

## THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUȘI'S SCULPTURES: AN ANTE LITTERAM ROMANIAN VISIONARY

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### ABSTRACT

*Through the refined works of one of the most esteemed Romanian sculptors, the philosophical traits of his creations will be traced, as well as the educational legacy passed down to future generations. It is a window into art that highlights an innovative approach that has made its mark on the collective imagination, thanks to the appreciation of raw materials, geometric essentiality, and formal purity. However, this revolution stems without ever disowning the connection with his homeland, diverging when he did not adhere to the then-prevalent trends of dissolving the object in space and the mere mimetic approach based on direct observation. Instead, he shifted towards an increasingly elegant union of essence and reality, harmonizing the sculpted object with the surrounding space. He was able to extract the final work from different raw materials, leading the plastic arts toward 'abstraction', delving into the soul, uncovering the truth, and endowing each masterpiece with its own life. His often simplified and stylized research, although it deviated from naturalistic representation, still maintained links with reality and was often inspired by mythological elements. Everyone can recognize themselves in his works open to the world, glimpsing fragments of their personal experiences and values accompanying us in timeless growth, besides in overwhelming experiential and emotional sharing.*

**Keywords:** art; artistic; Brâncuși; philosophical; philosophy;

### INTRODUCTION

The primary quality of any philosopher or anyone preparing to study a discipline cannot fail to be intellectual honesty. Despite a generalized love for art from each of us, it must be admitted that the *laymen* know Brâncuși only for his fame.

Still, many of us never had the opportunity (the honor and the burden) to admire his work unless one has spent stays in Romania or in the most cosmopolitan cities that have the privilege of preserving some of his masterpieces: from Bucharest to Craiova, from Venice to Paris, passing through New York, Washington D.C., Berkeley, Chicago, Philadelphia, to Pasadena, Canberra, and Oxford.

In particular, upon entering the rooms of the *National Museum of Art of Romania* in Bucharest proves indispensable to replace the verb *to look* with *to observe*, which allows reflection not only on some works by the sculptor from Hobița (Peștișani) made in the period

before full maturity but, above all, on the influence generated on his students and on the artistic-cultural heritage that can be perceived with the naked eye even for those who do not fall within the ranks of the experts. However, it is not enough. It is helpful to dissect the hidden aspects, motivations, feelings, and sensations that led him to be one of the prominent artists on the world stage<sup>1</sup> between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The same occurs when visiting Târgu Jiu and strolling along the bank of the Jiu River. One encounters the imposing *Endless Column*, the profound *Table of Silence*, and the intriguing *Gate of the Kiss*, giving rise to contrasting emotions oscillating amidst amazement and uncertainty, bridging the realms of the real and the symbolic. In both cases, one returns home with a more substantial baggage of knowledge and curiosity about art history but feels that something is still missing, such as more hidden philosophical and educational aspects that will try to be explained in this open contribution without any claim to exhaustiveness.

## 1. SCULPTING THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANVAS: BRÂNCUȘI'S ARTISTIC REBELLION AND THE DANCE OF MATTER AND SPIRIT

Philosophy was used here as a common thread since it presents itself as a *toolbox* devoid of impositions from above, a faithful travel companion facilitating the interpretation of works of art with a diverse perspective through critical thinking, never remaining one-dimensional. Delving deeper is also assisted by the strenuous work of Brâncuși, enabling the rediscovery and reevaluation of the not-always-apparent connection between philosophical reflection and art.

Upon entering the wing of the *Romanian Modern Art Gallery*, the *Danaide* captivates with its most harsh, essential, and violently personal form, evoking an intimate phenomenology of the myth. A daring realistic-plastic rebellion, in some ways, avant-garde but never abstractionist, against formal channels (despite having successfully assimilated the classical Greco-Roman models), versus dogmas experienced as extremely limiting and no less stringent, in the continuous search for his style that cannot be placed in any specific current.

