

Constantin Brancusi's Primitivism

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Romanian avant-garde artist Constantin Brancusi is considered one of the most significant artists of modern sculpture. This is due to his innovative use of materials, such as wood and marble, and his reduction and precision of form. Brancusi developed his abstraction with “primitive” sources of art in mind. This thesis examines how and to what extent primitivism played a central role in Brancusi’s sculptures and his construction as a primitive artist.

Romanian folk art and African art were the two main sources of influence on Brancusi’s primitivism. Brancusi identified himself with the Romanian peasantry and its folk culture. Romanian folk culture embraces woodcarving and folk literary fables—both of which Brancusi incorporated in his sculptures. In my opinion, Brancusi’s wood pedestals, such as the *Endless Column*, are based on wood funerary, decorative, and architectural motifs from Romanian villages.

Brancusi was exposed to African art through his relationship with the New York avant-garde. The art dealers Alfred Stieglitz, Marius de Zayas, and Joseph Brummer exhibited Brancusi’s sculptures in their galleries, in addition to exhibiting African art. Meanwhile, Brancusi’s main patron John Quinn also collected African art. His interaction with the New York avant-garde led him to incorporate formal features of African sculpture, such as the oval forms of African masks, into his abstract sculptures. Brancusi also used African art to expose the racial prejudice of his time. African art, along with Romanian folk art, informed Brancusi’s primitivism consistently throughout his long career as a modern sculptor.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family and to my Romanian heritage.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	vi
CHAPTER	
1 THE CONSTRUCTION OF BRANCUSI'S PRIMITIVISM .....	1
Modernist Readings of Brancusi.....	1
Postmodern Readings of Brancusi.....	10
Brancusi's Context.....	15
2 THE PRIMITIVE INFLUENCE OF ROMANIAN FOLK ART ON BRANCUSI AND HIS SCULPTURE .....	24
Folk Art and Romanian Nationalism.....	26
Constructing Brancusi's Primitive Identity .....	28
Brancusi and German Expressionism.....	34
Brancusi's Sculpture and Folk Art Motifs.....	36
3 BRANCUSI'S INVOLVEMENT WITH AFRICAN ART IN NEW YORK .....	50
Brancusi's Reception in New York.....	51
John Quinn .....	56
Photography: Scheeler and Man Ray.....	57
Brancusi and <i>White Negress</i> .....	59
Brancusi and <i>Blonde Negress</i> .....	61
Brancusi's Wood Sculptures.....	62
<i>Mademoiselle Pogany</i> .....	64
Conclusion.....	67

CHAPTER	Page
CONCLUSION.....	74
REFERENCES.....	82

## INTRODUCTION

The modern artist Constantin Brancusi is the best known modern Romanian artist outside of Romania. He participated in the avant-garde movement in Paris during the first half of the twentieth-century. Brancusi changed traditional modes of representation in sculpture and initiated abstraction in modern sculpture. In addition to various art history interpretations of Brancusi, he should also be understood in terms of his relationship with early twentieth-century primitivism. The manner in which Brancusi has been viewed in the past did not take into account the primitive aspect of his sculpture and of his identity as a modern artist. In the first chapter of my thesis, I examine his construction in art history, along with the issues and problems that come with it. In the second chapter, I analyze his relationship with Romanian folk art, while also taking into account his relationship with African art and the American avant-garde in the third chapter. My argument is based on a formal analysis of Brancusi's sculpture, along with an identity based analysis that takes into account the social and cultural context in which Brancusi lived.

In her book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, art historian Amelia Jones disputes the construction of the artist as an “autonomous figure.”<sup>1</sup> According to Jones, the artist is “an ideological construction... intimately reliant on social, political, and economic formations.”<sup>2</sup> Brancusi's modernist construction lacks consideration of these formations that impacted his identity and his art. Though Brancusi embraced his moments of solitude and artistic creation in his studio, he did not live in an insular environment. He traveled often, was involved with avant-garde

groups from Romania, France, and New York, and continued his native Romanian traditions while living in Paris—all of which helped him grow as an artist.

Brancusi's art needs to be examined within the context of Brancusi's multi-faceted identity. In his writings on the philosophy of art, John Dewey argues that when an art object becomes a masterpiece in the canon of high art, the object "becomes isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life experience."<sup>3</sup> Dewey's claim is applicable to Brancusi's sculptures, for they are usually seen as absolute, timeless entities or forms without the connection to the artist's identity or to the specific time period in which they were created. Such formalist analysis relocates the sculptures from daily experience to the realm of exclusivity and the unattainable—that which prevails in the museum environment. Indeed, one of Brancusi's purposes for his sculpture was to create for the viewer a spiritual experience of the incomprehensible and the infinite. Yet, he believed this kind of experience could be attained in our present reality. Furthermore, he associated his sculptures with the spiritual feeling and human condition of love encountered in daily life. Brancusi used the primitive to make the spirituality of his sculptures timeless and universal by connecting the past with the present and the future.

### **The Life of Constantin Brancusi**

Brancusi created an idealized Romania in his reference to himself as a peasant and a primitive artist. He celebrated Romanian peasant culture and his peasant origins. This was despite the fact that his childhood in Romania was not a happy experience and the Romanian peasantry was far from prosperous. Brancusi continued his familiar, peasant Romanian traditions while living in Paris in order to cope with his outsider,

foreign status. He longed for his native home, even though this home was a fantasy of an idyllic Romania that did not actually exist.

Brancusi was born on February 21, 1876 in a small rural village named Hobita, which is located in the Oltenia region of southern Romania. He was the youngest of four siblings born to Maria Deaconescu and Nicolae Brancusi, who had three more children from his previous marriage. With his father passing away when he was a small boy of eight years old and his mother left to take care of all seven children, it is no wonder that Brancusi attempted to run away from home several times.<sup>4</sup> This childhood neglect and lack of elementary education led Brancusi, at age twelve, to move to the city of Craiova where he earned money as a waiter and dishwasher.<sup>5</sup>

From 1884 to 1888, Brancusi studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Craiova. During this time period, he taught himself to read and write. The school offered training in various craft and industrial disciplines, including, “foundry-work, blacksmithing, shoemaking, agricultural mechanics, and sculpture.”<sup>6</sup> Brancusi produced several objects, among them, an oak chair, a casket, and a plaster bust of the school founder Gheorghe Chitu, which was made on commission. Upon the completion of his studies at the School of Arts and Crafts, Brancusi moved to Bucharest to study sculpture at the School of Fine Arts. The academic structure of the school was based on the curriculum of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, with courses on anatomy, perspective, and art history.<sup>7</sup> The School of Fine Arts in Bucharest provided Brancusi with four years of rigorous formal training in sculpture that enabled his acceptance at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1904.

Before his arrival in Paris, Brancusi stopped in Munich and spent several months with sculptor Frederich Stork actively discovering the city’s avant-garde scene. From

Munich, according to Brancusi himself, he undertook the journey on foot to Paris while depending on the kindness of villagers for food and shelter.<sup>8</sup> Brancusi states: “The peasants welcomed me with open arms, gave me provisions, and wished me a pleasant journey. They realized that I was one of them.”<sup>9</sup> Regardless of whether or not the accounts of his journey are entirely true, his tale of his walk to Paris marks the early beginning of Brancusi’s own construction as a nomadic peasant roaming the land without depending on the technologies and conveniences of modern life.

Brancusi arrived in Paris in 1904 with little money; fortunately, with a grant from Romania’s Ministry of Arts and Education, he was able to enroll at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. During his early years in Paris, the Romanian community, which included the Romanian Orthodox church and art patrons, supported Brancusi’s living and education in the form of commissions. While at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, he worked on many portrait busts in the academic style. Brancusi ended his studies at the school in 1907 and worked for a short period that same year in Rodin’s studio as one of his assistants. Though he acquired a considerable amount of technical learning from the experience, Brancusi was dissatisfied with his work in Rodin’s studio, claiming that he could not stand copying Rodin.<sup>10</sup> From 1907 onwards, Brancusi embarked on an individual form of expression in his sculpture that renounced the stringent academic style. Yet, he still carried the legacy of Rodin into his abstract stage with *The Kiss*, which was his only adaptation of one of Rodin’s sculptures. *The Kiss* marked the end of Rodin’s influence and the beginning of Brancusi’s primitivism.

### **The Primitive and Primitive Art**

Brancusi incorporated the primitive in his identity and in his sculpture. The primitive is important in understanding his art because it provided him with unique sources of inspiration that differed from classical European sculpture. Brancusi was drawn to the primitive because it signified the Other. It can be argued that Brancusi related psychologically to the Other due to his own outsider status as a foreigner in the modern, cosmopolitan environment of Paris. As Chave argues, Brancusi appropriated other cultures in order to make up for “the dislocation and displacement or homelessness that marked his own life.”<sup>11</sup> He considered himself as the Other and built upon this persona with his construction of the primitive peasant. For Brancusi then, the primitive functioned as a vehicle for self-expression. With his inclusion of African art and Romanian folk art, he was expressing his own primitiveness in his sculpture, along with the primitiveness of these other cultures.

For the artists of Brancusi’s generation, primitive art was something new—an entirely different and curious aesthetic source. These artists attached a feeling of awe to objects collected from distant places of the world such as Africa and North America. For the generation following that of Brancusi, which included Henry Moore, primitive art became an “accepted part” of their education.<sup>12</sup> In my view, Brancusi’s interest in primitive art was not merely formalist. He did not collect African or other indigenous objects, and there is little evidence of him actually discussing primitive art. Despite this, I believe Brancusi was deeply fascinated by primitive objects— not only because of their abstract forms, but also because of their displacement.

Primitivism is a term that designates the early twentieth-century Euro-American fascination with world art traditions. More specifically, the term is applied in art history

to designate the engagement of avant-garde artists with primitive objects. William Rubin describes the term primitivism as “ethnocentric,” for it allocates the Western preoccupation with “tribal arts,” rather than specifying the “tribal arts themselves.”<sup>13</sup> Art historian Kirk Varnedoe reiterates Rubin’s viewpoint on primitivism, stating that primitivism is “first and foremost a story about us, not tribal peoples.”<sup>14</sup> Within the concept of primitivism, the primitive is a loaded term that has inspired much debate in art discourse. To Hal Foster, the primitive is a “modern problem, a crisis in cultural identity, which the West moves to resolve.”<sup>15</sup>

Along this line of argument, modernist scholar Marianna Torgovnick argues how we, as the Western audience, need to acknowledge the “voyeurism and radical chic often embedded in our reactions to the primitive” and the maneuvering of the primitive to reflect “our inner most desires.”<sup>16</sup> This voyeurism and radical chic began to take place in European countries, foremost in France, during the late 1800s when colonialists exhibited foreign groups of people from their colonial territories with their foreign perceived exoticism in order to amuse Western onlookers. During the early 1900s in France, black culture or *l’art nègre*, which included art, music, and dance, was identified as a chic trend—a trend that was predominantly concerned with entertainment rather than the political implications of black culture.

The early twentieth-century adoption of the primitive to explore the Western yearning for the wild and the erotic recalls Sigmund Freud’s notion of the primitive as a tool to “uncover the modern self.”<sup>17</sup> Within the concept of primitivism, the Other came to symbolize the otherness within modern consciousness and the otherness that reaffirmed Western superiority. In the “*Primitivism*” in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal*

*and the Modern* catalogue, Rubin assesses how this otherness of primitive art had “broaden our humanity” by acknowledging the “otherness in ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> Within the Western confines of modernity, the primitive was seen as the Other in a “them versus us” relationship marked by difference. Western modern identity was formed through the juxtaposition of the primitive savage with the modern intellectual, who recognized the primitive in himself yet was aware of his supremacy by what he was and by what the primitive was not.

### **The Construction of Brancusi’s Primitivism**

In my first chapter of my thesis, I examine how art historians have discussed Brancusi in modern art discourse, along with how Brancusi shaped his own construction. In her essay on the reputation of Auguste Rodin, Anne Wagner takes a feminist approach to Rodin and his sexual imagery: she argues that the public celebrated his violent representations of the female body, which to them conveyed his “genius.”<sup>19</sup> While Wagner believes Rodin’s sexuality was celebrated, Anna Chave argues that the sexuality in Brancusi’s sculptures was “repressed.”<sup>20</sup> Chave believes Brancusi dismantled “the established lines of gender identity and cultural identity.”<sup>21</sup> It is sufficient to note that Chave reconstructs Brancusi into a postmodernist artist whose art deals with issues of multiculturalism and feminism. In other words, Chave deconstructs the twentieth century construction of Brancusi as a modernist whose art was purely formal and autonomous. I think Brancusi’s presentation in art history as the “father of modern sculpture” involved critical responses to the “pure” formalism in his art and to his own construction of the role of mysticism in his art.

In his important study *Brancusi: A Study of Sculpture*, Sidney Geist discusses the meanings and the type of techniques and materials Brancusi employed in his sculpture. Geist believes that Brancusi's "artistic seriousness lies in his demand that a sculpture carry meaning in its shape—that it be the shape of meaning."<sup>22</sup> Geist then affirms that Brancusi's genius lies in his ability to achieve meaning through shape. Brancusi is not only a master craftsman who creates shape; the meaning that Brancusi achieves through shape is what establishes him as a serious modern artist.

Edith Balas reiterates this notion when she asserts that Brancusi was not interested in primitivism because "Brancusi's self-image as artisan was not solely the consequence of his years in Romania."<sup>23</sup> Brancusi studied craft in Romania but reached a higher artistic level when he began creating abstract sculptures by reason of adding meaning to shape. Balas equates being primitive with being a non-innovative craftsman; she argues that being a modern artist is superior to being a primitive. Studying this construction of Brancusi, it becomes evident that artistic hierarchy is a central feature of modernism. Despite his inclination towards primitive art, Brancusi is not thought of as a primitive but the creators of African objects are. Brancusi is also viewed as a "Neoplatonist" due to the embodiment of the absolute in his sculpture.<sup>24</sup> According to Greenberg, sculpture exists "for and by itself"; it is this "self-sufficiency" of sculpture that most exemplifies the modernist "aesthetic."<sup>25</sup> Thus, Brancusi is not a mere craftsman because his sculptures are "self-sufficient," unlike the African objects or other indigenous objects that have religious or utilitarian functions.

There is a great deal of contradiction in this art historical construction of Brancusi. He is seen as a modernist master of absolute form, far from being a primitive.

However, in a significant number of writings on him, Brancusi is linked to mysticism, which is usually associated with indigenous cultures. For instance, in the 1933 exhibition catalogue for a Brancusi exhibition at the Brummer Gallery in New York, Roger Vitrac states: “those who do not know the author of these mystical sculptures readily imagine the artist as a sort of demiurge or sorcerer, presenting to our actual world modern totems laden with occult significance.”<sup>26</sup> Vitrac shrouds Brancusi’s art in mysticism, as though his art offered spiritual experience to ordinary viewers.

Brancusi enjoyed putting forth— or rather idealizing— an image of himself as a sort of mystical peasant from rural Romania. He created this image foremost through his physical appearance and his humble studio. When Alexander Liberman met Brancusi in his studio in 1955, Brancusi was wearing a “pointed knitted skull cap, and once-white bathrobe” that made Brancusi appear as if “he was outside of time and history.”<sup>27</sup> The ceramicist Beatrice Wood echoes the same sentiment when she visited Brancusi in 1956, noting that Brancusi was not “burdened by material things.” His only occupation was “philosophic search.”<sup>28</sup> Liberman and Wood convey an image of Brancusi as an artist-philosopher who cared neither for material things nor for his physical appearance. This construction of Brancusi as a mystic and peasant contrasts with the construction of Brancusi as the “father of modern sculpture.”

### **The Primitive Influence of Romanian Folk Art on Brancusi and His Sculpture**

The second chapter explores Brancusi’s primitivism in terms of Romanian folk art. His close relationship with Romanian folk art is conveyed in his sculptures and pedestals through his choice of material, abstract forms, and folk themes. His identity as a primitive and as a believer in spiritualism also asserts the folk influence. His mysticism

and primitive identity arises from the Romanian Orthodox religion, as conceived within the context of Romanian folk culture. Additionally, Brancusi's spiritualism and primitivism is comparable to the spiritualism and primitivism of Kandinsky and the German Expressionists.

When Romania was unified in 1881, peasant folk culture and Romanian Orthodoxy were used as propaganda tools to encourage nationalism among various ethnic groups. Romanian nationalism rested on the "Daco-Roman" identity, which was tied to the peasant class and its primitive, pagan traditions.<sup>29</sup> With his humble, non-modern lifestyle, Brancusi ascribed himself to the primitive Daco-Roman identity. Along with the primitive pagan associated with Romanian folk culture and the peasantry, the monastic life that was part of Romanian Orthodox religion was seen as a "symbol of national identity and essence."<sup>30</sup> Brancusi, with his self-constructed identity, embodied the mystic side of Romanian monasticism in his favoring of spiritual life over material life.

Brancusi shared with Wassily Kandinsky the spiritual belief in art and its necessity to rise beyond the materialism of the modern age.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this inclination for the spiritual, the German Expressionist groups *Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke* turned to primitive forms of art such as German folk art and African art in order to externalize their "discontent" with the modern world.<sup>32</sup> According to Wilhelm Worringer, the abstraction of these "primitive" art forms is due to the conflict and isolation encountered in the material world.<sup>33</sup> Based on Worringer's concept of abstraction, Brancusi's construction as a primitive and a mystic complements the abstract forms of his sculptures.

