

Simplicity Is Complexity Itself

ALTHOUGH Constantin Brancusi (1876-1956) thrived during the early part of the past century and left a manifest footprint on 20th-century Western sculpture, his work transcends the constraints of his time, tradition, and culture. Without an exegesis on the man and his philosophy, the universal and timeless qualities of his sculpture are nevertheless immediately apparent even to the casual observer. Brancusi was unaccustomed to offer insightful remarks or revelations about his work but shrouded his comments in aphorisms that rendered straightforward analysis difficult. Moreover, he insisted that scholars reserve their intellectual scrutiny of his work until after his death. Brancusi himself was an enigmatic man, seen in extremes, as an ascetic living alone with his canine companion, Polaire, or as a *bon vivant* attending grand premieres or consorting with wealthy American patrons.

Brancusi began his life in Romania. Born in the humble village of Hobita, he attended the School of Arts and Crafts in Craiova and then the National School of Fine Arts in Bucharest. His traditional Romanian origins informed the expressive nature of his work, the reliance on the craftsmanship of wood carving, and the inclination toward mysticism. In 1904, he arrived in Paris to enroll in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under the tutelage of the renowned sculptor Antonin Mercié. His emigration afforded him exposure to diverse talents—Auguste Rodin, Amedeo Modigliani, Henri Rousseau, Fernand Leger, and Erik

Satie—and artistic movements—Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. Perhaps as influential, or more so, the mystical world of Tibetan and African art would come to assume a prominent role in the cosmos of his art and lend a universality to his artistic themes that would transcend the boundaries of his heritage and culture.

Anyone familiar with Brancusi's sculptural pieces can attest to the exquisite simplicity of his forms and the visual appeal that his streamlined shapes offer the eye. His *Bird in Space* series exhibits all the essential elements of Brancusi's reductionist style. The avian form is clearly identifiable but distilled into a pure entity, free from the trappings of representational realism. His early efforts reveal the struggle with eliminating unnecessary detail but retaining the defining essence of his subject. As Brancusi espouses, "Simplicity is complexity resolved."¹ However, he makes a concerted effort to preserve the asymmetries that reveal the organic substance of his creation: the bird form *Maiastra* projects a beak that is skewed to the left and exhibits a more deeply recessed eye on the right. Brancusi remains squarely within the natural realm, electing to explore the forms of living creatures, such as the cock and the bird, and declares that he will "never seek to make what they call a pure or abstract form."¹ Unlike other artists who sought to evolve their style, Brancusi was satisfied to depict the same sculptural motifs throughout his career but aimed to rework them assiduously in different media and in various permutations.

The *Sleeping Muse* series (**Figure**) may be the most emblematic of his process to reduce nature to its essential core and thereby render an aesthetically pure form. Brancusi initially conceived the Muse's head in a more realistic fashion after the likeness of Baroness Renee-Irana Frachon whom he met in 1907. This early rendering of his *Muse* was undeniably steeped in the formal iconography of the Buddhist busts of the Far East with which he was familiar and of which he was very fond. His more stylized versions that followed reduced the rough-hewn elements of this prototype into a more curvilinear and sensuous expression. The distracting element of the chignon, or knot of hair, that is featured prominently on the forehead is relegated to the nape of the neck in subsequent workings. The facial features are softened and reduced to suggestive strokes that define serenity and femininity. The high-arched brows gently curve down to a delicate nose and mouth. The eyes are closed and only hinted at by small swellings in the marble. Brancusi is acknowledged as much for the mastery of his sculptures as he is for the charming sculptured bases on which his masterpieces are perched. In one version of the *Muse*, a formidable rectangular block under the figure's head serves as an unyielding foundation of support and contrasts well with the curvilinear design of the head. As in the *Sleeping Muse*, Brancusi would return often to the fertile and pregnant imagery of the oval, egglike shape (eg, in *Prometheus*, *Danaïde*, *Head of a Sleeping Child*, *The First Cry*, *Newborn*, *Beginning of the World*, and others).



Constantin Brancusi (1876-1956), Romanian, *Sleeping Muse I*, 1909-1910. White marble. $6\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{7}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{8}$ in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Lee Stalsworth, photographer.

Brancusi's simple yet undeniably complex sculptural forms escape classification under the rubric of any 20th-century trend or movement, defy cultural prejudices and influences of the artist's locale, and transcend all these limitations to reveal the universal and timeless beauty of nature more than any other artist of the last century.

Samuel M. Lam, MD
Williams Center for
Facial Plastic Surgery
1072 Troy-Schenectady Rd
Latham, NY 12110
(e-mail: samlammd@yahoo.com)

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