From his aphorisms<sup>2</sup>, simplicity should not be considered the ultimate goal of art but a process that isn't without obstacles, followed without any forecast, free from space-time

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, in correspondence with his parents, dated April 24, 1921, let emerges the admiration towards C. Brâncuși defined him first as «a fine sculptor», and a month later (May 26, 1921), communicating with his friend John Quinn used even more praiseworthy words like «the best sculptor». Direct citations were collected and systematized by Wilhelm James J. (1990), *Ezra Pound in London and Paris, 1908-1925*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, p. 271. Continuing with the reading of the chapter, a more detailed description can be found on p. 274, provided by the US publisher Robert Menzies McAlmon.

<sup>2</sup> Pollack Reginald (1988), *Șaman și showman: un portret intim al legendarului sculptor român Constantin Brâncuși, făcut de artistul care i-a fost vecin la Paris*, in Lemny Doina (2020), *L-au întâlnit pe Brâncuși. Interviu și mărturie prezentate de Doina Lemny*, Vremea, București, pp. 244-254. She took up this contribution from the North Carolina magazine *Art & Antiques*, May 1988, pp. 95-98, 114, 116. In detail, «Brâncuși maintained a profound connection with Greek and Coptic sculpture, the monolithic forms of early civilizations, likewise with his Romanian heritage. Presenting himself as a kind of intermediary who brought the primordial into the 20th century, he spoke of Leda, Socrates, and Milarepa as if they were among his closest friends and of Atlantis, the lost city, as if he had been there. Sometimes, while we were both talking in his studio, I gathered that he wanted to make me believe that all his works had come into being through some secret, magical act. He was charming, impressive, and somewhat terrifying, but above all an enchanter delighted by his power to enchant and trouble» (pp. 247-248). [All quotes have been translated by the authors from Romanian to English, faithfully reporting the extrapolated passages].

deadlines, making use of the unequivocal practical sense. An incessant pure psychological representation that rejects the mere naturalistic transposition to emphasize the essential features, the simple forms capable of capturing the attention with games of volumes, lights, and shadows on some specific anatomical parts that are deliberately made (and not) to the detriment of Hellenistic perfection.

The accentuation of archaic depictions is self-evident, a continuous return to primitive origins and mysticism, with linear, stylized, incomplete motifs, periodically taken up with new techniques, materials, and fusion of myriad patterns but always remaining faithful to that refined manual skill (ex. direct carving) that distinguished him.

The authentic message, as introspective as it is emotional-spiritual, which not infrequently gave rise to futile misunderstandings, must not be seized by remaining immobile and blindfolded before appearances or the most ephemeral exteriority, rather, catching the depth of reality in its complex being, layered and ever-changing. It is a work in progress, an exercise that is both individual and collective simultaneously. This endeavor necessitates the abandonment of traditionally held conventions, leading to a perspective where millennial cornerstones are either demolished or, at the very least, revisited. However, this did not happen to the US customs officer, who, in the autumn of 1926, during an inspection, found in his hands the *Bird in Space* not recognized as a sculpture but considered a household tool, asking for the payment of a tax of several hundreds of dollars. Here, a dilemma arises not only in law: what are the criteria for qualifying a piece of art, and who is assigned this task? But above all, the courts hold the authority (not in the Weberian sense of the term) in defining what is artistic and what is not (?) While contextualizing the historical-cultural framework of the time, it is reductive to qualify art as the only transposition of nature and leave out the mastery, the craftsmanship, the free inspiration, and the autonomous creation of the artist as well as his authentic expressive originality.

The transformation of matter into spirit and of spirit into matter - they are reciprocally combined in a whole - is constant, rhythmic, and is found in the mature phase where the sublime simplicity is the driving force for the breathless search for a balance between heaven and earth, finite and infinite, tradition and innovation without acclaiming that Michelangelo's torment but seeking smoothness and creative joy. And here, one can seriously glimpse the checkmate against the more conservatives, a fantastic ascensionist synthesis that sprouts from the Brancusian fracture.

