

The Construction of Brancusi's Primitivism

Amelia Miholca, Phoenix

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 abstractness in his work is derived either from African art or from 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 analyze their arguments surrounding 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 20th 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 paper, 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 is known as the foremost art historian on Brancusi. Geist trained and taught as a successful American sculptor, but he also conducted art historical research and writing. In 1968 he wrote his first book on Brancusi, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture*, which began his extensive list of publications regarding the life and work of Brancusi. The majority of art historians, Romanian and Euro-American, have referenced Geist when discussing Brancusi. The inclusion of Brancusi among the important artists of modern art is largely due to Geist's construction of Brancusi.

Geist published his essay about Brancusi's affinity towards African art in the exhibition catalog of the 1984 "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. 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.¹

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 Brancusi's interest toward wood carvings of tribal art. Geist voices his resentment of those who dismiss the influence of African art in Brancusi's art. According to him, Romanian art historians refuse to accept any influence in Brancusi's art other than folk art and Rodin. Although Geist does not mention her by name, he disputes Balas's argument for she does not offer enough examination of Brancusi's "denial" of African art, or of the "resemblance" between African art and folk art.²

1 Geist 1984, 362.

2 Geist 1984, 346.

Edith Balas is a Romanian-American art historian whose studies on Brancusi have led to a greater understanding of Brancusi's Romanian identity. In 1987 she published her book *Brancusi and Romanian Folk Traditions* in which she argues for Romanian folk art to be recognized in Brancusi's art. Writing three years after Geist's essay, Balas counters Geist's argument, declaring:

Arguments for a pervasive African influence uniformly overlook the possibility of Brancusi's incorporation of Romanian sources.³

Here, Balas repudiates the question of Brancusi's African influence in the same way that Geist repudiated the folk influence. Geist and Balas are at odds with each other. Neither is willing to seek a middle point in which both African art and folk art occupy equal importance in Brancusi's oeuvre. I think neither source of influence should be disregarded, for it limits the complexity of Brancusi's sculpture. He arrived at abstraction by utilizing his knowledge of African and folk art. I disagree with Balas and Geist because, in my opinion, it was not a process of inclusion and elimination – of either, or. Simplifying Brancusi's sculpture only takes away from its meaning.

In his discussion of Brancusi's affinity to primitivism, Geist compares Brancusi's sculptures in wood to African wood sculptures. He excludes from his analysis Brancusi's sculptures in other materials aside from wood, for those sculptures do not convey an African affinity. The beginning of Brancusi's abstract, primitive stage was when he carved *The Kiss* (fig. 1) in 1907. Geist, however, describes *The Kiss*, with its *taille directe*, as “a product of the primitivizing impulse of the opening of the twentieth century.”⁴ *Taille directe*, or direct carving, is a method of carving directly into the material without the aid of a model. Geist does not consider *The Kiss* a very original work within the context of primitivism. After all, there were other artists in Paris producing similar stone sculpture in *taille directe* around the same time as Brancusi. It is imperative to examine why Geist singled out the

3 Balas 1987, 24.

4 Geist 1984, 346.

wood sculptures and to be critical of his choice, for it caused subsequent art historians to limit their primitive studies to Brancusi's wood sculptures while disregarding his sculptures in other materials.



Fig. 1: Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss*, 1916, stone; image from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, courtesy of the article's author.



Fig. 2: Constantin Brancusi, *The First Step*, 1913, wood; Alfred Stieglitz, Wikimedia Commons <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3A291-Brancusi-1014.jpg>> (18.12.2014).

According to Geist, Brancusi “refined” his style and disposed of “primitivistic” residues with *The First Step* (fig. 2) of 1913, which was “his first venture into the direction of total formalization.”⁵ 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

5 Ibid., 347.

both are ovoidal”.⁶ 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 the influence of African art. Brancusi’s friend, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, is quoted frequently as stating that, “Brancusi was afraid of the African things”.⁷

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”.⁸ 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”.⁹ 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* (fig. 2), 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

6 Ibid.

7 Balas 2008, 42.

8 Geist 1984, 361.

9 Ibid.

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.¹⁰ 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 same explanation can be applied to *The First Step*. Geist assumes that Brancusi got rid of *The First Step* because "it wasn't African enough."¹¹ Though I agree with Geist's previous explanation, this explanation is a bit difficult to grasp. I doubt Brancusi's purpose was for his sculptures to look as similar as possible to the African sculptures. If Geist is arguing for an affinity to primitive art in Brancusi's sculptures, then why is he providing such an explanation? Possessing an affinity does not mean the same as possessing a direct likeness to the object.

