive restructuring of the feudal-medieval social arrangements are visible in the social history of modern Romania at the end of the 19th century. The secularization of the monasteries, the beginning of the process through which peasants acquire land ownership and the paid work have profoundly shaken the old social order. They also represented an advance in the capitalist development of the country. The big landowners will seek to strengthen their positions through new measures imposed with the help of the parties that protected their interests. The Law of Agricultural Expenses of 1866 and its harsher version from 1872 force the peasants to depend further on the landowners who, through communal councils, could oblige "rebellious inhabitants or fugitives" to work for them. The great landlords will be highly interested in preserving the feudal remains in their relations with the peasants, increasing their cultivated areas for grain exports.

The oppression of the still powerful strongholds and the primitiveness of the tools used to work the fields will prevent the majority of the rural population to overcome poverty. The working peasantry continues to live in miserable conditions, in dire needs, ill and impoverished, uneducated and subjected to all kinds of superstitions and prejudices (Coman 1954, 14-15).

Thus, the development of capitalism in Romania, at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth century, will lead to the intensification of the peasant revolts. The interplay between the old form of feudal exploitation and its new, modern form is increasingly deepening social conflicts. Landowners and leaseholders take half of the farmer's products apart from all sorts of "obligatory bugs". The misery of the working peasants increases. The 1888 peasant revolts in Ilfov, Ialomita or Prahova continue in Moldova in Roman, Vaslui, Iasi and Botosani in the following year, and in 1894 spread towards southern Moldova.

The peasant revolt of 1907 began on February 21 1907 in Flămânzi village, Botoșani county and spreads throughout the country shortly thereafter. The revolt was defeated by the government. It was repressed by the army and resulted in killing an important part of the country's rural population. The main cause was the discontent of the peasants related to the unfairness of land ownership, which was restricted to only a few large owners. According to the historians Dinu C. Giurescu and Constantin C. Giurescu, in the years when the harvests were abundant (between 1902 and 1905), the landowners also increased the rents very much, and, as a consequence, they increased the exploitation of the peasants. The latter's dissatisfaction increased eventually leading to the rebellion in March 1907. The two Romanian historians show that the disturbances started "in the northern part of Moldova, where the lessees were strong", and says that only the Fischer brothers' trust, which owned estates and forests, totalized 236,863 hectares, or 2,368 sq. Km, of an entire county, currently leasing about 75% of the arable land in three counties in Moldova (the so-called "Fischerland") (C. Giurescu and D. Giurescu 1965, 656-657). On 18 March, the state of emergency was declared, and then the general mobilization, until March 29, the number of soldiers mobilized reached 140,000. The Romanian army opened fire on the peasants, the army even using artillery in Oltenia, entire villages being literally erased: apparently, 11,000 peasants were killed in one of the most brutally repressed social revolts in Europe after 1870 (Veiga 1995, 25-26).

The events profoundly impacted Romanian consciousness, becoming the subject of one of the best interwar novels in Romanian literature, *The Revolt*, written by Liviu Rebreanu and published in 1932. As for the Romanian fine arts, the image of the peasant begins to appear in the Romanian art in the 19th and 20th centuries under the influence of French Romanticism (Iancu 2012). If Nicolae Grigorescu (who died in 1907) was interested in an idyllic representation of rural life, Stefan Luchian is the first Romanian fine artist to paint the dramas of Belle Époque peasants. The latter's painting entitled *Corn Dividing*, exposed in 1906, becomes a symbol of the oppressed peasant in Romanian painting.

