

## Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

## "Brancusi" exhibition

The "Brancusi" retrospective exhibition (27 March – 1 July 2024) explores all the facets of the creation of Constantin Brancusi, considered to be the father of modern sculpture. Take a tour in the exhibition with Ariane Coulondre, curator, and with artists and friends of Brancusi

### Colour code:

**In black**, Ariane Coulondre's voice

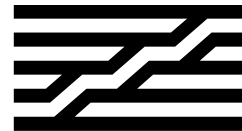
**In blue**, quotes form artists and friends of Brancusi

**In green**, quotes form Brancusi

**In purple**, the musical excerpts

**In red**, all the other sound indications





# Podcast transcription

Reading time: 19 minutes

## 1. Whiteness and light

[jingle of the show] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears. You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

[Dynamic Romanian percussion music] 120 years ago, a young Romanian artist crossed Europe on foot to settle in Paris. In the early 20th century, here in the bustling French capital charged with artistic effervescence, Constantin Brancusi invented a whole new way of sculpting, a universal language using a direct carving technique to produce simple shapes.

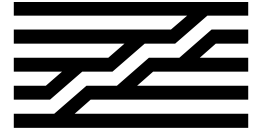
Considered to be the father of modern sculpture, Brancusi soon enjoyed an international reputation: many artists and admirers came to visit his studio in Impasse Ronsin (15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*).

The artist Valentine Hugo recounted:

[Theremin music]

That day, I went down a cul-de-sac lined with huge garages, and found myself in the remains of an abandoned garden. I found the gate I was seeking in a charming leafy country lane alive with birds. It was all the more surprising given that I was but 50 metres from the hell of the city.

I waited a short while for the door to open, then the grave, harmonious tolling of an invisible bell and my loudly beating heart gave me the impression of entering like a swinging sound, and I was suddenly blinded by light in an unknown place, immense and white, teeming with vibrant, unknown beings.



A man stood before me, it was Brancusi, in a white working man's blouse, with a white beard framing his symmetrical face with a smile that twinkled more in his eyes than it danced around his mouth.

All was calm before and above me, between high, whitewashed walls reaching up to a glass ceiling over which the Paris sky arched a pearly hue. All was calm, white Cocks soared like a spray of cries spiked with sparkles... *Birds* took flight in an infinitely graceful swoop.

The sculptor's studio was above all an emotion rather than a mere location. It was ablaze. Visitors to the studio were blasted with an onslaught of whiteness and light, greeted by a host of upright rooster figures reaching for the sky.

This was a motif that Brancusi used over and over for thirty years. Roosters are the emblem of France, the artist's host country, and also symbolise daybreak through their song.

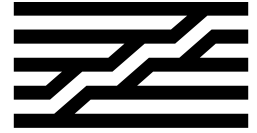
Light was one of the components of Brancusi's art. In his studio it was a work of art in its own right, as well as being reflected by his sculptures.

He would polish his bronzes patiently for their smooth surface to shine like a mirror.

*The Sleeping Muse* is a fragment of a reclining head, balancing on one cheek. It hints at dreams and utter tranquillity, free of all material contingencies. The form of the fascinating face is closed, a flawless oval, the features are barely hinted at. Yet it opens up with an interplay of reflections of its surroundings, including the image of those who approach it.

[Electronic organ melody] The first time I went to see the sculptor Brancusi in his studio, I was more impressed than in any cathedral. I was overwhelmed with its whiteness and lightness. Coming into Brancusi's studio was like entering another world." [Man Ray]

[Sound of gong]



## 2. The Origins of a New Language

[Dynamic Romanian percussion music] How did this new language spring forth? From what imagination? How did Brancusi become Brancusi?

Born in 1876 in a farming village in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains, Brancusi had a rocky childhood. Yet his precocious talent was such that he was admitted to the Craiova School of Applied Arts, then the Bucharest School of Fine Arts.