The concept of the affinity within primitivism derives from the introduction to the "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* 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."¹² 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

10 Ibid., 359.

11 Ibid., 360.

12 Rubin 1984c, 28–29.

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. If Geist followed Rubin's understanding of affinity, then it does not make much sense for Geist to say that Brancusi was dissatisfied with his work because it was not African enough.

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. As Hal Foster describes:

Primitivism disguises the problem of imperialism in terms of art, affinity, dialogue, to the point (the point of the MOMA show) where the problem appears resolved.¹³

The exhibition is understood as being unsuccessful in portraying the real circumstances of primitivism, failing "to forge a postmodern definition of the primitive, in part because its touchstone of importance remained Western high modernism".¹⁴ The issues surrounding the exhibition are too extensive to be discussed in this paper; 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

13 Foster 2003, 386.

14 Torgovnick 1989, 325.

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.¹⁵ 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”.¹⁶ Avant-garde artists may have been influenced by qualities of tribal objects, but they took and transformed the qualities to the point where they became almost unrecognizable. Hence, Rubin prefers to use the term affinity instead of direct influence.

Geist, however, does compare objects side by side when discussing the relationship between Brancusi and African art. For instance, *Princess X* (fig. 3) 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 Senoufo helmet masks.¹⁷ 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”.¹⁸ Geist breaks down Brancusi’s sculpture into parts, and then compares those parts to parts of

15 Rubin 1984c, 18.

16 Ibid., 29.

17 Geist 1984, 352.

18 Ibid., 351.

African sculpture. He pinpoints certain qualities in Brancusi's sculpture, such as serration and verticality, which are also evident in African sculpture. With these methods of analysis, Geist argues that Brancusi derived his wood sculptures, *Madame L. R.*, *Little French Girl*, *The First Step*, and *Princess X*, from African sculpture. It is constructive to examine the formal qualities between the two. However, I believe the type of comparison that Geist employs is not very successful in arguing for an African influence in Brancusi's work, for it is difficult to determine which specific African sculpture Brancusi saw during his museum or gallery visits. Also, it is unlikely that Brancusi, with his individualistic style, copied specific forms from African sculpture.



Fig. 3: Constantin Brancusi, *Princess X*, 1915-1916, bronze; image from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, courtesy of the article's author.

Balas employs a comparison technique similar to Geist's, only she brings in Romanian folk art. In *Brancusi and His World*, Balas compares African art to Romanian art more so than comparing them with Brancusi's sculpture. Balas believes that art historians continue to argue for an African influence in his art, because they have granted significant value to African art, and not Romanian folk art, in the late twentieth century.¹⁹ Balas here must be referring to the "*Primitivism in 20th Century Art*" exhibition, which initiated renewed, yet uncritical, discussion of primitivism, and in particular of African art. Balas states that art historians' preference to African art is that "a form of primitive art familiar to the avant-garde was more likely to influence a foreign artist working in Paris".²⁰ Lastly, the third reason Balas gives is due to the "strong affinities between African art and Romanian folk art".²¹ Balas argues that art historians have paid more attention to African art in regard to Brancusi rather than Romanian folk art. 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. Romanian folk art, on the other hand, is not associated with the avant-garde. Furthermore, it can be easy to mistake African art with Romanian folk art for they share a number of similarities. For example, 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.²² 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".²³ African art led the way to Romanian folk

19 Balas 2008, 43.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 49.

23 Balas 2008, 41.

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. Academic training in sculpture did not include training with wood. Brancusi had experience working with wood during his studies at the School of Craiova. While there, he carved numerous objects such as "ornamental picture frames and violins".²⁴ This experimentation with wood was lost during Brancusi's rigid, figurative studies at the School of Fine Arts in Romania and also in Paris. It was after Brancusi ended his studies that African art became a "trigger" not only for folk art but also abstraction. Balas notes other scholars of Brancusi who assume "that the exotic features in Brancusi's art were African, without carefully determining when the African pieces first appeared in Europe".²⁵

