Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957)

*Pearson specification requirements:*

1. *How is he influenced by ‘primitivism’?*
   1. To some extent, he is himself arguably, a primitive artist. Could neither read nor write when he entered the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts in 1895. Born Hobita, Romania where folk traditions were strong, working with natural materials important. Village life was focused on church and cemetery with a strong sense of collective identity. For B, primitivism was a way of returning to a dream of the beginning, that linked primal innocence with sculptural simplicity.
   2. **The Kiss**. The year 1907 marks his transition from a ‘Rodin-esque’ style to a radical change with the ‘direct carving’ on this work. He was secretive about the work and its influences, but it certainly coincides with the discovery of African art in Paris. Can be compared with Derain **Crouching Figure**, but also suggestions that B as looking at Egyptian ‘Cube figures’ in the Louvre. Geist argues that he was influenced by a Bambara figure from the Museum de l’Homme. Unlike Rodin, B is less concerned with beauty and more with how to express emotion, with minimal parts, through the use of appropriate materials. Direct carving allows him to attah a primitive, timeless quality to the kiss motif.
   3. **Maiastra** – 7 versions dated between 1910 and 1913. Romanian title makes the link to the fabulous, magical bird of Romanian folk tales that leads the wandering lover to his beloved. B says “All my life I have been seeking to capture the essence of flight. This series shows his steady reductionism to purer and purer form ending up with the final three forms of **The Golden Bird**. (One of these attracted the fury of the NY Customs **office** who tried to impose a $250 tax on a bronze version, arguing that it was a utilitarian implement rather than a work of art.)
   4. **The Endless Column** (1935-8) takes the form of a totem pole and replicates the idea of a stack of elements placed on top of each other. In a traditional totem pole, these would be mythical beasts and human creatures, but Brancusi has typically refined these to a single, abstracted shape which is repeated again and again. Creates an idea of infinite continuity – across the generations, and across time. Simplicity and raw power is also evocative of ‘primitive’ ideas. The 12 round stools of The Table of Silence are reminiscent of peasant furniture, and the Gate of the Kiss reuses the motifs and ideas of his earlier works on this subject. All are hugely simplified and achieve the raw, profound power that attracted so many early Modernist artists to ‘primitive’ artefacts.
2. *How is he ‘modernist’?*
   1. Direct carving rather than traditional approach
   2. Methodical process of simplification where the figurative elements are gradually streamlined towards abstraction.
   3. Rejection of traditional training and Academic values.
   4. Often called ‘the father’ of modern, abstracted sculpture.
3. *How does he reject Academic traditions?*
   1. Moves away from team of casters, apprentices, etc to direct carving
   2. Moves away from decoration and additive ideas of realism or idealism, towards a reductive one of refinement and simplicity, searching for the essential form.
   3. Rethinks the form and purpose of the plinth: traditionally an element to elevate a sculpture, but Brancusi develops the idea that bases were things in themselves and they become increasingly important – possibly culminating in the **Endless Column** which can be seen as a series of bases/plinths that here become the total form of the work.
4. *How was he influenced by cultural/social factors?*
   1. Early life experience of work: by the time he was seven he was employed as a shepherd in a Carpathian sheepfold, so his “teachers were Life and Nature” according to a friend. He left home, aged 12, in 1888 to find work in Craiova.
   2. At the Craiova School of Art, the taste was for neo-classical Western European and funerary sculpture. In 1898, moves on to Bucharest to study at the Academy of Fine Arts but still supporting himself through menial work.