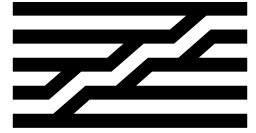
He arrived at the age of 28 in Paris. He caught the eye of the grand master of French sculpture, Auguste Rodin, and worked briefly as his assistant in 1907. Works such as *The Sleep* showed the master's direct influence. The young sculptor soon left Rodin to forge his own path. Three major works, *The Prayer*, *Wisdom of the Earth*, and *The Kiss* marked a clean breakaway.

This was a key moment in Brancusi's body of work since he broke with modelling in 1907-1908 and in a way severed his relationship at the time with Rodin. He took up direct carving, meaning that he attacked the material, whether wood or stone, without any previous sketches, which requires great control in technique and a great grasp of the material.

His relationship with Rodin is interesting because they were two great sculptors in the early 20th century. Rodin was a master, deemed as such, but would impose the shape he wanted on the material.

Interestingly, Brancusi had an entirely different approach to sculpture. For Brancusi, the artist must not impose a shape on the material, it is the material which suggests possible shapes to the artist. [André Avril, artist]

As we carve the stone, we discover the spirit of the material, its very nature. The hand thinks and follows the material's thought. [Brancusi]



*The Kiss* was carved from a block of rustic limestone, seemingly as a declaration of independence: in contrast to Rodin's famous marble depicting two lovers embracing comfortably on a rock, Brancusi's version shows the bodies merging together. The lovers are face to face, they become rock. The man and woman are on an equal footing as they embrace. Their traits are barely hinted at: an almond shape for an eye, a line to designate the mouth, no nose or ears.

After carving, Brancusi set to polishing, to achieve pure lines and smooth surfaces. This new language aimed to express the essence of beings, beyond mere appearance.

Simplicity is not an end in art. We achieve simplicity despite ourselves, by approaching the true meaning of things. Simplicity is complexity resolved, and we need to feed on its essence in order to understand its value. [Brancusi]

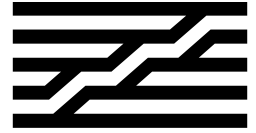
[Sound of gong]

### 3. Woodwork

[Dynamic Romanian percussion music] As a student in Romania, Brancusi designed furniture and then trained with a cabinetmaker during a stay in Vienna. In the mid-1910s, he resumed woodwork, as a throwback to the artisanal tradition of the region of his birth.

The doorframe of his studio, carved from wood, recalled door structures on traditional Romanian farms. Brancusi also crafted stools and armchairs in solid wood for his studio.

There was no dividing line between his art and his life: he sometimes transformed his furniture into plinths for his sculptures, while certain works such as his *Cups* and the *Vase* imitated the shape of everyday objects.



It was hot, I huddled by the stove: a massive white monument. No doubt Brancusi's work. Brick by brick, he built this cube up at the centre of his studio, he whitewashed it and now the fire burned in it.

This was what produced the strange smell, these overheating bricks and limestone, reminding me of that sweet yet sour farmhouse smell.

I forgot Paris and the famous sculptor I had come to see, transported to a distant countryside, where people live close to the land.

He had crafted all the objects around him with his own hands: his bed, a row of white wooden slats, the still-rough stools, hewn from tree trunks, the round coffee table, the shelf holding a dismantled radio, the remains of the lamp and wires exposed.

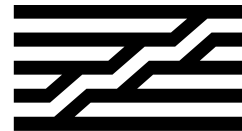
[Dora Vallier]

[Mysterious Theremin Music] His wooden sculptures, such as *The First Step*, *The Little French Girl* and *Caryatid*, point to his admiration for African statuary, which he could see at the Ethnographic Museum at Trocadero.

Like many avant-garde artists, Brancusi was attuned to the spirituality emanating from these sculptures and the vocabulary of shapes giving rise to other models, a far cry from academic convention.