I disagree with Balas's approach to African art in Brancusi's sculpture. I do not think that it acted as a "revealer" or a "trigger". As Geist indicates, Brancusi's sculpture conveys certain features of African art. If African art were simply a "revealer" for Brancusi, then these features would not be so prominent. Balas, however, believes that these "primitive" features are actually derived from folk art and are mistaken for African. Balas's main concern is to encourage the importance of Romanian folk art in the study of Brancusi; by doing so, she dismisses African art when it is an important part of Brancusi's development as an avant-garde artist and a primitive. Folk art and African art cannot co-exist in the study of Brancusi because Euro-American art historians have not viewed Romanian folk art as a serious source of influence. Balas cannot accept this concept of co-existence when folk art has been so marginalized.

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:

24 Balas 1987, 2.

25 Balas 2008, 44. Balas mentions Athena Tacha Spear and Geist as the other scholars.

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.²⁶

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 or non-Westerners. 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. Brancusi needed to look to the primitive origin 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.²⁷

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,

26 Geist 1983, 141.

27 Balas 1987, 17.

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".²⁸ Besides the "artists of the Gothic and the blacks", one can include the artists 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 Brancusi is also a primitive.

Why do art historians, particularly Geist and Balas, not perceive Brancusi as a primitive? Because he is placed within the canon of modern artists as an innovator of modern, abstract sculpture. This conflicts with the idea of the primitive. Speaking about primitive sculptors, Brancusi is thought to have remarked that they do not know "how to work with such precision up to the end as I do now".²⁹ Geist argues that what distinguishes Brancusi from primitive sculptors is his use of materials. Brancusi's handling of wood is more refined. From Brancusi's remark, I gather that Geist believes Brancusi identified himself with primitive sculptors and as a primitive himself, but only to a certain extent. Brancusi may have had an affinity to the primitive but he went beyond this in his development of abstract sculptural form.

Several other art historians have written on the relationship between Brancusi and primitivism within his general construction as the father of modern, abstract sculpture. Robert Goldwater wrote his prominent book *Primitivism in Modern Art* in 1956. Geist and Rubin refer to Goldwater throughout their essays. In the revised edition of the book from 1986, Goldwater discusses several avant-garde sculptors, such as Julio Gonzales and Antoine Pevsner, whose interaction with primitive art proved to be significant influences on their own work. Of Brancusi, Goldwater pronounces:

Brancusi attains that sense of presence (intensity and meaningfulness) which attracts many modern sculptors to the primitive.³⁰

28 Geist 1984, 361.

29 Ibid., 347.

30 Goldwater 1986, 233.

Brancusi, therefore, 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. According to Goldwater, Brancusi 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”.³¹ Like primitive sculptors, Brancusi is sensitive to the “untouched condition of both the shape and the surface of its material”.³² 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”.³³ Goldwater is arguing for an affinity between Brancusi and African sculpture, though he does not use the actual term affinity. I think Geist is following Goldwater’s example, for they both emphasize formal features shared by African sculpture and Brancusi’s sculpture, without mentioning a specific style of influence.

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 think these art historians do not take the wood pedestals, which accompany the marble and bronze sculptures, into full consideration. 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.

31 *Ibid.*, 234.

32 Goldwater 1986, 234.

33 *Ibid.*, 235.

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".³⁴ These formal affinities are conveyed in the elements of "cubes, cylinders, truncated pyramids, serated forms".³⁵ 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. Primitive art is composed of geometric elements like cylinders and serrated forms, which express both the living world and what lies beyond.

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".³⁶ 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.

34 Bach et al. 1995, 26.

35 Ibid., 27.

36 Ibid., 47.



Fig. 4: Constantin Brancusi, *Mademoiselle Pogany (III)*, 1931, marble, limestone, and oak base; image from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, courtesy of the article's author.

Bach observes that the “heterogeneity” and “tensions” of his pedestals is in opposition to “the definition of modernism as a progressive, linear, reductive process”.³⁷ 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* (fig. 4) 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* (fig. 5) 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 compliments the sculpture with the earth tone of the wood and the vertical, symmetrical composition. Bach argues that Brancusi’s position within the center of modernism needs to be questioned. Geist and Balas do not question it. In fact, they promote the understanding of Brancusi as the father of abstract sculpture without calling him a primitive or without questioning how some of his sculptures contradict the perceived understanding of his oeuvre.

