CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI:
His spiritual roots

by Aidan Hart

It wasn't easy to find Brancusi's studio gallery at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, at least in 1985. No flashy signs. No banners. In fact I walked straight past it a few times thinking that it was a builders' shed. But this shed it turned out to be.

The door was locked, but after a ring on the bell the lone attendant opened up. Within was a paradise, a garden of Brancusi's sculptures. And thanks to the studio's obscurity I was alone, able to enjoy the sculptures in silence. Probably Brancusi the craftsman wouldn't have minded his studio being mistaken for a builders' workshop, or that people had to make an effort to see his works; he knew that the best things come through persistence and solitude.

Constantin Brancusi is commonly regarded as a founding father of modernist sculpture, with Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian being founders of abstract painting. But has subsequent modernism much in common with Brancusi's work and vision, or has it become its very antithesis?

Herbert Read wrote in his book *Modern Sculpture* that the "modern artist, by nature and destiny, is always an individualist." If this is so, then the question is whether or not Brancusi was an individualist, in the sense that he aimed to break with everything that had come before. Brancusi's own words and his stylistic influences strongly suggest that it is closest the truth to say that rather than being an individualist and among the first of a line, he was in fact a traditionalist and among the last of a line. He was among the last practitioners within mainline western art who have worked according to the principles of what can be most accurately called sacred art. As Calinic Argatu has written, "Brancusi's amazing modern artistic message is a product of Tradition..."[1] He was new because he was old. He was an individualist in breaking with Europe's humanist tradition of the last few centuries, but a traditionalist in following the older and more universal sacred tradition.

The sculptural expression of this world view was uniquely his own - in this sense he was profoundly individual - but the world view itself was perennial - in this sense he was profoundly traditional. What critics have identified as his contributions to modernism - for example his shifting of art from imitation towards reality, or his direct carving, or his simplification of forms - are in fact his affirmations of principles common to all sacred art. To Brancusi these principles were nothing new. "I never burned my boats" he said, "nor pulled out my roots in order to roam giddily. My art profited from that."[2]

So what were these roots, and what was the artistic world view they gave Brancusi? Although he wrote little apart from letters, we are fortunate enough to have collections of his aphorisms and anecdotes so that we can go a long way towards answering these questions.

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[1] Calinic Argatu '*Peace and Rejoicing' with Brancusi* (Bucharest, 2001) p. 13.

[2] From Petre Andrea *Constantin Brancusi: Reminiscences and Exegeses* (Meridiane Publ., 1967). Quoted by Argatu.

Brancusi's world view

Constantin Brancusi is best known for the extreme reduction of his sculptures to their most pure, refined and monadic forms. But what compelled Brancusi to refine so much? Abstractionism and originality have come to be equated with a departure from reality, a means of inventing forms that hitherto did not exist. But Brancusi, or indeed the other early reductionists like Kandinsky, didn't see it this way.

For Brancusi authentic abstraction was a language to express objective metaphysical fact. Originality consisted in going to the origins, to the mysterious heart of things. And so he did not see artistic variation as an aim in itself, but, at its most profound, the natural result of limited beings encountering and expressing expansive mysteries. "Reality lies in the essence of things, " he said, "and not their external forms. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to produce anything real by merely imitating the external form of an object." His sculptures were simply an attempt to crystallise these essences: "The artist should know how to dig out the being that is within matter," he affirmed, "and be the tool that brings out its cosmic essence into an actual visible essence."

This perception and then physical manifestation of the inner name of the subject, of its archetype, is precisely the aim common to the art of theocentric cultures. As Titus Burckhardt has written in his book *Sacred Art East and West*: "Every sacred art is therefore founded on the... symbolism inherent in forms...[The symbol] manifests its archetype..."[3] It is what the ceramicist Rupert Spira alludes to in his interview in *Modern Painters* (Summer 2001) when he says that "the role of the artist is to provide a way that this presence can be approached and experienced through the senses."