Brancusi's appropriation of Romanian folk motifs and folk themes resulted in his sculptural abstraction from 1907 onwards. For example, the circular motifs on the *Gate of the Kiss* resemble the motifs of the Sun that were decorated on wood carved house objects and on house pillars and gates. In the *Endless Column*, Brancusi takes the tall rhomboidal form from death poles found in village cemeteries and from porch pillars, with some variation on the two. However, with the form of the *Endless Column*, Brancusi expresses his belief of infinity rather than putting forth a funerary or decorative significance associated with Romanian folk culture.

Brancusi expressed his interest in Romanian folk art in his choice of materials and his choice of literary themes from Romanian folk tales. The concept of "cules din nature," meaning gathered from nature, refers to folk wood objects that maintain the coarse texture of the tree trunk.<sup>34</sup> Brancusi employs this natural feature of wood in sculptures *The Kiss* and *Torso of a Young Girl*. Brancusi owed much to his upbringing in an environment where craftsmanship was revered. Though he considered himself more than a craftsman, his admiration for craftsmanship is visible in his treatment of wood. Moreover, he conveys the themes of love and metamorphosis found in Romanian folk tales in his animal sculptures *Leda*, *Pasarea Maiastra*, and *Cock*.

### **Brancusi's Involvement with the New York Avant-Garde and African Art**

The third chapter discusses Brancusi's exposure to African art and his incorporation of African art in his sculpture. In addition to Romanian collectors, American collectors became fascinated with Brancusi's sculptures. At the 1913 Armory show in New York, Brancusi exhibited five of his sculptures. The Armory show, an international exhibition, showcased modern art and included prominent artists like

Marcel Duchamp and Henri Matisse. Brancusi's inclusion in the Armory show pointed to Brancusi's growing reputation as an important modernist among the New York avant-garde. The following year, in March, 1914, Brancusi had his first one-man show at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery of the Photo-Secession in New York.<sup>35</sup> It is important that Brancusi's first one-man show did not take place in France or Romania, but rather in the United States where African art came to be seen as art rather than mere artifacts.

Brancusi enjoyed the most success in the United States. It was around 1913, when he began building relationships with American collectors, that Brancusi began his relationship with African art. The same year, Stieglitz held the first exhibition of African objects in the exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art."<sup>36</sup> Stieglitz was not the only prominent American promoter of modern art who was interested in Brancusi. John Quinn bought twenty-seven sculptures for his Brancusi collection. Quinn also formed a remarkable collection of African art consisting of forty objects.<sup>37</sup> I will examine more closely the relationships Brancusi had with these American promoters of modernism, or of avant-garde and African art, including Man Ray and Marius de Zayas. Brancusi was aesthetically drawn to African art due to his involvement with an American avant-garde that identified African art with modern art.

Art historians have debated whether or not Brancusi took inspiration from African art and to what extent. Due to the 1984 "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Brancusi was understood in the 1980s in terms of his affinity with primitivism. The exhibition was criticized because it placed more artistic value on modern art and less on the art being appropriated from African and other cultures. The exhibition did not consider the critical issues that arise when constructing

modernism “through stylistic and formal affinities with non-Western art.”<sup>38</sup> Although I believe Brancusi had an interest in what the avant-garde considered primitive art, unlike the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition, my intent is to analyze the issues surrounding his appropriation of African art within the context of western colonialism and modernism. To what extent did Brancusi find primitive art significant, and how did he appropriate it? Was he mainly concerned with the formal qualities of primitive art, or also with the racial beliefs associated with primitivism? I will attempt to explore and answer these questions in the chapter by comparing Man Ray's photographs *Noire et Blanche* and *Kiki de Montparnasse* with Brancusi's series *White Negress* and *Blond Negress*.

In his essay on primitivism, Sidney Geist does not discuss the issue of Brancusi's identity in relation to African art. Nonetheless, his formal analysis and comparison of Brancusi's wood sculptures with African sculpture is beneficial in understanding the African influence. Geist argues that only Brancusi's wood sculptures created during the period from 1908 to the end of the 1920s convey African influence.<sup>39</sup> Due to the fact that Brancusi worked with a variety of materials, it is too limiting to only consider his wood sculptures. Brancusi expressed his African interest in his other sculptures in marble and bronze, such as the series of *Mademoiselle Pogany* that has particular features of African masks.

Because of Brancusi's prominence, there is a considerable discourse devoted to him in the history of modern sculpture. This discourse, however, pays little attention to Brancusi's primitivism, which is a significant aspect of his sculpture and of his identity as

an artist. Brancusi drew his primitivism from two sources: Romanian folk art and African art. He fostered these two influences in his abstract sculpture. He used similar forms, materials, and spiritual themes in his numerous sculpture series that can be traced to Romanian folk architecture, folk utilitarian objects, and to African tribal artifacts. These two sources of his primitivism—the Romanian folk art and African art—must be included in any consideration of Brancusi that also takes his multicultural identity into account, therefore offering a deeper comprehension of his sculptural oeuvre.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 1934), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Sanda Miller, *Constantin Brancusi* (London, England : Reaktion Books, 2010), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>9</sup> Pontus Hulten, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, *Brancusi* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1987), 62.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, 46, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven, Massachusetts; London, England: Yale University Press, 1993), 196.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 244.

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- <sup>13</sup> William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Volume I* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern* (New York: Henry H. Abrams Publishers, 1990), 210.
- <sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, edited by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, California; Los Angeles, California; London, England: University of California Press, 2003), 389.
- <sup>16</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, "Making Primitive Art High Art," *Poetics Today* 10 (Summer, 1989): 325.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.
- <sup>18</sup> Rubin, 73.
- <sup>19</sup> Anne M. Wagner, "Rodin's Reputation," *Readings in Nineteenth-Century Art*, edited by Janis Tomlinson (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 250.
- <sup>20</sup> Chave, xii.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.
- <sup>22</sup> Sidney Geist, *A Study of Sculpture* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983), 145.
- <sup>23</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 17.
- <sup>24</sup> Chave, 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1971), 145.
- <sup>26</sup> Roger Vitrac, *Brancusi, November 17-January 13* (New York: Brummer Gallery, 1933).
- <sup>27</sup> Alexander Liberman, *The Artist in His Studio* (New York: Random House, 1988), 200.
- <sup>28</sup> Beatrice Wood, "Visit to Brancusi," *Archives of American Art Journal* 32 (1992): 21.

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- <sup>29</sup> Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University, 2001), 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Alice Forbess, "Mysticism and Modernity: The Transitions of a Romanian Orthodox Convent." *Tradition and Modernity in Romanian Culture and Civilization, 1600-2000*, edited by Kurt W. Treptow (Iasi, Romania: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2001), 244.
- <sup>31</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 65.
- <sup>32</sup> Joseph Masheck, "Raw Art: "Primitive" Authenticity and German Expressionism," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 4 (Autumn, 1982): 94.
- <sup>33</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, translated by Michael Bullock (New York: International Universities Press, 1967), 17.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul Petrescu, *Arta Populara Romaneasca* (Bucharest, Romania: Editura Meridiane, 1981), 50.
- <sup>35</sup> Sidney Geist, "Brancusi," "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, volume II, edited by William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 3.
- <sup>36</sup> Yaelle Biro, "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde: Exhibition Overview," *Tribal Art: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 14.
- <sup>37</sup> Yaelle Biro, "The John Quinn Collection of African Art," *Tribal Art: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 45.
- <sup>38</sup> Wendy Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.
- <sup>39</sup> Geist, "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art*, 345.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF BRANCUSI'S PRIMITIVISM

Within the discourse of modern sculpture, Brancusi is constructed as a primitive with either an affinity towards African art, or a familiar connection with Romanian folk art. For art historians, the source of Brancusi's primitivism and his abstraction in his work is either derived from African art or Romanian folk art, not both. This dichotomy of Brancusi's primitivism is exemplified in the Brancusian studies of Sidney Geist and Edith Balas. More specifically, Geist and Balas set in motion how Brancusi is conceived within the discourse of twentieth century primitivism. Therefore, it is imperative to my thesis that I analyze their arguments about the source of Brancusi's primitivism, along with the viewpoints of other art historians who either contradict Balas and Geist or follow their lines of argument. William Rubin includes Brancusi in his "'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art" discussion of avant-garde's affinity to tribal art. Robert Goldwater examines the reason for Brancusi's interest in primitive art. Anna Chave studies Brancusi and his work from a postmodern perspective, reconstructing his identity in relation to the Other. Along a similar postmodern perspective, Friedrich Teja Bach argues for the importance of the pedestal in Brancusi's art. Eric Shanes notes Brancusi's prejudice understanding of the primitive and argues against Brancusi being identified as a primitive. In this chapter I will also examine Brancusi within the context of other modern artists who were active in the development of modern sculpture and who were interested in primitive art.

#### **Modernist Readings of Brancusi**

Sidney Geist, who is known as the foremost art historian on Brancusi, published his essay about Brancusi's affinity towards African art in the exhibition catalogue

*“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.* In his essay, Geist states: “From his native tradition, he (Brancusi) inherited a familiarity and love of wood as a medium, and on the other, the tribal arts which in their form and spirit revealed a new universe of artistic possibility.”<sup>1</sup> With this statement, Geist acknowledges the influence of folk art in Brancusi’s oeuvre, yet he infers that such influence only extends to the use of materials and not to his use of the forms of folk art. While tribal art, with “their form and spirit,” directed Brancusi in a new, abstract phase of his art, folk art remained in the background, pushing his interest toward wood carvings of tribal art.

Edith Balas is a Romanian-American art historian whose studies on Brancusi have led to a greater understanding of Brancusi’s Romanian identity. In her book *Brancusi and Romanian Folk Traditions*, Balas counters Geist’s argument, declaring, “Arguments for a pervasive African influence uniformly overlook the possibility of Brancusi’s incorporation of Romanian sources.”<sup>2</sup> Here, she repudiates the question of Brancusi’s involvement with African in the same way that Geist repudiated the folk influence.

According to Geist, Brancusi “refined” his style and achieved a “total formalization” in 1913 with *The First Step*, which was his first sculpture based on African art.<sup>3</sup> At first glance *The First Step* appears to be an anatomically incorrect sculpture of a boy or a girl. Its child-like quality informs the title of the work—of a child in the moment of taking his or her first step. The title refers to the active movement of walking, yet both legs are static, resting on the support. The exclusion of one arm creates an asymmetrical composition that expresses the unsettling feeling of a child taking his first step into the world. Geist believes that a Bambara figure from the Musée de l’Homme was the main source for *The First Step* due to the similar formal qualities

shared between the two, such as “hollowed-out mouths with strongly peaked upper lips, and the heads of both are ovoidal.”<sup>4</sup> Brancusi exhibited *The First Step* at the Armory Show in 1913; yet in 1914, it seems he destroyed the sculpture because it was not exhibited after the Armory Show and it makes no appearance in any of his studio photographs. Why did Brancusi destroy the sculpture? The common view among art historians is that Brancusi destroyed *The First Step* because he renounced African art. Brancusi’s friend, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, is quoted frequently as stating that “Brancusi was afraid of the African things.”<sup>5</sup>

Brancusi’s alleged break with African art in the 1930s is what Geist calls “heuristic,” meaning it “helped him to pursue a new line of thought.”<sup>6</sup> It is evident in his essay that Geist does not believe Brancusi was repulsed by African art; rather, Geist argues for a pivotal relationship with African art during the 1920s and 1930s when Brancusi’s sculpture matured into his own individual style. Brancusi may have felt this way about African art when he spoke to Epstein, but by the end of his life, Brancusi surmised, “Only the Africans and the Romanians know how to carve wood.”<sup>7</sup> Brancusi appeared to have changed his mind about “primitive” art. Geist interprets the latter of Brancusi’s comments as proof that Brancusi did value primitive art, despite his new artistic course after the 1920s.

In addition to *The First Step*, Brancusi also destroyed the second versions of *The Little French Girl* and *Madame L.R.* The fact that both first versions of *The Little French Girl* and *Madame L.R.* were made during the same time period is discernable by the five-part composition and geometrical forms. The sculptures are composed of thin, elongated cylinders intercepted with oval and square forms that represent parts of the body like the

head, feet, and chest. *The Little French Girl* lacks the square block of wood that is placed at the center of *Madame L.R.* The block represents the chest of a woman and symbolizes the femininity of Madame L.R., which the figure of the little girl has yet to possess.

Brancusi manages to add individuality to the sculptures with as little detail as possible. He already achieved a high level of sophistication in the treatment of the wood and the abstract forms with the first versions. I agree with Geist's explanation as to the destruction of the second versions; Brancusi was not satisfied with the progress from the first version, or he was satisfied enough with the first versions; therefore, he had no need for the second version.<sup>8</sup> I do not think he destroyed the sculptures because he disliked their African quality. Throughout his career, Brancusi worked in series. He created multiple versions of the same theme in different materials. In this respect, one could call him a perfectionist. His aim was to perfect his previous version, seeking the best material which would suit the form.

The concept of the affinity within primitivism derives from the introduction of the *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* catalogue. William Rubin writes in its introduction, "The aesthetic affinities between signifiers do not permit us to assume comparable relationships on the level of the signified."<sup>9</sup> In other words, one cannot assume that common aesthetic affinities exist between the art of the avant-garde and African art. That which is signified in the art of the avant-garde and in African art, though the signified may look alike in both, conveys different meaning depending on the intention of the signifier. When Rubin's distinction between signifier and signified is applied to Brancusi and the issue of primitivism, one can argue that Brancusi and the primitive artist employ the same techniques, especially when working

with wood as Geist asserts; however, the outcome is different for Brancusi and for the African artist. Brancusi was interested in expressing his own meaning through his own conceptual form, not the meaning expressed in primitive art.

The 1984 exhibition, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," examined how the avant-garde assimilated primitive objects into their modernist aesthetic. The exhibition at the time, and henceforth, was criticized for ignoring the political and social issues surrounding primitivism, and for relegating tribal objects to a subordinate position in modern art. The issues surrounding the exhibition are too extensive to be discussed in this thesis; however, it is important to note that Brancusi was one of the main, central figures in the exhibition, included among other important modern artists, such as Picasso, Gauguin, and Modigliani. Due to his inclusion in the exhibition, over the past twenty years Brancusi has been mentioned more frequently in the discussion of primitivism. The exhibition, along with Geist's and Rubin's essays in the catalogue, began the debate on whether or not Brancusi was a primitive.

Rubin distinguishes between influence and affinity in regard to the relationship between the early twentieth century avant-garde and primitivism. Rubin compares Brancusi's *Madame L.R.* with Hongwe reliquary figures: the "convex" head and long neck of *Madame L.R.* is similar in form to the head and neck of the Hongwe figures. The half-oval head of the Hongwe figure is almost identical in form to the head of *Madame L.R.* However, the Hongwe figure is made of multiple materials—wood, brass, and copper—with the head being on its own without a supporting body. The body is an important part to *Madame L.R.*, for without the body, the wood head would not be as interesting in appearance as the head of the Hongwe figure. Rubin warns that tribal

objects and avant-garde objects should not be compared with each other because one cannot determine a direct influence in this manner.<sup>10</sup> Due to “circumstantial” evidence, it is challenging to determine a direct primitive influence in the work of the avant-garde, which is “very personal and highly metamorphic.”<sup>11</sup> Avant-garde artists may have been drawn to qualities of tribal objects, but they took and transformed these qualities to the point where they became almost unrecognizable. Hence, Rubin prefers to use the term affinity instead of direct influence.

Geist, however, infers a direct influence in his comparison of Brancusi’s sculptures to African art. For instance, *Princess X* has a likeness to “a stone pestle from New Guinea” in its position of the hand across its single breast; Geist postulates that Brancusi might have seen the pestle at the British Museum during his London visit in 1913. Reiterating Rubin, Geist mentions *Madame L.R.* and its resemblance to the Hongwe reliquary without adding anything new to Rubin’s observation. For the *Little French Girl*, Geist also references Rubin who thinks “the projecting ear and the ringed neck and torso” would have been familiar to Brancusi from Senufo helmet masks.<sup>12</sup> Along with Rubin, Geist argues that the omitted arms and the firm legs of *Little French Girl* are the same as the bodies of “Bijongo fertility figures.”<sup>13</sup>

Balas believes that art historians continue to argue for an African influence in Brancusi’s art because they have granted significant value to African art, and not Romanian folk art, in the late twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> It is more convenient to make the argument for an African influence due to the fact that African art was much more popular among the avant-garde in Paris. Furthermore, it can be easy to mistake African art with Romanian folk art for they share a number of similarities. For example, as Balas argues,

both African and Romanian carvers have an inclination for the rough texture of wood. Additionally, the mask in African and Romanian cultures functions as a spiritual object.<sup>15</sup> Art historians associate Brancusi's primitivism, according to Balas, with African art while disregarding the important role of Romanian folk art upon Brancusi's identity as a primitive.

Balas perceives African art as a "revealer," operating "as a trigger which released reminiscences of Brancusi's native folk art buried by long academic training."<sup>16</sup> African art led the way to Romanian folk art, which was the main contributor to Brancusi's primitive abstraction. More specifically, Brancusi found his way back to the folk wood objects, with which he grew up, through his contact with African wood objects. It was only after Brancusi ended his academic studies in sculpture that African art became a "trigger" not only for folk art but also abstraction.