3. Băncilă's History Paintings: Realism and Phantasy in the 1907 series of works

Capturing significant and dramatic moments of the 1907 uprising, the works of the painter Octav Băncilă were censored at that time, being accused in the press of a trend towards morbid socialism. The most famous such work is the one called simply *1907*. It depicts the suppression of the revolt: a peasant running among the wounded in despair under the heavy fire of the army. Băncilă often returned to this subject in a long series of paintings: *Before 1907*, *Execution*, *Recognition*, *Our All-Time Bread*, *The Story of Rebellions*, *Old Farmer's Head*, *Under Escort*, *The Funeral*, *After the Revolts*, *Historia*. Băncilă was not the only one interested in this topic: Stefan Dimitrescu, Camil Ressu, Ion Theodorescu Sion, Francis Șirato and Apar Baltazar were equally interested in social life. Nevertheless, Băncilă seems to have been the most affected by the violence of the landowners' retaliation. According to Coman (1954) and Comarnescu (1972) this increased sensitivity was directly influenced by Băncilă's social background, who was born in a poor rural family and kept close relations to rural life throughout his life.

The 1907 uprisings certainly had a strong influence on the young Băncilă who could not forget the "brothers from the countryside", as neither did Sofia Nădejde, his sister, who owned a journal militating for improving the living condition of the peasants. This in her writings published in *The Contemporary* and in a play published in 1888, entitled "A Love in the Country", Sofia Nădejde describes the miserable life of the village at that time, but without remarking the combative force of the peasantry. The mistake was as big and confusing as the conception of the "poporanists", who, on the contrary, saw in the peasantry a force able to change the composition of society alone (Coman 1954, 5). Băncilă does not regard the peasants as a passive and pitiful, homogeneous social group, but as engaged in social struggle. However, in exacerbating their frailty, questions at the same time their social agency.

Let us review the main works signed by Băncilă dedicated to events around 1907. *Before 1907* is a unique composition. It depicts an old peasant placed in the middle of the painting. The character stands and is exhausted by work, hunger, humiliation and troubles. The face is sunburnt, the hair is white and his face is covered by a short white beard, complemented by long, bushy mustaches. His clothes are torn apart the skin and the bones becoming visible. His head is proudly raised, his hands suggesting signs of rebellion. The whole posture of the peasant emanates despair and suffering. The painting was exhibited at the exhibition in Iasi in 1907 and later in 1909 in Bucharest (Comarnescu 1972, 21).

The old peasant head remains a very expressive work simply because it has a sketchy character, but certainly the most famous work dedicated to the subject is *1907*. It was once known as a part of a monumental composition entitled *On the Olt Valley*. Today, the painting is shown at the Gallery of the Romanian National Art Museum. The composition *On the Olt Valley*, intended by the artist, was commented in the *Romania Muncitoare* newspaper (Bujor 1909). Thus, the artist wanted to show how the army fired the cannon against a group of peasants from the Olt valley. He wanted to portray “a bunch of peasants, surrounded in a valley, and bombed by the artillery behind the hills.” The monumental composition has not been accomplished, it has only remained as a sketch.

In the painting currently found in the National Gallery, due to compositional dramatism and due to the dynamic and at the same time monumental depiction of the subject, the painting has a particularly strong effect on its viewers. The work was exhibited in 1907 in Iasi, in the shop window of Moldova Library. In September 1908, it was exhibited at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest. The work took part in the Romanian Art Exhibition in Moscow from 1949 to 1950, together with two other paintings, *the Worker* and *the Mender*.

The renowned *1907* is more complex in terms of composition and multilayered. It presents a devastated field on which the dead seem to appear as a background. They look like cardboard-made figures in comparison with the main character, who, in the foreground, continues the solitary battle against the invisible enemy. Expressionist accents are obvious and make this picture a testimony to the fact that Băncilă has the ability to transcend reality through expression and sentiment. Thus, contrary to Comarnescu and Coman's views, who regard Băncilă as a sort of socialist realist, depicting typical characters rather than individuals, one may also notice that the painter is rather subjectively depicting imaginary scenes.

Execution remains known only from articles written in the journals, it is an unseen work, known only as its description. It was commented in an article published in *Romania Muncitoare* newspaper in 1909. The information refers to a large painting, 2.5 meters x 2.5 meters, being

(...) one of the terrible scenes of the wild crackdown. In it, the painter caught and fixed the most deadly moment of the blood orgy of 1907. On a hill, surrounded by other green hills, under a glowing air like the struggle between the clouds of frowning, lead and sunny sunshine, there is the place of chastisement. In front, the execution squad is seated, with guns ready to shoot, waiting for the command of the officer, whose sword shines in the wind. Alongside there are troops brought to assist the slaughter, to learn the art of killing, get drunk with the scent of warm blood. In the front, there is the row of prisoners, the peasants waiting for their death (...) The painter had to overcome great technical difficulties painting a mute drama from almost rigid attitudes.

