

## **Chimeras of the Earth, Air and Water: Dimitrie Paciurea's Hybrid Sculpture in Inter-war Romania**

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Dimitrie Paciurea is a very particular artist of Inter-war Romanian sculpture. On the one hand, the lack of direct information about his private life – such as correspondence for example – as well as very few personal statements on his work, makes our attempt to comprehend the man and creator very difficult. On the other hand, we are confronted with a sort of legend that has been created and maintained for decades by his contemporaries and later by art critics and art historians. I am referring here to the myth of the isolated artist, whose creations, especially the chimeras, have always been perceived as a pure reflection of his enigmatic personality and his tormented imagination. Sadness, silence, isolation and frustration are the words that most of the critics use to describe the artist. This image that we have nowadays of Paciurea, the idea that his personality is directly bound to his chimeras, was widely supplied by poets and artists, Paciurea's contemporaries.

One of the most beautiful testimonies comes from Ion Minulescu (1881-1944), a symbolist Romanian poet and admirer of Paciurea's work:

His human and artistic existence was expressed by discreet resonances that only very sensitive ears could perceive. His person was almost an absence. He spoke little, he spoke rarely, he spoke slowly, he spoke like he was lost somewhere, deep in a dream, he spoke as for himself and his sentences were very much like his Chimeras [...].<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this kind of declaration must be considered with much caution and examined in a critical perspective. That same Minulescu recognised in Paciurea an 'ascetic artist', thinking and working 'like the lonesome anonymous'<sup>2</sup>. A more intimate portrait is sketched in 1933, one year after Paciurea's death, by a former student and later colleague at the Fine Arts School in Bucharest, the sculptor Oscar Han (1891-1976):

The man was dodging his way into the streets rather than he would really walk, and used to take the most deserted streets so that he wouldn't have to approach other

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Minulescu, « Dupa inmormantarea sculptorului Paciurea », *Adevarul*, n°14894, July 26, 1932, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> M. [MINULESCU], « Salonul Oficial. Sculptura », *Viitorul*, n°575, June 21, 1909, p. 1.

people. He avoided all contact with human beings; he was lonesome, silent and sad. Slave of contemplation. The man corresponds perfectly with his work. Through the man we can understand the work and the work defines the man. Paciurea was a rebel and a misfit. This clumsiness in life gave a strange appeal to his persona; one could feel the presence of a human being and that of destiny.<sup>3</sup>

This statement could be related to one of Paciurea's self-portraits. Probably realised at the end of his life, this drawing reveals a sad man, with a grimacing mouth, his head bent as a sign of resignation or tiredness, immersed in his thoughts. The artist chose here to represent himself in a macabre manner: indeed, half of his face is that of a skeleton. The eye disappears in the shadow of a large and deep eye-socket, firmly drafted by a network of curved lines, while the inferior part of the head remains drowned in a disturbing blackness.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Self-portrait*, not dated, ink, pencil, wash on paper, 16 x 13 cm.  
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Another student of his, the sculptor Ion Irimescu (1903-2005), recalled:

His gentle and sad face, soaked by a natural modesty, lacking any professorial self-importance, will be anchored in my memory forever. He was simple and lonely, like an oak tree in the middle of a vast plain, speaking very little. But even if they were

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar Han, « D. Paciurea », *Arta*, January 1933, in *Dalti si pensule*, 1970, Ed. Minerva, Bucharest, p. 14.

rare, his words had the power to penetrate you and to make you understand the vital problems of sculpture.<sup>4</sup>

All these statements increase the enigma that the sculptor and his work emanate. This mysterious aura was also developed by Paciurea himself. In his very rare declarations, the sculptor defines himself and the artist in general as a unique being, 'able to reveal the mysteries of the invisible'. And he continues:

The artist is the only one who can disclose something of this real mystery, as he is the only intermediary between the Divine and the tangible world. He suffered atrociously in order to reveal Beauty to the others and in exchange, they welcomed him with their ingratitude and their indifference. The artist mustn't be booed, he must be respected and he must be loved.<sup>5</sup>

Beauty, mystery and suffering are related to mysticism and faith, as for Paciurea, like for many symbolists, 'the artist is the supreme priest of art, art being a religion.'<sup>6</sup> His chimeras could thus be interpreted as the revelations of some invisible and very intimate, sacred world.