According to Balas and Geist, primitivism is concerned with the past. Brancusi was a primitive because he gained inspiration from primitive objects, along with a primitive mysticism. Geist observes how "In Brancusi, this turning to the past took the character of a return to beginnings, of a dream of beginning that linked primal innocence with sculptural simplicity."<sup>17</sup> The primitive is generally identified with the beginning, before, or at the advent of civilization, and the progress of technology; without scientific and philosophical knowledge, humans lived in "primal innocence." Brancusi turned to the primitive for his search of the essence of form and "sculptural simplicity" because the primitive is thought to be less complex and less corrupted by civilization. Geist, however, does not discuss the prejudice attached to this conception of the primitive. One needs to be critical when using the term "primal innocence" for it possesses a negative

connotation within the context of colonialism. The term implies ignorance, that which was identified with the colonized. Brancusi may have looked to the past for his inspiration of form and philosophical meaning, but he was at the center of modernism, which perpetuated the idea of progress. He needed to look to the primitive because the time period in which he lived was a time of rapid technological advancement. Geist implies that “primal innocence” does not exist in the modern age and, therefore, the primitive was Brancusi’s best choice for artistic breakthrough.

It is this comingling of the primitive past and the progressive present which characterizes Brancusi as a primitive. Balas makes the distinction between primitivist and primitive when she says, “Brancusi was no primitive but rather one of many among his generation who looked backward to step forward.”<sup>18</sup> She echoes Geist in the idea of looking to the past to gain artistic progress. The primitive is only concerned with the origin or the past. The avant-garde, on the other hand, has an affinity for the primitive but is mainly concerned with the future. Therefore, for Balas, Brancusi was not a primitive because he searched for new forms of representation in sculpture. The Romanian poet Benjamin Fondane, who was among Brancusi’s circle of friends, wrote in 1928 of Brancusi recognizing “his brothers only in the primitives, the artists of the Gothic, and the blacks.”<sup>19</sup> Besides the “artists of the Gothic and the blacks,” I think one can include the craftsmen of folk art. Fondane’s statement offers insight into the contemporary perception of Brancusi as a primitive. If his brothers are as Fondane described, then this indicates that he is also a primitive.

Several other art historians have written on the relationship between Brancusi and primitivism within his general construction as the father of modern, abstract sculpture. In

his seminal book *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Robert Goldwater pronounces, “Brancusi attains that sense of presence (intensity and meaningfulness) which attracts many modern sculptors to the primitive.”<sup>20</sup> According to Goldwater, Brancusi is not only attracted to the formalism of primitive art. He also sees in primitive art a “meaningfulness” which he seeks to express in his own sculpture. He is a primitive due to his deference to the material with which he works, to “his wish to conserve an awareness of its original state within the awareness of what a work of art has become.”<sup>21</sup> Like primitive sculptors, he is sensitive to the “untouched condition of both the shape and the surface of its material.”<sup>22</sup> In Goldwater’s view, Brancusi’s sculpture does not resemble a particular tribal style; nevertheless, it exhibits certain features of African art such as vertical three-dimensionality, along with “African staccato handling of solid and void.”<sup>23</sup> Goldwater is arguing for an affinity between Brancusi and African sculpture, though he does not use the actual term affinity.

Goldwater, Geist, Rubin, and Balas discuss Brancusi’s wood sculptures only because these sculptures are thought to be the most African or primitive. In their opinion, the other sculptures in bronze and marble do not exhibit African features. Furthermore, they convey an elegance of form that is closer in appearance to classical Greek art rather than primitive art. I will discuss the role of the pedestal in my next two chapters within my analysis of Brancusi’s sculpture; but I think it is important to note how little consideration is given to the issue of the pedestal in the discussion of Brancusi and primitivism. Goldwater does not mention the pedestals at all. Geist only examines the ambiguity of sculpture and pedestal within the context of the wood sculptures. Balas, meanwhile, utilizes the wood pedestals to prove the influence of Romanian folk art. I

think the interplay between the wood pedestals and stone or bronze sculptures is a crucial component in determining Brancusi's primitivism.

Carola Giedion-Welcker (artist, art historian, and friend of Brancusi) first mentioned Brancusi's primitivism, before Geist and other scholars. In her 1959 survey of Brancusi, Welcker argues the folk art to which Brancusi was exposed as a child had a significant impact on his wood sculpture. Because Welcker's study of Brancusi preceded Geist and Balas's, it can be assumed that Welcker first introduced the idea of folk art as being a meaningful source for Brancusi. She identifies several folk motifs evident in the wood sculptures, but she denies the importance of the pedestals, believing that they serve a "subservient" role to the "volume and space" of the supported sculpture.<sup>24</sup> Welcker thought of the pedestals as secondary because they are too abstract compared to the sculpture.

### **Postmodern Readings of Brancusi**

In the 1995 exhibition catalogue of the Brancusi exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Friedrich Techa Bach bestows a more important meaning to Brancusi's pedestals. In her view, Brancusi "intended to emphasize the kinship between geometrically structured matter and living form...through formal affinities between base and sculpture."<sup>25</sup> These formal affinities are conveyed in the elements of "cubes, cylinders, truncated pyramids, serrated forms."<sup>26</sup> Though Geist and Rubin attribute an affinity between primitive art and the wood sculptures of Brancusi, neither mentions the formal affinities between base and sculpture. The relationship of organic and geometric forms is also evident in primitive art, whether African or folk. It can be argued that

Brancusi attempted to embody this relationship of forms in his juxtaposition of sculpture and base.

In the same catalogue from 1995, Margit Rowell juxtaposes the symbolism of African sculpture with that of Brancusi's. African sculpture is simultaneously "specific and general," neither "too individualized or too abstract;" likewise, the pedestals are defined by their "universal symbolism."<sup>27</sup> Rowell is referring only to the pedestals, but I think a "universal symbolism" is achieved more readily in the dichotomy of sculpture and pedestal, as opposed to only the pedestal. Brancusi's sculptures in marble and bronze tend to be more figurative than the more abstracted pedestals on which they reside.

Bach observes that the "heterogeneity" and "tensions" of his pedestals is in opposition to "the definition of modernism as a progressive, linear, reductive process."<sup>28</sup> Brancusi has been perceived as the father of modern sculpture due to his "reductive" bronze and marble sculptures. Like modernism, the sculptures begin as figurative and progress over time into abstraction. The pedestals, on the other hand, are abstract from the beginning. There is no progression. The pedestals are more "heterogeneous" and complex than the sculptures. The form does not get simplified but rather becomes more complex and meaningful depending on the type of sculpture it supports. For example, the wood pedestal of *Mademoiselle Pogany III* has a rough texture that contrasts severely with the smooth marble of the head of *Mademoiselle Pogany*. The difference in line further emphasizes the contrast between pedestal and sculpture: the elegance of the organic lines marking the features of the face is downplayed by the cross-hatched lines running across the entire pedestal. On its own, the head of *Mademoiselle Pogany* has the likeness of sculpture from classical antiquity. With the pedestal, the head becomes more

complex and more primitive. The sculpture *Bird in Space* also has a wood pedestal, in a shortened form of the *Endless Column*. The three rhomboidal modules elevate the sculpture, functioning as a springboard for the figure of the bird to take flight. The pedestal of *Bird in Space* does not contrast with the sculpture as severely as in *Mademoiselle Pogany*; rather, it complements the sculpture with the earth tone of the wood and the vertical, symmetrical composition.

Bach goes on to say that “Brancusi’s work points the way to a necessary widening of the definition of modernity.”<sup>29</sup> Bach should have used the term modernism instead of “modernity” because it is a more specific term. Brancusi is predominantly associated with modernism and its canon of high art. Modernity refers to an entire time period and, though Brancusi was part of the growing modernity of early twentieth century, he was specifically active, along with other artists, in defining visual modernism. While the definitions of modernity and modernism do need to be broadened, Brancusi’s work needs to be redefined beyond modernism in a manner that takes into account his relationship with the primitive.

Anna Chave deconstructs the modernist Brancusi whose art was purely formal and autonomous. She enumerates on Bach’s argument, stating: “His practice of hybridizing and juxtaposing contrasting visual modes is a decisive counter to the artist’s vaunted, Neoplatonic purity.”<sup>30</sup> Chave thinks that Brancusi has not been given much attention within the history of modern art. He is central within the history of modern sculpture but not within modernism as a whole. Brancusi is esteemed for his “Neoplatonic purity.” Though despite this, he has been marginalized because he is “not geographically and historically localized,” with a consistent style.<sup>31</sup> His art has more than

just a classical purity: the diverse elements in his sculpture, stemming from African, folk, and other sources, hamper him from being included in the canon of high modernist artists like Picasso.

Chave goes on to argue that Brancusi can be identified as a primitive: “Brancusi’s turn to the visual modes...lauded as primitive involved less an act of appropriation than one of retrieval...of suppressed elements of his own identity.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, Brancusi had an affinity to primitive art not because he wished to appropriate its aesthetics, but because he felt a bond between the art and his own identity. His appropriation of other cultures signifies “the dislocation and displacement or homelessness that marked his own life.”<sup>33</sup> The objects taken from Africa, or other places outside of Europe, became homeless after their arrival in Paris. Their cultural background was dislocated and a new Euro-centric significance was placed on them. Even with a new aesthetic role, the objects were considered outsiders—the Other—which acted as a foil to Western modernity. For Chave, Brancusi identified with primitive objects because they conveyed the Other. Brancusi can also be viewed as the Other: a Romanian outsider in a modern and cosmopolitan Parisian environment. It was this common dislocation that drew him to primitive objects.

Another art historian who questions Brancusi’s primitiveness is Eric Shanes. He argues, “the apprehension of Brancusi as a primitive is totally contradicted by the extent of his academic training and by the formal sophistication of the majority of his works.”<sup>34</sup> Shanes does not take into consideration the manner in which Brancusi invented his own image—as that of a primitive. Brancusi’s simple way of living corresponds to what one interprets as primitive. Though I agree that his presence in early twentieth century

modernism renders him modernist rather than primitive, in my view, Brancusi can be called a primitive due to his invented self-image. There are numerous accounts of friends and visitors who visited his studio and commented on his technologically deprived space and monk-like appearance. I will explore Brancusi's construction as a primitive in chapter two of my thesis, for I think his primitive self-image relates to his relationship with Romanian folk art and culture.

Furthermore, Shanes considers Brancusi "a prejudiced man of his own era in that he regarded Africans as 'savages;' it was that supposed savagery he drew upon to extend the content of some of his works."<sup>35</sup> While it is difficult to decipher how Brancusi actually felt about indigenous cultures since he spoke only briefly on the subject, I doubt that Brancusi thought of savages in a negative manner. Avant-garde artists sought objects from places such as Africa and Oceania for their own artistic work, without learning more about the cultures from which the objects came; however, it is an exaggeration to say that avant-garde artists, including Brancusi, were predominantly drawn to primitive objects due to their savagery. The relationship is more complex, for it was built out of both prejudice and admiration. Artists were interested in collecting and drawing inspiration from tribal objects because they presented "new methods and new problems."<sup>36</sup>

Shanes infers that Brancusi was a prejudiced man from a comment Brancusi made around 1923. Here is Brancusi's full comment:

The African negro savages also preserved the life of matter in their sculpture. They worked with wood. They did not wound it, they knew how to eliminate the unnecessary parts of it to make it become a fetish sculpture. And the African wood sculpture remains a living and expressive wood under a form given by a human feeling. Christian primitives and

negro savages proceed only by faith and instinct. The modern artists proceeds by instinct guided by reason.<sup>37</sup>

Brancusi places “Christian primitives” and “African savages” in the same category.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the derogatory meaning of the term “savage,” Brancusi’s comment does not express the level of prejudice alleged by Shanes. Brancusi is comparing the pre-modern artists to the artists of his own modern time. The early Christians and African artists are savages in the sense that they apply “faith and instinct” to their art instead of modern, scientific “reason.” Thus, Brancusi aligns himself with these savages, for he tries to enliven his materials through the expression of form, like the earlier craftsmen working in wood.

### **Brancusi’s Context**

The construction of Brancusi as a primitive must also take into account other modern sculptors working in Paris during the beginning of the twentieth century, between 1905 and 1925. Sculptors such as Jacob Epstein and Amadeo Modigliani interacted with primitivism at the same time as Brancusi, yet Brancusi’s primitivism has been more widely discussed and held to a greater significance than that of other artists. His craftsmanship and choice of sculptural materials, along with his expressive, abstract approach to his art, set him apart as a primitive from the rest of his colleagues. Art historians have viewed Brancusi as a central figure of primitivism partly due to Goldwater, who wrote in 1956, “Consciousness of the primitive entered the general stream of modern sculpture through Brancusi.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, in his survey of modern sculpture, William Tucker acknowledges Picasso and Brancusi as “the artists most notably responsible for the revolution in sculpture that occurred between 1909 and

1915.”<sup>40</sup> This time period, between 1909 and 1915, coincided with the “discovery” of primitive art and the beginning of abstraction in modern sculpture. Brancusi and Picasso shared an interest in primitivism and in non-representational forms, though they took separate routes to arrive at abstraction.

It is important to understand that Brancusi could not fully appropriate African sculpture into his art due to the fact that it was the same medium and, therefore, would become redundant. Picasso, meanwhile, could transfer African forms into his paintings, like the masks in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, without having to restructure the forms so as to make them unrecognizable from those in African sculpture.<sup>41</sup> Sculptors were much more limited than painters in their appropriation of African art. When African forms are transferred to canvas, they gain a new context and new meaning, but it is difficult to create new meaning and context when the medium is the same. Brancusi was successful at incorporating primitive art and redeveloping it into something unfamiliar and modern, all through the medium of sculpture.

It is partly due to his handling of stone that Brancusi is perceived as a primitive. By the advent of the twentieth-century, avant-garde artists were questioning the “authenticity” of sculpture. These new artists wanted to work alone in their studios without assistants, and without clay or plaster models and an electric pointing machine that carved the stone. They discovered a way to do so through direct carving, a technique in which the sculptor carves directly into the stone. The first artist to experiment with direct carving was Paul Gauguin around 1882.<sup>42</sup> Avant-garde artists correlated direct carving with the primitive, choosing from primitive sources such as African, Oceanic, Indian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and Mexican.<sup>43</sup> Brancusi was trained in the traditional

techniques of sculpture, but abandoned these techniques between 1907 and 1909, as he was about to embark on carving directly in stone and wood.

His first work in direct carving was *The Kiss*, which he completed in 1908. Brancusi referenced Rodin's *The Kiss* to create his own, less figurative version of *The Kiss*. He maintained Rodin's aspect of the intertwined bodies while abandoning every other detail. Brancusi's *The Kiss* is more intimate due to its smaller scale and its unified form. The sculpture is carved from a block of stone with only the essential features, like the mouth and arms, being added to express the couple's embrace. Rodin's *The Kiss*, with its refined marble and elegant body parts, draws the viewer's attention to the beauty of the two bodies in their embrace. Brancusi, meanwhile, is less concerned with beauty and more concerned with how to express emotion through the use of appropriate materials. The method of direct carving allowed Brancusi to attach a primitive, timeless quality to the kiss motif.

Though he eliminated the initial plaster model in his wood and stone sculpture, when it came to bronze, Brancusi had no choice but to revert back to his academic training. While responding to an interrogation in his case against the United States in 1928, he writes the following on his sculptural process:

I conceived it to be made in bronze and made a plaster model of it. This I gave to the founder, together with the formula for the bronze alloy and other necessary indications. When the roughcast was delivered to me, I had to stop up the air holes and the core hole, to correct the various defects, and to polish the bronze with files and very fine emery. All this I did myself, by hand; this artistic finishing takes a very long time and is equivalent to beginning the whole work over again. I did not allow anyone else to do any of this finishing work, as the subject of the bronze was my own special creation and nobody but myself could have carried it out to my satisfaction.<sup>44</sup>

Brancusi describes his sculptural process in order to prove that his bronze sculpture, *Bird in Space*, is an original work of art, not an industrial object. His description also proves how differently avant-garde sculptors approached sculpting compared to their nineteenth century predecessors. Though the foundry created the cast for the bronze sculpture, it was the artist himself who worked the bronze “by hand,” forming it into his own original “special creation.” Sculptors of the nineteenth century and before did not mind employing a foundry and various other individuals tasked to create the sculpture. They cared more about the quantity of sculpture rather than its quality.<sup>45</sup>

Abstraction began to flourish in the works of the Parisian avant-garde because of the concern for originality and hands-on approach. Many of the artists who took up sculpting were not academically trained in sculpture as Brancusi was. Amedeo Modigliani began as a painter; Matisse and Picasso were predominantly painters; Raymond Duchamp-Villon had no formal academic training in sculpture before he started sculpting. In my view, Brancusi stands out from the avant-garde group because his abstraction possessed a high level of craftsmanship and knowledge of the human form, learned from his academic studies. Though he broke with figurative, academic sculpture in 1907, he still applied his training to his new abstract works. For this reason, some art historians hesitate to place Brancusi in the same category as other primitive artists whose sculpture is rougher and less crafted than that of Brancusi’s.

A large number of avant-garde artists developing their artistic careers in Paris at the same time as Brancusi came not from France but other parts of Europe. Joseph Csaky, in particular, moved to Paris in 1908 from Hungary, Romania’s neighboring country. Csaky’s work can be compared to Brancusi’s. Balas writes that Csaky “strove to

represent an essential, universal image of the object, to achieve the impossible task of representing its absolute concept.”<sup>46</sup> Like Brancusi, Csaky came to Paris in order to study Rodin, but then tuned to abstraction in his exploration of the “absolute.” Csaky followed the same animal theme as Brancusi; he produced several sculptures in the 1920s with titles such as *The Cock*, *Bird*, and *Fish*. *The Cock* was made around the same time, 1924, as Brancusi *The Cock*. Given the dates and similar subject matter, my notion of their relationship is that the two artists knew of each other’s work and inspired each other.

