Brancusi and America

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Constantin Brancusi: *Bird in Space*, 1928, bronze, 54 by 8 1/2 by 6 1/2 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©

IN 1907, by simplifying and clarifying the human form into near abstraction with *The Kiss* and *The Prayer*, Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) fundamentally transformed sculpture, just as Pablo Picasso revolutionized painting that year with his *Demoiselles d’Avignon*—together perhaps the two most radical disruptions in the history of Western art. In their wake, Brancusi left what artist Richard Serra has termed a “handbook of possibilities for sculpture.”[1](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn1) Those possibilities are now, in effect, on dual-venue view in New York, thanks to the recent installation of major Brancusi selections at the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, each drawn from the institution’s own collection. Here, seeing Brancusi’s work in quantity and anew, we can readily infer the many ways he changed art, especially in the United States.

The story of Brancusi and America is long and rich, though to date told only in parts.[2](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn2) The artist’s innovations are so numerous—and so apparently contradictory—that doubts can arise about the true extent of his influence. Could one artist really have galvanized sculptural practice so thoroughly? Yes, but all his formal contributions have not yet been fully researched and documented. Nor was he the sole influence on later sculptors. Nevertheless, as Martin Puryear has said, “even those who may not be aware of it, owe a debt to Brancusi.”[3](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn3)

The essence of Brancusi’s greatness is his ability to balance opposites, to find equal measure between seemingly irreconcilable factors: male and female, organic and machine-like, ancient and modern, smooth and rough, dense and “weightless.” Such fusions enabled Brancusi to utterly recast existing motifs. He did not originate the “kiss” theme, but he revived its face-to-face fundamentals so thoroughly, so elementally, that the work’s blockiness seems to convey a new (and simultaneously very old) notion regarding the equality of partners. He did not invent the memorial column, but his famed “endless” version is so profoundly different—fully abstract, freed from all programmatic rhetoric and narrative—that it seems unprecedented.

Late in life, Brancusi—Paris-based, though born, raised, and first artistically schooled in Romania—declared: “Without the Americans, I would not have been able to produce all this or even to have existed.”[4](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn4) His first connection with an American artist came in 1907, when he met Edward Steichen at Rodin’s home in Meudon, a suburb of Paris. (Brancusi had previously been an assistant to Rodin, but grew restless and left after two months.) Steichen later saw his bronze *Maiastra* in the 1911 Salon des Indépendants exhibition and purchased it from the artist. Brancusi installed the work in Steichen’s garden in Voulangis on a tall pedestal, an early example of his predilection for bold verticality.

During this early period, Brancusi discovered the smooth-surfaced figures of Elie Nadelman, Polish-born but soon destined to establish himself as a noted American artist. He met Marcel Duchamp (who would spend many years in the US and eventually become an American citizen) at the Duchamp brothers’ home in Puteaux, and the two artists became close friends. Duchamp would curate two shows for Brancusi in the US and loyally promote him among his acquaintances and professional contacts. Meanwhile, the American collector and painter Walter Pach, living in Paris, alerted the organizers of the landmark 1913 Armory Show in New York to Brancusi’s work; five of his pieces were included—and singled out for withering ridicule in the press.

But in March the next year, Alfred Stieglitz, on the recommendation of Steichen, gave Brancusi his first solo exhibition, at the 291 gallery in New York. Criticism now was muted, and some reviews were even favorable. Americans had taken to Brancusi’s work, and collectors were buying. The painter Arthur B. Davies, one of the organizers of the Armory Show, had acquired a piece in 1912, and soon the sculptures were being collected by progressive buyers like John Quinn, Walter and Louise Arensberg, Katherine Dreier, and, later, Peggy Guggenheim.[5](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn5) By contrast, Brancusi never had a one-person show in France during his lifetime. Although he was widely befriended by avant-garde figures like Modigliani and Man Ray, French critics tended to think of him as a peasant, an outsider, more a craftsman than a real artist.[6](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn6) He was ignored in print by such leading art writers as Guillaume Apollinaire and André Salmon. The first essay on him was written by Ezra Pound in 1921,[7](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn7) beginning a long critical and artistic dialogue that is still widely evident across American art.