Exhibited for the first time in Bucharest in 1921, Paciurea's hybrid forms aroused the scepticism of the public and of the majority of the critics, who were acquainted with a rather academic language. These enigmatic creatures had, at that time, neither an equivalent nor any kind of antecedent in Romanian art. Nicolae Tonitza (1886-1940), one of the most representative twentieth-century Romanian painters states in 1927: 'In Romanian art [...] those bizarre apparitions, modelled in almost immaterial surfaces had, naturally, a weird and almost intimidating impact on our public. The "experts" gazed at them with stupid smiles.'<sup>7</sup>

Recognised as one of the most talented Romanian sculptors of his lifetime, especially for his portraits, Dimitrie Paciurea suffered because of his contemporaries' contempt and indifference towards the most intimate part of his work. The same Nicolae Tonitza established a causal link between the incomprehension aroused by his chimeras and the sculptor's personality: 'In an apparently democratic country, a temperament like Paciurea's must

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<sup>4</sup> Ion Irimescu, « Amintiri din timpul uceniciei », *Arta plastica*, n°12, 1964, p. 590.

<sup>5</sup> Dimitrie Paciurea, n.d., not pag., Prints and Drawings Departement, National Museum of Art of Romania (NMAR), inv. 425.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolae Tonitza, « Dimitrie Paciurea », *Sinteze*, April 1927, in *Scieri despre arta*, 1964, Ed. Meridiane, Bucharest, pp. 144-145.

inevitably suffer. Isolated in an environment where neither his ideas nor his sensibility could find any echo, Paciurea retreated into a world of his own, into an ideal paradise.’<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the posthumous recognition of his work, Paciurea’s chimeras have never ceased to intrigue and to provoke the most varying reactions from art historians. In the 1950s, the famous Romanian art historian George Oprescu presented the chimeras as ‘lesser and lesser sculptural forms’, as ‘some kind of snakes or worms with beasts’ feet and female heads.’<sup>9</sup> Rejecting this sculpture founded on hybridism, Oprescu insisted nevertheless on the anatomical quality of these monsters, in a rather academic way: ‘The details of these monsters’ bodies (for instance the muscles insertion on the bones, their articulations etc) are so perfectly executed, that we can’t help regretting the great loss for Romanian sculpture brought about by the exclusive interest of Paciurea in these unreal fantasies.’<sup>10</sup>



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Chimera*, 1922-23, patinated bronze, 38,7 x 40 x 13 cm.  
© National Museum of Art of Romania

Dimitrie Paciurea was born in 1873 in Bucharest, into a family of modest condition.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the education of the children played a very important role, as Paciurea’s parents dedicated themselves to their instruction. After graduating from the Arts and Craftsmanship School in Bucharest (1890-1894), Paciurea obtained a scholarship in Paris. In April 1895, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>9</sup> George Oprescu, *La Sculpture roumaine*, 1957, Édition en langues étrangères, Bucharest, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> On Paciurea’s life see Petre Oprea, « Dumitru Paciurea. Anii copilăriei, adolescenței, debutului și afirmării (1873-1909) », *Revista muzeelor*, n°3, 1969, pp. 206-215 ; Petre Oprea, « Dumitru Paciurea (1910-1932) », *Revista muzeelor*, n°2, 1970, pp. 154-165. Also see Ion Frunzetti, *Dimitrie Paciurea. Studiu monografic*, 1971, Bucharest, Ed. Meridiane; Ion Frunzetti, *Dimitrie Paciurea, precursorul*, 1974, Bucharest, Ed. Meridiane.

sculptor entered the School of Decorative and Industrial Arts. Between 1895 and 1899 he also attended the sculpture classes at the Fine Arts School, in Gabriel Thomas and Antoine Injalbert's studios. Paciurea's name appears likewise in the students' register of the Julian Academy in 1898 and 1899.