His works had much in common with Sub-Saharan statuary: the rejection of naturalism, the symbolic proportions of various parts of the body (elongated necks and torsos, shortened legs), stylised details, the principle of symmetry and frontality, the musical pace of volumes and so on.

Brancusi's genius lies in his knowledge of where to seek out the true "sources" of shapes that he felt capable of creating.



Instead of reproducing the plastic worlds of popular Romanian or African art, he applied himself, as it were, to “interiorising” his own lived experience.

In other words, Brancusi managed to “see the world” like the authors of masterpieces from prehistory, ethnology and folklore.

Brancusi’s attitude towards materials, especially stone, may help us one day to gain insights into human mentality in prehistoric times. For Brancusi embraced certain stones with the reverent, yet anxious, exaltation of somebody for whom a holy power was manifest within the element. [Mircea Eliade]

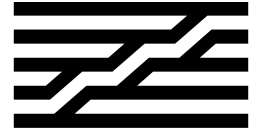
While relating to ancestral and popular traditions, Brancusi was also very excited about aerodynamic shapes in aviation. He visited the Salon de la Locomotion Aérienne at the Grand Palais with his friends Fernand Léger and Marcel Duchamp. The latter challenged him: “Who can do better than this propeller? Can you do that?”

[Sound of gong]

## 4. Timeline

[Electronic organ music] From the Romania of the last quarter of the 19th century through to Paris in the aftermath of WWII, Constantin Brancusi’s career was truly prodigious. His scrupulously conserved archives (including over 10,000 letters, diaries, books and articles) are a goldmine for insights into his key position among the modern avant-gardes.

Backed by Romanian circles and patrons upon his arrival in France, Brancusi frequented the bohemian élite in Montparnasse. Recounting his life amounts to chronicling his friendships with many artists and authors, starting with Marcel Duchamp and Henri-Pierre Roché who were quick to promote Brancusi’s work in the USA, not forgetting Fernand Léger, Man Ray, Amedeo Modigliani, Blaise Cendrars and James Joyce whose portrait he produced.



[Violin music] His career was a succession of events, exhibitions, debates and scandals, starting with his participation in the 1913 Armory Show in New York. This was a sign of his growing international dimension as well as his stays in Romania, the USA and India.

His studio had a mythical reputation as a place for partying, playing music and dancing: countless visitors and admirers were attracted. In 1922, Lizica Codreanu danced to the "Gymnopédies" composed by his friend Erik Satie, wearing a costume designed by Brancusi. Later, his young American friend, Florence Meyer, was filmed dancing on a plinth among the sculptures.

[Violin and piano music] As a fervent music lover, Brancusi had a record collection reflecting his eclectic taste and curiosity for exotica: he had not only classic music but flamenco, Afro-American jazz, traditional Romanian songs and traditional music from Latin America, Asia and Africa.

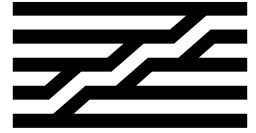
Brancusi died in his oasis in Impasse Ronsin, bereft of all but a few studios, clustered around his own, protected by it, still standing like a forgotten tuft of hair.

He had lived for nearly half a century in this low-rise artists' quarter which used to stand proud, famous because of him. Like a farmer in his farmhouse, usually donning a white flight suit, he would go to the market for his groceries, joking with the vendors, small, ascetic, *bon vivant*, slowly climbing out of poverty into comfort in later life.

He consulted two physicians, one orthodox, one alternative, he followed two diets, with two rival stocks of food stored in two different refrigerators, one for himself and one for his friends, and he conducted personal experiments. He liked his Mumm champagne half-dry, and his whisky with Vittel mineral water and a dash of honey.

