

## CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI (1876-1957)

After graduating from the Bucharest Fine Arts Institute, Brancusi exhibited his *Ecorché* in 1903 at the Romanian Athenaeum.

One year later he dared adventure, and left for Paris. After traveling for two months and a half, he stopped in Vienna and Munich, where he worked to make some money. He arrived in Paris on July 14, 1904. The capital city was celebrating France's national holiday with flags, brass bands and fireworks. "See how Paris is saying welcome to me, excellent foreboding!" He often visited the studio of Antonin Mercier at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and, for a while, he worked in Rodin's studio.

In 1907 he exhibited at the *Salon de la Société nationale des Beaux-Arts*. That same year he executed the *Prayer*. This was a first step in his evolution toward simplified, essential forms. Now that he had found his line, he drew his inspiration from the basics, and made *La Sagesse (The Wisdom)* and the *Wisdom of the Earth* (1908).

Let's remember that 1907 was also the year when Picasso invented cubism with his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*.

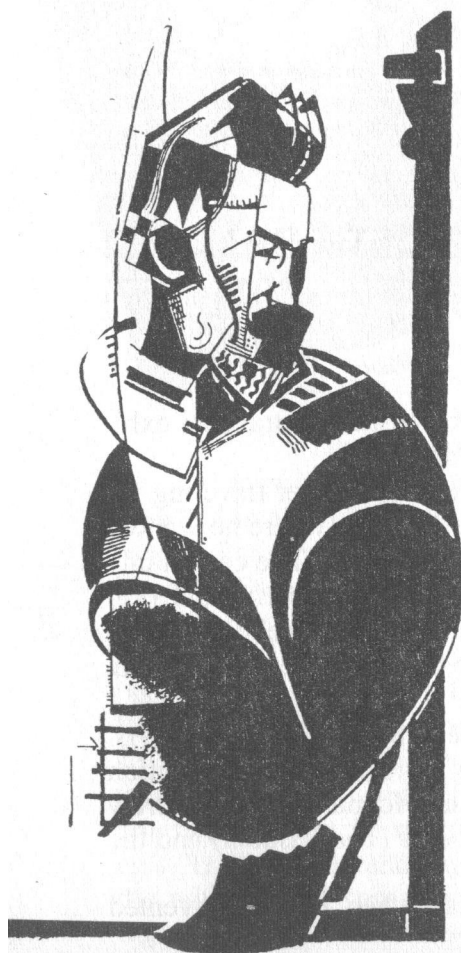
In 1909, starting with the portrait of Baroness Renée Frachon, Brancusi began his series of egg-shaped sculptures with the *Sleeping Muses*; that was over in the 20s, with the pure oval of the *Beginning of the World. Sleep*, the piece that preceded this series, was bought in Bucharest by collector Anastasie Simu, the founder of the Simu Museum.

Brancusi now began other series, which were later developed along the years: the *Kiss*, the *Column*, the *Birds* and the *Fish*.

Brancusi, whose "mind was that of a shepherd from the mountains of Thracia," as Jean Cassou put it, and who was "Socrates' brother," as Erik Satie called him, also paid very much attention to his own epoch. The artist's biographers tell the following story of an event which proved to be, as Brancusi himself put it, "an actual release mechanism." Before World War I, Brancusi, with his friends Fernand Léger and Marcel Duchamp, visited the Aviation Salon in Paris. Looking at a propeller, he exclaimed; "Look, this is sculpture! From now on, sculpture must never be inferior to this." Less enthusiastic, Duchamp noted: "Propeller (in French, a pun: '*Hélice, Délice d'hélice*' – delight with a propeller). Painting is now over. Can anyone make anything better than this propeller? Tell me, can you do it?"<sup>1</sup>

In 1920-1922 Brancusi was to a certain extent associated with the Dada group. He made friends with Erik Satie, Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Man Ray and attended several events organized by the group. By 1922, he wrote on a drawing that represented Socrates: "Dada will bring us the things of our time."

In 1922, Brancusi found himself involved in the conflict between Breton and Tzara. Breton invited Tzara to join the committee that had to prepare a "congress to define the directions of, and defend the modern spirit." Tzara rejected this invitation and Breton's initiative. Breton issued a communiqué in the *Comoedia* paper, where he inserted vague accusations against Tzara and warned the public "against the actions of this man known as the promoter of a current from Zurich," and against "the tricks used by a publicity-hungry impostor." As a retort, Eluard, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Satie and Tzara called a meeting of the entire avant-garde. It took place on February 17 at the Cloiserie des Lilas and sided with Tzara.



M.H. MAXY, *Constantin Brâncuși, INTEGRAL 4*, Bucharest (1925)

Among the 45 artists who signed the final resolution: Satie, Arp, Man Ray, Pansaers, Cocteau, Tzara, Charchoune, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Huidobro, Van Doesburg, Péret, Eluard, Brancusi. In signing, Brancusi added: "There are no foreigners in art."