Unfortunately, the lack of documents concerning his Parisian stay leads us to suppositions: we can only imagine that he was acquainted with the two annual famous exhibitions, the *French Artists Society Salon* and the *National Fine Arts Society Salon*, but also with those of the *Independents* or with Joséphin Péladan's *Rosicrucian Salon*, held from 1892 to 1897. A few months after Paciurea's arrival in Paris, the *Art Nouveau Salon* opened in Bing's eponymous gallery. Here he could have seen sculptures by Jean Dampt, Pierre Roche or Pierre Fix-Masseau, whose works included hybrids such as chimeras, sphinxes or sirens.

Back in Bucharest, Paciurea exhibited in 1900, for the first time after a four-year break. He would be a constant presence at the official salons and would participate, almost exclusively with portraits, in the events organised by the 'Artistic Circle', 'Artistic Youth' and 'Romanian Art', societies of a great importance in the first half of twentieth-century Romanian art history. The period that follows his return to Bucharest is rich in commissions, with Paciurea winning several official competitions: he sculpts two fountains in Craiova and a statuary group in Bucharest. He is also in charge of the Natural History Museum's façade.

1906 is a very significant year in Paciurea's career, as he exhibits the statue that will confirm his talent: 'The Giant', highly admired by his contemporaries, compared to Michelangelo's slaves, was commissioned for the *National Exhibition* which took place in The Filaret Park in Bucharest. This colossal stone statue, measuring three metres and a half, can still be seen in the park, but its initial place was changed, as with the other two statues belonging to the same group. In the following years, Paciurea shows his works in solo or group exhibitions, together with Constantin Brancusi and other young Romanian sculptors. From 1909 until his death he occupies the sculpture chair at the Fine Arts School in Bucharest, and he is appointed curator at Theodor Aman Museum in Bucharest, where he sets up his studio. This same year, at the *Official Salon*, Paciurea and Brancusi obtain the highest distinction awarded, the Second Prize for Sculpture.

Around the same period, Paciurea started working on a project he would be obsessed with all his life: a monument dedicated to the Romanian national poet, Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889). A solitary genius, the incarnation of the misunderstood poet, tormented by the chimeras that his poems evoke, Eminescu could have been Paciurea's *alter ego*. I will come

back to this aspect later. The initial plaster cast, measuring almost three metres, was destroyed by the artist, who was unhappy with the disinterest of the authorities. Fortunately, the National Museum of Art of Romania owns a patinated clay model and a few preparatory drawings that can give us an idea of this monumental project. Paciurea's intentions evoke the sculptural conceptions of David d'Angers, for the colossal proportions given to the poet's head, as well as for the importance given to the forehead and to the hair. The nude and tormented figures from the pedestal were judiciously compared by Romanian art historian Ioana Vlasiu to Rodin's work<sup>12</sup>, an influence that can be seen in many of his portraits, maternities or children's heads.

The pre-war period is a rich one in his career: in 1912 Paciurea made 'The Sleep of the Virgin', considered to be one of Romania's Neo-Byzantine masterpieces. He put it on display next to his 'Sphinx', the first appearance of a mythological figure in his work. After his 'Beethoven' (which some critics related to Bourdelles's), exhibited in 1913, coincidence wants that both Paciurea and Brancusi present two statues entitled 'The Prayer' at the *Artistic Youth*. Paciurea's taste for colossal heads materialises once again in the 'God of War', exhibited in 1915, one year before the entrance of Romania in the First World War, on the Allies' side. This work obtained the Bronze medal in 1929 at the *Universal Exhibition* in Barcelona.

The end of the war marks the death of both Paciurea's sister and of his fiancée, events that probably inspired the creation of a small sculpture, 'The Suppliated', 1919. Considered by the critics a 'bizarre and interesting' rough model, this sculpture makes the transition to the chimeras' period, as we notice a new interest in fluid forms, which will lose their human anatomical similitude, like in these small nudes. During the last decade of his life, Paciurea would dedicate himself almost exclusively to his chimeras. Nevertheless, in 1920, he honoured the commission of the National Theatre director, Victor Eftimiu, which consisted in a series of Romanian and foreign portraits of playwrights.