He had his own slang, exclaiming "Ah, les vaches !" to show surprise. He always said "Yes, bring your friends, simple or funny people who'll enjoy it,





and beautiful women, not art critics or dealers, and if you want to remain friends with me, don't write about me for as long as I live." [Henri Pierre Roché]

[Sound of gong]

## 5. Studio

[Electronic organ music] Brancusi's studio resembles a scene from prehistoric times: logs, blocks of stone and an oven where the master of the house went full primitive, grilling meat on an iron poker. The Brontosaurus had laid eggs in all four corners and gleaming statues attracted beautiful American women like birds. [Jean Cocteau]

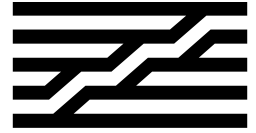
Brancusi designed every aspect of his studio. He did not distinguish between sculpture, plinths, and furniture: it all belonged to a world of his creation, in which art and life blended fully together. There was no pecking order between the various elements that formed the studio as a whole. Each item was in its place, and each was deployed in relation to the rest. [André Avril]

In 1916 Brancusi moved to his studio in Impasse Ronsin, a quiet cul-de-sac of 30-odd artists' studios (in the 1950s, Max Ernst, the Lalannes, Eva Aeppli and Jean Tinguely all worked there).

Brancusi's studio was both a museum of his creation and a work of art.

He had crafted practically everything himself: the fireplace, tables, stools, and even loudspeakers, which he embedded in blocks of stone.

Brancusi's revolution was firstly a revolution in gesture. His purest forms emerged from marble and plaster dust. He engaged physically with his material. Technique was of immense importance to him: he used to film and photograph himself at work.



At certain moments he even dramatized the setting of sculptures in the studio. He well knew how the morning light was cast, in which corner, during which season. So he might move a bronze sculpture for it to be lit up, as a beam of sunlight suddenly pierced the breadth of the studio. He would often do this with visitors who came to see him.

Later in life, Brancusi refused to exhibit, considering that his studio was the best possible setting in which to view his work. He invited people and displayed his works deliberately. He would go as far as to cover some sculptures, then remove the cover just as sunrays hit the surface of a bronze or marble work, all but dematerialising the surface of the sculpture. [André Avril]

[Joyful music on electronic organ] And there were his tools, hanging all over the wall. All shapes and sizes of scissors, hole punchers, files, pliers, clamps, screwdrivers, hammers and saws, jostling each other. Beneath them, on the long counter, an anvil and planes, and dust, dust everywhere. Who knew how long the tools had been hanging untouched after they last shaped a sculpture? Each object was right there where Brancusi left it the last time he needed it. Dust came to settle, day after day, as if to mark the passing time. [Dora Vallier]

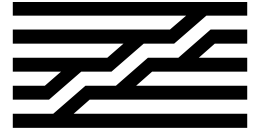
[Solemn music on the theremin]

In his will, one year before his death in 1957, he wrote:

“I hereby bequeath the entire content of my studios to the French government on behalf of the Musée national d’art moderne, as of the day of my death.

This legacy is to be left on condition that the French government reconstitutes a studio containing my works, sketches, easels, tools and furniture, preferably in the premises of the Musée national d’art moderne.”

The studio was first partially installed at the Palais de Tokyo then in its entirety at the Centre Pompidou. [Sound of gong]



## 6. Feminine and masculine

[Light metallic music] In Brancusi's art, the simplification of shapes and the suppression of details were paradoxically a source of ambiguity and double meanings.

At the 1920 Salon des Indépendants, the ambiguous shape of his sculpture *Princess X* caused a scandal, being deemed obscene. By order of the Police, it was excluded definitively despite a show of support "For Independence in Art", signed by a host of celebrities and published in the press.

Quite the kerfuffle at the Salon des Indépendants yesterday.

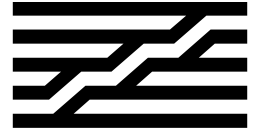
When the sculptor Brancusi arrived for the opening, he noticed that his exhibit, a highly stylised bust, *Princess X*, was no longer in place.

