**MoMA Audio**
**Brancusi: The Artist & His Studio**
Studio Visitor Anecdotes
Platform Gallery Monophones

## Valentine Hugo on: A journey to Brancusi's studio

**Narrator 1:** In 1955, the French artist and writer Valentine Hugo published an essay about her visit to Constantin Brancusi's studio at the impasse Ronsin. The following excerpt describes her experience:

**Narrator 2:** One day, a long time ago, I finally went to ring at that blue door. After turning up a cul-de-sac flanked by large garages, I ended up in the remains of an abandoned garden on a charming country lane where birdsong and the rustle of leaves filled the air. This seemed all the more unexpected as I was barely 50 meters from the deafening roar of the city.

A man was standing in front of me—it was Brancusi, dressed in his working whites, bathed in sunlight, the ivory tone of large handwoven canvases, a beard of the same color framing the even features of his face, where the eyes smiled more than the mouth.

Inside, everything was calm and seemed to be alive around me. The white Cocks soared up in a blaze of shrieks, full of luminosity; the *Endless Columns* climbed somberly into space; the *Birds* flew by in a rush of infinite grace; and the *Sorceress*, the *Caryatid* were there, and the large gray marble *Fish*. Gently, with a precise hand, he removed the thick covers, the silken cocoons, light as a feather, soft as a mother's fur, releasing the radiant works of polished bronze that were preserved in this way from any blemish.

Excerpted from: Valentine Hugo, "Hommage à Brancusi," *Cahiers d'art*, 30 (1955): 241–42.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Man Ray on: Dinner parties in Brancusi's Studios

**Narrator 1:** American-born artist Man Ray was a close friend of Constantin Brancusi. He helped Brancusi purchase photo equipment, and even made a film portrait of the artist at Brancusi's request. Here is one of Man Ray's memories of the studio, included in the photographer's 1963 autobiography.

**Narrator 2:** The first time I went to see the sculptor Brancusi in his studio, I was more impressed than in any cathedral.

Coming into Brancusi's studio was like entering another world; I was overwhelmed with its whiteness and lightness. This whiteness extended to the home-built brick stove and long stovepipe. A solid white plaster cylinder six feet in diameter, cast on the floor of the studio, served as a table—with a couple of hollowed-out logs to sit on.

Soon, I became part of the circle of visitors who were welcome when we pulled the string at his door, which rang a deep-toned gong he'd installed. One night we were a party of four or five whom he had invited for dinner. It was a rare thing with him, the height of hospitality. He thrust a leg of lamb on the cinders of his stove, laid the places on the plaster disc, around which we sat and drank small glasses of Rumanian firewater while waiting for the roast. When it was ready, there was a huge dish of polenta to go with it.

The meal finished, Brancusi piled up the dishes and carried them to a corner sink, came back with a stiff steel brush and scraped the table clean and white again. Our clothes were more or less white with the plaster, but he said not to worry—it was perfectly clean stuff. Then he produced a violin and played some Rumanian folk tunes, accompanying them with a little dance.

Excerpted from: Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (Little, Brown and Company, 1963): 206–214.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Robert Payne on: The magic of Brancusi's studio

**Narrator 1:** In a 1949 essay, the British writer Robert Payne describes a journey through Brancusi's studio. Here are some excerpts from his writing:

**Narrator 2:** The bell rang outside the great square studio in the impasse Ronsin. There is a long pause. You hear the bell echoing inside the studio. You know he is old and hard of hearing, and sometimes has no desire to receive visitors. And then at last he comes, and there is on the old red face the smile of a young child.

Immediately, almost before you have entered the great barn-like studio, he motions to you to keep still while, like a conjuror performing with finesse the first of a series of tricks, he switches on the current which makes the turn-table revolve. And on this turntable, gliding rather than revolving, there moves the polished bronze statue he calls Leda.

A fish, in blue slate-coloured stone, also revolves; and if its shape reminds you of the flint axe-heads of our ancestors. And behind rise the white dove columns of wood moving into endless height. Around the room there are still more birds and fishes, so that you feel you are in a forest where only birds and fishes remain. It is all light and the beating of wings.

We had wandered freely round the studio. Sometimes Brancusi would snatch off a dust-cover, revealing an egg, a portrait, a tortoise made of wood, and almost hidden away there were some sketches. I asked if he had made many drawings. He pulled on his cigarette, and shrugged his shoulders. "Why draw?" he said. "We have to go back to the simplest things—the shapes of birds, fishes, columns—and it is hard to go back to these beginnings."