The sculptor continued to exhibit in Bucharest, but the city council and the officials no longer commissioned any other work from him. In 1921 Paciurea exhibited for the first time his chimeras at the *Romanian Art* exhibition. Due to the generic name of these sculptures, most of them entitled 'Chimera', and to the fact that not all of them are dated, we don't know precisely which sculptures were on display. In the following years, Paciurea exhibited his chimeras alongside other works: portraits, another monument project for Eminescu, a 'Head

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<sup>12</sup> Ioana Vlasiu, « Paciurea, le monument d'Eminescu et Rodin », *Revue roumaine d'histoire de l'art*, 1991, pp. 17-28.

of Satyr' or 'The God Pan'. Even if the chimeras weren't approved by most of the artist's contemporaries, Paciurea's hybrids found admirers among a few poets and artists close to the sculptor. One of them, the poet Alexandru Obedenaru (1865-1945) was so influenced by Paciurea's creatures that, in 1927, he published a long poem, 'Chimeras', most probably inspired by the sculptor's work and enigmatic personality.

In 1924, Paciurea sent five works to the *XIVth International Art Exhibition* in Venice, among which an 'Eminescu's Monument Project' and one chimera. The Project was broken on its way to Venice. As for the mysterious chimera, the only one he ever exhibited abroad, we haven't found any statement or photograph that could have helped us to identify it.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Chimère*, n.d., gouache and pencil traces on paper, 14,3 x 24 cm, inv. 6859, Prints and Drawings Department, NMAR. © National Museum of Art of Romania

The most controversial part of Paciurea's work was finally recognised by the authorities in 1927, when he obtained the National Prize for Sculpture for the 'Chimera of the Air, shown at the *Official Salon* in Bucharest. If the sculptor had always cautiously exhibited his sculpted chimeras together with other works, his drawings weren't shown to the public, except for one time, in 1929, at the *Drawing and Engraving Official Salon* in Bucharest. The rediscovery of his drawings allows us to measure the extent of his work. Paciurea certainly wanted to create new forms and, from this point of view, his drawings aim towards a much more liberated formal language than his sculptures. His contorted figures abandon all proportions and all anatomical similitude. His pencil drawings, as well as his watercolours, gouaches or ink compositions, representing chimeras, were most probably produced in the 1920s. The identification of the three drawings shown three years before his death, is impossible, due to the same lack of information I mentioned above. The *Salon* catalogue only gives us the title, which is invariably 'Chimera'. Only one of Paciurea's drawn chimeras is mentioned in the permanent exhibition of 1940, in the Pinacotek of Bucharest. All the other drawings seem to never have been exhibited during Paciurea's lifetime, being thus unknown to most of his contemporaries.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Chimeras*, n.d., pencil on paper, 17, 7 x 11, 4 cm, sketchbook V, f. 50 v., inv. 425, Prints and Drawings Department, NMAR. © National Museum of Art of Romania

The sculptor's last years are marked by suffering: a physical one, caused by cancer that led to his death on 14 July 1932, but also a moral pain, caused by bitterness and frustration. Indeed, the rare interviews of Paciurea prove that he considered his talent not fully recognised, especially by the establishment. The speech of the painter Camil Ressu, officially sent to Paciurea's funeral by the Romanian Academy, reveals an image of the artist that was used by later historiography: 'We thought that he was healthy, but he was sick; we believed him to be sceptical, but he was romantic; we believed him shy, but he was proud; we thought he was cheerful, but he was sad. Concealed in his inner life, he appears to us as mysterious, strange and cold. [...] His complex feelings were materialised in his art.'<sup>13</sup>

The question of the chimeras' origin in Paciurea's work often aroused contradictory opinions. There is no doubt that we should start asking ourselves about the sculptor's interest in medieval art, so rich in monsters of all kind. The recent discovery of a bronze sculpture signed by Paciurea, but whose attribution remains to be confirmed, shows the sculptor's curiosity for gargoyles, from which this figure, called 'Griffon' by its owner, is directly inspired: the long and tense neck from which a howl seems to burst out, its position and anatomy, entirely elongated, refer to this architectural element that is the gargoyle. Moreover, a drawing associating chimeras to a capital may confirm this source of inspiration.