In that he sought to unearth the laws which underlie nature, those laws which give it harmony, Brancusi was more of a scientist than an artist as these two roles are now understood. The difference is that because he sought metaphysical laws as well as physical laws, he needed not only the mental discipline of a scientist but also the spiritual integrity of a mystic. What Brancusi once said of the viewer of art is even more true of the maker: "They who have preserved in their souls the harmony residing in all things, at the core of things, shall find it very easy to understand modern art, because their hearts shall vibrate in keeping with the laws of nature."

From this quote it is clear that the modernism with which Brancusi wanted to be associated was one that sought out and manifested the inner harmony of things, their beauty and "instress", to use Gerard Manley Hopkins' term. Evidently Brancusi's modernism is the very antithesis of the alienation which has ended up driving most modern and post-modern art. Might not this alienation be the inevitable result of abandoning belief in that harmony?

Beauty is the face of truth. That is why the subjective state of the artist had such importance for Brancusi: truth needs humility and courage to apprehend. He believed that the key to depicting the essence of things in sculpture lay in the person of the sculptor: "There is a purpose in everything. In order to achieve it, one must detach oneself from an awareness of self." The importance of this humility lay in the fact that without it one cannot perceive things as they are in themselves; egotism tries to refashion things according its own distorted perceptions. "I am no longer of this world," wrote the young Brancusi. "I am far from myself, I am no longer a part of my own person. I am within the essence of things themselves."[4] This lack of self-

[3] Titus Burckhardt in *Sacred Art in East and West* (Middlesex, 1967), p.8.

[4] Translated by Herschel B. Chipp from David Lewis, *Constantin Brancusi* (New York, 1957), p. 43.

consciousness or egotism enabled the sculptor to enter "the essence of things themselves."

By essence I don't think we are meant to understand some confinable and definable thing. It is rather the mysterious heart of the subject, that which simultaneously sustains its unique "this-ness" and yet reveals its unity with all else. It is an essence which thrives in relationship. Its beauty resides both in its giving-ness - it wants to be known - and in its elusiveness - it can never be entirely known.

"Simplicity is complexity resolved"[5] Brancusi asserted. He began with the apparent complexity of things, and sought the pattern which resolved these into a wholeness, a unity. He had done his homework and knew well the complexity of nature: an early flayed anatomical study which he modelled was so accurate that it was purchased and used by four hospitals to teach anatomy. So one cannot dismiss this anatomical and other early figurative work as an embarrassing period, unrelated to his mature abstract work. He could not have arrived at the absolute equity of his mature sculptures without first having mastered the complexities. He spoke of *entering* simplicity, and this journey could not have been accomplished without passing through non-simplicity, through the complexity of the apparent.

"Simplicity is not an objective in art, but one achieves simplicity despite oneself by entering into the real sense of things."[6] Abstraction was the necessary language to express these inner laws. It corresponds to the mathematical formulae of the scientist. In traditional societies artistic activity is a form of sacred technology, since it makes things which are based on objective laws of being. Just as the success of modern technology is based on knowledge of scientific laws, so sacred art's enduring success is based on knowledge of equally objective laws of existence. To shun these can only lead to cacophony.

But Brancusi's world of essences was no Platonic world of disembodied ideas. His love for the inner was married to a profound respect for the outer, for the stuff of his sculptures. He did not want to force himself onto the material of each sculpture. He preferred to be the matrix for its fruition rather than its tyrant. "Matter must continue its natural life when modified by the hand of the sculptor...Matter should not be used merely to suit the purpose of the artist, it must not be subjected to preconceived ideas and to a preconceived form. Matter itself must suggest subject and form; both must come from within matter and not be forced upon it from without."[7] One sees this sensitivity in the different ways he treated bronze, hard stone, soft stone and wood. Dense materials like bronze and marble he tended to polish in order to affirm their compactness, whereas wood he tended to form into more organic shapes and leave the chisel marks.

Themes of peace, joy, comfort and healing recur in Brancusi's aphorisms. He evidently believed that art should nourish the viewer. Purely self referential art had little room in his aesthetics. The natural result of an art which resonates with cosmic harmonies is that it helps re-tune discordance within the viewer. "Don't look for obscure formulae or mysteries," he said. "It is pure joy that I am giving you." Whenever leaving his friend Petre Pandrea he would take his leave with the words,

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[5] Quoted in *Constantin Brancusi* by F. Bach. M. Rowell, A Temkin (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), p. 23.