37 Bach et al. 1995, 34.



Fig. 5: Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1923–1924, marble, limestone, and oak base; image from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, courtesy of the article's author.

Bach goes on to say that “Brancusi’s work points the way to a necessary widening of the definition of modernity”.³⁸ Bach should have used the term modernism instead of “modernity” because it is a more

38 Ibid.

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 studies Brancusi from a postmodern perspective. She endeavors to reconstruct Brancusi from a postmodernist standpoint, concentrating on issues of multiculturalism and feminism. 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.³⁹

Chave thinks that Brancusi has not been given much attention within the history of modern art. Brancusi is central within the history of modern sculpture but not within modernism as a whole. She makes an interesting observation regarding earlier studies of Brancusi: artists and not art historians have conducted most of these studies. Despite being esteemed for his "Neoplatonic purity", Brancusi has been marginalized because he is not geographically and historically localized, with a consistent style.⁴⁰ Brancusi's art has more than just a classical purity: the diverse elements in his art, stemming from African, folk, and other influences, hamper him from being included in the canon of high modernist artists like Picasso.

I think a more encompassing critique of Brancusi's art is required, one that examines other facets of his art in addition to the Neoplatonic aspect. This paper offers such a critique. However, I do not think Chave is right in her argument about Brancusi being marginalized by art historians. Art historians have embraced Brancusi as a

39 Chave 1993, 20.

40 *Ibid.*, 4.

central figure in the history of modern art, and not just sculpture. Chave's study was written twenty years ago and, thus, it may be due to the passage of time that her argument is no longer applicable. Since 1993, there have been several large exhibitions of his work, most recently at the Tate Modern in 2004. Brancusi would have been more marginalized had he stayed in Romania. Instead, he joined the avant-garde artists in Paris and exhibited internationally. During his lifetime he was considered a well-known artist, and after his death the acknowledgement of his contribution to modernism only intensified. It is true that, after Brancusi's death, artists like Geist and Carola Giedion-Welcker were among the first to construct Brancusi as a great modernist; but since then, Euro-American and Romanian art historians have joined the discussion. Chave argues 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.⁴¹

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. Brancusi's appropriation of other cultures signifies "the dislocation and displacement or homelessness that marked his own life".⁴² 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 Brancusi to primitive objects.

41 Chave 1993, 20.

42 *Ibid.*, 196.

Carola Giedion-Welcker first constructed Brancusi's primitivism, before Geist and other scholars. Giedion-Welcker (artist, art historian, and friend of Brancusi) first published a complete survey of Brancusi in 1959. In her survey, she examines how primitive art affected his philosophy and his move towards simplification in his sculpture. Surprisingly she credits "oriental" and folk influences in his art rather than the African influence, explaining:

Brancusi's sculpture combines Mediterranean beauty of form with Eastern wisdom and abstraction of form.⁴³

The abstraction inherent in Brancusi's sculpture is, thus, due to an inclination towards Eastern aesthetics and philosophy, coupled with a classical Greek conception of form. According to Giedion-Welcker, Brancusi is "related to an alchemist [...] in his direct treatment of primitive matter" – the alchemist "who took minerals from the depth of the earth and gave them life".⁴⁴ In her exaggeration of his artistic ability, Giedion-Welcker portrays Brancusi as more than a great master of sculpture; he uses magic to add value to primitive materials like wood and stone. It seems Giedion-Welcker, like Balas, is conflicted about identifying Brancusi as a primitive. On the same subject, Pontus Hulten asks:

What did he (Brancusi) have in common with African art, designed to exert magical power, when his own aims essentially, was to purify the forms he invented?⁴⁵

It is not only the Eastern influence that directed Brancusi to abstraction. Giedion-Welcker also believes that the folk art to which Brancusi was exposed as a child had a significant impact on his wood sculpture. Because Giedion-Welcker's study of Brancusi preceded Geist and Balas's, it can be assumed that Giedion-Welcker first introduced the idea of folk art as being a meaningful source for Brancusi. With her belief that his wood sculptures manifest the world of

43 Giedion-Welcker 1959, 19.

44 *Ibid.*, 24.