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<sup>13</sup> « Paciurea », *Romania literara*, n°23, July 23, 1932, p. 3.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Griffon*, n.d., bronze, size not known, private collection, Munich.

Another source that Paciurea couldn't have ignored is Greek mythology. The chimera belongs to this repertory, where it is very well defined: the child of Typhoon and Echidna, it is a fire-breathing monster, commonly represented with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. But Paciurea didn't find his inspiration in this monster's description in Hesiod's 'Theogony'. It is more than tempting to relate Paciurea's creatures to popular Romanian mythology, where monsters, demons and other fantastic creatures are very frequent. However, Paciurea doesn't seem to have found direct inspiration in this popular source either. We can only notice that, through the symbolism of the Elements, Paciurea's chimeras could be related to the spirits that inhabit the rivers, the sky and the earth, spirits either evil or good, omnipresent in Romanian mythology. I am referring here to the 'Chimera of the Air', 'of the Water' and 'of the Earth', three sculptures probably made between 1927 and 1928.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *The Chimera of the Earth*, 1927-28, patinated bronze, 54 x 33 x 58 cm.  
© National Museum of Art of Romania

For ‘The Chimera of the Earth’ Paciurea has most probably found his inspiration in a familiar figure of Romanian popular mythological language: the dog of the earth. This fantastic creature, gifted with a diabolic intelligence, also known as ‘the child of the earth’, lives under cemetery crosses and plays the role of the guardian of the dead souls. It is a Romanian equivalent of the famous Cerberus, guiding the souls of the dead into the hereafter and ensuring that they never return into the world of the living. Paciurea couldn’t have ignored this widespread legend, and we can distinguish on one of his drawings one or two chimeras – very similar to ‘The Chimera of the Earth’ – at the foot of a cross. Constantin Brancusi could also have employed a similar popular repertory for his ‘Wisdom of the Earth’, 1907.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, for Paciurea, the figure of the dog of the earth could represent the key to the mystery of all his chimeras. Indeed, in 1932, a few months after Paciurea’s death, the writer Victor Ion Popa (1895-1946), a close friend of the artist, recalled a dialogue with the sculptor: ‘I asked him once: -Tormented as you are by Eminescu’s chimeras, why wouldn’t you try to do *The dog of the Earth*? All the mystery of the Romanian soul lies within it. He answered me later, as if to himself: -If I had the money, the life and the necessary force, I would create a museum of chimeras. And I will call it *The Dog of the Earth*.’<sup>15</sup> The appropriation of this theme could thus rest on Eminescu’s work, himself greatly inspired by Romanian folklore. ‘The dog of the earth’ could be related to one of his famous poems, ‘The

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<sup>14</sup> Barbu Brezianu, *Brancusi en Roumanie*, 1998, Édition Bic All SRL, Bucharest, pp. 143-144 et *Constantin Brancusi. 1876-1957* (Paris, Centre George Pompidou, April 14-August 21, 1995), Paris, Gallimard, 1995, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Ion Popa, « Paciurea. Cu prilejul expoziției retrospective », *Ordinea*, n°1, November 17, 1932, p. 2.

Ghosts' (1876), where this terrifying figure is invoked: 'In the name of all Saints, shut up and listen to howls of the dog of the earth, hidden beneath the stone cross.'