He defeated the difficulty. He knew how to dramatize the peasants' attitude in the gesture of that old man who draws the little child beside him and covers his face so that he does not see the awfulness that awaits him. And thus, the painting releases a cry of horror and produces a terrible sentiment (...). (Coman 1954, 76)

The painting entitled *The Execution* was exhibited at the 1909 Exhibition installed at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest. The authorities ordered the removal of the painting from the gallery shortly after the opening. *The Recognition* is today a lost or destroyed painting, which is known only from the reproductions that appeared in the journals of those times. The composition depicts a field after the repression where the peasants gathered to recognize their killed relatives. The painting was exhibited in Iași, in the showcase of the Moldova bookstore in 1908. After twenty minutes of exposure, the police ordered her removal from the showcase and ordered the librarian to be expelled from Romania. In 1909 it was exposed at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest, where it was also banned by the authorities. The same happened with the *Funeral*, which is also known only from the period reproductions of the time press. It shows the end of the crackdown on a field with many dead bodies, where two soldiers deal with the gathering of the dead and the digging of the graves. The painting was exhibited in Iasi, in the shop window of Moldova in 1908, for two weeks, after which it was banned from the authorities. Such gestures testify on the social agency of Băncilă's painting. The nonconventional and uncomfortable representations certainly succeeded in disturbing the ideologically complicit order installed shortly after the revolts.

Other paintings depart from realism while presenting equally troubling scenes in a less dramatic tone. *Under escort* is a painting reproduced in a monograph written by N. A. Bogdan (Coman 1954, 77). It presents a group of peasants with ragged shirts with hands tied back, under the escort of a convoy of knights. One of the peasants is in a fallen position, ready to be trampled by a rider. *After the uprisings* is known only from the articles written in newspapers of the time. It was exhibited in 1909 at the Romanian Athenaeum on the occasion of a contest for a professorship position at the School of Belle Arte in Iași that Băncilă took part of. The composition presented some peasants who are on a boyar's field. As a result, a peasant gathers with a stick the bones that come out of the plow blade. *The Curse* is a study realized by Băncilă in order to execute the larger painting entitled *The Recognition*. The picture shows a woman with her hair wobbling in the wind, full of despair and revolt. Grieved and with scarred cheeks, she has her arms raised, her fists clenched, suggesting the curse. *The Story of the Rebellions* (also known as *The Premonition of the Rebellions*) presents a young peasant who holds a red flag in one hand and knocks at the door of a

dwindled house. It seems she goes to a gathering of a group of rebels who will decide what is to be done. It is interesting to note that Bancilă approaches the female figure as an exponent of the uprising. It basically cancels out the fragility and vulnerability of the female body to bring us silhouettes full of pathos and physical strength.

Historia is one of the few allegories that Octav Băncilă made in 1911. It is painted in a decorative style that remembers Bancilă's debut work *Caritas*. In the picture a woman embodies History and speaks to the children around her about the uprising in 1907. Octav Bancilla had as his wife Ana as a model for the History, and his sons Vasile and Grigore as models for the bourgeois and the worker.

The paintings of the 1907 cycle were not entirely identified after a hundred years after Octav Băncilă made them. Some may exist in unknown private collections, some have been destroyed, and others have been sent abroad. It was represented by Bancilă in at least twelve paintings. Bancila later made paintings with the same theme, but they were given less attention by the art critics and the public (Coman 1954, 78).