**Light**

One of Brancusi’s major formal innovations was sculptural luminosity—the play of light on works like the two versions of *Bird in* *Space* (1928 and ca. 1941) held by MoMA. This almost preternatural glow results from the artist’s compulsive polishing of hard materials and his search for an inner light, the essence of the forms he created. He could make surfaces as translucent, as soft, as human skin—an effect seen in his *Torso of a Young Girl* (ca. 1923) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

After working with Brancusi from 1927 to 1929, Isamu Noguchi continued to develop this high-polish technique, which also became prevalent in the more conservative work of American artists William Zorach, Hugo Robus, and Paul Manship. Scintillating reflection later energized the welded-steel work of David Smith, such as *The Hero* (1951–52), with its frontal, architectural frame and zigzag base. Subsequently, in pieces such as *Cubi XXVII* (1965), Smith expanded the frame to a gatelike structure of burnished stainless steel, composed of disparate stacked elements that catch and reflect light, dematerializing solid metal before our very eyes.

Intense, shimmering light animates much of Donald Judd’s art, especially the plexiglass and steel boxes of the 1960s and the one hundred milled aluminum boxes installed at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. At sunrise and sunset, the latter works—displayed in a huge glass-walled shed—seem to dissolve in the intense Southwestern sun. For both Brancusi and Judd, light generates deeply felt spiritual (though not formally religious) associations.[8](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn8)

Brancusi loved to take photographs, many of which—focusing on light, sky, and columns—recall Stieglitz’s cloud series from the 1920s. The quest for infinite space, on earth and above, runs throughout American art, from the Luminist painters of the nineteenth century through Georgia O’Keeffe and Arthur Dove to Michael Heizer and James Turrell. Brancusi’s dematerialization of forms by light must be counted as a precedent for the California Light and Space movement. Later, Walter de Maria’s *Lightning Field* (1977) claimed the land, capturing natural forces through multiple stainless-steel poles, all reaching for the heavens.

**Motion**

Brancusi’s light creates constant motion; we see our reflections in the polished bronzes and can follow our own gestures and physical maneuvers, thus becoming part of the piece. For Brancusi, this visual flow evoked a world in constant flux, like water, giving sculpture a new expressive power. He increased that dynamism dramatically when he introduced actual movement into his work. Consider, for example, the smaller polished bronze version of *Leda* (1926), placed on a mirror base and set on a revolving motorized pedestal, and the 1930 blue-gray marble *Fish* (“I want just the flash of its spirit”[9](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn9)), shown at MoMA on a rotating stand. Brancusi’s adoption of movement, real and implied, fulfilled a longtime dream of sculptors to overcome the dead weight of objects and seemingly lift them up in the air, off the pedestal. Indeed, Brancusi dispensed with the traditional pedestal and made the base an intrinsic part of the sculpture.

Duchamp, Brancusi’s fellow-European guide to America, was modernism’s other inventor of movement. The Cubist artists who gathered in Puteaux, sometimes called the Golden Section group (Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger, Robert Delaunay, and others), sought to capture the grand themes of modern life, to go beyond the traditional genres of still life, landscape, and portraiture that Picasso and Georges Braque preferred. Speed, change, and movement—elements beloved by the Futurists but also closely associated with the US—were firmly embraced by Duchamp and Brancusi. Duchamp’s *Nude Descending the Staircase* led the way in 1911–12, followed in 1913 by his first readymade, the *Bicycle Wheel*, and then continued with the spinning disks in his film *Anemic Cinema* (1926).

Brancusi’s emphasis, at first, was less on literal movement than on the implicit motion of his highly stylized biomorphic forms and the perceptual dynamic induced by stacked and/or polished shapes. He incorporated endless implied motion in the spiral that stands in for the author of *Ulysses* in his cardboard-and-metal *Portrait of James Joyce* (ca. 1928). O’Keeffe, who had previously scrutinized the spiral form in her own 1916 charcoal *No. 8-Special (Drawing No. 8)* and who surely knew about Brancusi through Stieglitz, later used this eternal form in her 1946 sculpture *Abstraction*. Robert Smithson credited Brancusi’s spiral as a key source for his *Spiral Jetty* (1970).[10](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn10)

Perceptual motion—as opposed to literal movement—is evident in works such as Brancusi’s birdlike and highly reflective *Maiastra* (1911), his leaning *Torso* (1912), and most notably his *Maiastra* of 1910–12 at MoMA. In the last of these, the eye’s transit is upward, though viewers pause to ponder each segment before reaching the apex: an emblematic representation of the magical bird that guides lovers in Romanian folklore.