## 2. BRÂNCUȘI'S ARTISTIC ODYSSEY: SCULPTING BEYOND NEWTONIAN BOUNDARIES INTO THE ENLIGHTENED REALMS OF ENERGY AND LIGHT

It is clear to everyone what Brâncuși's profession was, but this does not mean it is not worth putting a magnifying glass on his messages. For Pandrea, it is a solicitation steeped in emotions, a philosophy that emphasizes life as distinct from existentialism as such.

Sketching a personal portrait, he traces the Tolstoian influences and what remains of the notes with Joyce to sketch a bond with the *eternal return* of the Nietzschean *equal*, appreciating its contents without turning him into an adept with blinders, always maintaining that autonomy of critical judgment as pointed out in the following passages:

*Like Joyce, Brâncuși believed in the "eternal return" depicted as a spiral. Similarly to Joyce, he held a belief in geometry, mathematics, and cosmic laws. Nature is mathematized through laws, and humanity and society*

*develop within regularities (legitimacies) in vital fluids that need to be deciphered and formulated<sup>3</sup>.*

In addition,

*The philosophical conception of Brâncuși is not fatalistic in the Eastern sense: it reflects a Carpathian and European perspective. His understanding of destiny differs from Eastern fatalism. In philosophy, specifically in epistemology, he maintained the thesis of the unfathomable and unknowable cosmic mystery that surrounds us, perturbing and referred to as 'destiny' in a certain philosophical language, akin to other Stoics. Brâncuși resigned himself to destiny. [...] Life, viewed as an expression of inexorable and perturbing destiny, leads to serenity, euphoria, acceptance, and detachment from oneself. This represents Constantin Brâncuși's precise stance in the realms of knowledge and ethics. It is a position that is simple and rural, yet as solid as a granite rock amidst the waves of decadent Western cosmopolitanism<sup>4</sup>.*

Life must be faced integrally without running away despite the difficulties, accepted in its eternal, cyclic totality, which will repeat itself without stopping. Nietzschean perspectivism rejects the Christian linear temporal approach, inviting one to abandon any form of transcendence, any attempt to understand life to grab the essence of even the most tragic things and abandon oneself to them. A superficial reading will plunge this sculptor into aberrant pessimism; it is imperative to endorse the appeal to live one's life fully, accepting it and coming to terms with it in a spherical sense. This is also what emerges from his creations, and it is far-fetched to overlap or identify Brâncuși with *Übermensch*, the overcoming of the Apollonian and the supremacy of the Dionysian but it is profitable instead to highlight the common elements found in his works since:

*Brâncuși can be considered a philosopher, a moralist, and a prophet with immortal, stoic, ancient, and rural-modern parables, not only an able sculptor, an abstract modernist, a founder of contemporary cubism and geometrizing or surrealist art, a seeker of essences and essentializing simplifications<sup>5</sup>.*

Essentiality, sobriety, and simplicity<sup>6</sup> also accompany the input for a fresh outlook of space with philosophical reverberations. This can be seen first from the frequent use of pedestals to provide impetus to the works and secondly from the specific placement of some of them in contexts full of symbolic meaning. For example, the Târgu Jiu Park where the three works blend perfectly with the surrounding environment, providing the visitor with the

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<sup>3</sup> Pandrea Petre (2010), *Brâncuși, amintiri și exegeze*, Vremea, București, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Pandrea Petre (2010), *Brâncuși, amicii și inamicii. Sociologia lui Brâncuși*, Vremea, București, p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> Pound Ezra (1970), *Guide to Kulchur*, New Directions Publishing, New York, p. 59.

impression of something eternally spontaneous as if nothing else could replace them, as if they were born in that atmosphere<sup>7</sup>.