Excerpted from: Robert Payne, "A Meeting with Brancusi," *World Review*, no. 8 (1949): 61–65.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

**Jeanne Robert Foster on: Brancusi as a host**

**Narrator 1:** The American poet and journalist Jeanne Robert Foster developed a close friendship with Constantin Brancusi during the 1920s. She wrote about her visits to his studio several times. Here is a selection of excerpts from her writings:

**Narrator 2:** The most interesting men in Paris today are not its writers but its artists. A Romanian by birth, who has lived twenty-five years in Paris. He is modest in speaking of his work, but one feels that he has attained serene confidence in the beauty and the significance of his own creations. He is singularly handsome, a man of great personal distinction, broad-shouldered with a noble head covered with curling black hair; his black beard, streaked with white. The lightness of his movements, the dancing light in his eyes, give one the impression of an elderly faun.

The path to his atelier on impasse Ronsin leads through a graveled garden-court planted with shrubs and trees. After the clatter of the Paris streets, that approach prepares one for the spaciousness of his workshop. As the soft light of the Paris afternoon faded into the grey of twilight, one imagined his studio to be part of a cool, lofty white temple, the workroom of one of the gods upon lofty Olympus.

Like many Frenchmen, Brancusi is an incomparable cook. A dinner cooked and served by him is an event. If two or three intimate friends have the rare pleasure of dining with him, he will cook the dinner over a fireplace of his own construction built into a corner of his studio. He is a connoisseur of wines and of strange fiery spirits that, as one visitor said, would take paint from the door.

He will grind the after-dinner coffee at the table in a Turkish coffee mill of brass. He will astonish by flashes of wit and knowledge. He will talk of his work, of its materials, of the old wood that he loves and of the beauty of marble and stone. He will talk gently of women and lovingly of his friends.

Excerpted from: Jeanne Robert Foster, “New Sculptures by Brancusi,” *Vanity Fair* (1922): 68, 124.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Angus Wilson on: The “living stillness” of Brancusi’s studio

**Narrator 1:** Following a visit to the impasse Ronsin in August 1923, the British writer Angus Wilson published an article titled: “A Visit to Brancusi’s.” Here is an excerpt from Wilson’s essay:

**Narrator 2:** A brisk, gritty shuffle on a marble-dusted floor, followed by an agitated “*Entrez*!” answers your knock on the great swing doors, and unceremoniously, but with the rarest courtesy, the Master himself shows you in.

Brancusi’s studio is rather like stepping suddenly out of the vortex of Paris into the middle of a still, white forest. Marbles and stands are strewn in disorder everywhere, yet despite this disorder the air hangs calm as if under Summer-morning chestnut trees; and into this living stillness sunrays slide from the high square windows, striking the finished pieces and revealing the loveliness of their form.

When you have seen everything, Brancusi takes you to a rough divan and shows you some of his own photographic reproductions, and makes the Turkish coffee, grinding it himself. There is an eloquence in the caress of his short, worn hands and in the critical swallow-glances of his deep-set eyes.

While he is heating the water, he tells you of his early life, of his years at the academies and how the study there cramped his work. And he says: ’Look at the body of a man or of a woman. Isn’t it a lovely thing? But how foolish to try to copy it! Is it not better for the artist to try to create something beautiful of his own?’

Excerpted from: Angus Wilson, “A Visit to Brancusi’s,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), August 19, 1923.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Reginald Pollack on: Living next door to Brancusi at the impasse Ronsin

**Narrator 1:** Many artists had studios at the impasse Ronsin, and for eight years, American painter Reginald Pollack lived next door to Brancusi. Here is part of a 1988 essay in which Pollack shares his memories of Brancusi and his studio:

**Narrator 2:** When I first met Brancusi, I was dazzled by this artist who seemed, in his studio, to be a sorcerer in his temple. But as the years passed, we grew friendlier.

Once he dropped in when my wife was about to cook a tongue, which he examined with distaste, leaving abruptly. Twenty minutes later he returned, just as the tongue was ready to be eaten. Without preamble, he removed it from the table, saying that it was fit only for cats. He set a leg of lamb he'd just roasted in his forge in the center of the table. 'Ah, you are also a cook?' my wife said. Brancusi laughed delightedly and declared that he was one of the greatest cooks in the world.

He also used to reminisce with pleasure about the escapades—bacchanales, he called them—he had had with the medical students from Necker Hospital nearby. He'd invite the interns over, roast a gigot on the forge, serve it with asti spumante, and they would all dance around his studio, drunk and naked.

At times, talking to him in his studio, I had the feeling that he wanted me to believe all his work had sprung into existence as the direct consequence of some secret, magical act. He maintained this public image so skillfully that posterity has accepted it at face value, remembering him as a modern-day artistic shaman. The myth captures a part of Brancusi that was larger than life; it also obscures the human side of him I knew.