We also find chimeras on the poet's monument pedestal. The sculptor replaces the Rodinian figures by his own chimeras: therefore, they could suggest abstract concepts like Idea, Inspiration, or search of the Ideal. One of his monument projects surprises by combining a giant bust, identified as Eminescu's, with a long-bodied creature, situated in the inferior part of the monument, perched on a rocky pedestal. Another project is even more explicit, because it associates a chimera – very similar to the sculpted 'Chimera of the Air' – to an open book and to a mask. Two other projects use this same association chimera/human being, referring most probably to the same poet.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Project for a Monument with Chimeras*, n.d., pencil on paper, 24,2 x 20,9 cm, inv. 482, Prints and Drawings Department, NMAR. © National Museum of Art of Romania

But the chimeras are not exclusively associated to the poet's monument. Paciurea had imagined some independent chimeras monument projects, and some of them were listed as 'Project for a Monument with Chimeras' or 'Two Sketches for a Chimera'. We can also notice that this theme was rather flexible in the sculptor's mind and we can find it on projects for a tray or for a symphonic poem poster, like 'Aleodor', commissioned by a friend of the artist, the composer Victor L. Gheorghiu (1888-1951).<sup>16</sup>

Far from conveying a precise meaning, surpassing all the boundaries of all mythologies, Paciurea's chimeras invite multiple interpretations. This ambiguity of their signification can be perceived both in his drawings and in his sculptures. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>16</sup> Inspired by a folk tale, this poem is about a young king, Aleodor, whose fantastic powers and miraculous friends help him to accomplish the most difficult tasks.

study of Paciurea's graphic work allows us to identify new reflexion fields.<sup>17</sup> Except for the project for Eminescu's monument, the association of the chimeras to the Poet, or, more widely, to the Artist, is only to be found in the drawings. Symbol of Thought, of Inspiration, incarnation of the Ideal or of the creator's torments, the chimera is a sort of silent guardian or a bizarre muse accompanying the Poet. A small composition from the Prints and Drawings Department of the National Museum of Art of Romania is listed under the title 'Study for Composition – Orpheus'. This identification is pertinent, as the main figure holds a lyre in his left hand.<sup>18</sup> Mainly known as a self-identification figure for the misunderstood artist, the myth, but especially the tragic end of Orpheus correspond to the image that Paciurea had of the artist's destiny.

The chimera can be associated to Thought and to Creation, a supposition that Ioana Vlasiu has already underlined in one of her articles.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, three of Paciurea's drawings represent an athletic man on whose head rises a small chimera, like an emanation or an extension of his body. Two other drawings represent a man fighting against chimeras, surrounding his head. The theme of fight is much more explicit in a sketch where three chimeras burst out from a headless man's body, while another one is coiling around his leg, like the Laocoon's snakes. Here we can notice that chimeras can be a possible mode of metamorphosis.

Not having at our disposal a reliable chronology, we prefer to list them around general attributes and frequent themes, like Death, Woman or the Elements. One of Paciurea's first sculpted chimeras is dated 1919. Its actual title, 'Chimera', may have been added later and we don't know if this bronze was exhibited during Paciurea's lifetime. This figure recalls first of all the traditional representation of a siren or that of a Romanian mythological creature, called 'striga', an evil spirit issued from the metamorphosis of a dead or living human being. Paciurea's bronze represents an airy feminine demon with a human head, perched on a rocky base to which it is firmly attached by strong claws. The modelling of the body is very similar to that of the base. Except for the claws, the only parts of the body distinct enough are the breast and her bald head, whose features are barely sketched. A soundless howl seems to burst out of her mouth. But the strangest thing in this figure is the contrast between the immobility

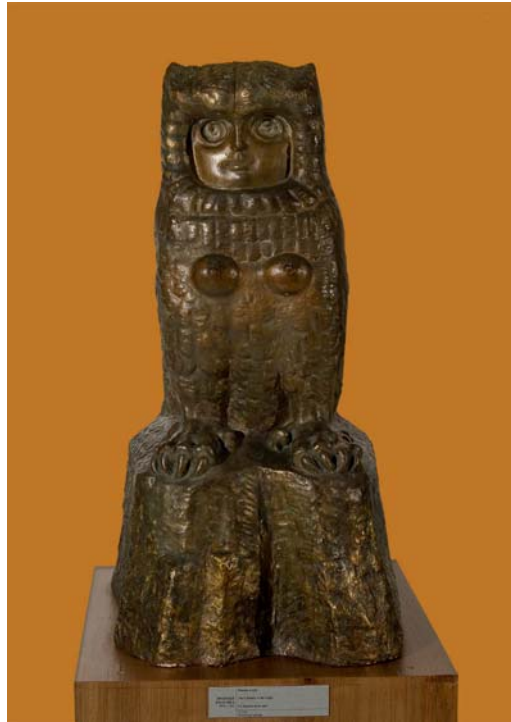
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<sup>17</sup> See Adriana Sotropa, « Les dessins de Dimitrie Paciurea (1873-1932) : “un tâtonnement des zones inconnues” », *Revue roumaine d'histoire de l'art*, 2004-2005, Bucharest, Édition de l'Académie Roumaine, pp. 47-55.