He rushed to warn his friends, who were duly alarmed. They then learned that the police were concerned about the somewhat... strange shape of the princess's portrait, and removed it "so that the Minister would not be shocked!"

"Did you see that?" the artist cried amid those clustered around him.

"They cast aspersions of obscenity on this polished copper bust! I myself have never heard such allusions. You do understand my statue, don't you? It is "Woman", the very essence of woman. It has been pared down to show the very essence of Woman Eternal. It is such a pity to have to spoil a beautiful material by hollowing out little holes for eyes, hair and ears. And my material is so beautiful with its sinuous lines, shining like pure gold and encapsulating all feminine effigies on this earth in a single archetype."

[Metallic organ music] He began to work on his first attempt in 1909 with his *Woman Looking at Herself in a Mirror*, a classic nude. He retained only the curve linking the rounded shapes of head and breasts, culminating in the ambivalent *Princess X*.



Like a deforming mirror, the polished bronze further destabilizes the gaze.

Despite himself, this double symbolic interpretation of *Princess X* was revealed, in which masculine and feminine merge into the same image, tapping into the androgyny theme that he had already touched upon in *The Kiss*. Disrupting symbolic orders, *Princess X* echoed the Dada spirit of protest, advocated at the time by his friends Man Ray, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Duchamp, who first pronounced the adage: “The viewer makes the work of art”. [Sound of gong]

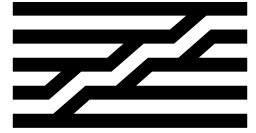
## 7. Portraits?

[Metallic music] From his very beginnings in Romania, portraits played a key role in Brancusi’s art. Moving away from outer appearance to get to the essence, the sculptor nevertheless continued to represent human figures, especially female.

While the titles of sculptures preserved the names of the friends or companions who inspired the sculptor (Margit Pogany, Baroness Frachon, Eileen Lane, Nancy Cunard and Agnes Meyer to name but a few), their personalities tended to blend and melt together into a smoothly stylised, oval face, distinguished only by a few distinctive features such as almond eyes, a chignon or a lock of hair.

*A Muse*, the ultimate portrait of the Baroness Frachon after *The Sleeping Muse*, prefigured his explorations with *Mademoiselle Pogany*, the portrait of a young Hungarian woman who came to study painting in Paris.

As Brancusi said to his model: “I just need to watch you living to remember you. Lower your lashes, let your eyelids rest on your closed eyes. This is all I need for inspiration.” Dissatisfied, he destroyed the studies produced with the model. It was only after her departure that he sculpted *Melle Pogany* from memory.



Brancusi revisited this sculpture three more times, using veined marble and polished bronze. The last version with a very definite shape accentuated the arch of the eyebrows and hair rippling right down the model's back.

At one of our gay suppers in Brancusi's studio, in July 1929, when I revisited Paris, the hostility that existed between the modernists and the classicists was brought home to me.

Despiau had just completed a bust of me which was purchased by the Luxembourg Museum. I had kept it a deep secret from my friend Brancusi that I should allow a pupil of Rodin's to do a portrait of me. Not knowing this, Milhaud called to me across the table, "I think Despiau's bust of you is superb."

Brancusi looked at me as if I had driven a dagger into his heart; he fell into an oppressive silence which ruined the remainder of the evening.

When I bade him good night he gave me a look of defiance. "I'll show you what a portrait of you is really like," he murmured sadly. Two years later he had finished the black marble abstraction which he called "La Reine pas Dédaigneuse".

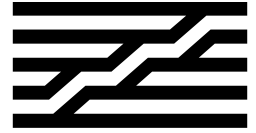
His indignation over Despiau's more realistic sculpture had produced another masterpiece. [Agnes Meyer] [Sound of gong]

## 8. Flight

[Mysterious metallic organ Music]

As a child, I used to dream of flying among the trees and up in the sky. I still feel nostalgia for this dream and for 45 years, I have been making birds. It's not the actual bird I wish to portray, but the gift, the taking flight, the swoop. [Brancusi]

Producing over 30 variants in marble, bronze and plaster, the bird motif was to occupy Brancusi for 30 years. For the artist, the taking of flight symbolised humankind's dream



of escaping our earthbound condition, to ascend to spirituality.