These are perhaps the only paintings of Bancilă that cannot be assimilated to realism. His vision goes beyond the limits of a naturalistic play, and the distance from reality leads to fiction, to an imaginative surplus. Bancilă was accused vis-avis of these works of a lack of authenticity. R. Dreptu argues that they are the product of a burning imagination in the workshop shelter, an imagination that wanted to create a symbol of the peasant struggle, truly terrible and only managed to achieve a pastiche (Dreptu 1987). Băncilă would thus not be a true revolutionary. He remains at the periphery of the class struggle acting only as an observer.

It is remarkable that Băncilă was not subordinated neither to the leftist, nor to the conservatory ideologies, and his dramatism was thus, truly uncomfortable. In supporting this claim, one may also quote the hostile attitude of the leftist journals *Universe* and the *Epoch* to the paintings from the 1907 series. In the first newspaper, P. Botzan writes that the painter "worked a lot, but he was too impressed by those events painful", then criticizing his allegedly formalistic technique, thereby undervaluing the art of the painter (September 19, 1908). The more open is the attack in the *Epoch*, a conservative newspaper, which says,

"However, surprises have not been spared. One puzzling, Mr. Bancilă's macabro-cadaveric conception, another particularly pleasant, Mrs. Cornelia Emilian's cloth. The former, wishing to be the painter of peasant rebellions, only succeeded in betraying morbid socialism, and how the technique seems to envy the glory of the great Abrahamovici painter. Something else is with Mrs. Emilian." (Coman 1954, 40)

4. Towards Realism: the Nomad, the Soldier and the Worker

An important place in the work of Octav Băncilă is represented by the paintings inspired by the life of the Gypsies, especially the nomadic Gypsies. The painter made over a hundred works in which he evoked nomad carts that crossed the distances under blazing skies. This is how the paintings entitled *Caravan*, *Nomad Carriages*, *Towards the Unknown*, *Nomads* etc. can be seen. All compositions that have as their theme the life of the Gypsies are sad but lyrical. They are like blue-hearted songs, the entire color scheme is dominated by blue hues, with intertwined dark reds and purple beads. They reveal the painter's sympathy for people who are forced to earn their living from small jobs.

With the military theme, Octav Băncilă depicted in his work the hostility of the peasantry towards the military service. Thus, in 1898, Băncilă painted the famous painting entitled *Recruiting*, which was the beginning of his critique of the way in which the Romanian army was organized and led. In addition to the themes devoted to Romanian fine art, Octav Băncilă has created many portraits, still lifes, pictures of flowers and landscapes, all of which make the pleasure of contemporary auction houses.

From 1905 on Băncilă begins to represent in his paintings the workers and scenes of their life and labor. Until then, proletarians are not depicted by Băncilă. The two paintings entitled *Worker* and *Resting Worker*, painted in 1905, are the beginning of a major subject of his later works – the condition of the worker.

In the first painting, the proletarian is standing on his feet, clothed with an apron, wearing a hat and looking to one side. He has a beard and penetrating eyes. He holds his hands close to his chest under the apron. His gaze is serious and scrutinizing. The work is constructed with more nerve-like features than in the works of the same period. The *Silent Worker* has the same look, seated in the first plane and holding his hands together in one another. The beautifully shaped face is embossed by the shadow of the shirt. The energy of the hand also draws your attention (Coman 70-71).

With these two paintings, *Worker* and *Worker at rest*, the Băncilă begins to depict the life and struggles of the working class. For the representation of these workers, the painter sought a sober technique. The desire to make it more truthful and typical, with that resplendent look and dainty attention, causes the painter to use a technique that overlooks the details, focusing on the expression of the face and the outfit. The lines are nervously driven, but the contours do not have the vigor and precision of other work-related works, of which the most important are *The Worker* (1911) and *Flemish* (1908).

Painted in 1911, *The Worker*, sometimes referred to as *The Artisan*, according to the titles of the 1905 work on paper and of a 1909 work in

crayon, depicts a massive, hungry worker sitting and smoking his pipe, while his penetrating gaze searches to the future that bothers him. The laborer wears tights and some polished work clothes. The sleeves are rolled up, leaving the forearms visible. The painting is worked with realistic force and precision, and the worker's psychology expresses self-indulgence and awareness of responsibility. The man is preoccupied, he is embarrassed by an important thought, though apparently at rest.

