ARRIVING AT IMPASSE RONSIN

After arriving in Paris from Romania in 1904, Constantin Brancusi moved through a succession of studio spaces, eventually settling at 8, impasse Ronsin in January of 1916. Visitors described the journey from bustling city streets to the quiet, plant-lined gravel pathway that led to the studio entrance. Upon entering the three-room space with soaring ceilings and skylights, guests were met with sculptures in various stages of completion, raw materials, and Brancusi himself.

Already an established sculptor, Brancusi had brought with him artworks, some of which are on view here, that demonstrated many of the themes and materials that he would continue to explore for the next forty years. The artist remained at impasse Ronsin until the end of his life, working across mediums including sculpture, photography, works on paper, and film. The consolidated living, working, and display space set the stage for Brancusi's career-long reconfigurations of sculptures and pedestals. The studio environment would become an ever-shifting composition.

THE WORK BEGINS

Soon after moving to impasse Ronsin, Brancusi set about creating sculptures in his new studio. Like many modern artists at the turn of the twentieth century, he embraced direct carving, hewing into stone and wood with chisels, hatchets, and saws. The resulting works feature intricately textured and articulated surfaces that show the marks made by his tools. Brancusi described the intuitive immediacy and tactility of the technique: "Your hand thinks and follows the thoughts of the material."

Many of these works are also exemplary of the artist's wide-ranging sources of inspiration. These include wooden sub-Saharan African masks and statuary forms, which proliferated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Paris due to European colonialism, as well as Romanian folk art and vernacular architecture, which he encountered early in his life. Building on his foundational experiences with carved wood furniture, Brancusi simultaneously began creating increasingly complex bases and pedestals that could serve as independent objects, upending the traditional relationship between an artwork and its support.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Throughout the 1920s, the studio continued to be a dynamic space for the artist to rearrange his sculptures. Brancusi combined works from within his holdings into ephemeral constellations of sculptures and pedestals that visually and thematically affected one another. He called these temporary ensembles *groupe mobiles*. This gallery features arrangements inspired by Brancusi's photographs of his studio and this unique approach.

Brancusi also created a sense of dynamism within a single work by pairing smooth surfaces with rough-hewn textures. The resulting contrast highlights the transformative nature of his refinement process, now applied to wood, in addition to marble and bronze. Using a range of tools and materials, he polished, sanded, and carved many of his works until nearly every sign of his hand had been removed. On view are examples of his differing approaches, including roughly carved oak, smoothly finished walnut and cherry wood, gleaming bronze, and luminescent onyx. Brancusi deftly adjusted his method and technique to the sensibilities of the material at hand, stating: "You can't do what you want, but what the material allows."

THE GHOST STUDIO

Awe-struck visitors to Brancusi's studio resorted to invocations of the sacred, referring to it as "a cathedral," "a sanctuary," "a temple," and in earthly terms, "a still, white forest." Many remarked on an overwhelming impression of whiteness, inspired by the abundant natural light, plaster sculptures, and the artist's clothing choices. As sculptures were sold, Brancusi often replaced them with a plaster cast, a phantom of the absent work. Punctuating the space were colored backdrops against which the artist positioned and photographed his works, as well as the rich tones of his many different materials. Together, the varying shades, hues, and textures of the studio came together to create a singular experience.

The translucent scrim and colored flooring in this gallery trace the final footprint of Brancusi's studio at 11, impasse Ronsin, an evocation of the demolished architecture. Several elements correspond to their placement within the studio: including *Doorway*, the tool wall, and film documentation of Brancusi's *Fireplace*, which is projected in the second of its two locations.

Hear from the exhibition's design team about how they sought to evoke the artist's studio.

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MODERN MATERIALS AND MOVEMENT

Paris in the 1920s and 1930s was an electric place. Streamlined industrial designs, gleaming metal, and humming motors heralded the Machine Age, and Brancusi carried that influence into his studio. He incorporated and repurposed modern-day technologies and materials, producing *Newborn II* (c. 1927), his only work in stainless steel. Expanding on his desire for dynamism within his sculptural forms, Brancusi integrated the potential for mobility using ball bearings and motors. The artist had long intended for his works to transform based on the shifting perspective of a viewer, and now select sculptures could be propelled by machine in addition to manually.