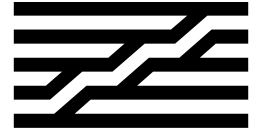
As a series which he first started on in 1910, the *Maiastras* with curving breast, elongated neck and wide-open beak refer to a fabulous bird from Romanian folklore. By the 1920s, Brancusi had streamlined the shape, stretching it up and slimming it down. The socle is reduced to a minimum, defying the laws of balance. In his studio, Brancusi showcased some *Birds* against colourful backdrops (hangings or painted panels), as an appropriate setting for his sculpture.

The bird theme is most probably the one he reproduced most throughout his life. Brancusi produced nearly 29 birds in various materials, mainly bronze and marble. These materials could both be polished to the extreme, to the point that viewers can sense the very energy of the light on the sculpture.

With the *Bird* in polished bronze, he went even further than with marble, for marble is a material that's extremely hard to work with: Brancusi often broke his sculptures. While seeking out extremity in the material's capacity to absorb the shape that Brancusi strove to bestow upon it, he attained the strongest tension and ascending swoop.

But marble polishing has its limits, he could not achieve extreme finesse. At this point, with his bronze *Bird in Space*, he achieved a truly glossy sculpture leveraging the capacity of bronze to absorb light and even absorb the space around it.  
[André Avril]

All my life, I have sought the essence of flight! Flight – what bliss! [Brancusi]  
[Sound of gong]



## 9. Smooth and Raw

[Slow, repetitive metallic music] A small, sky-lighted room in a New York gallery held a kind of constellation in polished bronze, in wood, marble, onyx, and alabaster – nine sculptures and also some drawings and frescoes.

Surfaces scintillant, flaming, natural ; varyingly, warm and cool, not hot or cold, nor dry or lush, but living.

To one staying to know them, birds, fish, heads, torsos spoke out of this polished marbles and bronzes and season naked wood. Here was a geometry of forms in bronze, wood and stone. Each form had the look of having been proved; each was ruled by the material it was made of. [Dorothy Dudley]

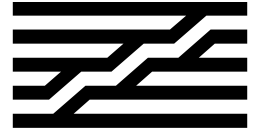
[Slow melody on electronic organ]

Many of Brancusi's works feature painstakingly polished surfaces, with all traces of tooling erased, contrasting with unhewn or roughly hewn pieces. Smooth and raw: this interplay of material was as tactile as it was visual, as indicated in the title for his *Sculpture for the Blind*. Working in series: each sculpture is at once unique and multiple, often set on several plinths, one on top of the other.

Considering that the plinth was part of the sculpture, Brancusi questioned the conventional status of this accessory, traditionally used to elevate the sculpture and set it apart from its surroundings.

For example, a piece in rough wood, called *Watchdog*, can be presented either as a sculpture in its own right or doubling up as a base for *The Witch*, with its silhouette rising up from a forked branch. Rejecting any hierarchy between the top and the bottom, or between the banal and the noble, Brancusi opened sculpture up to its surroundings.

His *Newborn II* in bronze, set upon four plinths, shows the extreme care he took with displaying his sculptures. Made of limestone, a piece of solid oakwood with holes,



a white marble cross and a polished bronze platter, the four plinths piled one on top of the other set a dynamic, ascensional pace. The round wooden cavity, the same size as the ovoid *Newborn* appears to be the matrix from which the sculpture emerged. The mirror disk forms a cradle over which everyone leans, welcoming the birth of the sculpture. [Sound of gong]

## 10. Reflection and Motion

[Slow melody on electronic organ]

By endlessly polishing bronze, the artist achieved shiny, mirror-like surfaces. The sculpture thus shines outward beyond itself, breaking out from its strict contour. The artist's photographs and films confirmed his fascination for sometimes blinding shards of light.