[6] *Aphorisms (undated)*. From *This Quarter* (Paris), I, I (January 1925), p. 235. Translated by Herschel B. Chipp.

[7] Quoted in "Constantin Brancusi: A Summary of Many Conversations" *The Arts, vol. 4, no. 1 (July 1923) pp. 16-17.*

"Paix et joie!" - "Peace and rejoicing!" [8] Lack of this joy and purity is what he found difficult about Michelangelo's work and that of most subsequent western sculpture. He asserted that "[Michelangelo's] art neither comforts, nor heals...Ever since Michelangelo's time sculptors have wanted to create the grandiose. They have only succeeded in creating the grandiloquent."[9] For Brancusi such pretence was sophistry rather than *sophia*, wisdom.

As difficult as it might be for a secular art world to accept, Brancusi's artistic inspiration was primarily spiritual: "Look at my sculptures until you see them. Those nearest to God have seen them." Although knowledgeable about artistic movements, past and present, and inspired by some of them, he sought for the timeless, hidden as it might be in the present: "I do not aspire to be in fashion. For what is in fashion, goes out of fashion. If, on the contrary, your work is contested today, it doesn't matter. For when it is finally understood, it will be for eternity."

His roots

A number of influences formed Brancusi's philosophy of art. They are of course varied, and commentators differ on which one of these is most important. However, the chief are his homeland Rumania - its folk culture in general and its Orthodox Church spirituality in particular; his first-hand knowledge of various crafts learned in his formative years (as cooper, dyer and furniture maker); the academic training he had as a figurative sculptor; fellow artists such as Rodin, Gaugin and Modigliani whom he knew in Paris; Buddhism, as expressed by the poet Milarepa and by its art as shown in Parisian galleries. To these could be added the lessons he learned from the solitude which he loved so much. But here I shall restrict myself to a few comments on the influence of Rumania and Buddhism.

What evidence is there for an influence of the Rumanian Orthodox Church's spirituality on Brancusi's thinking and work? Most immediately we have his own testimony. Once when his friend Petre Pandrea was praising his sculpture, Brancusi with his characteristic humour retorted that all he had done was to set up in Paris a branch office of Tismana Orthodox Monastery.

According to the biography written by his friend V.G. Paleolog (*Tineretea lui Brancusi* or *The Young Brancusi)* Brancusi spent many years as a church server and chanter, beginning from the age of eleven. Later while an art student in Bucharest aged 28 he was again a chanter, well respected for his pure tenor voice. From 1906 to 1908 he sang and served in the Rumanian chapel in Paris, the same chapel in fact where his funeral was held according to the Orthodox Church's rites in 1957. He evidently held the hymns which he chanted in high regard, believing them to possess metaphysical depth: "I know that the prayers of our old Oltenians [Brancusi came from the county of Olt] were a form of meditation, that is to say a philosophical interrogation."

His aphorisms show a marked similarity to the teachings contained in the hymns that he would have chanted and to other mystical writings of the Orthodox Church, most notably the teaching on the inner essences or *logoi* of things. Compare, for example, the text below from the seventh century saint, Maximus the Confessor, with the aphorism of Brancusi which follows it: "Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses," writes Maximus, "but seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences (*logoi*), seeing them as images

[8] Calinic Argatu p. 10

[9] Quoted in Jean-Louis Ferrier (ed.) *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Chene-Hachette,1999), p.539

of spiritual realities...” And Brancusi’s words: “They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.”

Alongside these philosophical influences, there is the direct stylistic influence of Rumanian church and folk art, most notably the carved wooden architectural and funerary columns which inspired his own *Endless Column* series. In fact the true name of the largest version of this column, found at Tirgu-Jiu in Rumania, is *The Column of Endless Commemoration*. It is in memory of the Gorj soldiers who died in World War I and so has a function similar to that of the commemorative funerary columns which stood, for example, in the Loman cemetery in Hunedoara, Transylvania. Their stacked geometric shapes were clearly a starting point for Brancusi’s own commemorative column.