**Eroticism**

Numerous avant-garde artists felt that the rapid rise of aviation, signaling the primacy of the machine, unleashed semimystical forces. In 1912, Brancusi and Duchamp, along with Fernand Léger, visited the Exposition de la Locomotion Aérienne in Paris. They were all struck by the beauty of the planes, especially by the propellers, which Brancusi—prompted by Duchamp—took as the new standard for sculpture. For him, physical flight now joined with spiritual release, which in turn was innately linked to the erotic—just as it was for Duchamp. Brancusi’s *Princess X* (1915–16), clearly phallic, is also a woman’s portrait, another example of how Brancusi could reconcile seeming opposites. Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), an object originally designed for male urination, also—when repositioned by the artist—evokes a vagina. So, too, the beautiful Brancusi marble *Leda* (1920), owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, suggests both a phallus and a reclining female nude.

Brancusi’s formal androgyny is paralleled in O’Keeffe’s grieving figure statue of 1916, followed by the 1920s paintings in which the forms soar in the air, probing a higher order. In her *Grey Line with Lavender and Yellow* (ca. 1923), O’Keeffe combines vaginal and phallic shapes. Finally, *In the Patio IX* (1950) features a V-shaped black image formed by the walls that resembles a bird rising into a vast sky.

**Verticality**

Soaring verticality is one of the most salient characteristics of Brancusi’s sculpture. The wooden, archaic-looking *Adam and Eve* (1921) and *King of* *Kings* (1938) at the Guggenheim embody this tendency, figures seemingly elongated into space. Throughout his life, Brancusi was compelled to seek a higher order, to find freedom and release from earthly concerns, as exemplified by his crowning accomplishment, the 98-foot-tall *Endless Column* (1938) in Târgu-Jiu, Romania. The supernal impulse permeates his entire oeuvre, which he once described as “advancing toward the divine.”[11](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn11)

The *Endless Column*, transcending its commission as a military memorial, has been an icon—and a provocation—for countless American artists. We see it echoed by figures as varied as Barnett Newman, Tal Streeter, Lynda Benglis, Serra, Dale Chihuly, Puryear, and Ellsworth Kelly. Of particular note is Claes Oldenburg’s *Clothespin* (1976) in Philadelphia and *Batcolumn* (1977) in Chicago. Each captures an essential aspect of its city’s history—one referring (as Oldenburg himself stated) to *The Kiss* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the other to epic moments of baseball in Chicago. Brancusi has everything, said Serra, and here we find how his monumentality could be adapted to the American vernacular.

As Carl Andre remarked, Brancusi’s column is endless because it has no terminal points; there is no head or foot to contain and complete it.[12](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn12) This is evident at MoMA in the work’s first version, a nearly seven-foot carved oak shaft dated 1918. Continuity is strongly implied by the use of half elements at the top and bottom. The roughly geometric units could be extended infinitely both above and below ground, like an axis mundi. Andre’s 1966 *Lever*, a thirty-eight-footfile of bricks set on the floor, is essentially Brancusi’s *Endless Column* aligned horizontally. The possibilities of the infinite, as explored by artists like Judd and De Maria, gave modular-component sculpture a powerful dynamism.

**Unity**

Works like Brancusi’s *Maiastra*, with its use of disparate elements, helped engender later art such as Robert Rauschenberg’s *Odalisk* (1955-58), a brilliant takeoff on the MoMA sculpture. Rauschenberg’s bird is a common rooster, love is indicated by a pinup, but above all the artist created a whole new order of Constructivism. Each part has its own role, its own story. The installation of Rauschenberg’s 1953 show at the Stable Gallery, New York, looked much like Brancusi’s studio, complete with a bench, a single egg shape, and a standing column; on the wall was an all-white painting activated by light and shadows, just as Brancusi’s reflective pieces are. This ensemble effect, prefiguring installation art, was adopted by David Smith in his sculpture field in the Adirondacks, and then by Judd in his compounds in Marfa.

Judd, however, insisted on art with no extraneous parts, and pointed to Jean Arp and Brancusi as sources for this type of form. He created vertical stacks of repeated elements as Brancusi had in his various columns—works characterized by the seriality of more or less identical units.[13](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn13) In addition, Judd arranged multiple individual objects to produce a unified experience, again as Brancusi did in his studio. Both artists wished viewers to see the assembled works whole, as a total unity, a careful and continual adjustment to a single space.