Brancusi started photographing his works in the 1910s for documentary purposes. In the 1920s he met Man Ray, who gave him advice, after which photography became a key element. Brancusi was not interested in perfecting the shot, more in the possibilities for formal experimentation with photography as a medium.

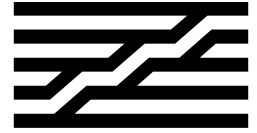
[Piano music]

Man Ray wrote: “[His photographs] were out of focus, over- or underexposed, scratched and spotty. This, he said, was how his work should be reproduced. Perhaps he was right—one of his golden birds had been caught with the sunrays striking it so that a sort of aurora radiated from it, giving the work an explosive character.”

He perceived photography as a means to provoke thought, metamorphosis of the shape, helping to reveal what was not perceptible at first glance.

Many of these photographs were produced from negative stills of his films. Proof that sculpture was as he defined it, “a shape in motion”.





With *Leda*, the sculptor twists the ancient myth of a human metamorphosing into an animal. “I have never been able to conceive of a man turning into a swan, only a woman, and easily. Can you see her in these birdly features? She is kneeling, leaning back. And these dots of light above, were her breasts and head, but they have been transformed into the very shape of a bird. And as they rotate, they transform for all time into a new life, a new pace.” [Brancusi]

The American artist and patron Katherine Dreier acquired it in 1926.

Before this marble version, Brancusi produced one in bronze, true to his habit of always preserving a double in the studio. A few years later, he installed his bronze *Léda* on a disc of polished metal, which in turn was placed on top of ball bearings. He then added a small engine to make the work turn round slowly.

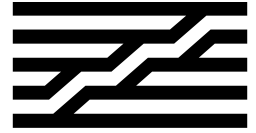
The film he shot with his camera shows this new metamorphosis, with the myriad reflections endlessly erasing and recreating his image, doubled by the disc polished like a mirror, representing the smooth surface of still water. [Sound of gong]

## 11. Animal

[Slow melody on electronic organ] In the 1930s and 1940s, Brancusi borrowed many of his motifs from the world of nature. The animal theme ushered in an evolution towards oblique and horizontal shapes.

There are two distinct groups in this bestiary: volatile creatures (roosters, swans and other birds) and aquatic creatures (fish, seals and turtles).

Changing from stone or wood to plaster, then to bronze, with slight variations, Brancusi invented a symbolic figuration, expressing the essence of the animal, with no sign of any unique feature.



When you see a fish, you don't contemplate its scales, do you? You admire its speed, the way its body slides and darts through water. So that is what I am striving to convey. If I had depicted its fins, eyes and scales, I would have halted the movement and achieved a mere 'sample' of reality. What I wanted was to capture the spark of its spirit. [Brancusi]

The massive, swaying body of the seal is thus pared down to a synthetic form, the polished marble evokes its gleaming fur. He also seeks to project the power and plunge of the animal's massive body.

For me, this sculpture shows a certain vital grace in this animal, corpulent and ungainly on land, lively and incredibly graceful in water. Brancusi has managed to reproduce the tension of that moment when it slides from land into water, from an unwieldy state to sheer fluidity. He achieves it with the relationship he creates between the materials and the shapes.

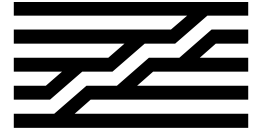
The seal sits atop a dense, heavy base; light absorbs fully into the rounded stone holding up the blue marble seal. I find the tension between the weightiness and bulk of the stone, and then this apparent lightness of blue marble, utterly beautiful.

When you look at this sculpture you see that the marble veins emanate from the animal's tail and reach undulating up to its head in reference to the movement of water running over the surface of the seal.