The other overtly religious influence on his thinking is Milarepa, the Tibetan Buddhist poet of the eleventh century. Anecdote has it that Brancusi always had his biography, published in 1926, by his bed. He often cited its importance to him. Apart from this, we know from Cecilia Cutescu-Storck’s letters that he saw and admired the Buddhist carvings from India, China and Turkistan found in the Musée Guimet and the Louvre. His portrait of Baroness Renee-Irana Frachon - the prototype for his series of *Sleeping Muses* - shares so many features with these Buddhist heads that there is undoubtedly a direct influence.

Brancusi and modernism

Brancusi saw that radical changes were needed to free European art from the slavery to imitation into which it had strayed. A reaction against the formalism of the Salon style was inevitable - he himself called those spiritless works *biftek,* steak.

So he saw the early impulses of modernism and its abstractionism in a positive light. For him modernism was the struggle to deliver western art from its bondage to imitation and become once again a direct source of joy and beauty. It was to do with drawing out the essences of things. Of his own works he said: “I would rather make a mistake in achieving these sculptures than not make a mistake and re-create Venus of Milo.”[10]

But what seems to have happened in subsequent twentieth century art is that, by and large, modernism took the language of abstraction which Brancusi helped reintroduce to the west but forgot that this language denoted a metaphysical reality. With a few exceptions, such as Rothko, artists came to use abstraction as a style to discuss style and not as an incarnation of the numinous. Post modernism has been the best response which our present secular art world has been able to offer to counter the staleness which inevitably ensued. Time will tell if this is just another shuffle or a genuine expansion.

Brancusi developed his works primarily in depth rather than in breadth. He was not interested in novelty for its own sake, for he didn’t equate life with change, or originality with forming new fashions. For him authentic variation arose naturally from the discovery of the mystery inherent in things. The search for quintessence naturally produces originality, for it is a search for origins.

Brancusi was more a scientist concerned with the discovery and crystallisation of eternal facts than an artist bent on novelty. He was certainly not an artist concerned with the expression of fleeting subjective states or with a search for the shock of the

[10] *ibid.* p. 11.

new. Angst (in the guise of honesty), oddity (in the guise of originality), and fascination with death, decay and the surface of things have increasingly dominated the modern and post-modern art world. This subjectivism could hardly be further removed from the art and aims of the modernism which Brancusi stood for. "What really matters in art is joy" he said. "You don't need to understand. Does what you contemplate make you happy? That is the only thing that counts."[11]

Perhaps things have gone this way because the humility which is the hallmark of his tradition is so difficult to sustain. He said that in every work of the spirit "the vain ego of the person ought to be dissolved. The hidden principle - that is, *the truth* - can only be revealed if the ego is entirely eliminated."[12] At another time he said: "People do not get along with each other because they arrange their communal existence on the basis of a fatal pyramid. They all try to reach the top, relentlessly pushing each other aside when it would be more natural to live like flowers in a field, each one finding its own spot and being provided with rain, sunshine, the freshness of a cool breeze, the blessing of the sky, and the violence of storms."[13]

An anecdote told by one of Brancusi's friends, Frank McEwen, illustrates this 'fatal pyramid'. In 1945 McEwen (then Fine Arts Officer of the British Council in Paris) along with Herbert Read organised an exhibition of children's paintings to which they invited Picasso, Bonnard and Brancusi. When McEwen told Bonnard that Picasso had been at the show Bonnard said: "Is he still making monsters?" And when McEwen told Picasso that Bonnard had been there Picasso said: "I hope he learnt something." But when Brancusi came there was none of this thrusting competition: "... the divine Brancusi!" exclaimed McEwen. "He was like a saint, a radiant, beautiful person and he came in and he just looked and he said 'La joie éclate!' and that's all he said and he just looked around marvelling."[14]

So perhaps Brancusi was an individualist after all, but in the literal sense, for he wanted his life and works to be undivided, whole, unitary, harmonious.

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[11] *ibid.* p. 12
[12] *ibid*. p. 11
[13] Quoted in Ferrier, p.539
[14] From a transcript of an interview by Michael Shepherd in August 15 1989.