Excerpted from: Reginald Pollack, "Shaman and Showman," *Art & Antiques* (May 1968): 94–98, 114–116.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Margaret Anderson on: A party at chez Brancusi

**Narrator 1:** American writer and publisher Margaret C. Anderson first visited Brancusi's studio in 1921. Years later, she reflected on the experience in her autobiography, *My Thirty Years' War*. Here are some excerpts from her book:

**Narrator 2:** Constantin Brancusi lives in a stone studio in the impasse Ronsin. His hair and beard are white, his long work shirt is white, his stone benches and large round table are white, the sculptor's dust that covers everything is white, his Bird in white marble stands on a high pedestal against the windows, a large white magnolia can always be seen on the white table.

A party at chez Brancusi is not to be missed. He begins his preparations in the morning. Lighting a freshly rolled cigarette, he strolls out into the [town] and does his marketing. By the time the cigarette is finished, he has acquired a chicken, potatoes, and a salad. He strolls back to the studio and sculpts until dinner time.

When his guests arrive, he lays out plates, silver, white paper napkins, wine and champagne glasses on the stone table. While he laughs and talks with you, he makes chicken soup on the clay stove he built himself. When you have finished the soup, he grills the chicken over the coals. He fills your glasses constantly, tells stories constantly.

By one in the morning, he decides that the night will be lost unless the party will spend it with him in the streets of Paris. Brancusi leads the way through the streets. He stops at cafés where there is music, talks with everyone, drinks with everyone, dances in the middle of the floor. He is not in the least drunk. He is happy.

Excerpted from: Margaret Anderson, *My Thirty Years' War: An Autobiography* (Stratford Press, 1930), 251–55.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Isamu Noguchi on: Working as an apprentice in Brancusi's studio

**Narrator 1:** In 1927, the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi met Brancusi for the first time. After this initial encounter, Noguchi went on to serve as an apprentice for the artist, spending seven months in Brancusi's studio. Decades later, Noguchi wrote about his encounters in a 1976 issue of *Craft Horizons* magazine. Here are some of the reflections Noguchi shared:

**Narrator 2:** I was privileged to observe Brancusi in mid-career, at the height of his powers, most generous to me, and always with his eyes smiling.

The studio was big, with high ceiling, large skylight and windows. A small adjoining room was where he slept. His attire was all white, his beard already white, and white dust covered the studio with its blocks of marble. There was a white stove in which he cooked his famous steaks; and there were two white dogs to which he fed milk in a washbasin.

Brancusi tried his best to din into me the need of tedious and exacting work. "Concentrate and stop looking out the window!" he would shout. Or, "Whatever you do, it is not for fun or for study. You must treat it as the best thing you will ever do." He was insistent on the right way to handle each tool for the job and material, and on the respect to be accorded to each.

Brancusi came [to Paris] to learn, a student of the academy. But he brought with him something more than learning: the memory of childhood, of things observed, not taught, of closeness to the earth, of wet stones and grass, of stone buildings and wood churches, hand-hewn logs and tools, stone markers, walls, and gravestones. Brancusi carried this memory all the way from Rumania by foot.

Excerpted from: Isamu Noguchi, "Noguchi on Brancusi," *Craft Horizons* 36, no. 4 (1978): 26–29.

Original text has been edited for clarity.

## Jacqueline Matisse Monnier on: Memories of the studio

**Narrator 1:** The French artist Jacqueline Matisse Monnier is the granddaughter of painter Henri Matisse and came to meet Brancusi through her family's connections. In 2011, she shared this anecdote about the comfort she found in Brancusi's studio:

**Narrator 2:** I first visited Brancusi's studio with my mother, in the winter of 1949–50, when I was a student at the Sorbonne. As a student, I didn't know many people in Paris, and luckily, I used to visit Brancusi in the impasse Ronsin about once a week to have a good meal.

I remember you had to go through a thick wooden doorway that Brancusi had sculpted to get from the main room into the kitchen, where we often ate together. He made delicious lunches in a stove that he had designed for grilling, and that was always wonderful, and we dined at the large round plaster of Paris table. We often talked about new books, particularly books about mysticism, which he enjoyed. And, of course, we talked about art.

When I first saw his studio, I loved it. The studio was all white, which was rather unusual at the time. I recall he gave me a tour when I first arrived. All his sculptures were his 'babies'. He would keep black cloths over most of them. He would carefully take off the cloths, fold them, preciously store them away, and shine each piece before he would show it to you. If any sculpture needed to be manipulated—a few turned on their bases—he preferred to do it himself.

He was so proud of his work, and would look and look at his pieces.

Excerpted from: Jacqueline Matisse Monnier, "Memories of Brancusi," in *Serra/Brancusi*, ed. Oliver Wick, exh. cat., Fondation Beyler, Riehen/Basel, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011, p. 41.

Original text has been edited for clarity.