   3. Reaches Paris (by walking from Munich) in 1904. A huge contrast to the sophistication of the ‘Belle Epoque’ and ‘fin-de-siecle’ sophisticated Paris, which since the 1900 Universal Exhibition had become the unchallenged cultural capital of Europe.
   4. Two strong artistic communities in Paris at this time: in Montparnasse and Montmartre. Montmartre home to both the Fauves and to Picasso (who arrives in Paris the same year as B.) was a decadent, free-spirited poor but irreverent world that was a magnet to artists. Montparnasse was more of a gentrified village and its transformation into a modern arrondissement didn’t begin until 1905. Leo and Gertrude Stein settled here in 1903 and established a popular salon. Circles and friendships of artists important to him in both locations.
   5. B owned both of Henri Bergson’s most important books ‘Material and Memory’ and ‘The Creative Evolution’.
   6. Also interested in the new theories of the fourth dimension, as presented by Henri Poincare.
5. *How was he influenced by political factors?*
   1. Not a political activist.
   2. The region of the Lower Danube (where B was born) was technically still part of the Turkish empire at the time of his birth. Independence came the following year in 1877. The end of serfdom (peasants working for the gentry) came late here and Cuza’s attempts to emancipate the rural working class ended in considerable tension and in 1907 with a bloody uprising in which tens of thousands of peasants were massacred. Not hugely significant for B who was sheltered from this in rural Hobita.
   3. The **Targa Jiu** ensemble could be used here as it is obviously a result of the political chaos of WW1 but B is responding to commission and reusing earlier ideas rather than taking the opportunity to criticise the War or politics/politicians.
6. *How was he influenced by technological factors?*
   1. Henry Ford ideas of mass production in **Endless Column**, Targu Jiu. Works with an engineer to realise the project.
   2. Metro system is new in Paris at the time of B’s arrival in the city. Entrances were Art Nouveau in style.
   3. B was a passionate photographer. Took a huge number of photographs of his own sculptures and became friends with some of the finest 20th century photographers, including Edward Steichen and Alfred Stieglitz. Began using a camera as early as 1905, but later turned to Man Ray for guidance and training in the 1920s.
   4. Very interested in modern technology and aviation and visited the Salon of Aviation Travel with Duchamp and Leger in 1912. Can be linked to ideas of flight in **Maiastra** series.
7. *How each chosen specified artist was influenced by two other artists?*
   1. **Rodin.** Under whom he worked on arrival in Paris (1906), and when Rodin was working on the Gates of Hell. In many ways, this is an oppositional influence – Brancusi seeks to be completely different from Rodin, then the most successful sculptor in Paris. Uses Rodin’s method of fragmentation, ‘the partial figure’ which enabled him to eliminate parts of the anatomy for expressive purposes.
   2. **Cezanne** In 1907 there were two posthumous exhibitions of Cezanne’s work. His large bathers can be seen in his early figure sculpture, eg The Prayer.
   3. **Elie Nadelman** and **Modigliani** were both important influences on B during the years 1909-14. Working and living closely together, exploring African art and ideas of geometry in space and simplification.
   4. **Marcel Duchamp**, influenced him in terms of choice of materials and in later years, became his dealer. Curated B’s exhibitions in New York in 1926 and 1933. Their friendship began in 1912 when B exhibited The Kiss, Sleeping Muse and Prometheus at the Salon des Independents. They shared an interest in modern technology and aviation and visited the Salon de la Locomotion Arienne in 1912. Seems to have been instrumental in inspiring B’s sophisticated games with bases, furniture and sculpture.
8. *The extent to which each chosen specified artist typifies the style and country from which they come?*