We should remember that, at the same time, Ioan Zaicu (1858-1914), a painter who was born in Vienna and whom Băncilă certainly did not know, also painted a worker after his workday. *The Blacksmith Resting* depicts his main character stripped to the waist, looking at one side and having the knee-supported hammer. The muscularity of Zaicu's laborer has a force similar to that of Băncilă's workman, but the look and the whole expression are not so deep and meaningful in Zaicu's work, which must however be joined by Băncilă, due to the theme of this well-constructed work. However, Zaicu did not continue this subject, the *Blacksmith resting*, being a liturgical work on his romantic portrait and the church painting he practiced in the style of his forerunner in Banat, Nicolae Popescu (1835-1877).

It is particularly significant that in 1905, the year of the first bourgeois-democratic revolution, Octav Băncilă painted these workers and opened a series of other paintings with workers at work, on strike or unemployed. The revolution in Russia had a strong resonance and gave a new impetus to the struggle of the working class in Romania. Băncilă's intellectual affinities with the *Contemporary* magazine, his relations with some socialists and progressive scholars, his knowledge of the labor movement in Romania are now linked with the Russian revolution. It is true that Băncilă had previously been interested in social problems, only that, now, he begins to expand the social reality he observes (Coman 1954, 36).

Between 1907-1916, Băncilă also painted numerous images of the Jews in Iasi: *Zarafii* (1912, 1913, 1914), *Moses Ișic The Shepherd* (1914), *Old clothes* (1908), *The Mender* (1908), *The Witch* (1911-1913). In all the work created with Jewish themes, Octav Băncilă distinguished the social classes and revealed the antagonism between them. He portrayed the life of the poor Jews in Iași, revealed the sufferings characteristic of the exploited beings, criticized the wealthy wrath and the money-makers, and revealed some of the causes that determined the emigration wave of the early twentieth century. Both the Fascists and the anti-Semites expressed their hostility towards Octav Băncilă. The artist enjoyed a certain popularity among the humble because he was interested in oppressed people regardless of culture, nationality or religion.

His attention to this particular ethnic community seems rather to be based on class distinctions, the artist distinguishing between the ironmongers portrayed as avaricious exploiters and the wider group of service providers

who are busy with small jobs. About these images, art critic Petru Comarnescu noted that Băncilă's Jews appear to be labored workers, representative of the social condition of the inhabitants of the lousy neighborhoods of Iași. Referring perhaps to the artwork ironically entitled *A Good Business*, Comarnescu commented: "You see how good was the 'business' of those who are dressed in caftans." (Comarnescu 1972) With this series of paintings with Jews, which became remarkable through their realism, the painter drew the attention that most of them, as well as most of the Christians, are not wealthy or bankers, but they suffer together because of social inequality. They were deprived of citizenship rights, and they were forced to work as craftsmans and to do small, mostly unprofitable trades.

In Băncilă's painting an important place is occupied by the representations of the city life, an example of the progressive literature of that time. The subjects are chosen from the life of the poor people living at the outskirts or in the slums in are either comical or tragic situations. The works have a more pronounced narrative character visible in artworks such as *Telali* or *Towards School*. Another socially importance subject in the art of those times, famine can be encountered in two different artistic visions - Băncilă's *Starving* and Tonitza's *Bread tail*. The first one depicts a ragged boy standing with his mouth open in front of a showcase filled with sausages. The second presents an endless and anonymous queue, the people being impoverished by poverty. The overall expression loaded with a surplus of too explicit details, and the piousness of a desperate expectation of the depicted people denote an anecdotal approach opposed to the dramatic one favoured by Băncilă. These formal features distinguish the two paintings, although the intention of both painters had been the same – to criticize social injustice (Dreptu 1987, 83).