They transmit the original artistic intentions, without filters, censorship, and tampering, because they are chosen and placed to pay homage to the Romanian fallen of World War I<sup>8</sup>, the heroes who paid with their lives defending democratic rights and the values of the patriotic identity:

*[...] the ideal urbanistic combination between the Coloana infinitului, Poarta sărutului, and Masa tăcerii is primarily inscribed within the order of meanings and admirably serves for the most authentic structuralist deciphering<sup>9</sup>.*

For Mocioi, the philosophical resonance of dialectics in motion becomes intelligible for the first time thanks to communicative realism, a daily sentimental training to look beyond the external envelope, beyond trivial appearances<sup>10</sup>. It is a difficult task since it involves putting aside, even for just a moment, the final work and getting closer to the inceptive idea. It implies asking oneself not rhetorically which are the archaic elements and which are the innovative ones, how and why they have been synthesized in the sculptural representation. An introspective journey that cannot expect immediate and circumscribed answers, supported by several dichotomies such as centrifugal force-centripetal force, continuity-discontinuity, life/fecundity-death, unity-splitting, materialization-dematerialization, man and woman, etc.

Șușara elegantly returns to the theme of space by mentioning the “sacred monsters” of modern science such as Newton and Einstein. How? Brâncuși’s sculptures exist: it is pulsating, timeless, alive, and tends to be more and more independent in space and from space without ignoring the material from which it was generated. Coming back to *Bird in Space*, one will not find the elements that are used to identify a bird, such as the forelimbs, the feathers, the beak, etc., since only the tangibility with which dealing is lost; in spite of this, the upward motion remains, such as the chase for the upward thrust, and that sense of freedom and gratefulness towards more distant destinations by detaching oneself from earthly stability as if to want to escape.

It is undeniable, some qualifying physical characteristics are missing but the bird is forsooth there, traceable in its purest essence. If we placed ourselves in front of it now, what would be observed?

Physics prompts us to answer formally that it is a static system from which three elements are highlighted: the bird in polished brass, a small circular base, and the quadrilateral that supports both. Given the *III Law of dynamics*, the first element exerts a force perpendicular to the plane which is equal to its mass multiplied by the acceleration of gravity; the same applies to the small circular base and the quadrilateral. The ground floor, in turn, exerts an opposite force that is equal in intensity to the  $\Sigma$  of the previous three directed upwards:

<sup>7</sup> Hertzberger Herman (2000), *Space and the Architect: Lessons in Architecture 2*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 103-105.

<sup>8</sup> Scott A. David (2002), *Copper and Bronze in Art: Corrosion, Colorants, Conservation*, Getty Publications, Los Angeles, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Uscătescu George (1985), *Brâncuși și arta secolului*, Meridiane, București, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Mocioi Ion (1987), *Estetica operei lui Constantin Brâncuși*, Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, pp. 124-127.

*[...] all his works, [...] remain in the canonical space of the Newtonian paradigm, that is, in the captivity of mass, substance, cohabitation, through the force of gravity, with their founding source, with the primordial and amorphous matter, with the Earth itself. Even when Brancusi's forms drastically simplify and tend to condense a field of maximum meanings in a formal economy with minimal discursive accessories, [...] although the expressive focus inward, the centripetal forces of the form and the appropriation of light are evident, the struggle with gravity, even if present, is nowhere near won<sup>11</sup>.*

Here, a key passage takes place in his stylistic evolutions: in works such as *The Kiss*, the *Wisdom of the Earth*, or the *Danaïde*, the artist, despite bringing notable innovations, remains inspired by the Newtonian approach, by the connection with the Earth and by the narrowness of the matter<sup>12</sup>. However, the desire to simplify his works through elementary forms<sup>13</sup> led him towards progressive dematerialization, abandoning three-dimensionality and converting mass into energy; this can be seen, among others, in *The Sleep*, the *Beginning of the World*, *Torso of a Young Man*, and the *Măiastra*<sup>14</sup>, where gravitational theories are overcome by distancing themselves from the stability of the Earth and moving towards the light. A cutting-edge upward dynamic that frees creations from the weight of matter, providing them with their light, enhancing their energy, canceling temporal chains, and definitively embracing the Einsteinian paradigm shift.