At the same time, the columns, as well as other pieces such as *Architectural* *Project* (1918) and *The Gate of the* *Kiss* (1938), have an architectural character. Brancusi saw architecture as inhabited sculpture. In 1926, when he first glimpsed the New York skyline from his arriving ship, he exclaimed, “Why, it is my studio! . . . All these blocks, all these pieces to be shifted and juggled with, as the experiment grows and changes.”[14](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn14) In 1956, the year before he died, Brancusi proposed a fifteen-hundred-foot *Endless Column* to be built in Chicago, a kind of living sculpture that would incorporate apartments. Frank Gehry has said that he learned more from Brancusi than from most architects—a judgment confirmed by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, whose sweeping forms were taken directly from Brancusi’s studio.

**Time**

Like many artists of the early twentieth century, Brancusi had a quasi-scientific fascination with time. We see this in the 1910–12 version of *Maiastra*, the first piece we encounter at MoMA. It is not as well-known as other works, but it contains many of Brancusi’s innovations. Time is apparent in the way we must read the sculpture vertically; in the contrast between the smooth surfaces of the bird with the awkward carved figures below, which appear to be on the verge of collapse, saved by the artist from some long-lost archaeological site. Encountering this sculptural fusion of ancient and modern, we travel centuries. At Puteaux, the philosophy of Henri Bergson was an intellectual force. In works such as *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson outlined the way perceptions evolve, one moment at a time, each moment containing the essence of the past moment and at the same time part of the future stage; this progression, called *la durée*, was a reaction against the old one-second-at-a-time Impressionist view. Thus we move from old to new, at the same time, in a single piece through a gradual transformation. This is the basis of Brancusi’s development of the “Bird in Space” sequence*,* from 1919 to 1941. He starts with a primary form, then slowly transforms it with minute but distinct differences, a process also evident in his ovoid heads.

Time is apparent in MoMA’s *Endless* *Column* because Brancusi left clear evidence of the work involved in the roughhewn, hand-carved surfaces. The piece is composed of geometric shapes, but it bespeaks a very human type of geometry, another amalgam of opposites. On one section we see what look to be initials, recalling graffiti left on an ancient monument; yet the work is the most up-to-the-moment sort imaginable. Its repeated shapes offer a new sense of structure and stability. The serial units should be seen as a manifestation of the post-WWI “return to order,” so termed by Jean Cocteau. In 1916, in the Paris magazine *SIC*, poets and critics such as Apollinaire called for an art of harmony and stability, a reaction to the mass destruction of the global conflict. The free-form abstractions of prewar art were to be renounced in favor of a classical structure, around which a new and better world could be built.

**Clarity**

The 1950s were marked by a return to volume, a reaction against the dominant 1940s mode of linear welded sculpture. Only Noguchi had maintained a consistent allegiance to Brancusi’s approach—to his radical simplification of forms, his finely treated surfaces, his infatuation with implied movement and spiritual lift, balanced by his loyalty to physicality and the continuation of sculpture as an object of weight and density. For artists in the 1950s, it was now impossible to avoid Brancusi. His work was being acquired by museums in New York and Philadelphia, and his first-ever retrospective was organized in 1955 at the Guggenheim by director James Johnson Sweeney, who acquired the pieces now on view there.

During this period, many younger US-based artists visited Brancusi’s studio in Paris, attracted by his aesthetic and his fame. Among them was Louise Bourgeois, whose early work was based on Brancusi’s practice of stacking on a vertical axis, her idiosyncratic pieces mimicking his zigzag shapes. Many of her other sculptures of the era were single lightweight objects reminiscent of the “Bird in Space” series. But perhaps the most consequential visit to Brancusi’s studio was made by Ellsworth Kelly in 1950. By then, Brancusi had stopped producing new objects and spent his time polishing and endlessly arranging and rearranging his sculptures so that they could be seen in the best light, sequences, and combinations. One could observe how the works affected the space as one moved among them.

On his visit, Kelly was inspired by the clarity of Brancusi’s shapes and forms; he was also prompted to follow a path of spirituality in his work. His oeuvre came to include flat paintings, reliefs, and sculptures in which he cultivated Brancusi’s principles, including the activation of the viewer’s space. His credo is fully evident in his posthumous chapel in Austin (2018), an homage to Brancusi and Henri Matisse. Kelly said that his aim was “to free shape from its ground, and then to work the shape so that it has a definite relationship to the space around it; so that it has a clarity and a measure within itself of its parts (angles, curves, edges and mass); and so that, with color and tonality, the shape finds its own space and always demands its freedom and separateness.”[17](https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/brancusi-and-america/#fn17) He could have been speaking for Brancusi himself, the fountainhead of so much advanced American sculpture.