Csaky is not as highly regarded as Brancusi by art historians due to his shift to a more “representational style in the late 1920s.”<sup>47</sup> Brancusi and Csaky shared a respect for traditional, sculptural materials. Unlike other modern artists who assembled sculpture out of new, synthetic materials or found objects, Brancusi and Csaky were loyal to the primitive materials of wood and stone, along with traditional materials like bronze. Rosalind Krauss rejects the general view of art historians regarding Brancusi’s “truth-to-materials ethos” because, she argues, Brancusi enjoyed experimenting with different materials.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Brancusi did not limit himself to one type of material, but he did not experiment with plastic, metal and glass, unlike some Constructivist and Surrealist artists.

Csaky’s sculptures are geometric and stiff, embodying remnants of figuration. In the case of Brancusi’s sculptures, the figuration is abstracted to the point where the depicted subject is nearly unrecognizable. The difference in style between the two sculptors is evident in the composition of *The Cock*. Despite the straight lines and geometric forms, Csaky’s sculpture has the appearance of a real cock. No one would mistake the sculpture for anything else but a cock. On the other hand, Brancusi’s sculpture of the same subject conveys the formal possibility of a cock with its serrated

head, but its appearance is less discernable due to its abstraction. With its less reflected bronze surface and dark shadows, Casaky's *Cock* seems simultaneously stable and somber, possessing an ominous, imposing presence. In contrast, Brancusi's *Cock* with its vertical form, has a movement which is absent in Csaky's static *Cock*. Brancusi's *Cock* is about to fly into the air. This ephemeral quality is emphasized further in Brancusi's bronze version of *The Cock*, which he created ten years after the wood version. The bronze form becomes weightless as light reflects off the translucent, gold surface. I think it is this qualitative difference in form and representation that propelled Brancusi as the "father of modern sculpture"; meanwhile, Csaky, unfortunately, was overlooked in the history of abstract sculpture.

Brancusi's construction in art history as a primitive is centered on his sculptural abstraction, manifested in his materials of stone and wood. Brancusi arrived at abstraction due to his encounter with primitive art. Though art historians believe that Brancusi was influenced by primitive art—either African and/or Romanian folk art—few of them agree that Brancusi was a primitive himself. MOMA's "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition initiated discussions on Brancusi's relationship with primitivism. On one hand, Rubin, Goldwater, and Geist argue for an African influence in Brancusi's early work; on the other hand, Balas and Welcker argue for the importance of Romanian folk art in his work. Art historians need accept the idea that there is a little bit of African and a little bit of folk art in Brancusi's formal and conceptual creation of sculpture. In the next two chapters I will argue for these two sources and also trace Brancusi's constructed self-identity as a primitive. Brancusi is singled out in the history of modern sculpture as a

foremost primitive and modernist because of his craftsmanship and early abstraction, which took form in 1907.

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Geist, “Brancusi,” “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Volume II* edited by William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 362.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and His World* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Geist, 361.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>9</sup> William Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction,” “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Volume I* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 28-29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Geist, 352.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>14</sup> Balas, *Brancusi and His World*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

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- <sup>17</sup> Sidney Geist, *A Study of Sculpture* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983), 141.
- <sup>18</sup> Balas, *Folk Traditions*, 17.
- <sup>19</sup> Geist, *Primitivism*, 361.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 233.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, and Ann Temkin. *Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 26.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven, Massachusetts; London, England: Yale University Press, 1993), 20.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.
- <sup>34</sup> Eric Shanes, *Constantin Brancusi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 8.
- <sup>35</sup> Shanes, 51.
- <sup>36</sup> Jacob Epstein, *An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1955), 188.

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<sup>37</sup> Constantin Brancusi, “Coda: Quotations from Artists and Writers,” *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, edited by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, California; Los Angeles, California; London, England: University of California Press, 2003), 420.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Goldwater, 246.

<sup>40</sup> William Tucker, *Early Modern Sculpture: Rodin, Degas, Matisse, Brancusi, Picasso, Gonzalez* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 75.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>42</sup> Albert E. Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture: Pioneers and Premises* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 73.

<sup>43</sup> Curtis, 83.

<sup>44</sup> Margit Rowell, *Brancusi vs. United States, the Historic Trial, 1928* (Paris, France: Adam Biro, 1999), 48.

<sup>45</sup> Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture 1900-1945: After Rodin* (Oxford; New York : Oxford University Press, 1999), 74.

<sup>46</sup> Edith Balas, *Joseph Csaky: A Pioneer of Modern Sculpture* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 87.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>48</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 100.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PRIMITIVE INFLUENCE OF ROMANIAN FOLK ART ON BRANCUSI AND HIS SCULPTURE

This chapter examines Brancusi's primitivism within the context of his relationship with Romanian folk art. I argue that Brancusi took inspiration from the folk art of his native country, as evidenced in his sculptures and especially in his wood pedestals. The abstract forms as well as the materials he used both originate in Romanian folk motifs. Brancusi's construction of himself as a primitive depended on Romanian folklore and Romanian Orthodoxy. His self-portrayal of himself as a mystic derives from the religious mysticism of Romanian Orthodoxy. Additionally, his portrayal of himself as a peasant derives from the customs and beliefs of Romanian folk culture. Though a "mystic" and a "primitive" are not the same, they do share similarities, such as a denial of modern life and a belief in the spiritual power of nature. I will use both terms throughout the chapter when discussing Brancusi's spiritualism and primitivism.

After his move to Paris, Brancusi visited Romania on several occasions but never moved back to his home country. If he had intended to return to Romania, he would most likely have lived in Bucharest where he was in touch with the Romanian avant-garde artists and collectors. It is a great paradox that Brancusi cherished the Romanian folk art of his childhood and his persona as a rural peasant, yet he was content to live in a large cosmopolitan city with modern, progressive society. Paris allowed him to work on his art in peace without the political uncertainties and social intolerance that took place in Romania between the wars. Additionally, I think his act of distancing himself from

Romania was a way for him to preserve Romanian folk life as it was in his childhood, untouched by modern social and political changes.

Brancusi kept a link with Romania through Romanian folklore, which signified this mythical, ideal childhood and the ideal peasant life. He did not engage with Romanian folklore in the same manner as the folklore's creators in Romanian villages, for he was countries apart and cultures apart. Though he retained his Romanian folk identity, while living in Paris and traveling abroad he was exposed to numerous people from diverse backgrounds. This cultural awareness must have broadened his world-view beyond the confines of Romanian folk culture. Hence, it is doubtful that Brancusi shared the exact beliefs of those practicing Romanian folklore in village communities. In my view, Brancusi employed folk art motifs and folk tales in order to maintain his personal identity and connection to Romania and not in order to actively participate in the contemporaneous village traditions of Romanian folklore.

Before delving into Brancusi's self-construction as a primitive and his use of folk motifs, an overview of folk art in Romania, and to a greater extent folk culture is beneficial. This will create a context to regard Brancusi's relationship with folk art. I will also discuss the roles of Romanian Orthodoxy and peasant culture in the creation of Romanian nationalism during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Primitivism becomes nationalistic within this folk, Orthodox context; and in turn, Brancusi's art also becomes nationalistic. Brancusi's incorporation of folk art parallels the interest of German Expressionists in folk and primitive art. In particular, Brancusi held similar spiritual, and philosophical beliefs about art as did Wassily Kandinsky and the *Blaue Reiter* group.

## **Folk Art and Romanian Nationalism**

Folklore and folk art in Romania developed from the conversion of pagan beliefs into Christian ones. Folklore is a general term that refers to the customs and beliefs, such as costume, music, dance, literature, cuisine, and art, which make up village life.<sup>1</sup> Folk art is a subcategory of folklore and is used specifically to designate material objects.

Folklore is identified with the peasantry, and, therefore, with nationalism. There is a romantic image attached to folklore, of a primitive peasant living harmoniously with nature while creating beautiful songs and objects.<sup>2</sup> Of course this image idealizes the peasant, for in reality, as stated earlier, the peasantry in Romania lived in less than ideal conditions.

Folk art in Romania derives from a place of nationalism and religion. Romania came into existence during the late nineteenth century, when the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia united and formed the kingdom of Romania in 1881. In 1918, after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the principality of Transylvania joined the kingdom of Romania, forming the territory of Romania as it is known today. Due to the diverse cultures and population of each principality, it was important to create a nationalist feeling in the new nation in order to achieve its unity. This nationalist feeling was based on the pride in “Daco-Roman identity”—an invented identity made up of the Dacian ancestors that occupied the present day land of Romania and the second century A.D. Roman conquerors.<sup>3</sup>

Brancusi was born into the peasant, rural class, which was a key component of Daco-Roman identity. Unlike the peasantry, the higher class of the Romanian elite identified itself more with the West. From the 1830s onwards, young Romanian

intellectuals traveled to Paris and trained there, supported by family connections and wealth. Brancusi, meanwhile, had to work low-paying jobs to support himself in Paris during his early years. Romanian intellectuals identified so closely with French culture that the majority of them spoke French.<sup>4</sup> Peasants were especially regarded as close descendants of the Dacians, for they worked and lived off the land in the same manner as their ancestors. Moreover, there are pagan motifs present in folk art from the pre-Christian, Dacian period.

The peasantry was important to the advancement of nationalism not only because they were closely associated with the Daco-Roman identity, but also because they made up a large part of the population. Though there was a growing middle class, at the beginning of the twentieth century eighty-two percent of the population were peasants and resided in rural areas. Early on, Brancusi distanced himself as much as possible from the peasantry with each new city: first Craiova, then Bucharest, and finally Paris. But it is evident that Brancusi had a change of heart about his peasant origins. With each passing year, particularly towards the end of his life, he became nostalgic for his homeland, showing a special fondness for his childhood and peasant traditions. The folk presence in his art and his peasant upbringing identifies him with the peasant class, whether or not Brancusi was a nationalist.

The Romanian Orthodox Church solidified the nationalist sentiment of the peasantry towards the Romanian nationhood. The Orthodox Church was, and still is, the national church of Romania. Village life was organized around the Church.<sup>5</sup> The Orthodoxists sought to “homogenize” all citizens of Romania by imposing the Orthodox faith, for they believed that Orthodoxism was part of the “Romanian spirit.”<sup>6</sup> The concept

of nation was “synonymous with Orthodoxy.”<sup>7</sup> Orthodoxists believed that the ideal Romanian was a “peasant, gentle and contemplative, disdaining material concerns, and unsuited for industrial work.”<sup>8</sup> This description of the ideal Romanian conveys a romantic understanding of village life and folk culture. It is also pertinent to how critics perceived Brancusi.

Romanian folklore originates in pre-Christian traditions. For instance, in order to celebrate the New Year, village children traditionally wear masks and portray goat characters that were used in pre-Christian winter solstice festivities.<sup>9</sup> It is very likely that Brancusi participated in these New Year festivities when he was a young boy, like other children in his village. The peasantry in Romania continued pagan traditions through folklore while maintaining their national support through their Christian, Orthodox faith. Brancusi was familiar with the mystical pagan aspect of Romanian folklore—an aspect that he later incorporated in his sculpture.

### **Constructing Brancusi’s Primitive Identity**

Brancusi had a close relationship with the Orthodox Church. It is known that at least in 1906, Brancusi attended and worked in a Romanian Orthodox chapel in Paris.<sup>10</sup> It is uncertain whether Brancusi continued to attend the chapel in his later years. He may have only participated in the church community during his first few years in Paris in order to get acquainted with other Romanian expatriates and to comfort his homesickness. Brancusi was not a religious man in the traditional sense, for he spoke of feeling closer to God through the act of creating art. For him, “being close to God is to leave behind the contingent, is to tackle the principle, the essence of things, is to steer

one's eyes towards the absolute.”<sup>11</sup> He became closer to God through his sculpture in which he sought the “essence of things.”

Brancusi's religious faith was a mixture of Orthodoxy, Buddhism, Hinduism, and general spiritualism. *Life of Milarepa* is among the books in his library. The book is an introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, providing biographical accounts of Milarepa who was an eleventh century Tibetan monk.<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising that Brancusi possessed this book, for it narrates Milarepa's spiritual search through meditation, which Brancusi also practiced.<sup>13</sup> Brancusi was also interested in Hinduism. He traveled to India in 1937 in order to meet with the Maharajah of Indore who commissioned him to build a grand mausoleum for his deceased wife. While on the trip, Brancusi absorbed Indian culture and, more importantly, Hindu spiritualism.<sup>14</sup> He visited old temples and practiced meditation there.<sup>15</sup>

The spiritualism of Buddhism and Hinduism attracted Brancusi, but I think his spiritualism and his mystic persona stems predominantly from Romanian Orthodoxy. The Orthodox faith in Romania is closely identified with monastic life.<sup>16</sup> For the Orthodoxists, mysticism meant having a direct “experience with the divine.”<sup>17</sup> Orthodox mysticism is symbolized in the Spirit, the Spirit of God; it is also referred to as the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of the Father and Son. The Spirit lies beyond “time and space” and is not constrained to “visible and material phenomena.”<sup>18</sup> The Spirit that is found in the believer's soul guides the believer to God.<sup>19</sup> Brancusi reiterated this spiritual connection with the divine; he stated that when creating art, “you need to join yourself with the universe and the elements.”<sup>20</sup>

Brancusi also reinforced his spiritualism through his self-image as a mystic and a primitive. Critics described Brancusi as a mystic and a primitive, and indeed this is how he wished to be perceived. Being a mystic, however, also made him a primitive in that he renounced modernity in favor of a spiritual existence unfettered by society. In the exhibition catalogue for Brancusi's 1933 exhibition at the Brummer Gallery, Roger Vitrac, a French poet and playwright, wrote: "Those who do not know the author of these mystical sculptures readily imagine the artist as a sort of demiurge or sorcerer, presenting to our actual world modern totems laden with occult significance."<sup>21</sup> Vitrac's choice of words—"mystical," "sorcerer," and "occult"—implies an existence outside of reality, as if Brancusi and his sculpture reside in a realm beyond physical reality. Thus, he becomes an almost prophet-like figure, though Vitrac does not go as far as to say this. In correlating Brancusi's sculptures, like the wood *Endless Column*, with totem poles, Vitrac alludes to the primitive position of Brancusi's art within the modern world. For Vitrac, he is more magical, and is, therefore, primitive, rather than modern.

Brancusi determined that his own physical appearance and lifestyle would become significant factors in his construction as a primitive and a mystic. Though he was well educated and lived in Paris, critics often labeled Brancusi as a peasant. The poet William Carlos Williams offers the following description of Brancusi:

The man, now well over 70, living alone...has now become famous for his broiled steaks cooked by himself at his own fire, which he himself serves as though he were a shepherd at night on one of his native hillsides under the stars. A white collie named Polaire used to be his constant companion reinforcing the impression of a shepherd, which, with his shaggy head of hair, broad shoulders and habitual reserve, he seemed to his friends to be.<sup>22</sup>

Since he is alienated from society and the modern world, Williams sees Brancusi as a shepherd, a common occupation for those who lived in villages and one of the oldest of occupations of man. Brancusi even carried a flute around with him, in the manner of the shepherds from his native land of Oltenia.<sup>23</sup> The Romanian art historian Ionel Jianou claims that Brancusi was a “peasant” and a “Carpathian shepherd” his entire life, and that he was “one with Nature.”<sup>24</sup>

To his audience, Brancusi’s old age also transformed him into a mystical figure from a distant, primitive past. Marielle Tabart uses the following adjectives to describe Brancusi: “primaire, instinctif, rustique.”<sup>25</sup> These adjectives describe someone who is out of touch with modern life. A *Vanity Fair* article from 1922, published when Brancusi was in middle age, describes that he provides “one the impression of an elderly faun. . . he has a pagan feeling for life and a pagan sense of duty.”<sup>26</sup> Brancusi possessed intellect and charm, despite his humble, otherworldly appearance and simple lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> Far from being a hermit, like a shepherd traveling alone with his flock of sheep, Brancusi welcomed visitors to his studio and always seemed to enjoy lively conversation. According to Jacob Epstein, who met Brancusi in 1912, Brancusi was “charming and simple in appearance and manner like a sailor or a farmer.”<sup>28</sup> Brancusi may have dressed like a farmer, but his intellectual capacity, backed by his library of books by Plato and Henri Bergson, proves otherwise.

The austerity of Brancusi’s studio complimented his peasant-like physical appearance. The ceramicist Beatrice Wood visited Brancusi’s studio in 1956. In her description of his studio Wood remarks, “there was no furniture, in the accepted sense of the word. Tables, couch, chairs had been carved by Brancusi himself of aged wood, rich

in color and grain.”<sup>29</sup> The avant-garde Romanian journal *Contimporanul* refers to Brancusi’s studio as the “laboratorului natural” as where in the center stands the wizard.<sup>30</sup> The “laboratorului natural” not only reiterates Brancusi’s mystical persona, but also attaches his home and studio space to nature—which was also important to the peasant and his home. Brancusi lived and worked in his studio. He fashioned his studio space as a Romanian peasant would his home, with every object built by hand. Stefan Gorjan, the Romanian engineer who worked with Brancusi on the Tirgu-jiu ensemble, commented on Brancusi’s furniture that it was “*taranesc*.”<sup>31</sup> In the Romanian language, the word *taranesc* is used within the context of the peasantry or folk culture. Though there is no specific translation of the word in English, it is close in meaning to “peasant” or “village-like.” Like a peasant, Brancusi carved his own furniture. This is a peculiar thing to do in a modern age when one can buy manufactured furniture in shops. I think Brancusi chose to carve his own furniture as means of feeling closer to Romania, his childhood home.