<sup>18</sup> See also Dan Haulica, « Triumful lui Paciurea. Orfeu si Himerele », *Contemporanul*, n°46, November 9, 1973, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.* footnote 11.

of the body, including the massive trunk, and this extension formed by the head and by the weird protuberances surrounding it.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *The Chimera of the Night*, 1928, patinated plaster, 96 x 46 x 56 cm.  
© National Museum of Art of Romania

Like the previous work, 'The Chimera of the Night', exhibited in Bucharest in 1928, associates the potentially dangerous feminine figure and the bird. In Romanian folklore, the owl is also endowed with evil powers: its cry predicts death. Unlike the earlier chimeras, this patinated plaster figure, measuring up to 96 centimetres, testifies to a completely different sculptural conception. Most of Paciurea's chimeras are conceived to be seen under different angles and become more suggestive through the way in which they stand out in space. On the contrary, 'The Chimera of the Night' forms a quadrangular compact block, made to be seen frontally or in a three-quarter view. The large eye-socket creates a fixed and harrowing look, while the childlike face has the impassibility of a mask. Its plumage is summarily executed, in small successive rectangles. Paciurea's interest in geometry is also to be found in the half-curves of the breast, which seem to be stuck on the body. Like others chimeras, this one has a patina and the various colours employed – green, brown and gold – give to this monumental creature a power of suggestion even more striking. A nocturnal figure, 'The Chimera of the Night' doesn't suggest the idea of a howl: it is a silent, hieratic creature. Childhood, femininity and death are concentrated in this solemn hybrid that seems to be watching over the threshold of some forbidden nocturnal world.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *Winged Chimera*, 1927, patinated clay, 20 x 18,5 x 12 cm.  
© National Museum of Art of Romania

Another chimera, perched on a pedestal that suggests an overhanging position, associates an androgynous head with a monstrous body, subject to contradictory tensions. Contrary to 'The Chimera of the Night', the accent here is put on sinuosity and on the body's flexibility. The hind paws are violently stretched, while the bust and the neck are thrown backwards, in a resistance or a defence position. The rest of the body seems to continue its climbing, which reinforces the tension within this creature. The impassiveness of the face is common to other chimeras. Nevertheless, far from displaying an impassive coolness, the small 'Winged Chimera' seems to smile. Its indefinable and enigmatic smile is analogous to the smiles painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. Paciurea must have admired the painter, as we can identify on a photograph a reproduction of 'Saint John the Baptist', among the reproductions on the wall, behind the sculptor. Unlike other chimeras, this bold creature is looking straight at the spectator, with its strange eyes, sketched out by two delicate depressions, underlined by the arch of the eyebrows.



Dimitrie Paciurea, *The Chimera of the Air*, 1927, patinated plaster, 162 x 47 x 74 cm.  
© National Museum of Art of Romania

‘The Chimera of the Air’, probably the most astonishing sculpture belonging to the three elements group, was exhibited in 1927, at the *Official Salon*. The National Prize awarded to this sculpture aroused many contradictory opinions and one of the most famous Romanian art critics of the time, Oscar Water Cisek characterised the chimera as ‘a totally anti-sculptural work’. ‘I think’, he continues, ‘that this *Chimera of the Air* wouldn’t have lost anything of its chimerical nature, if it had had more sculptural qualities. In its present state, this chimera has nothing to do in an artistic exhibition. It is nothing more than a simple weirdness, come from elsewhere than the artistic horizon’.<sup>20</sup> But Paciurea also had his defenders, among whom the critic Petre Comarnescu, who, even if he admitted not understanding this chimera, saw in it the personification of a thought, ‘just come out from a dream’.<sup>21</sup>