5. Still Life as Social Critique

The leftist engagement of a painter such as Băncilă can easily be grasped from paintings in genres such as history painting, portraits or genre studies. Nevertheless, they are more subtly felt in minor genres seemingly devoid of ideology such as the still life. A case in point is *Pot with Bluebells* dating from 1934. Using one of the existing interpretations of the artworks, written by Petru Comarnescu, who operates with the traditional instruments of Marxist theory, one may notice that bluebells were not a noble subject in the conventions of the genre at that time. Usually, at the beginning of the 20th century, still life was meant for a bourgeois viewer interested in contemplating a pictorial representation of natural beauty. According to Comarnescu's insight, the social and political engagement of the artist is expressed by his choice to depict simple, popular, accessible flowers (Comarnescu 1972). This is obvious in the current painting, where, instead

of greenhouse flowers, commonplace wild flowers are presented. The pot is also simple, unpretentious, a mere bowl of clay that could be found in any house. The painting thus suggests an intimate atmosphere, typical for simple popular life, that the artist is clearly sympathetic with. The analysis of the representational content, indicating the absence of certain representational topics in the artistic imaginary of the time, becomes of outmost importance. What is the meaning of choosing such a subject matter? What are the most common representations of that subject matter at the time and in the cultural space the artwork was produced?

In order to determine the relation between social classes and artistic representations in a given artistic configuration, T. J. Clark also employs a necessary history of reception. Relevant questions asked by the social art historian include: what did the art critics say about certain artworks? Who was actually seeing them? These questions are as important as those about the transformation of the source material by the artist. What transformations occur both in the representational technique and style, and in the very construction of that subject matter? It is perhaps telling that for Clark, Courbet's realism was equally shocking due to the way subjects entered the field of representation as a non-differentiated multitude of people situated on a horizontal plane of vision in artworks such as *Burial at Ornans* (Clark 1982).

The histories of reception and patronage are also relevant here in order to understand, for instance, how the genre of still life may be found among the artworks of an explicitly socially critical artist such as Octav Băncilă, while the analysis of the artwork should explain what is political in this obviously apolitical artwork. Although he painted many still lifes, it is certain that they seem to conform to the taste of the bourgeois clients at that time. However, the painter also affirms in this artistic genre his preference for depicting the life of simple people such as peasants and workers. One may observe that, belonging to the late period of Băncilă's practice (the 1930s), probably the result of a command from a wealthy person in a period of relative economic prosperity in Romania, the political effects of the image may be found in the option for the realist depiction of a commonplace subject in an interior typical for popular culture. Thus, by introducing a commonplace subject accessible to all social classes in the pictorial representation, Băncilă may be considered to produce a democratization of aesthetic pleasure, which transgresses the social boundaries of taste. Even though the fragment of domestic interior depicted belonged to the artist himself, indirectly expressing his own particular social condition, through its pictorial representation, the artist considers it to be equally worthy of interest as any other subject. It might be even implied that Băncilă is subversively juxtaposing in this painting two distinct social groups and environments, introducing popular culture in the imaginary of bourgeois, urbanized

social groups that attempted to conceal it by favouring the idyllic vision of rural life they have been accustomed to see in the paintings of Nicolae Grigorescu.

Concerning the way this subject matter is treated, it is through the chromatic scale that Octav Băncilă seems to comment upon the depicted fragment of domestic life (Nae 2017, 113). The overall chromatic scale is cold and austere, sustained by the flower's own blue, reminiscent of the winter that has just passed. This cold chromatic environment may be understood as an affective comment upon the ordinary world that fragment of reality belongs to.

6. Conclusions

The few examples discussed in this text show that the use of social history of art can explain the production and primary reception context of a certain artistic representation, given that the primary meanings of that image became less intelligible and its rhetorical underpinnings more difficult to read due to historical distance. Placing the artwork in a certain socio-political "conjuncture" that the interpreter has to patiently reconstruct from various historical data can offer precious information concerning the way a certain artistic representation can embody and sometimes, may even conceal a political, socially emancipatory potential, which is inscribed into a collective representation of the depicted subject-matter. It can also indicate the ideological relations that certain artistic representations can exemplify and contest when they are naturalized, becoming invisible for today's viewer.

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