Brancusi’s childhood house consisted of only two bedrooms and a kitchen, which was the standard size for a village home. Aside from the functional objects like the bed, stove, and chairs, the rooms were “filled with colored textiles” and with “decorated, incised, carved or painted furniture and utensils.”<sup>32</sup> Brancusi built a similar oven that was typical of a Romanian village home for his studio, attempting to create the same home environment of his childhood. His love for his homeland is evident in his intensity of emotions while listening to the music of the folk singer Maria Tanase. At the sound of his native music, Brancusi emotionally remarked, “I have the impulse to leave everything behind and to go home as a woodcarver or stone carver and to carve all the columns of the farmhouse porches and all the supper tables of the peasants.”<sup>33</sup>

Brancusi learned furniture construction while working at a furniture factory in Vienna during the summer of 1897.<sup>34</sup> Benches, made of oak beams, stood in front of gates outside village houses in the region of Oltenia and elsewhere in Romania. Brancusi made similar benches from oak beams and placed them around his studio.<sup>35</sup> But furniture construction was not his end goal, for he continuously appropriated the forms of his wood furniture in his sculptures and pedestals. For him, these objects were not merely utilitarian objects decorating a living space. They were works of art, maintaining a simultaneous aesthetic and utilitarian function. Brancusi borrowed forms from his carved furniture for his pedestals. One example is the pedestal of *Beginning of the World*, which looks quite similar to one of his constructed stools. He presents a crescent form that merges into an oval at the top and a half oval at the bottom in both the stool and pedestal. Brancusi reconfigured the form of the stool for the pedestal, simplifying it into one block of wood and adding a lustrous bronze plate as the base for the sculpture. Its functionality of this stool is replaced with aesthetic sophistication.

The *Beginning of the World* is not the only sculpture where Brancusi used to a borrowed form from his studio furniture. Balas notes that one of Brancusi's wood constructions from his studio appears in the sculpture *King of Kings*.<sup>36</sup> The rounded cylinder, with a circular hole in its middle, was meant to function as either a low standing table or stool, depending on the circumstance. The dual functionality of the table/stool exemplifies Brancusi's flexibility and improvisation in regard to form. In *King of Kings*, the rounded cylinder takes on a third role as a pedestal. The coarseness of the wood, which is an important element of the table/stool, is absent in the pedestal; the smoothness of the wood there correlates with the overall pristine appearance of *King of Kings*.

Brancusi's wood pedestals usually look unfinished, with cracks and discoloration that convey agedness and entropy. Paul Petrescu refers to the wood crafted objects of Romanian folk art as "cules din natura," which means that the objects were gathered directly from nature.<sup>37</sup> For instance, the trunk of a tree was formed into a honey barrel. The "cules din natura" attribute is prominent in Brancusi's work, particularly in the pedestals for *The Kiss* and *Torso of a Young Girl*. The pedestal of *The Kiss* is essentially a block of wood that he had most likely chosen from those laying around his studio. The pedestal of *Torso of a Young Girl*, meanwhile, is a long bench carved from a tree trunk. Brancusi directs the viewer's eyes to the ground by positioning the sculpture on the short block of wood, without additional stone or marble pedestal in between. In this low-lying on the ground position, the sculpture is closer to nature, as though it were resting on a tree log in the middle of a forest.

### **Brancusi and German Expressionism**

Brancusi and Wassily Kandinsky both believed in the spiritual role of art. In his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky argues that primitive people are more spiritual than modern individuals who are hindered by materialism and a "lack of purpose."<sup>38</sup> He notes that the goal of the artist is to bridge this modern spiritual gap and to give form to an "inner meaning" arising from the soul.<sup>39</sup> The German Expressionism movement parallels Brancusi's artistic experimentation not only in the search for spirituality but also in its incorporation of primitive and decorative art, and use of folk images. The German Expressionists wanted to join decorative and fine art together.<sup>40</sup> The *Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke* groups were inspired by Gothic art, while the artists of *Die*

*Brücke*, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, also favored African art. These forms of art offered both groups emotional and spiritual alternatives to European academic art of the time.<sup>41</sup>

In 1912, Kandinsky and Franz Marc published the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*. The almanac featured essays on the German avant-garde and its promotion of primitive art and spiritualism. Franz Marc identifies the avant-garde artists who are part of German Expressionism as “savages.” With “mysticism...in their souls,” he says their goal is to create “symbols that belong on the altars of a future spiritual religion.”<sup>42</sup> In Chapter One, I referred to Brancusi’s identification with “savages,” the same term that Marc subscribes to the German Expressionists. Brancusi and the German avant-garde artists share this identification, along with mysticism and spiritual symbols that prevail in their art. In the *Almanac*, Kandinsky argues that it is inconsequential if the form is abstract, real, national, or personal, “as long as it serves the inner necessity.”<sup>43</sup> Brancusi did not regard his sculptures as abstract. He did not simplify his forms in order to arrive at abstract art; rather, his simplification served to express his spiritual and philosophical beliefs. It is not known whether Brancusi owned a copy of the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* or whether he ever met Kandinsky. As a member of the French avant-garde who was around the same time as the German Expressionists, it is likely that Brancusi was familiar with the German movement and with Kandinsky.

The German art historian Wilhelm Worringer was highly influential among the German Expressionists. In his most important work, *Abstraction and Empathy*, published in 1908, Worringer examines modernism’s affinity to abstraction. He argues: “The less mankind has succeeded, by virtue of its spiritual cognition, in entering into a relation of friendly confidence with the appearance of the outer world, the more forceful is the

dynamic that leads to the striving after this highest abstract beauty.”<sup>44</sup> Abstraction arises from mankind’s conflicting, isolating relationship with society and the world at large. As was the case of Brancusi, this isolation causes one to retreat and seek spiritual meaning within oneself.<sup>45</sup> Naturalism is a result of empathy, when one empathizes with an object that is different from one’s self.<sup>46</sup> Worringer infers that “primitive” cultures had less empathy than other more “stable” cultures like the Greeks. Within the context of Worringer’s views on abstraction, one can argue that Brancusi related more to the abstract motifs of folk art because he was in conflict with his surrounding environment—a Romanian peasant in a foreign modern metropolis.

### **Brancusi’s Sculpture and Folk Art Motifs**

The influence of Romanian folk art in Brancusi’s work is seen in the *Gate of the Kiss*, which is part of the Tirgu-Jiu ensemble of 1938. The motif of a circle divided into two equal parts rests on the front of the two columns and on the sides. The circle represents two lovers. It can also refer to the folk motif of the sun. The circular image of the sun is a recurring motif in Romanian folk art. It is represented in the form of a simple circle or a circle with six rays. In Brancusi’s native Oltenia, the motif is found on nineteenth century and early twentieth century wood gates.<sup>47</sup>

Brancusi completed the *Gate of the Kiss* thirty years after *The Kiss*. The difference in the two representations exemplifies Brancusi’s progression into abstraction. This progression is evidence that Brancusi developed a deep connection with abstract forms of his native folk culture. Brancusi’s choice of material is the main difference between the sun motif and Brancusi’s kiss motif on his gate. In folk art the sun motif is carved on wood surfaces and functions more as a decorative element. The kiss motif,

meanwhile, is carved in stone and is an important element of the *Gate of the Kiss*. I think the main reason why Brancusi chose stone over wood in creating the gate is its practicality. Stone is more durable than wood. Most monuments are built in stone in order to withstand outside weather conditions. Within the context of Romanian folk art, the *Gate of the Kiss* could be understood as a stone variation on the wood gates that stand in front of village houses in Romania, acting as a welcoming symbol for guests.<sup>48</sup> For instance, a gate from the region of Maramures is richly decorated with a beautiful, finely worked texture of plants, which transforms the gate into an aesthetic object. The coiled circle with the cross form that runs along both pillars underscores the harmonious symmetry of the gate. This circle motif, in particular, resonates with the *Gate of the Kiss*, except in it Brancusi divides the circle in four parts rather than two.

The *Endless Column* is also part of the monument ensemble at Tirgu-Jiu. Like the *Gate of the Kiss*, I think it conveys certain qualities of Romanian folk art. Rising ninety-six feet high in the air and built of multiple square rhomboids, the *Endless Column* stands tall in the memorial park dedicated to the fallen Romanian soldiers of World War I. In order to support the thin, vertical form, Brancusi designed the column with an iron core and polychromed it with molten bronze; this gives the appearance of a shimmering, gold stairway leading to another cosmic world.

Art historians have interpreted Brancusi's column as an axis mundi—as a link between Heaven and Earth. Brancusi was mesmerized with capturing the concept of infinity in his work, for his *Endless Column* is not his only version of the column. Before 1937, Brancusi produced several columns in the same rhomboidal form of the *Endless*

*Column*; however, these columns were all in wood and were smaller in scale. Some of these columns functioned as bases for sculptures.

In her comparison of the column to death poles and porch pillars, Balas argues that the column is meant to express “the end of life and the entry to another, transcendent, form of existence.”<sup>49</sup> The similarity in form between the column and Romanian death poles, and the added meaning of the memorial, supports Balas’s argument that the column is a symbol of death and the afterlife. Yet, as mentioned above, the *Endless Column* is only one among a series that Brancusi did not connect with any memorial or funerary theme. Like his other columns, the *Endless Column* is meant to express the concept of infinity, rather than the end of life. The concept of infinity is also captured in the *Bird in Space* from 1923. The base of the sculpture appears to be a miniature of the *Endless Column*, carved out of wood into three squared rhomboids. In addition to separating the sculpture from the ground, Brancusi’s base helps propel the form of the bird into space, as the title indicates.

The form of the column complements the subject matter of *Bird in Space* and in the *Endless Column*. Brancusi meant for both the column and the bird elements to rise higher and higher in the sky, without an end point. The bird and the column elements suggest infinity. Balas claims that there exist certain Romanian death poles with a bird placed at the top; this bird, painted in black, symbolizes the “bird of the soul.”<sup>50</sup> Could *Bird in Space* be a different interpretation of this type of Romanian funerary symbolism? Brancusi may have been aware of the motif of the bird atop the carved pole, but my notion of funerary symbolism is that it is expressed differently in *Bird in Space*. Brancusi might have reconstructed the funerary motif in order to symbolically express the joyful

flight of the soul into eternity. The black bird of folk culture grimly foreshadows the impending death or the soul's meeting with Death; on the other hand, Brancusi's gold bird, with its radiant appearance, anticipates the soul's flight from the deceased body into heaven.

In terms of form and material, Brancusi's columns refer to Romanian folk architecture. Such architecture includes churches, cemeteries, and houses.<sup>51</sup> Cemetery poles, carved of wood with an axe and chisel, mark the location of graves.<sup>52</sup> Their slim, cylinder form, clearly resemble Brancusi's columns, despite the absence of the rhomboids. Aside from the *Endless Column*, all of Brancusi's columns were carved in wood. In 1918, while visiting his friend Edward Steichen's home outside of Paris, Brancusi cut down a tree from the garden and carved a twenty-four foot *Endless Column* with his Romanian broadax. Through the act of creating an object from a tree, Brancusi shows a kinship to Romanian village craftsmen.<sup>53</sup>

A strong resemblance to folk architecture can be seen in comparing the gate and house pillars to Brancusi's columns, especially those made of wood. Romanian house pillars are built out of two or three rhomboids, with some having additional decorative motifs in between each rhomboids. Though such pillars are carved to a particular form in order to accommodate the structure that they support, the wood remains rough, with marks and cracks conveying an unfinished, natural quality. Such Romanian houses and gates are located in a village community and are created by the hands of a craftsman, but they are still part of nature. This might also be said of Brancusi's woodwork.

Because there are similar serrated wood structures in tribal art, Geist arrives at the conclusion that Brancusi's columns are "quintessentially African."<sup>54</sup> He believes that folk

architecture is an “unlikely source” of influence.<sup>55</sup> It is more likely, Geist argues, that Brancusi took the form of the *Endless Column* from one of Modigliani’s paintings called *Portrait of Dr. Paul Alexandre*; in its right hand corner there is a curtain of “Moroccan or African origins” decorated with a rhomboidal pattern that also defines the *Endless Column*. Evidently the pattern on the curtain has a striking resemblance to Brancusi’s column. Was this more influential for Brancusi than the folk architecture with which he grew up? This is doubtful, for the material and the medium—sculpture and wood—were closer to his art practice than painting and fiber art. Welcker argues that the repeated rhomboidal forms allude to the “liturgical recitative of the Gregorian chant” that Brancusi sang in the Orthodox Church in Paris.<sup>56</sup> As mentioned earlier, Brancusi was an active participant in the church and prone to the spiritualism of Romanian Orthodoxy. According to Welcker, the repetition of form in a single structure could then symbolize the visual manifestation of the Gregorian chant, which offers a kind of spiritual mediation through music.

The animal motifs in Brancusi’s sculptures occur frequently in Romanian folk art, as means of expressing the spiritual relationship between humans and animals. Clay pots from the villages of Oltenia were fashioned with animal or human characteristics. A clay pitcher from the nineteenth century, for instance, takes the form of a mother hen with her small chicks playfully gathered around her. With its animated details of mother and chicks, along with the decorative texture embellishing its body, the pitcher could be a sculpture if it were not for the protruding opening. According to an old Romanian folk tale of Creation, Adam and Eve were made of clay and, thus, clay possesses the ability to have a soul; animals were similarly thought to come alive when formed out of clay.<sup>57</sup>

There is a direct correlation between the visual representation of the animal and the real animal. Not only does the animal come alive through the representation, but humans could also identify with the animals through the visual motif.

Similarly, Brancusi's sculptures assign the animal a "spiritual message" that speaks to the "harmonious totality" of the "intuitive" animal with rational man.<sup>58</sup> Wood vessels likewise took the form of animals, particularly birds.<sup>59</sup> In Oltenia, ceramics and wall paintings from the Middle Ages are covered with anthropomorphic figures in the guise of both animal and human.<sup>60</sup> The figures Brancusi includes in the *Three Penguins* appear to be anthropomorphic and resemble the two figures in *The Kiss*. The three penguins seem to pose in the human act of affectionate embrace. Their bodies and heads are in close contact, mimicking the intimate contact of the figures in *The Kiss*.

The ovoid form predominates in Brancusi's animal sculptures. He chose the same ovoid form in *Newborn* for the creation of his *Little Bird* sculpture. In employing the same form to signify both young bird and young human, Brancusi designates a distinct relationship between animals and humans. Along with the rhomboidal form of the columns, the ovoid form was a favorite of Brancusi's. It reappears a significant number of times in various sculptures of bronze and marble, as in *Beginning of the World* and *Fish*.

Balas believes the oval form was developed from Brancusi's memories of colored Easter eggs.<sup>61</sup> The decoration of eggs is part of the traditional Romanian folk celebration of Easter. Rosalind Krauss understands the perfectly balanced and proportioned ovoid in the *Beginning of the World* as a "found object, a form that in the real sense is given to Brancusi rather than invented by him."<sup>62</sup> Because it is found in nature, the ovoid is a

found object, like the eggs of a mother hen. The ovoid is also a primitive object, as it is believed that it has been present in the world before the existence of humankind. The ovoid in Brancusi's work simultaneously alludes to Christian folk traditions and to primitive Romanian beliefs about the nature of existence. Furthermore, the ovoid, with its very minimal features and perfect, geometric form, makes possible the farthest point of abstraction for Brancusi.

*Pasarea Maiastra* is a sculpture from Brancusi's early period when his sculpture still retained figurative characteristics that closely resembled the subject it represented. Despite its simplification, the bird in *Pasarea Maiastra* still possesses a small beak and wings that flow behind its thin legs. There is a significant difference between *Pasarea Maiastra* and *Bird in Space*. Because the scale of *Pasarea Maiastra* is a bit smaller than the scale of *Bird in Space*, its form is not as commanding. *Pasarea Maiastra* is comparable to a classic Greek sculpture in its marble whiteness and upright posture; but its short, ovoid body makes the overall form of the bird quite bulky in comparison to the tall elegance of *Bird in Space*. The beauty and grace of *Pasarea Maiastra* lies in the sublime shadows and highlights that are absorbed by the white marble, enshrouding the bird with hints of mystery and magic—that which characterizes the master bird in the folk tale.

Romanian folk tales are the primary source for animal motifs in Brancusi's sculptures *Pasarea Maiastra* and *Leda*. These tales teach about the evil of magic through the interaction of humans with animals, in a manner similar to Aesop's Fables. Brancusi seemed to take pleasure in reading such folk tales, for his library included books by Ion Creanga, a leading Romanian literary figure and folklorist of the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup>

Creanga's comical and morally didactic tales for children also involve roosters. Balas points out that Brancusi might have taken the motif for the *Cock* sculpture from Creanga's tales.<sup>64</sup> *Pasarea Maiastra* references a folk tale of the same title in which, according to Brancusi, "the master bird...spoke and showed the way to Prince Charming."<sup>65</sup> The bird guides Prince Charming to his love Ileana.

The Romanian title for *Pasarea Maiastra* translates into magnificent or magical bird. The title is unique because it is the only known Brancusi sculpture that has a Romanian title. Brancusi usually titled his sculptures in French. Some of his sculptures have an ambiguity regarding its source, but there is no ambiguity about *Pasarea Maiastra*. It is clear that he intended the sculpture to epitomize the Romanian folk tale that he describes. Its distinction lies in the fact that he rarely explained his work. The bird, because it unites the two lovers, is a symbol of love; thus, it fits perfectly within the Brancusi's model of spirituality centered on universal love.