In October 1926, Brancusi went to the United States for the second time that year. He was invited for a one-man show at the Brummer Gallery, New York (27 East, 57th Street.) The opening was on November 27. The artist left Paris on September 1 and his works followed him in mid-October. But at the New York customs, the expert in charge with checking the goods, who was a sculptor himself, refused to exempt the bronze *Bird in Space* in from customs duties, as he saw no quality of a work of art in it. He said it was a vulgar piece of metal, so Brancusi had to pay customs duties. This assertion, rather than his work, assured that inspector's place in the history of 20th century art. The exhibition

was a great success and it was shown again in Chicago, on January 4-22, 1927, according to the notes of the unflinching Marcel Duchamp, who was the Romanian artist's "agent" in the United States until his death. When he returned to New York City from Chicago, Marcel Duchamp saw that the New York customs issue had not been settled. He advised Brancusi to pay the requested \$210 and then sue immediately. The government brought in Robert I. Aitken and Thomas H. Jones as experts. Brancusi chose Edward J. Streichen, a painter and photographer, Forbes Watson, editor of *The Arts* magazine, Frank Crownshield, editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine, William H. Fox, director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Henry MacBride, an art critic for the *Sun* and the *Dial*, Epstein, a sculptor. The trouble had begun in October 1926 and now it was January 1928. Obviously, in such a matter where an artist was opposed to the government, the status of modern art was at stake, in a more than symbolic manner. The experts for the U.S. Government were adamant.



# INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF MODERN ART ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS

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FEBRUARY 15th TO MARCH 15th 1913  
AMERICAN & FOREIGN ART.

AMONG THE GUESTS WILL BE — INGRES, DELACROIX, DE  
CEZANNE, REDON, RENOIR, MONET, SEURAT, VAN GOGH,  
HODLER, SLEVOGT, JOHN, PRYDE, SICKERT, MAISON,  
BRANCUSI, LEHMBRUCK, BERNARD, MATISSE, MANET, SEURAT,  
LAUTREC, CONDER, DENIS, RUSSELL, DUFFY, BRAQUE, HENRI,  
GLEIZES, SOUZA-CARDOZO, ZAK, DU CHAMP-VILLON,  
GAUGUIN, ARCHIPENKO, BOURDELLE, C. DE SECON.

LEXINGTON AVE.—25th ST.

(1913)

As far as Robert Aitken was concerned, this piece did not trigger any emotional reaction of an aesthetic nature – he claimed.

And Thomas Jones felt this was not a work of art because it was too abstract: an abuse of the sculptural form.<sup>2</sup>

After two years of consultations, the ruling came on November 26, 1928. Justice was served, as far as the Romanian artist was concerned, but the document also reveals the exemplary desire of the American court to keep up with the changes that had taken place in the artistic language.

It argues that during that time something had been born, called the new art school, whose purpose was to represent abstract ideas rather than natural subjects. Whether people liked those new ideas and the schools representing them or not, the court decided that the very fact of their existence and their influence on the world of the art acknowledged by the courts must be taken into consideration.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the ruling on this “matter,”<sup>4</sup> there is also a drawing of Brancusi’s *Bird*, which was to be included in publications of court rulings, as a model. An unexpected homage to the work of Brancusi, who became an example of modernity by way of a court ruling.

In June 1928, Kurt Schwitters asked Brancusi to join an association of avant-garde artists, with Mondrian, Schlemmer, Van Doesburg, Malevitch, Lissitsky, Picabia, Max Ernst, Naum Gabo and others. It seems that Brancusi did not accept this invitation, and his relations with the avant-garde as an artistic movement constituted around groups did not go any further. He continued to pursue his research on his own.

For several decades, to Romanian artists, Brancusi was a landmark and a model, and his studio in Paris was a gathering place for the hall of fame. Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, Benjamin Fondane often visited him. The painter Herold even worked in his studio for a while (1930). In 1931 Victor Brauner borrowed from Brancusi a camera and went up and down Paris with it, taking photos. One of these is particularly interesting: it shows a man covering the eyes of a clairvoyant woman. This happens in front of the building at 83, Boulevard Montparnasse. The address is perfectly clear on the photo. That was the building where the accident in which Victor Brauner lost his left eye took place seven years later.

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Romanian sculptors came to his studio to learn: Milita Petrascu, Romul Ladea, Mac Constantinescu.

In his turn, Brancusi wanted his work to be known in Romania. Until the very eve of World War II, he attended almost regularly the Salons of the *Tinerimea artistica* (*Artistic Youth*) group and other events in Bucharest. In 1924, at the grand exhibition of modern art organized by the *Contimporanul* magazine, Brancusi brought in his own weight to the Romanian participation.

Translated from French  
by Monica VOICULESCU



## NOTES

1. Pontus Hulten, *Natalia Dumitresco-Alexandre Istrati, Brancusi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995.
2. Pontus Hulten, *Natalia Dumitresco-Alexandre Istrati, Brancusi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995, p. 185.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
4. For more details on this episode, see also André Paleologue, *Brancusi contre les Etats Unis – un procès historique (Brancusi vs. The United States – A Historic Trial)*, Paris, Biro, 1996.