45 Hulten et al. 1987, 98.

the peasant, Giedion-Welcker transports Brancusi's art from the Parisian avant-garde to his native homeland.⁴⁶ Because Brancusi was at the center of the modernist movement, it is easy to conjecture that he severed his ties with his "peasant" beginnings. Instead, Giedion-Welcker acknowledges the importance of his native home on the development of his art. 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.⁴⁷ Giedion-Welcker thought of the pedestals as secondary because they are too abstract compared to the sculpture; the pedestals, in my view, resemble more African art than Eastern art. Therefore, I think it was difficult for Giedion-Welcker to incorporate the pedestals into her argument for folk and Eastern influences.

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".⁴⁸ I do not think that his academic training and the complexity of his art renders the primitive argument moot. Shanes does not take into consideration the manner in which Brancusi constructed 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, Brancusi can be called a primitive due to his constructed 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.

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

46 Giedion-Welcker 1959, 32.

47 *Ibid.*, 36.

48 Shanes 1989, 8.

works”.⁴⁹ 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. The interest of artists in collecting and drawing inspiration from tribal objects because they presented “new methods and new problems”.⁵⁰

Shanes infers that Brancusi was a prejudice 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.⁵¹

Brancusi places “Christian primitives” and “African savages” in the same category.⁵² 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 primitive artists working in wood. Shanes is right when stating that Brancusi incorporated the savagery, which Brancusi describes in his comment, into his

49 Shanes 1989, 51.

50 Epstein 1955, 188.

51 Constantin Brancusi, cited in: Coda 2003, 420.

52 Ibid.

work. Shanes should have provided the context in which Brancusi used the term “savage”, because based on Brancusi’s full comment, it is inaccurate to construct Brancusi as prejudiced.

Brancusi’s Context

The construction of Brancusi as a foremost 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 Epstein and 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”.⁵³ Additionally, in his survey of modern sculpture, William Tucker acknowledges Picasso and Brancusi as “the artists most notably responsible for the revolution in sculpture which occurred between 1909 and 1915”.⁵⁴ 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 (O. J. R. M.)*, without having to restructure the forms so as to make them unrecognizable from those in African

53 Goldwater 1986, 246.

54 Tucker 1974, 75.

sculpture.⁵⁵ 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. Up until the twentieth century, sculpture was produced in a large studio with many assistants specializing in individual tasks while the master artist oversaw production. Rodin, for example, had about fifty assistants who carved the sculpture with a pointing machine based on clay model.⁵⁶ The “authenticity” of sculpture began to be questioned with the new avant-garde artists who worked alone in their studios without an entourage of assistants. These new artists wanted to make sculpture authentic; they discovered a way to do so through direct carving, a technique in which the sculptor carves directly into the stone without the application of a clay or plaster model, and a pointing machine. The first artist to experiment with direct carving was Paul Gauguin around 1882.⁵⁷ The new generation of avant-garde artists, which included Brancusi, attended the Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d’Automne in 1906 and were supposedly inspired to do their own experimentations with direct carving. Geist argues that Brancusi finally took notice of directly carved sculpture when he saw André Derain’s *Crouching Man*, exhibited in 1907.⁵⁸ Avant-garde artists correlated direct carving with the primitive, choosing from primitive sources such as “African, Oceanic, Indian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Mexican”.⁵⁹ Brancusi was trained in the tradi-