In the 1930s, Brancusi realized a longstanding interest in working on a monumental scale upon receiving two major commissions, one for an ultimately unbuilt temple near Indore, India, and the other for a World War I memorial in Târgu Jiu, Romania. For the latter, Brancusi returned to *Endless Column*, a form he explored over the course of his career in a range of sizes. Produced at a towering height, the nearly 100-foot-tall cast-iron version is a feat of technical engineering. The artist captured his kinetic and technological innovations on film, using the medium as a tool for both documentation and experimentation.

THE GUARDIAN OF HIS OWN MUSEUM

Over time, Brancusi's studio became an increasingly fixed site of display, in part due to the growing scale, heft, and ambition of his late works as well as the artist's own declining mobility. During World War II, Brancusi chose to remain in occupied Paris, safeguarding his artworks. By the war's end, the sculptures in the studio had largely reached their final positions.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, Brancusi still offered guests a dynamic experience through carefully choreographed visits. The artist scheduled tours according to the season and time of day to maximize light, dramatically unveiling bronze sculptures to startle his delighted guests with their gleaming reflections. Desiring to maintain the installation of the studio as a total environment beyond his lifetime, Brancusi took on the role of caretaker and protector of his life's work, calling himself "the guardian of my own museum." And what a museum it was; visitors flocked in droves to cross the sacred threshold and capture a glimpse of the artist and the world he created.

ENDLESS REMEMBRANCE

Brancusi died on March 16, 1957. His last years had been haunted by the threat of eviction and demolition of his studio. In 1956, after much negotiation and desperate to preserve the studio's unity, he agreed to bequeath its contents to the French government on the condition that it be reconstructed.

A provisional installation of the studio opened in 1962 in Paris's Musée national d'art moderne (National Museum of Modern Art), Palais de Tokyo. This was followed by two different reconstructions outside Centre Pompidou, where the museum relocated, in 1977 and 1997. The last, known as Atelier Brancusi, remained open until 2023, when it closed for renovations.

The next chapter of Brancusi's bequest is still being written. This exhibition—made possible by that closure—and you, in seeing it, are part of that process.

Upon exiting, you are invited to sit on Brancusi-inspired stools and listen to the recollections of visitors to his original studio. You can also follow a self-guided tour to explore works by artists who, during Brancusi's lifetime and since, have engaged with, contested, expanded upon, and reimagined his ideas about art, ensuring they remain alive and active, like the sculptures themselves and the studio in which they were created.

Interested in looking at Brancusi's legacy through the works of other artists? Scan the QR code to follow a self-guided tour through the Museum's collection galleries on Floors 5, 4, and 2.

HISTORY OF THE IMPASSE RONSIN STUDIO

Brancusi weathered floods, wars, and threats of eviction over the course of four decades on impasse Ronsin. At the end of his life, Brancusi sought to preserve his life's work as a total environment and prevent its dispersal. Its final configuration is evoked by the to-scale white structure in this room.

The evolution of Brancusi's studio on impasse Ronsin is outlined here through chronologically organized archival materials and photographs. From correspondence and images to legal documents and invoices, these papers capture his time living on impasse Ronsin from 1916 through 1957. Together, they illustrate the studio as a place of spatial and material experimentation, a lively setting for a rotating cast of visitors, and an imperfect structure in need of continuous maintenance and care.

How did Brancusi's studio at impasse Ronsin change over time?

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THE PARTY

The lore of Brancusi's parties is well documented by the parade of visitors who dined and danced with the artist, some of whom he captured on film. Brancusi hosted a number of gatherings in his studio; one visitor reflected: "Brancusi is an incomparable cook. A dinner cooked and served by him is an event." The menus included lamb, chicken, and potatoes grilled and baked in the coals of his self-constructed forge. Meals were fueled by fine wines, champagne, and spirits that "would take paint from the door." Dinner was followed by freshly ground Turkish coffee, shortbread cookies, and music—at times played by Brancusi himself, a skilled violinist and flautist, or from the artist's collection of about two hundred records representing genres from around the world.

Discover how Brancusi's studio was a place of lively hospitality.

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