This is a work in motion, perpetual motion conveyed by the undulating marble veins as well as in the movement of light on the surface of the marble. [André Avril]

People who call this sculpture « abstract » have not felt it, have not seen how the edges are vibrant, how a pulse appears to beat in each one, how they are living organisms and projects. And how they have the look of having been made by a friend, not an outsider, by one on the inside of things, who stands on the ground an equal among rocks, trees, people, beasts and plants, never above or apart from them.

[Dorothy Dudley] [Sound of gong]



## 12. The Base of the sky

Nature engenders plants that grow up straight and strong from the ground; here is my column. It has the same form from the ground to the top, it needs no supporting pedestal or base.

My friend once told me that he had never been aware of the great beauty of his garden until he had placed my column there, it had opened his eyes... that is what the artists are here for... to reveal beauty. [Brancusi]

[A few notes on the xylophone]

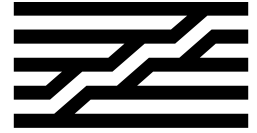
Brancusi's rapport with nature was coupled with a deep consciousness of the space the work occupies. From an early point in his career he hoped to produce monumental works standing outdoors. His first opportunity came in 1926, when he carved an *Endless Column* standing over 7m tall from a poplar tree found in the garden of his American photographer friend Edward Steichen, in Voulangis.

Originally, the *Endless Column* was inspired by Brancusi's thinking using a modest wooden plinth. The artist then repeated the module vertically to create a radical work, destined to "uphold the arc of the firmament". Its shape recalled funerary pillars in southern Romania. And in fact his only monumental project was erected in his homeland, in Târgu Jiu in 1937-1938 as a tribute to the heroes who fell in WWI.

[Light sound of wind]

According to Romanian folklore, the Pillar of Heaven represents an archaic, pre-Christian belief, soon absorbed into Christianity. Brancusi had certainly heard of the Pillar of Heaven in his home village or on the farm in the Carpathian mountains where he was apprenticed as a shepherd. He highlighted the symbolism of ascension, for in imagination, people long to climb up this heavenly tree.

Brancusi only retained the core element of the Pillar of Heaven's former symbolism: ascension as a way of transcending our humanity. [Mircea Eliade]



Metal cast, reaching over 30 metres high, the *Endless Column* is a link between earth and sky, marking the culmination of his creative output. Photographed and filmed by Brancusi at all hours of the day and from all angles, it truly appears to be endless, giving the illusion of multiplying through space.

Along a 1.5 km axis running through the town of Târgu Jiu, he placed two more symbolic elements: *The Table of Silence* and *The Gate of the Kiss*. The latter shows the repetition, stylisation and architectural scale-up of the *Kiss* motif, which Brancusi was to rework constantly throughout his life. In the *Column of the Kiss*, designed for a Temple in India, the couple melts into two abstract piles, their juxtaposed eyes blending into a single circle.

With *The Gate of the Kiss*, the sculpture becomes a triumphal arch featuring a litany of eight circles, dominated by a frieze of forty embracing couples. The kiss motif, which had become a signature of the artist, was developed, as a stand-alone work or in friezes, using all sorts of media.

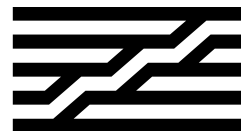
As an infinite motif, it is both the symbol of love transcending the individual and death. The motif becomes the metaphor of the artist facing their material, and reflects the constantly repeated image of Brancusi's artistic and spiritual quest.

[A few notes on the xylophone]

My homeland, my family, is the Earth as it turns – the breath of wind, the passing clouds, water pouring, the warming fire. Green grass – dried herbs – mud, snow.

[Brancusi] [Sound of gong]

[jingle of the show] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!



## **Credits**

Production: Clara Gouraud and Delphine Coffin

Recording: Ivan Gariel

Music and mix: Fabrice Naud

Sound design: Sixième son

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