55 Ibid., 51.

56 Curtis 1999, 73.

57 Elsen 1974, 73.

58 Geist 1984, 345.

59 Curtis 1999, 83.

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

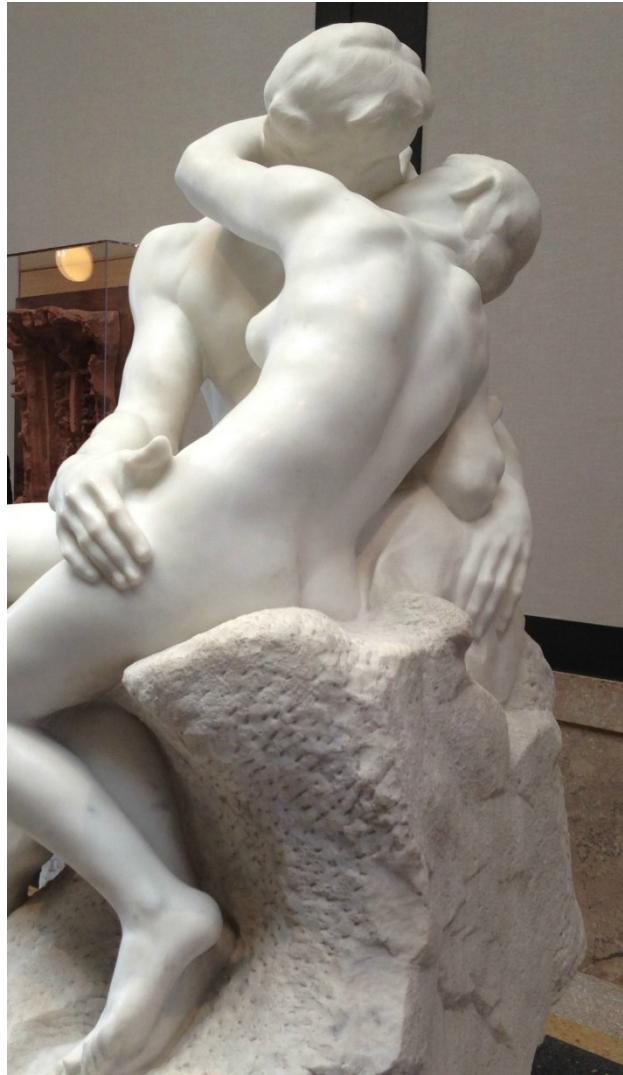


Fig. 6: Henri Greber, Copy of Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss*, 1929, marble; image from the Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, courtesy of the article's author.

His first work in direct carving was *The Kiss* (fig. 1), which he completed in 1908. Brancusi referenced Rodin's *The Kiss* (fig. 6) 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, with minimal parts, 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, Brancusi 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.⁶⁰

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. Brancusi's 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.⁶¹ Some sculptors working in Paris at the beginning of the new

60 Rowell 1999, 48.

61 Curtis 1999, 74.

century still employed assistants and traditional modes of making sculpture. For example, Jacques Lipchitz relied on a stone cutter instead of doing the carving himself. Brancusi preferred to work alone in his studio, but later in his career, in 1927, he had Isamu Noguchi act as his assistant.⁶² Nonetheless, avant-garde sculptors did not rely on craftsmen to the extent of academic sculptors.

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 more rough 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".⁶³ 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's *The Cock*. Csaky's *Fish*

62 Curtis 1999, 96.

63 Balas 1987, 87.

was made in 1926, four years before Brancusi's own *Fish* sculpture. Given the dates and similar subject matter, it can be inferred that the two artists knew of each other's work and inspired each other. Though there is no exact account of their relationship, it is likely that they were at least acquaintances. Csaky was included in an exhibition at the *Salon des Independants* in 1912, which featured the abstract sculpture of Brancusi, Wilhelm Lehmbruck and Alexander Archipenko.⁶⁴ Additionally, Brancusi and Csaky were members of *The Abbaye de Creteil*, a "commune of artists and writers touched to a varying degrees by Marxism, utopian socialism, and anarchism".⁶⁵ Given Brancusi's lack of interest in politics, it is doubtful that he was a very active member of the commune.

Csaky is not as highly regarded as Brancusi by art historians due to his shift to a more "representational style in the late 1920s".⁶⁶ He was also involved with craft, creating furniture and decorative objects. It seems Csaky revered African art, for he states in his autobiography: "African art does not copy nature but recreates it."⁶⁷ Csaky may have returned to figurative representations in the 1920s, but he retained the geometrical and rigid forms that predominate in African objects. 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.⁶⁸ 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.

64 Balas 1987, 3.

65 *Ibid.*, 47.

66 *Ibid.*, 1.

67 *Ibid.*, 10.

68 Krauss 1977, 100.



Abb. 7: Constantin Brancusi, *The Cock*, 1935, bronze; courtesy of [geishaboy 500](https://www.flickr.com/photos/geishaboy500/2845862540/in/photo-stream/), [Creative Commons License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/geishaboy500/2845862540/in/photo-stream/>> (18.12.2014).

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, Csaky'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* (fig. 7), 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 Giedion-Welcker argue for the importance of Romanian folk art in his work. Art historians should accept the idea that there is a little bit of African art and a little bit of folk art in Brancusi's formal and conceptual creation of sculpture. These two components – African art and Romanian folk art – create a hyperprimitivism that is evident in Brancusi's work.

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