Not linked with a style label (other than Modernism) and clearly not typical of Romanian art.

Seen as the father of modern, abstract sculpture, due to his reductive bronze and marble sculptures. Like Modernism, his sculptures begin as figurative and get increasingly abstract in development.

Giedion-Welcker claims that “B’s sculpture combines Mediterranean beauty of form with Eastern wisdom and abstraction of form.”

1. *Use of materials:*
   1. Limestone and direct carving in **The Kiss**
   2. Wood in **Adam and Eve** (1921).Academic sculpture training did not include working in wood, but B had experience of this when he was at his first Art and Craft school in Craiova where he had worked on musical instruments and picture frames in wood.Influenced by Gauguin’s direct caring which he saw in a Salon Retrospective in Paris in 1906. Serrated patterns typical of African carvings on the bottom portion of **Adam and Eve.** Sexual references by have been inspired by so-called ‘primitive fetishes’. Important roots for wooden carving in the folk traditions of Romania. Adam is made from chestnut and Eve from oak on a limestone base. (Size 238m high). Oak has a smoother grain and more polished shine – closer to the appearance of a woman’s skin. Adam has the rougher texture of chestnut. Eve: 4 half-spherical orbs at the top, appears to be the form of a head, with the suggestion of lips and mouth. Long thin cyclinder to suggest graceful female neck and at the bottom, two round orbs to suggest breasts. Adam is stouter and heavier/denser build Large square head and rectangular body hinting at masculinity. Neck has grooved lines suggesting muscles. Placement suggests he is holding her up. Although the two were created separately, it looks like a single, unified unit. Base is a simple, square limestone block. Raw and unpolished and a yellow, earthy tone, the rock seems to refer to Adam’s birth from the dust and the earth and so connects the sculpture to the ground. So Adam is born from the earth and Eve from Adam’s rib.
   3. Range of materials in the **Targu Jiu Memorial**: **Endless Column** is 100’ high (30m), sand cast units in iron, then painted. Threaded on to an engineering quality carbon steel post (in three sections) that is embedded in the ground, encased in concrete to a depth of 5m. Each unit is roughly the size of a standing man. 16 units in total, with the first and last a half unit to suggest infinite connection. Significant ratio, 1(side of base):2 (central width):4 (height) give “the plastic harmony of the element”. B sent a letter to insist that the metal was painted yellow. **The Gate of the Kiss** and **The Table of Silence** are made from Banpotoc travertine.
2. *Detailed knowledge and understanding of at least one critical text that discusses the chosen specified artist: their works, contributions and influences?*
   1. **Antony Gormley** ‘On Sculpture’ describes his Endless Column as “the idea of a connection between the unknowable realms of the sky and the certainty of the earth.”
   2. **Antony Gormley** ‘On Sculpture’ describes him as “meditating on the condition of sculpture as a made thing and on the condition of the sculptor as a maker of independent objects.” Gormley says his sculptural language “has to do with togetherness and apartness.”
   3. **Sidney Geist** ‘Brancusi: A study of the Sculpture’ (1968) claims B inherited “a familiarity and love of wood as a medium from his native [Romanian] tradition” and from African tribal arts “a new universe of artistic possibility in their form and spirit.”
   4. **Edith Balas** ‘Brancusi and Romanian Folk Tradition’ (1987) disagrees, claiming that this argument “overlooks B’s incorporation of Romanian sources.” This is reinforced by Jacob Epstein who claims B was “afraid of African things”. “B was no primitive but rather one of many among his generation who looked backward to step forward.”
   5. **Geist** on The Kiss “a product of the primitivizing impulse of the opening of the 20th century.
   6. **Herbert Read** in his obituary on Brancusi claimed that he achieved “utter refinement rather than utter simplicity…. But I am disturbed by a slick suavity {in Mlle Pogany that is] wholly absent from his greatest works.”
   7. **Paul Morand** (catalogue for B’s one-man show in New York, 1926) “Brancusi is a born artisan. He knows nothing of pupils, assistants, stone-pointers, polishers or cutters. He does everything for himself. His materials are always true to him, always faithful. He has approached them from every angle. Brancusi, as we know, is a Romanian of the old peasant stock of that beautiful country…. He works on without masters nor disciples without advertising, without toadying art critics. The extreme freedom of Paris has allowed Brancusi to remain the least ‘Parisian’ of Romanians.”
   8. **Jean Arp** (Dada sculptor) **“Mlle Pogany** is the fairy-tale grandmother of abstract sculpture!”
   9. **Brancusi** himself “Simplicity is not an aim in art but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves in approaching the real meaning of things.”
   10. **Goldwater** ‘Primitivism in Modern Art’ (1956) “B attains that sense of presence (intensity and meaningfulness) which attrats many modern sculptors to the primitive.”
3. *Motives and role of patronage in commissioned works?*
   1. **Mlle Pogany**. She sat for him several times over the winter of 1910/11, although she says he would not discuss the financial side, saying anything “I should offer would be alright.” “Each time he began and finished a new bust in clay. Each of these was a beautiful and a wonderful likeness, and each time he only laughed and threw it back into the boxful of clay that stood in the corner of the studio – to my great disappointment.” In fact, he continues to work on Mlle Pogany from 1913 through to Mlle Pogany III of 1931.
   2. In 1934, the National League of the Romanian Women of Gorj, headed by the wife of the Prime Minister, proposed a monument to honour the soldiers killed defending their town against the Germans in WW1. The idea for **Endless Column** had been conceived much earlier, in 1916 and was made from wood. She had always envisaged a Triumphal Arch, so B included one, but his **The Gate of the Kiss** serves as a portal. The round table and stools were completed after his trip to India in 1938.
4. *Significance of location and setting?*
   1. **Endless Column,** Targu Jiu. B’s hometown. Three elements conceived in relation to the natural environment and landscape of the site as an installation work.
   2. **Mlle Pogany** First public exposure was the New York Armoury Show of 1913. Initially, B had a bigger client base in USA than Paris as a result of relationships with deadlers, Walter Pach and Henri Roche. Many of his sculptures (31) collected by John Quinn.