

CONSTANTIN
BRANCUSI



SCULPTURE



Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) first exhibited his sculpture in New York at the 1913 Armory Show, alongside work by Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and other vanguard artists. The presentation of international modern art was met with fanfare, and Brancusi's sculptures were later singled out by *Vanity Fair* magazine as "disturbing, so disturbing indeed that they completely altered the attitude of a great many New Yorkers towards a whole branch of art."

Born in rural Romania, Brancusi came to art through an immersion in craft; in his youth he learned direct carving techniques, eventually becoming a skilled woodworker. In 1904 he moved to Paris, where, like most of his peers, he made sculpture by modeling clay and casting it in bronze. He quickly abandoned this technique, choosing instead to carve his sculptures from stone and wood. With a vocabulary of simplified shapes, he created visually reductive works that evoke rather than resemble the subjects named in their titles, pushing form to the threshold of abstraction. Equally revolutionary was Brancusi's approach to the pedestal; his bases, composed largely of geometric shapes, performed a dual function, serving simultaneously as components of the artworks and as their supports.

This exhibition charts Brancusi's achievements through a focused presentation of eleven sculptures, drawn mainly from MoMA's collection. The works on view demonstrate Brancusi's approach to materials such as bronze, stone, and wood and show his repertoire of subject matter, which consisted primarily of people and animals. His works on paper, photographs, and films are displayed as extensions of his sculpture—additional avenues through which he explored his primary themes and concerns, chief among them how objects occupy space. A selection of documents from the Museum's archives positions Brancusi in the context of New York, where his work was exhibited and found its earliest supporters. What emerges is a rich portrait of an artist whose risk-taking and inventive approach to sculpture changed the course of the art that followed.



After moving to Paris from Romania in 1904, Brancusi studied at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts and then briefly assisted the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Like Rodin and his peers, Brancusi modeled in clay, the preferred method of making sculpture at the time. In 1907 he renounced this approach, instead choosing to carve his work from stone. This shift was accompanied by the artist's embrace of simplified forms and, with it, an antipathy to realism. With limestone, travertine, and marble, Brancusi made works that conveyed their references through minimal means; an ovoid with a stylized ridge, for instance, could signal a head. He cast some of his carved sculptures in bronze, then polished the resulting works to achieve a broad range of finishes. While bronze casting allows an artist to produce "editions" (or near-exact duplicates), Brancusi worked each sculpture extensively, subtly varying its dimensions and surface qualities. In 1914, Brancusi added wood, a material familiar to him from his early craft-based education in Romania, to his sculptural vocabulary. Using both new and salvaged woods, he sought to enhance their inherent properties, leaving some works rough-hewn and finely sanding the surfaces of others.

Although Brancusi made hundreds of sculptures in his lifetime, he limited his subject matter to people and animals, with just a handful of exceptions. He especially preferred portraits of women (as seen in *Mlle Pogany* and *Blond Negress II*), children's heads (as in *The First Cry* or *The Newborn*), and birds (such as *Maiastra* and *Bird in Space*). Relationships seem to emerge between his favored subjects—mother and child, bird and egg. In fact, the artist Marcel Duchamp, a friend of Brancusi's, wittily conceded to a reporter from the *Brooklyn Eagle*, "It is true that there is a touch of egg to Brancusi's art." The most abstract of Brancusi's sculptures is *Endless Column*, whose form evolved from the 1918 version made of oak, on view in this exhibition, to a colossal steel variant erected in Tîrgu-Jiu, Romania, in 1937. The sculpture's importance lies in its use of repetitive geometries—a formal quality it shares with both Romanian folk art and African art—and in its suggestion of infinity through a finite form.



Bird in Space. 1928

Brancusi constructed the environment of his studio at the Impasse Ronsin, in Paris, with great care. Aside from sculptures, he filled this space with functional objects he made himself, such as stools, fireplaces, benches, and pedestals for his sculptures, which he carved from wood, limestone, and marble. These bases became part of the art; many were created for specific sculptures, and some were constructed from existing sculptures. For example, into the base of *Maiastra* the artist incorporated the sculpture *Double Caryatid*, which depicts two figures. On other occasions Brancusi made pedestals that could support a variety of sculptures rather than one work in particular. The artist famously experimented with various combinations in his studio, though the pairings were never haphazard. He preferred to present his sculptures in a manner that acknowledged their subjects. So his *Bird in Space* works soar high above one's head, often set on lofty tripartite bases; his portraits are typically positioned at eye level; and the heads of children and sleeping women tend to live low to the ground. The unprecedented importance Brancusi bestowed on his bases transformed sculpture's relationship to the space it inhabits and, by extension, to the world at large: if a base is part of the art, nothing differentiates art from its surroundings.