Was he closer to Newton or Einstein? Although the change of pace that Einsteinian theories<sup>15</sup> have brought to modern science and the reflections that continue to be matured on his contributions are also known, even in this case, no transposition *ad litteram* will be valuable, throwing us into a blind alley. For instance, without falling into reductionism, *general relativity* and the *equivalence between mass and energy* (previously studied as two separate quantities) have been greatly appreciated, among others, by Brâncuși that finally managed to release the vitality inherent in the sculpture that does not remain confined to the material but ready to show its full potential only to those who will be able to grasp its deeper meaning:

*Brâncuși separates [...] from the Newtonian paradigms of sculpture by concentrating matter, by suppressing mass or by converting it into energy, by removing objects from the regime of daylight and by putting them in a position to generate their light<sup>16</sup>.*

<sup>11</sup> Șuşara Pavel (2020), *Brâncuși*, Monitorul Oficial, București, pp. 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Owen J. Barry (2019), *Dictionary of World Biography*, ANU Press, Canberra, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Lanchner Carolyn (2010), *Constantin Brâncuși*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, pp. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> The *absolute space* and the *absolute motion* after Aristotle, Galileo Galilei, and Newton are overturned by Einstein. For the sake of completeness, it should be remembered that before Șuşara (2020) even the painter Niram Romeo (2007) made Brâncuși's sculpture dialogue with Einstein's physics in an exhibition entitled *E = mc<sup>2</sup>*. A fragment can be consulted at the following address: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4-mRN-zPOU&t=6s>]. Prof. Vacariu Gabriel (2018), analyzing the *Endless Column*, invites us to reflect on intriguing mysteries: the *PHI golden ratio*, the *sequence of Fibonacci*, and the *proportions of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man* at the pp. 9-10 in the presentation entitled *Despre "metoda lui Brâncuși"* pp. 1-16 at the following address [<http://filosofie.unibuc.ro/filosofie-si-film/despre-brancusi/>].

<sup>16</sup> Șuşara Pavel, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

## CONCLUSIONS

An attempt was made to understand how it is counterproductive to qualify the Romanian sculptor as an “unrealized philosopher” but the borderline between art and philosophy is not so marked. It proved equally essential to retrace the friendships and life experiences that forged him.

Myriad aspects are available for exploration, but for synthesis, the main ones have been highlighted without indulging in Pindaric flights, aware of his timeless interest in cosmology or for the incredible strength of birth, of the phenomenology of life but also the animal world or the unexplored in all its forms, postponing this investigation to future works:

*It was in the spirit of Brâncuși back then, and he will forever be, to scrutinize the origin of beauty, form, color, meaning and becoming, number and rhythm, and above all, the question: where do we come...? And towards which and to what zenith are we going?<sup>17</sup>*

One has the sensation that each of his works is infused with pedagogical and philosophical teachings, generating a resounding resonance perceptible to this day that extends well beyond his time and his geography of origin<sup>18</sup>. He managed to blend essentiality with the clearest simplicity by digging into the purity of created objects, transcending the perimeter of the tangible, and heading toward more metaphysical dimensions. From this perspective, therefore, Brancusi’s clean, dynamic, and stylized sculptures represent a *medium* that opens the doors of eternity, freeing us from temporal constraints and the superficiality of appearances: simplification as revelation. The omnipresent valorization of authenticity starts from an inverted conception of art, configured as a universal language capable of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, communicating without filters with a heterogeneous audience, and transmitting emotions and thoughts without resorting to complex explanations. In other words, it provided a reflexive response to modernity.

He managed to make the work of art and the observer interact thanks to the simplified forms, involving the users, inviting them not to assume a passive attitude but actively participate in the exploration of internal beauty and the search for the founding meaning, fueling a connection between creation and those who make it their own through contemplation.

A heavy legacy that is intertwined with his experience, his cultural identity, and expressive freedom, providing the springboard for the internationalization of Romanian art.

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<sup>17</sup> Paleolog V. Georgescu (1967), *Tinerețea lui Brâncuși*, Tineretului, București, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> Coen Ester, *Umberto Boccioni*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, p. 207.

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