Brancusi's sculptures possess such an intense quality of peacefulness and stillness that it is almost inconceivable to visualize the sculptures in motion. Yet Brancusi did indeed place some of his sculptures in motion. Brancusi attached *Leda* attached to a swivel, causing the sculpture to rotate in the studio space while light reflected off its gleaming bronze body.<sup>66</sup> He wanted to capture Leda's metamorphosis through movement. The title of the sculpture refers to the Greek myth of Zeus transforming into a swan in order to seduce Helen of Troy's mother Leda. However, there are a number of Romanian folk tales about swans, like the "Swan Maiden" and the "Bird of Heaven."<sup>67</sup> Ionel Jianou interprets the lower part of *Lena* as a "symbol of fecundity" because of its resemblance to an egg.<sup>68</sup> I think the lower half of the sculpture is more of a primitive

symbol of what was there before—an origin symbol before the metamorphosis from human to animal. Brancusi once again uses the ovoid, this time attaching an irregular rectangle to the ovoid that signifies the head of *Leda*. The organic nature of its form lies in its asymmetry. Neither the ovoid nor the rectangle is symmetrical; when the two forms are attached together, they create an unbalanced composition that conveys the unsettling nature of metamorphosis. Through its reflection, the oval mirror on which the sculpture rests further emphasizes this transformation from human to animal. The mirror envelops the sculpture, while the smooth, reflective texture of the sculpture itself invites the gaze of the viewer. We as viewers are part of the sculpture and, ergo, of the moment of metamorphosis.

Romanian folk art motifs, folk literature, and Orthodox spiritualism are part of Brancusi's art, philosophy, and lifestyle. Because of his “shepherd-like” physical appearance and humble living environment, many intellectuals considered Brancusi to be a primitive hermit. My notion of Brancusi's wood pedestals and furniture is that it expresses his bond with his native land of Romania and its Romanian folk culture, in which craftsmanship thrives, along with the occult. Romanian folk culture was associated with the peasantry, whose main religion was Orthodoxy. Brancusi took inspiration from the monastic mysticism of Romanian Orthodoxy in crafting his persona as a mystic. Furthermore, Brancusi's mysticism and interest in Romanian folk art parallels Kandinsky's spiritual beliefs regarding art and the German Expressionists' fascination with primitive art. The influence of Romanian folk art in Brancusi's sculpture is evident in his use of the material of wood. It is also apparent in his abstract forms and motifs,

such as animals, carved columns, circles, and ovoids. Although his abstraction began with these primitive forms and motifs during the decade of the 1920s, he continued to use Romanian folk art well into the late 1930s.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Baycroft, "Introduction," *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During The Long Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, Germany; Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Paul H. Stahl, *Romanian Folklore and Folk Art* (Bucharest, Romania: Meridiane Publishing House, 1969), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University, 2001), 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Hroch, David Hollan, and George F. McLean, eds., *National, Cultural, and Ethnic Identities: Harmony Beyond Conflicts* (Washington D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1998), 286.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Forbess, "Mysticism and Modernity: The Transitions of a Romanian Orthodox Convent." *Tradition and Modernity in Romanian Culture and Civilization, 1600-2000*, edited by Kurt W. Treptow (Iasi, Romania: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2001), 246.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Dorondel, "Orthodoxy, Nationalism, and Local Identities: a Romanian Case Study," *Ethnologia Balkanica* 6 (2002): 120.

<sup>8</sup> Forbess, 247.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce Corbett, "Romanian Folk Art." *Between East and West: Folk Art Treasures of Romania*, edited by Rob Sidner ( San Diego, California: Mingei International Museum, 2010), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Sanda Miller, *Constantin Brancusi* (London, England : Reaktion Books, 2010), 125.

<sup>12</sup> Radu Varia, *Brancusi* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1986), 11.

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- <sup>13</sup> Lobsang P. Lhallunga, *The Life of Milarepa* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), xvii.
- <sup>14</sup> Eckart Muthesius, "My Meeting with Brancusi in India." *Art and Philosophy: Brancusi, the Courage to Love*, edited by Florence M. Hetzler, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing), 77.
- <sup>15</sup> Guggenheim's exhibition catalogue *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* examines how American artists took inspiration from Eastern religions and Asian art forms to create their modern identity, in a manner similar to that of Brancusi's.
- <sup>16</sup> Forbess, 244.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.
- <sup>18</sup> John Anthony McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 92.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.
- <sup>20</sup> Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 245.
- <sup>21</sup> Roger Vitrac, *Brancusi, November 17-January 13* (New York: Brummer Gallery, 1933).
- <sup>22</sup> Ionel Jianou, *Constantin Brancusi* (London: Adam Books, 1963), 59.
- <sup>23</sup> Balas, 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Jianou, 13, 20.
- <sup>25</sup> Marielle Tabart, *Brancusi: L'inventeur de la Sculpture Moderne* (Paris, France: Decouvertes Gallimard; Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995), 108. "Primordial, intuitive, peasant-like."
- <sup>26</sup> Jeanne Robert Foster, "Constantin Brancusi: A Note on the Man and the Formal Perfection of His Carvings," *Vanity Fair* 18 (May 1922): 68.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacob Epstein, *An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1955) 223.
- <sup>29</sup> Beatrice Wood, "Visit to Brancusi," *Archives of American Art Journal* 32 (1992): 20.

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- <sup>30</sup> Marcel Iancu, “Constantin Brâncuș.” *Contimporanul IV* (January, 1925), “natural laboratory.”
- <sup>31</sup> Stefan Georgescu-Gorjan, *Amintiri despre Brâncuși* (Scrisul Romanesc, Craiova, 1988), 31.
- <sup>32</sup> Miller, 5.
- <sup>33</sup> Barbu Brezianu, “Brancusi vorbe de dor,” *Amfiteatru* (October 1966): 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Miller., 3.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>37</sup> Paul Petrescu, *Arta Populara Romaneasca* (Bucharest, Romania: Editura Meridiane, 1981), 50.
- <sup>38</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated by M.T.H. Sadler, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 1-2.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 54-55.
- <sup>40</sup> Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven, Massachusetts; London, England: Yale University Press, 1991), 21.
- <sup>41</sup> Joseph Masheck, “Raw Art: “Primitive” Authenticity and German Expressionism,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 4 (Autumn, 1982): 94.
- <sup>42</sup> Franz Marc, “The “Savages” of Germany,” *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 64.
- <sup>43</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Viking Press, 1974): 153, 168.
- <sup>44</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, translated by Michael Bullock, (New York: International Universities Press, 1967), 17.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.

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- <sup>47</sup> Paul H. Stahl, *Romanian Folklore and Folk Art* (Bucharest, Romania: Meridiane Publishing House, 1969), 27.
- <sup>48</sup> Balas, 28.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>50</sup> Cornel Irimie and Marcela Necula, *Folk Wood Carving in Romania* (Bucharest, Romania: Meridiane Publishing House, 1985), 136.
- <sup>51</sup> Ion Pogorilovski, *A Commentary on the Masterpiece of Brancusi: Road of the Heroes' Souls* (Romania: Junimea Publishing House, 1987), 34.
- <sup>52</sup> Irimie, 135.
- <sup>53</sup> Sidney Geist, "The Endless Column," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16 (1990): 76.
- <sup>54</sup> Sidney Geist, "Brancusi," *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, Volume II*, edited by William Rubin, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 358.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.
- <sup>56</sup> Carola-Giedion Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi* (Maria Jolas and Anne Leroy, trans. New York: George Braziller, 1959), 33.
- <sup>57</sup> Stahl, 20.
- <sup>58</sup> Welcker, 29.
- <sup>59</sup> Stahl, 21.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>61</sup> Balas, 43.
- <sup>62</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 88.
- <sup>63</sup> Balas, 39.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>65</sup> Geist, *Study of Sculpture*, 38.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>67</sup> Balas, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Jianou, 67.

## CHAPTER 3

### BRANCUSI'S INVOLVEMENT WITH AFRICAN ART IN NEW YORK

In this chapter I will examine Brancusi's interaction with African art. As argued in my last chapter, Brancusi had a close relationship with his native Romania and its folk culture. However, he was also interested in African art. He may not have had as much of a familiarity with African art as he did with Romanian art, but he was exposed to African art during his participation in the New York avant-garde scene. Because of his involvement with New York collectors and artists, Brancusi was able to develop a successful, high-earning career as an artist. From 1913 onwards, Brancusi sold and exhibited most of his sculptures in New York. New York collectors and artists like Alfred Stieglitz, and John Quinn aimed to integrate African art into the canon of modern art. Stieglitz's Gallery 291 and Marius de Zayas's Modern Gallery were important vehicles in introducing African objects that were seen as art instead of simply artifacts. They did so by collecting objects acquired from French colonies in Africa and by displaying these objects alongside new Euro-American modern art.

Though African art was significant in shaping Brancusi's primitivism, it was less personal than Romanian folk art. He experienced Romanian folk art first hand during his childhood and even later when he lived in Paris. He spoke the Romanian language and was familiar with the Romanian culture. Because of this, it must have been easier for him to understand and appropriate Romanian folk art in his sculpture. Meanwhile, he had little knowledge of the diverse cultures, people, and languages of Africa. It is unknown how much Brancusi knew of African artifacts and their original context, for there is no written account of him discussing African art at length. He did encounter African

artifacts in Paris and in New York. More importantly, the New York avant-garde helped to inform him about African art. Brancusi did not have first-hand knowledge of African art as compared to Romanian folk art, but he learned of African art in his practice of American primitivism, which emphasized more the African artifacts' aesthetic forms and less their cultural and religious context. Brancusi, like other avant-garde artists, may have had an interest in the exotic, magical appeal associated with African ritual objects but his knowledge of tribal ritual practices was most likely very limited. His ignorance, however, does not diminish African art's importance because its aesthetic forms had a meaningful impact on his sculptural abstraction.

Brancusi began to look to African art as a source of inspiration for his own art around the same time that he began exhibiting in New York. As was the case with Romanian folk art, Brancusi did not replicate the exact forms of African objects. Instead, he appropriated the sculptural abstraction of African objects to enhance the essence of form in his own sculpture. I analyze in this chapter how Brancusi altered African sculptural forms in his wood sculptures and in his sculptures of women, particularly the series of *Mademoiselle Pogany* and *White Negress*. Furthermore, I discuss Brancusi's relationship with the New York avant-garde, the important figures involved in this relationship, and the reception of his work in New York.

### **Brancusi's Reception in New York**

Brancusi's success in New York began with the Armory Show. The Armory Show of 1913 was an international exhibition featuring American and European artists and twelve hundred works of art in a variety of styles such as Impressionism and Realism.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Walter Pach, the American artist Walt Kuhn and the Armory

Show's President Arthur B. Davies were the main organizers of the Armory Show.<sup>2</sup> John Quinn was the primary lender to the Armory Show, loaning seventy-nine artworks.<sup>3</sup> A New York lawyer and a modern art collector, Quinn became Brancusi's most important patron.

At the Armory Show, Brancusi exhibited five plaster versions of *Mademoiselle Pogany*, *The Muse*, *The Sleeping Muse*, *The Kiss*, and *Torso of a Young Girl*.<sup>4</sup> Pach and Davies had selected these sculptures from Brancusi's studio.<sup>5</sup> In choosing to submit the plaster versions instead of the original sculptures, Brancusi may have felt that the Armory Show was not very significant or he did not want to risk damaging the sculptures by shipping them overseas. Either way, the plaster versions were of lesser quality than the originals but it did not mean that they did not get much attention. *Mademoiselle Pogany*, in particular, caused a great stir among the public who was perplexed, repulsed, and beguiled by its distorted features.<sup>6</sup>

After his pivotal participation in the Armory Show, Brancusi showed his sculpture again in New York in 1914 at Gallery 291, in a solo exhibition running from March to April. The famed American photographer Alfred Stieglitz cofounded Gallery 291 (known originally as the Gallery of Photo-Secession) in 1905 with Edward Steichen, a painter and photographer from Luxembourg. Brancusi's exhibition featured nine sculptures in total. *The First Step* and one of the marble *Danaide* were the only works that were not sold. The others were sold to John Quinn, Arthur B. Davies, and Agnes and Eugene Mayer.<sup>7</sup>

Brancusi's exhibition at Gallery 291 garnered mixed reviews. Henry McBride of *The Sun* proclaimed that Brancusi's art "seems to expand, unfold, and to take on a startling lucidity."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, Elizabeth Luther Garry of the *New York Times*

understood Brancusi's sculptures as "seductive, intellectual, and mystic... Probably no other age could have produced them, and as an expression of contemporary tendencies they are important but they miss the nobility of design."<sup>9</sup> Despite the mixed reviews, the importance of Brancusi's exhibition at 291 cannot be overstated. Due to the endorsement of Stieglitz and Steichen, Brancusi's status within the New York art scene was elevated to that of the preeminent modern sculptor. Stieglitz rarely gave sculptors solo shows at 291. There were only two shows entirely of sculpture—Brancusi's and Elie Nadelman's, which took place two years after Brancusi's show.<sup>10</sup>

A few months after the Brancusi's exhibition in 1914, Stieglitz organized an African art exhibition at 291, titled "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art."<sup>11</sup> It was the first exhibition in New York and in the West to exhibit African objects as art. In a special issue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art magazine *Tribal Art: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde*, Yaelle Biro argues that African art "developed its own distinct identity" in New York.<sup>12</sup> According to Biro, African art differed in New York than in Paris. For the New York avant-garde, African art was considered a "primary catalyst for avant-garde creativity."<sup>13</sup> But this does not mean that France and its colonies were not important components of the surge of African art in New York. African objects shown in New York were collected from French dealers who acquired these objects from French colonies.<sup>14</sup>

In France, artists such as Picasso and Derain encountered African objects at the Trocadéro museum or at markets where foreign souvenirs were sold. Maurice de Vlaminck wrote of his and Derain's excursions to the Trocadéro. Both Vlaminck and Derain viewed these objects at the museum as only "barbarous fetishes."<sup>15</sup> Though there

is no written recollection of his experience, Brancusi must have frequented the Trocadéro or been exposed early on to African objects through his participation in the Parisian avant-garde circle. Unlike the Trocadéro, Stieglitz's exhibition "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" added aesthetic value to African objects by placing them in a contemporary art setting and by displaying them alongside modern works of art.

African art was also shown at the Modern Gallery. The gallery specialized in "paintings of the most advanced character of the Modern Art Movement, Negro Sculptures, Pre-conquest Mexican Art, and Photography."<sup>16</sup> Marius de Zayas, the director of the gallery, had access to African sculpture because of the avid French collector of African art Paul Guillaume.<sup>17</sup> Yaelle Biro describes de Zayas as the "foremost harbinger of African art in New York."<sup>18</sup> He was significant in the creation of the African art collections of Quinn, the Mayers, and Walter and Louise Arensberg.<sup>19</sup> De Zayas built an opportune relationship with Brancusi, presenting his sculptures in several exhibitions at the Modern Gallery.

Brancusi's second solo show in New York was at de Zayas's Modern Gallery in 1916, from October 23 to November 11.<sup>20</sup> The exhibition featured four sculptures: *Head of a Sleeping Child*, a marble and a bronze version of *Princess X* and *Three Penguins*, which Quinn bought.<sup>21</sup> Brancusi was also in multiple group exhibitions at the Modern Gallery. For example, in September of 1916, a month before his solo show, Brancusi exhibited *Head of a Sleeping Child* in a group exhibition. The exhibition also included a Dahomey mask, an Ogooue fetish and a Madagascar carved wood.<sup>22</sup>

Although African art was popular among the New York avant-garde, there was considerable prejudice in response to the exhibitions at 291 and Modern Gallery. Even de Zayas expressed racial opinions of African craftsmen. According to him, the intellectual inferiority of the “Negro savage” is due to his “cerebral condition,” which supposedly no longer develops after the first ten years of his life.<sup>23</sup> Brancusi’s art may have been compared to African art but there was a clear Western bias that favored the former over the latter. Some critics were shocked by his abstraction, but none of them correlated his sculpture with his lack of intelligence or his technical deficiencies.

Brancusi’s close relationship with New York continued when he exhibited his sculptures at the Brummer Gallery from November 17 to December 15, 1926.<sup>24</sup> The exhibition at the Brummer Gallery was his biggest one yet, with forty-two sculptures, one painting, and twenty-six studies, expanding over fifteen years.<sup>25</sup> Among many of the works shown, there were five pedestals displayed as standalone sculptures.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition showcased Brancusi’s versatility of material: *Blonde Negress* in bronze, *Mademoiselle Pogany* in marble, *The Chief* in wood, *Prodigal Son* in wood, *Beginning of the World* in marble, and *Bird in Space* in yellow marble. Many of the sculptures were taken from Quinn’s collection. It was necessary for Brancusi to travel to New York in order to prepare and bring all the scattered works together for the exhibition.<sup>27</sup> Beside the works that Quinn already owned, Brancusi sold six sculptures.

The Brummer Gallery hosted another Brancusi exhibition in 1933, from November 13 to January 17. This exhibition was larger than the one in 1926 in terms of the amount of sculptures. Whereas the 1926 exhibition had forty-two sculptures, there were fifty-eight sculptures in total in the 1933 exhibition—almost all the work that

Brancusi had in his Paris studio.<sup>28</sup> Instead of Brancusi going himself, he sent Marcel Duchamp to be the curator of the exhibition.