In addition to sculptures, Brancusi made drawings, photographs, and films, all of which can be understood as extensions of his work in three dimensions. On paper, Brancusi chose subject matter that echoed that of his sculpture. In addition to drawing women, he depicted objects assembled in his studio, artworks among them. He did not produce many drawings, and those he did were executed with whatever materials were on hand. Many of the finished works betray a nonchalance foreign to his sculptural practice.

By contrast, his relationship to photography was sustained and deliberate. He took many photographs of his sculptures, often capturing how they were installed in his studio. Although some of his photographs are straightforward representations, many obscure rather than reveal their subjects. Abstracted and occasionally out-of-focus images capture the play of light and shadow on the surfaces of the artist's works.

Brancusi's least known experiments unfold in film, a medium to which he was introduced by Surrealist artist and friend Man Ray. Although few of Brancusi's films survive, many of those that do demonstrate his interest in the movement of objects through space and affirm his desire for his work to be experienced in the round.

Constantin Brancusi Sculpture

The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
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Organized by Paulina Pobocha,
Associate Curator, with Mia Matthias,
Curatorial Fellow, Department of
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Cover: *Endless Column*. Version I, 1918

Inside cover: *Mlle Pogany*. Version I, 1913

Unless otherwise indicated, all works
are in the collection of The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.

List of Works

Maiistra. 1910–12
White marble, 22" (55.9 cm) high, on
three-part limestone pedestal, 70"
(177.8 cm) high, of which the middle
section is *Double Caryatid*, c. 1908;
overall 92 × 12 ¾ × 10 ⅝" (233.7 × 32.4
× 27 cm)
Katherine S. Dreier Bequest, 1953

Mlle Pogany. Version I, 1913
Bronze with black patina, 17 ¼ × 8 ½
× 12 ½" (43.8 × 21.5 × 31.7 cm), on
limestone base, 5 ¾ × 6 ⅜ × 7 ⅝" (14.6
× 15.6 × 18.7 cm)
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss
Bequest (by exchange), 1953

The First Cry. 1917*
Bronze, 6 ⅞ × 10 ¼ × 6 ⅝" (17.5
× 26 × 17 cm)
Private collection

Endless Column. Version I, 1918
Oak, 6' 8" × 9 7/8" × 9 ⅝" (203.2 ×
25.1 × 24.5 cm)
Gift of Mary Sisler, 1983

The Newborn. Version I, 1920**
Bronze, 5 ¾ × 8 ¼ × 5 ¾" (14.6 ×
21 × 14.6 cm)
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss
Bequest (by exchange), 1943

Socrates. 1922
Oak, 51 ¼ × 11 ⅜ × 14 ½" (130 × 28.8
× 36.8 cm), on limestone cylinder,
11 7/8" (30.2 cm) high
Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1956

The Cock. 1924
Cherry, 47 ⅞ × 18 ¼ × 5 ¾" (121
× 46.3 × 14.6 cm)
Gift of LeRay W. Berdeau, 1959

Bird in Space. 1928
Bronze, 54 × 8 ½ × 6 ½" (137.2
× 21.6 × 16.5 cm)
Given anonymously, 1934

Young Bird. 1928
Bronze, 16 × 8 ¼ × 12" (40.5 × 21 ×
30.4 cm), on two-part pedestal of
limestone and oak, 36 × 13 ½ × 14"
(91.4 × 34.2 × 35.6 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M.
Burden, 1964

Fish. 1930
Blue-gray marble, 21 × 71 × 5 ½" (53.3 ×
180.3 × 14 cm), on three-part pedestal
of one marble and two limestone
cylinders, 29 ⅞" (73.9 cm) high × 32 ⅞"
(81.5 cm) diameter at widest point
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss
Bequest (by exchange), 1949

Blond Negress II. 1933
Bronze, 15 ¾" (40 cm) high, on four-
part pedestal of marble, limestone, and
two oak sections, 55 ½ × 14 ¼ × 14 ½"
(141 × 36.2 × 36.8 cm)
The Philip L. Goodwin Collection, 1958

Bird in Space. c. 1941
Bronze, 6" (182.9 cm) high, on two-part
stone pedestal, 17 ⅞" (44.1 cm) high
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M.
Burden, 1964

Selection of gelatin silver prints.
c. 1910–37

Selections from *The Films of Brancusi*.
c. 1923–39. Digital transfer of 35mm film
Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée
national d'art moderne/Centre de
création industrielle

* On view through November 2018
** On view starting November 2018