Nowadays ‘The Chimera of the Air’ has lost some of its golden patina, the white layer that once covered its face like a mask has disappeared, as well as the golden star that crowned it. We can still see its white mask on a photograph. This chimera was most likely inspired by another one of Eminescu’s poems, probably the most famous poem of Romanian poetry, ‘Hyperion’ (1883). All its attributes recall the poem’s main character. Hyperion is an

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<sup>20</sup> Oscar Walter Cisek, « Cronica plastica : Salonul oficial », *Gandirea*, n°6, June 1927, pp. 231-232.

<sup>21</sup> Petre Comarnescu, « Sculptura la Salonul Oficial », *Rampa*, n°2851, April 1927, p. 1.

immortal being, who, deceived by human nature, exiles himself in the universe and chooses to live its immortality in solitude. Death, exile, injustice, incomprehension, solitude, and suffering are the main themes of this poem. The chimera's white mask may thus recall Hyperion's impassibility and inaccessibility, its wings make us think of his tragic and terrible ascent, the golden patina of the light that he spreads around him and the star recalls his belonging to the celestial universe. Wound up like a snake, this strange pedestal evokes a cocoon from where the chimera bursts out. Spreading its thin angelic wings, this triumphant chimera is perched on this mound of convolutions, which could suggest a superposition of clouds or waves. Its paradoxical body is conceived neither for walking nor for flying, while its face expresses a cold indifference and a hieratic rigidity.

With the chimeras of the earth, air and water, Paciurea created three sculptures tightly bound to their specific elements: 'The Chimera of the Water' has a long and pointed face, as if it were conceived to split the waters; 'The Chimera of the Earth', with its feline and snakelike body, is firmly attached to the earth; and 'The Chimera of the Air' belongs to the space by its extreme stretching, and by the display of its wings which slash the air. Similar to some sort of enchanted visions, these chimeras are extremely polished, and Paciurea gave them a brown-golden or a brown-red patina. The light seems thus to cover their forms, by highlighting the brilliance of their surfaces.

The anthropomorphic character of the chimeras is not a constant element. Sometimes, the head is just an excrescence, like in another sculpture, where the creature is organically bound to its pedestal by a sort of umbilical cord which inserts into its abdomen. Paciurea pursued his reflexion on the link between figure and pedestal in other sculptures. He even inverted the hierarchies, like in this small chimera, whose face is very vaguely humanlike: a sort of rough brick, of an ancient appearance gives birth to the chimera. It seems to emerge from this mass in which its paws are stuck.

Even if the artist's statements on his art are rare, we know that he clearly stood up for sculpture, in the ancient debate on the rivalry between sculpture and painting: 'Sculpture is the most plastic of all arts, being the most tangible and the closest to reality, unlike painting, that uses colour to create this illusion.'<sup>22</sup> 'Closest to reality' doesn't necessarily mean for Paciurea that the sculpture must render real objects or beings, because 'this art aims to realise in a raw material [...] a flower, a leaf, animals, human beings or models without being.'<sup>23</sup> These 'models without being' probably evoke his strange chimeras.

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<sup>22</sup> Dimitrie Paciurea, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

Professor of the most important generation of Romanian sculptors, Paciurea didn't durably influence them – with the exception of Horia Boamba (1890-1923). Far too intimate to be transmitted, Paciurea's art remains unique and untypical in the Romanian context. The only student receptive to the chimeras' fascination was not a sculptor, but a painter: Victor Brauner (1903-1966). Indeed, Brauner was one of Paciurea's students in 1922, at the Fine Arts School in Bucharest. Like many Surrealists, Brauner executed a series of chimeras in the 1930s. But Paciurea's chimeras represent more than a series. They are the climax of his entire work, of his spiritual and aesthetic quest.