Brancusi's reception in New York is significant because it cultivated Brancusi's interest in African art through his exposure to the New York avant-garde's collection of African art. The important figures of the New York avant-garde, such as Stieglitz, Brummer, and de Zayas, showed Brancusi's sculptures and also African sculptures at their prominent galleries. Due to his participation in this avant-garde circle of African art collectors, Brancusi became associated with African art. Exhibition reviewers noted the resemblance between Brancusi's sculptures and African art. Brancusi integrated African in his identity as an avant-garde sculptor and a primitive artist.

### **John Quinn**

Quinn accumulated the largest collection of Brancusi's sculptures between 1914 and 1923. The collection consisted of twenty-seven sculptures, twenty-four of which he bought; two were given to Quinn by Brancusi as gifts.<sup>29</sup> It was fortunate for Brancusi that Pach introduced him to Quinn.<sup>30</sup> Although Quinn was a lawyer by profession, he was a major collector of modern art and African art, and was extensively involved with avant-garde artists abroad and in United States. In 1919, Quinn employed the French writer Henri Pierre Roche as his personal agent in New York with the job of finding him modern art of high quality.<sup>31</sup> Roche, along with Duchamp, bought some of Brancusi's sculptures after Quinn's death in order to exhibit them at Brancusi's 1926 solo exhibition at the Brummer Gallery.<sup>32</sup>

Quinn's interest in African art began in 1913 at the start of his friendship with the artist Jacob Epstein, who was not only influenced by African art but also collected

African art.<sup>33</sup> This friendship prompted Quinn's introduction to African art. Most, if not all, of Quinn's African art collection came from the Modern Gallery, 291, and the Brummer Gallery—all of the places at which Brancusi exhibited.<sup>34</sup> Quinn was good friends with Stieglitz, Brummer, de Zayas, and Pach whose shared interest in African art heralded the acceptance of African objects into art galleries. It was thus natural that Quinn would end up owning so many of Brancusi's sculptures and African artworks.

### **Photography: Scheeler and Man Ray**

The photographer Charles Sheer documented Quinn's African art collection in an album produced in 1918. Quinn's album and the album *African Negro Wood Sculpture* that was produced with de Zayas were rare at the time, for there was barely any documentation of African art in New York.<sup>35</sup> The *African Negro Wood Sculpture* album of photographs documented the African objects owned by de Zayas and the Modern Gallery. According to Biro, the limited edition album realized Sheeler's "efforts to discover abstract forms in the world around him through the employment of African objects."<sup>36</sup> It was partly through the medium of photography, through artists like Sheeler, and, through collectors like de Zayas, the Arensbergs and Quinn that African art came to be viewed as modern.<sup>37</sup> Through photography's use of "framing, lighting, camera angle, and cropping," African objects were represented as art.<sup>38</sup> Brancusi employed similar photographic techniques to accentuate the abstract forms of his sculptures and to bequeath an aura of mystery to his sculptures.

Man Ray's photographs *Noire et Blanche* and *Kiki de Montparnasse*, both from 1926, are the two most well-known examples of the use of African objects in art photography. In these two photographs, Ray juxtaposes the face of a white woman with a

static, black African mask. In *Kiki de Montparnasse*, Ray frames a nude woman with pomaded, black hair and exposed breast who intimately holds an African mask to her face. In *Noire et Blanche*, Ray depicts the woman resting her head on the table. She appears to be in a deep state of dreaming, yet she holds the African mask upright. The difference between the woman and the mask in *Noire et Blanche* is more visible than in *Kiki de Montparnasse* due to the horizontal position of the woman's face versus the vertical position of the mask. On account of the exact horizontal resting pose of the head, it is likely that Man Ray was inspired by Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* from 1910. The head of *Sleeping Muse* is separated from the rest of her body, like the face mask in Man Ray's photographs. The facial features of *Sleeping Muse* resemble those of the female model and the mask. The oval face structure, dramatic eyebrows, pensive almond-shaped eyes, and small contoured mouth, characterize both model and mask.

Wendy Grossman argues that Man Ray's photographs were part of an overall Western understating of Africa, which relied on "fictive conceptions about the continent and racial biases about its diverse people."<sup>39</sup> In the 1920s, African masks were affiliated with the "primitive," wild culture of Africa. This perception was the result of prejudices obtained and valued by France during its colonial rule. In a derogatory manner, Man Ray advanced the notion of French primitivism that had to do with women and indigenous people. Man Ray intensifies the racial bias in his photographs through the marked difference between the Western woman's white skin and the black skin of the African mask. He clearly intended for the viewer to make note of this difference, given that the title is *Noire et Blanche*, meaning black and white. This formal contrast is derogatory in that it pivots the beauty of whiteness against the beauty of blackness during a time when

racial prejudice was rampant. In choosing to position the model with a black mask, Man Ray reinforces the assumed superior beauty of the model whose face is portrayed as a white mask.

In his autobiography *Self-Portrait*, Man Ray comments on how he helped Brancusi set up a darkroom in his studio and guided him through the photographic process. Brancusi wanted to learn how to photograph his sculptures because of his dissatisfaction with the way others photographed his work. According to Man Ray, Brancusi's photographs were "out of focus, over or under exposed, scratched and spotty."<sup>40</sup> Yet, the quality of the prints did not matter as much to him as the way his sculptures appeared in the photographic prints. Brancusi sought to convey the materiality of the sculptures through the medium of photography. His photographs may have been scratched and spotty, but he did achieve a contrast of black and white that references Man Ray's use of contrast in his own photographs.

### **Brancusi and *White Negress***

Brancusi had conveyed the black and white theme three years before, when he created *White Negress (I)* in 1923. According to Eileen Lane, a friend of Brancusi's, Brancusi was inspired to create the sculpture after he saw an African woman at the 1922 *Exposition Coloniale* in Marseilles.<sup>41</sup> Brancusi formed the top section of the sculpture with a large "ellipsoid" and three smaller forms. He propped this top section on a cylinder that stands firmly on a "cruciform."<sup>42</sup> He evoked hints of a female head with the inclusion of lips and a chignon hairstyle. In his second version of *White Negress (II)*, 1928, Brancusi created the silhouette in white marble rather than veined marble as in the first version. He further changed the color of the cruciform from white to a bold black, and

added to two additional supports of limestone and wood. The result of these changes is a sculpture with greater contrast of the black and white theme than the first version. The contrast of black and white in *White Negress (II)* can be interpreted as an influence from black and white photography. The contrast of the white marble ovoid with the black marble cruciform creates a striking visual image that parallels the black and white photographs of Man Ray.

What was Brancusi's intention in depicting an African woman in white marble? Was he commenting on the racial prejudice of his day or expressing the belief that white is more beautiful than black? I think he was aiming for the former. Rather than staging a formal contrast between a white subject and a black subject, as in the case of Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche* and *Kiki de Montparnasse*, Brancusi substitutes one color for the other. However, he still retains his main subject matter in the title of the sculpture. In his other works, the title functions as a signifier of the motif or idea he wished to express with a particular form and material. None of his works are untitled; this indicates the importance of Brancusi's choice of title in the overall meaning of the work. Without the title *White Negress* to designate an identity to the form, the sculpture would lose its meaning.

The substitution of black for white speaks to the complexities of how white Westerners perceived individuals whose skin color did not conform to the Western beauty standard of "white." The only way for a black woman to be perceived as beautiful through the eyes of early-twentieth century Westerners was to make her skin white. Brancusi draws attention to the issues of race and beauty, which were taboo at the time, through the materiality of the sculptures, with the aim of creating a dialogue in the mind of the viewer. In employing the material of marble, he harks back to classical Greek

sculpture in order to convey the irony present in his *White Negress* series. For *White Negress (I)*, he used veined marble to form the upper ellipsoid. For *White Negress (II)*, he contrasted the white marble of the ellipsoid with a cruciform pedestal made of black marble. The white marble of classical Greek sculpture signifies a purity of material. He reacts against this purity with his veined and black marble. Thus, he breaks away from the classical and ventures into the modern.

### **Brancusi and *Blond Negress***

Three years after *White Negress (I)*, Brancusi completed *Blond Negress (I)* in 1926, followed by *Blond Negress (II)* in 1933. The *Blond Negress* sculptures are another variant of the contrast between black and white as metaphor. The title is a reference to the gold bronze used for the sculpture. The title of *White Negress*, in turn, refers to the whiteness of its marble. Like *White Negress*, *Blond Negress* reinforces this European quality with the bronze material that designates blond hair to the African woman. Version one and two of *Blond Negress* are quite identical with one another. These versions of *Blond Negress* are also similar to *White Negress* in regards to the ellipsoid form and the mouth and chignon. The most significant difference between the second *Blond Negress* from 1933 and the other sculptures in the series is the slimness of the ellipsoid head and the symmetry of the top chignon.<sup>43</sup> The top chignon is an element that is present in various African masks, such as in a *Mukudj* face mask from Gabon. Sheeler photographed the mask for the *John Quinn Album of African Art*. The chignon is also present in a portrait mask and a Balue mask, both from Côte d'Ivoire. Brancusi might have taken the form of the chignon from these African sources as means of connecting

*Blond Negress* to African female representations. Thus, it is not only the title of the sculpture but also its form that connects *Blond Negress* to African art.

Brancusi liked to install the same sculptures or variants of a sculpture on different pedestals to see how they changed the appearance and meaning of the sculpture. This playful interchange between sculpture and base is manifested in the transition between *Blond Negress (I)* and the second *Blond Negress (II)*. He conceived the first version with two minimalist bases: a black marble cruciform and a limestone block. He placed the second version on a cruciform made of limestone and added a heavy wood pedestal. This change of pedestal accounts for the more primitive quality in the second version of *Blond Negress (II)*. The pedestal was created separately from the sculpture, but it became part of *Blond Negress (II)* once the sculpture was placed on top of it. His addition of the wood pedestal creates a connection between *Blond Negress (II)* and the African wood masks through the sculpture's materiality.

### **Brancusi's Wood Sculptures**

Brancusi took certain formal feature of African sculpture for his wood sculptures. For example, his *Torso of a Young Man* the element of the absence of arms with a Bijou fertility doll. This absence, as Geist insightfully notes, is quite different from Rodin's sculptures in which the absence of arms is made "by design"—meaning the arms were actually cut off from the sculpted figure.<sup>44</sup> Brancusi eliminated the arms altogether without designating a place on the torso for their attachment.<sup>45</sup> The elimination of arms is typical of sculpture from West Africa and Zaire.<sup>46</sup> This elimination conveys the wholeness of the object—it can hold its overall form without the addition of the arms. The meaning of the object does not rely on the object having arms because there were no

added arms in the first place. The meaning changes when the arms are cut off by design due to the implicit absence of the arms. The harmony of the object is disrupted, whereas harmony remains intact in the object that was devised without any arms.

*Caryatid* is another example of one of Brancusi's wood sculptures carrying formal characteristics of African sculpture. Brancusi created it in 1914 and then modified it in 1926. As Geist points out, the African motif of "annulation" is present on the back of *Caryatid*.<sup>47</sup> Annulation refers to the ring-like segments that signify body limbs in African sculpture. The annulation in the back of *Caryatid* is comparable to the annulation in a wood helmet mask from Senofo. In both sculptures, the annulation defines the torso of the figure: the continuous ring-like bands emphasize the back arch of *Caryatid* and give form to the straight torso of the helmet figure. Despite the supporting legs that indicate a representation of a full figure, *Caryatid* blurs the category between sculpture and pedestal.<sup>48</sup> Ann Temkin argues that he reconfigured the initial *Caryatid* in order to minimize the "explicit" African influence.<sup>49</sup> He shortened the legs of the sculpture in 1926 but he did not shorten the legs to make it less akin to African sculpture. The short legs recall Fang reliquary figures whose legs are disproportionate with the rest of their bodies. Brancusi wanted to reconfigure the form of *Caryatid* without creating an altogether different version.

*Adam and Eve* is another wood sculpture that bears the African influence. The sculpture was originally two different sculptures: the upper *Eve* and the lower *Adam*. Brancusi joined the two sculptures together in 1920. Brancusi's mastery and manipulation of form is palpable in the versatile elements that make up the entire sculpture. Quinn purchased *Adam and Eve* in 1922. It is likely that Quinn was intrigued

with Brancusi's wood sculptures because of their affinity to African sculptures from his collection of African art. The *Maiden Mask*, from Quinn's African art collection, is a Nigerian mask created by the Igbo people in either the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth century. The mask bears a resemblance to *Adam and Eve*, in particular to the top section of *Eve*. *Eve* is evidently more abstract and geometric than the female figure represented in *Maiden Mask*, which, unlike *Eve*, is painted. Nevertheless, there exist similarities between these two masks in the elements of the lips and the top of the head. The full large lips of *Eve* resonate with the exaggerated large mouth of *Maiden Mask*. *Eve*'s hair is conveyed through the form of a half ellipse situated obliquely on the top of her two part head. Likewise, an intricate half ellipse form, which functions as an extension of the figure's hair or as a decorative crown attached to the top of the head, characterizes the head of *Maiden Mask*.

### ***Mademoiselle Pogany***

Brancusi scholars have overlooked the series of *Mademoiselle Pogany* sculptures within the context of African art. Brancusi created a total of five *Mademoiselle Pogany* sculptures: three in marble and two in bronze. Perhaps the main reason why Brancusi scholars disregard these sculptures is because none of them are made of wood. Though the material of wood in Brancusi's sculptures is a significant link with African art, aspects of form in his marble and bronze sculptures should not be dismissed. The first *Mademoiselle Pogany (I)* caused a considerable commotion at the Armory Show in 1913. Brancusi created the last *Mademoiselle Pogany (III)* in 1931.

*Mademoiselle Pogany* is modeled after Margit Pogany, a Hungarian girl who lived and studied painting in Paris. Following an initial introduction with Brancusi in

1910, Pogany came to Brancusi's studio and sat for a portrait. Brancusi made studies in drawing and clay during Pogany's visits with the goal of creating a marble sculpture. However, after each visit, he threw away these studies. This act of destruction could have been a reaction to his dissatisfaction with his progress of the portrait.<sup>50</sup> But most likely Brancusi wanted to challenge himself by creating the portrait from memory in an attempt to capture a new kind of representation in portraiture, in opposition to the French academic style. Brancusi's aimed to construct a portrait with only the most essential parts. *Mademoiselle Pogany* was an important moment in Brancusi's development as an abstract, modern artist.

Brancusi eventually completed Pogany's marble portrait in 1912, but only after she had returned to Hungary. *Mademoiselle Pogany (I)* has two essential forms: the ellipsoid head and the broad cylinder arms. Brancusi enlarged the eyes into piercing almond shaped eyes that define the entire face. This exaggeration of the eyes gives the sculpture a striking, distorted appearance. It is not surprising that *Mademoiselle Pogany* was received with such shock and ambivalence at the Armory Show. Brancusi positioned the head on the figure's clasped hands, which extend from the chin to her ear. Brancusi separated the form of the hands from the rest of the figure and represented them an altogether separate entity.

Instead of sending Margit Pogany the marble version of the portrait from 1912, Brancusi sent her a bronze version that he made in 1913. The bronze *Mademoiselle Pogany (I)* has a stronger resemblance to Margit Pogany than the marble: the painted black hair of the bronze sculpture is modeled after the dark black color of Pogany's long hair.<sup>51</sup> Because he liked to polish the bronze until its luminosity was fully revealed, it is

very unusual that he painted *Mademoiselle Pogany (I)*. It is the only known painted, bronze sculpture of Brancusi's, which leads me to conclude that he sought to please Margit by providing some sort of resemblance to her likeness.

The *Mademoiselle Pogany* sculptures have certain elements that characterize African face masks. For example, a female face mask, *Ngady Mwaash*, and another mask, *Kifwebe*, have large almond-shaped eyes similar to the eyes of *Mademoiselle Pogany*. Both masks originate from the Democratic Republic of Congo and were created around the late or early twentieth century. The *Kifwebe* mask is now in the collection of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. In addition to these two masks, *Mademoiselle Pogany* shares similar eye features with a late nineteenth century to early twentieth century Baule mask from Côte d'Ivoire.

These African masks differ from *Mademoiselle Pogany* in terms of material and function. The wood masks were primarily designed for ritual ceremonies. *Mademoiselle Pogany* has no religious or spiritual significance. It is a marble sculpture that belongs in a gallery or museum space. There is also the issue of two-dimensionality versus three-dimensionality. Notwithstanding its protruding nose and carved eyes, a mask is a two-dimensional object that is worn on the person's face or hung on the wall. A viewer cannot walk around the mask as in the case of a three-dimensional sculpture. However, these differences between African masks and *Mademoiselle Pogany* are ultimately irrelevant because Brancusi was not attempting to create his own version of an African mask. Rather, African masks were a starting point or an initial source of inspiration that led him to flatten and simplify the figure of *Mademoiselle Pogany*, and to break away from traditional European portrait busts. With that said, all of his sculptures are three-

dimensional. This suggests that he did not want to stray too far from the three-dimensionality of classical European sculpture as some other avant-garde sculptors at the time.

A further comparison can be made between the bronze *Mademoiselle Pogany* of 1933 and a figure from a Kota reliquary ensemble. Kota artists from the Democratic Republic of Congo employed wood, copper, brass and pigments to construct the ensemble. Brancusi might have been aware of the Kota sculpture by either seeing it in Stieglitz's or the Eugene and Agnes Meyers' collection. It can be argued that *Mademoiselle Pogany* has a greater affinity to the Kota figure than the masks because the figure is part of a three-dimensional, sculptural ensemble. The slim, ovoid head of the Kota figure is almost identical to the head of *Mademoiselle Pogany*. On both sculptures, the space between the eyelids and the arched eyebrows is emphasized and illuminated by the shining material. The regality of the Kota figure is conveyed by the inclusion of a crown on the figure's head. A regal feeling is also expressed in *Mademoiselle Pogany* through the tall pedestal and gold bronze. Both sculptures represent the female figures as sacred entities without any sexual undertone, which is unusual during Brancusi's time when African art was correlated with unrestrained human sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Avant-garde artists were captivated with African masks or objects like the Kota figure due to their embodiment of abstract aesthetic forms and their symbolization of what lies outside physical reality. For artists, masks signified savage sexuality and revulsion in their role of awakening terrifying, unknown spirits. Pablo Picasso called masks "magical things" and viewed them as fetish objects of exorcism and the

unconscious.<sup>52</sup> He associated African masks to female faces in his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*. This association could very well have been his attempt at setting his troubled unconscious free through aesthetic form, contrary to the Surrealists' pursuit and acceptance of the unconscious. Picasso's friend and fellow artist Georges Braque was interested in African masks because he thought they were well-made sculpture.<sup>53</sup> Artists creating art around 1905-1930 were also fascinated with the inward nature of African sculpture. Unfortunately, this inward nature lacked any cultural awareness beyond spirits and mythology.

Because Brancusi made no specific comments on African masks, it is difficult to ascertain whether he found African masks appealing due to their formal quality or whether, like Picasso, he found them to be merely fetish objects. Balas argues that he perceived African masks as only "autonomous plastic creations" without an understanding of their cultural context.<sup>54</sup> While this may be true, I think Brancusi's interest in African art manifested itself from a shared belief in ideal, abstract forms. For both Brancusi and African craftsmen, these forms served as connections between the spiritual and the aesthetic. Brancusi's affinity to African art manifested itself from this shared belief in ideal, abstract forms. For both Brancusi and African craftsmen, these forms served as connections between the spiritual and the aesthetic. African craftsmen were not concerned with realistic representations, for the object was meant to represent something outside or beyond physical reality. An African object is on one hand culturally specific, created in a specific tribe with its own unique craftsmanship and vision. On the other hand, it is an object imbued with religious or mythological significance that,

although it may differ greatly from Western or other beliefs, touches upon the universal concepts of death, birth, community, and divinity.

The New York avant-garde was an important factor in developing Brancusi's career and integrating African sculptural forms in his work. Due to their involvement with African art, Stieglitz, de Zayas, and John Quinn contributed most to Brancusi's awareness and knowledge of African art. Though Brancusi did not take many trips to New York, it is likely that he read about the various African art exhibitions taking place at 291, the Modern Gallery, and the Brummer Gallery. In relation to primitivism, Brancusi scholars have paid significant attention to Brancusi's wood sculptures such as *Caryatid*, *Adam and Eve*, *Torso of a Young Girl*, and *Little French Girl*. These sculptures evoke several formal characteristics of Zang reliquary figures and figures from West Africa. Although Brancusi's wood sculptures exemplify Brancusi's development of primitivist abstraction, I argue that his *Mademoiselle Pogany* series and *White Negress* series are just as significant in understanding Brancusi's interpretation of African art. His interpretation was a formalist one, but it also encompassed race, gender, and spiritualism. Brancusi incorporated Romanian folk motifs in his sculpture; similarly, he incorporated African motifs in his sculpture. In creating a balance between these two sources, Brancusi became recognized as the most prominent abstract sculptor in the New York avant-garde circle well into the 1940s.

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Stavitsky, "Americans and the Armory Show: An Introduction," *The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show, 1913* (Montclair, New Jersey: Montclair Art Museum, 2013), 7.

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Zilczer, “*The Noble Buyer*”: *John Quinn, Patron of the Avant-Garde* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Zilczer, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Sanda Miller, *Constantin Brancusi* (London, England : Reaktion Books, 2010), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Mintz Messinger, ed., *Stieglitz and His Artists: Matisse to O’Keeffe* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Henry McBride, “What is Happening in the World of Art,” *The Sun* (March 1914): 7.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Luther Carey, “Art at Home and Abroad,” *New York Times* (March 22, 1914): 11.

<sup>10</sup> Bricker Balken, *Debating American Modernism: Stieglitz, Duchamp, and the New York Avant-Garde* (New York: American Federation of Arts; Distributed Art Publishers, 2003), 198.

<sup>11</sup> Yaelle Biro, “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde: Exhibition Overview,” *Tribal Art: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice de Vlaminck, “Discovery of African Art, 1906,” *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, edited by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, California; Los Angeles, California; London, England: University of California Press, 2003), 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Biro, 16.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven, Massachusetts; London, England: Yale University Press, 1993), 124.

<sup>21</sup> Temkin, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Marius de Zayas, *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1996), 146.

<sup>23</sup> Marius de Zayas, "African Negro Art and Modern Art, 1916," *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, edited by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, California; Los Angeles, California; London, England: University of California Press, 2003), 94, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Sidney Geist, "The Endless Column," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16 (1990): 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Brancusi Exhibition: November 17-December 15, 1926, Catalogue* (New York: Brummer Gallery, 1926).

<sup>26</sup> Temkin, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Brancusi : November 17-January 13, 1933, Catalogue* (New York : Brummer Gallery, 1926).

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Geist, *Study of Sculpture* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Zilczer, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Temkin, 59. After Quinn's death, his Brancusi collection was sold to various individual collectors such as Walter and Louise Arensberg and Henri Pierre Roche. Of the total of twenty-seven Brancusi sculptures sold, eleven of them are now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection. Others are in private collections or museum collections throughout the country. For further consultation on the whereabouts of Quinn's Brancusi collection, see Judith Zilczer's "*The Noble Buyer*": *John Quinn, Patron of the Avant-Garde*.

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<sup>33</sup> Yaelle Biro, “The John Quinn Collection of African Art.” *Tribal Art: African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Wendy Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, and Ann Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 196.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>44</sup> Sidney Geist, “Brancusi,” “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art: the Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, Volume II* edited by William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 350.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>48</sup> Bach, Temkin, and Rowell, 262.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

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<sup>52</sup> Pablo Picasso, "Discovery of African Art 1906-1907," *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, edited by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, Los Angeles; London, England: University of California Press, 2003), 33.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and His World* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2008), 49.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have examined how Brancusi incorporated these different aspects of Romanian folk art and African art in his sculptures that were made between 1907 and the late 1930s. I argue that Brancusi did not copy directly the abstract forms of African art and Romanian folk art. Instead, he used such forms as a means to develop his own distinct direction of abstraction. The prominent Romanian philosopher and historian Mircea Eliade wrote of Brancusi, that “instead of reproducing the plastic worlds of Romanian or African folk art, he set himself to interiorizing as it were, his own vital experience.”<sup>1</sup> Eliade reiterates a significant notion of Brancusi’s. Brancusi did not employ sculptural forms and motifs from African art and Romanian folk art only to develop his own abstract sculpture. He further employed these different aesthetic sources to add expression and meaning in his constant reconfiguration of his sculptures.

Additionally, I discussed the reception of Brancusi’s primitivism in art history discourse. Within the history of modern sculpture, Brancusi was perceived as a father of modern sculpture due to his use of classical forms and his mastery of materials. This modernist discourse on sculpture does not associate Brancusi with primitivism. His primitivism came into focus mainly after the 1984 "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Yet, the primitivism that was promoted in the exhibition was seen as stemming from African art. Current discourse on Brancusi either credits African art (as in the case of Sidney Geist) or Romanian folk art (as in the case of Edith Balas) as the main source of his primitivism. Current discourse, therefore, requires a reconfiguration of Brancusi’s primitivism into a type of hyperprimitivism, one which exists within a larger framework of Brancusi’s identity as a primitive artist.

Based on his own construction as a primitive and his application of primitive sources of art, Brancusi should be understood as a primitivist artist, and not only as the father of abstract sculpture. Balas and Geist reject the notion of Brancusi as a primitive artist. Balas argues that despite his incorporation of primitive folk forms in his wood sculptures, Brancusi was not a primitive because he used primitive forms of the past to advance modern sculpture into the future.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Geist distinguishes Brancusi from a primitive artist in his refinement of materials, particularly wood.<sup>3</sup> In my thesis, I attempt to disprove Balas' and Geist's notion of the primitive in relation to Brancusi. It is important to understand Brancusi as a primitive in order to understand his interest in primitive art.

Brancusi relied on his peasant-like appearance and simple lifestyle to construct his own identity as a primitive in the eyes of others. He created this primitive identity in order to feel closer to his peasant upbringing in Romania and the Romanian folk culture, which included Romanian Orthodoxy and its significant mysticism. I have discovered throughout my research that it was important for Brancusi to preserve his Romanian heritage and identity. In art history discourse, Brancusi is often discussed as more of a French sculptor because he spent the majority of his life living in Paris. However, he held close ties to his native country through the incorporation of Romanian folk art.

Brancusi's primitiveness is exemplified in his wood pedestals, which have become a vital component in the postmodern construction of Brancusi. According to Geist, Brancusi's pedestals are "not works of art, but decorative objects of the same kind as picture frames."<sup>4</sup> Geist believes that the pedestals are not works of art when left alone without a sculpture to support.<sup>5</sup> Geist's modernist interpretation of the pedestal assumes

the pedestal was unnecessary in Brancusi's oeuvre. On the contrary, as Friedrich Teja Bach observes, the wood pedestal added a postmodern "heterogeneity" to Brancusi's modern "progressive" and "reductive" marble and bronze sculptures.<sup>6</sup> Brancusi's pedestals, such as the *Endless Column*, functioned as both pedestal and sculpture. The *Endless Column* also functioned as a motif from Romanian folk architecture in its appropriation of form and material. Furthermore, the contrast between the severely abstract, rough wood and the highly sculpted, delicate marble and bronze serves as a juxtaposition of classical European art with primitive art.

Brancusi is considered among the foremost sculptors to embrace primitivism in his sculpture and employ materials and techniques, such as wood and direct carving, in his abstraction of form. Yet, while Brancusi's contribution to modern sculpture is well acknowledged, he has not been given as much prominence as Picasso in the discourse of twentieth-century primitivism. For instance, in his chapter on primitivism from his book *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern*, Kirk Varnedoe does not mention or discuss Brancusi. Instead, he dedicates most of the chapter to Picasso.<sup>7</sup> Anna Chave argues that the hybridization of Brancusi's work—encompassing various primitive influences and materials—caused the marginalization of Brancusi within modern art history.<sup>8</sup> I would go one step further and argue that Brancusi's primitivism in particular caused his marginalization. Picasso is highly regarded for being the founder of the Cubism movement, along with Georges Braque; meanwhile, Brancusi was not associated with any artistic movement, though he participated in the avant-garde circles of Paris and New York. Unlike in Picasso's paintings, Brancusi made African sculptural forms in his sculptures more explicit due to the similarity in materials. Picasso's sculptures,

meanwhile, express no primitive interest in form or materials. Modernism allowed avant-garde artists to incorporate “primitive” influences but only to the extent of not losing the Western quality in their art. The cause of Brancusi’s marginalization may have been the primitivism that led Brancusi to create abstract sculpture, which was too primitive and abstract to be placed in one particular category of modern art history. Brancusi’s engagement with African art was more consistent than others such as Picasso. The canon of art history should be more inclusive of artists like Brancusi who is not connected with any particular art movement but yet contributed extensively to modern art and primitivism, a phenomenon that played a central role in the development of modernism.

African art featured prominently in Brancusi’s work. Through the New York avant-garde, Brancusi was exposed to African sculpture and its abstract forms, which he incorporated in his wood, marble, and bronze sculptures. Important figures of the New York avant-garde, such as Alfred Stieglitz, Marius de Zayas, and Joseph Brummer, held exhibitions of Brancusi’s sculptures at their galleries, along with exhibitions of African art. Brancusi may have noted the various African sculptures shown at their galleries.

Brancusi’s *Mademoiselle Pogany* and *Caryatid* share formal similarities to African masks and Zang reliquary figures. For his *White Negress* series, Brancusi experimented with the materiality of the sculpture in order to comment on contemporaneous race relations and to break away from classical Greek sculpture. His use of the contrast of black and white allude to Man Ray’s black and white photographs *Noire et Blanche* and *Kiki de Montparnasse*. Brancusi’s marble and bronze sculptures are often overlooked in the discussion of his primitivism. It is important to note that he employed African art to add spiritual, racial, and gender meanings to his sculptures. Brancusi utilized African art to

establish his modernist formalist sculpture. The sculpture becomes a complex postmodern expression of multicultural awareness.

As part of my thesis research, I observed the collection of Brancusi's sculptures in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. *The Kiss*, *Mademoiselle Pogony*, and *White Negress* are part of this collection. I have read American and Romanian art historians and critics, along with exhibition catalogues such as the 1995 Brancusi exhibition catalogue of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. My research traces the dynamic art historical understanding of Brancusi and his sculpture from the 1950s to today. My research does not examine directly archival documents such as Brancusi's letters to Quinn and Stieglitz, nor does it focus on one specific period of Brancusi's artistic development. Rather, it embraces a broader examination of his sculptures from 1907 to the late 1930s. This broader view allows for an observation of how Brancusi changed his abstract forms with each subsequent series of sculptures.

When referring to Brancusi's primitivism, I suggest using a new term called hyperprimitivism. In the art history discourse on Brancusi, the term hyperprimitivism has not been used before to describe Brancusi's unique primitivism. My notion of hyperprimitivism is a term that describes an application of diverse primitive sources in the creation of multiple artworks during a long time span. Art historians usually discuss primitivism in reference to one specific primitive source, which in most cases is African art. Hyperprimitivism, on the other hand, can encompass various forms of primitive sources and not be limited to only one interpretation. However, hyperprimitivism does not require for an artist to embrace and employ world art traditions into a single work of art. Rather, I assign hyperprimitivism to an artist who engages with multiple world art

traditions or “primitive” art forms throughout the artist’s oeuvre. Brancusi, for instance, took interest in Romanian folk art and African art. He used these two primitive sources during his creation of various series of sculpture spanning more than two decades. Romanian folk art and African art reside side by side in a duality that characterizes the hyperprimitivism of Brancusi’s sculptures. Either Romanian folk art or African art emerges as the main source of influence on a chosen sculpture. A Brancusi sculpture does not exhibit both African and Romanian folk influences at the same time. Nevertheless, when studying Brancusi’s oeuvre, it becomes clear that his sculptures express forms, materials, and motifs present in Romanian folk art and African art.

What I found in my research to be the most significant about Brancusi’s art is his extensive devotion to reinterpreting primitive forms in his evolving abstract sculptures and his balanced use of African and Romanian art sources. The notion of primitivism in modern art implies only one primitive source, which according to the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition was only African art. On the contrary, primitivism had many sources of influence that were juxtaposed side by side during an artist’s career or in a single artwork. In the case of Brancusi, he used Romanian folk art and African art throughout his career to define his identity as a primitive artist and his identity as an abstract sculptor.

Hyperprimitivism is unique to Brancusi, for no other prominent artist in the canon of modern art has engaged with primitive art to the extent of Brancusi’s engagement. Furthermore, no artist has done so exclusively without being part of an art movement. Brancusi’s individualism defines his unique primitivism in contrast to Kandinsky’s and Picasso’s primitivism. Kandinsky was the leader of the *Blaue Reiter* group that drew

upon German folk art, Russian folk art, and gothic art for their experimentation in color, form, and materials. Kandinsky's primitivism was more group oriented and less personal than Brancusi's primitivism, which partly embodied his Romanian childhood.

Meanwhile, Picasso collaborated with Georges Braque in their development of Cubism, in which primitivism played a minimal role. His *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Guitar* constructions are regarded as having an African art influence, though this notion has been disputed. Hence, Brancusi has a wider variety of work that can support the argument of a primitive influence. His rare hyperprimitivism places him among the innovative and distinguished avant-garde artists of modern art.

My thesis brings up topics that can be further developed and research. Brancusi's work with photography is among these topics. His oeuvre of photographic prints explores photography's role in how sculpture is reproduced and represented within the framework of modern art and its audience. Another topic is Brancusi's World War I monument at Tirgu-Jiu and its ties to Romanian nationalism. Although Romanian viewers reacted with ambivalence when the monument was completed, Romanians came to revere the monument, along with Brancusi, as symbols of national pride. The relationship between Duchamp and Brancusi also deserves further study. Duchamp was instrumental in bringing Brancusi's work to places such as New York and Philadelphia. It would be noteworthy to examine how Duchamp's art and his creative process informed Brancusi's art production. Lastly, the creation of John Quinn's Brancusi collection figures prominently in Brancusi's success and recognition as a prominent modern sculptor. For this reason, Quinn's collection requires further research. Although these topics are relevant to the contemporary reassessment of Brancusi and his work, Brancusi's

primitivism is one of the most, if not the most, significant topic that needs to be taken more seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Brancusi and Mythologies," *Art and Philosophy: Brancusi, The Courage to Love*, edited by Florence M. Hetzler (New York: Peter Lang Publishing), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Geist, "Brancusi," "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art, Volume II*, edited by William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 347.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Geist, *A Study of Sculpture* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1983), 169.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bach, Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, and Ann Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern* (New York: Henry H. Abrams Publishers, 1990), 183.

<sup>8</sup> Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven, Massachusetts; London, England: Yale University Press, 1993), 4.

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