

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

“Look at them, until you see them”. The Brâncuși Exhibition in Timișoara 30.09.2023–28.01.2024



Following the success of the Victor Brauner exhibition, which attracted 26,000 visitors in the spring of 2023, the National Art Museum of Timișoara prepared for another grand event last fall: the *Brâncuși: Romanian Sources and Universal Perspectives* exhibition, which opened on September 30. Its success surpassed all expectations. By the end of the year, the number of online-purchased tickets reached 100,000 and yet there was a continuous queue in front of the museum, as people from all parts of the country and even from abroad hoped to encounter Brâncuși's creations without having pre-purchased tickets.

The exhibition created through the collaboration of the National Art Museum of Timișoara, the Art Encounters Foundation, and the French Institute in Romania, with financial support from the Timiș County Council was undoubtedly the most successful event of the Timișoara 2023 European Capital of Culture. If you were to ask why... Among the main reasons was undeniably the pulling force of the name itself: alongside George Enescu, Brâncuși is internationally recognized as the most acclaimed Romanian artist. Another factor was the effective marketing campaign, emphasizing that this was Brâncuși's most comprehensive exhibition in Romania in the last 50 years, displaying 100 artworks from major European collections (e.g. Centre Pompidou - Paris, Tate - London, Guggenheim Foundation - Venice). The professionalism of the exhibition was guaranteed by the curator,



Doina Lemny, as she is among the most knowledgeable experts on Brâncuși's oeuvre. The Romanian art historian, residing in France, has authored several books and studies on the artist and had previously worked on large-scale exhibitions dedicated to his art (Europalia, Brussels, 2020).

The organizers faced a challenge in arranging the exhibits in the confined spaces of the Baroque palace in Timișoara, while taking into account the high number of visitors expected. The "black box" constructed based on Kim Attila's plans aimed to make the best use of the available space by covering windows, doors, and the Baroque ornaments, ensuring that the sculptures were optimally displayed and could be walked around. Despite the attempts to control the number of visitors with an entry system, navigating the somewhat corridor-like, cramped spaces without stepping on anyone's toes or intruding into the protective aura of the sculptures equipped with alarms proved quite challenging.

The curse of blockbuster exhibitions is that it hinders the thorough examination, the meditation in front of artworks, which is one of the main requirements of the aesthetic experience, that probably floated before the curator's eyes during the planning. In several interviews with Doina Lemny she emphasized that one of the main goals of the exhibition was not merely to look at, but to truly see Brâncuși's creations, or as the artist phrased it: "Look at them, until you see them."

The well-structured exhibition, operating with diverse materials, sought to capture Brâncuși's complex personality, perspective and relationships. The last comprehensive exhibition showcasing Brâncuși's oeuvre in Romania was in 1970, at the National Museum of Art in Bucharest, exhibiting 48 sculptures from major European and American collections — significantly more than the exhibition in Timișoara (which featured only 22 sculptures), but without displaying any photographs. One of the novelties of the Timișoara exhibition, at least among those in Romania, was that besides his sculptures one could see the artist's "secondary" artworks as well, meaning photographs and fragments of films he directed depicting his own creations. The artist never commented on his works in writing or verbally. Instead, the photographs developed in a darkroom set up in his studio serve as commentary on the sculptures. These photos reveal the artist's unique perspective on his artworks, showing how he saw and intended to present them. The photos from the David Grob private collection and the film fragments shot by Brâncuși himself allowed the visitors to virtually step into the artist's studio.

As the title suggests, one focus of the exhibition was to emphasize the Romanian sources and connections in Brâncuși's creations. However, it nuanced the widespread belief, particularly emphasized during the era of state socialism, that the artist's sculpture drew inspiration from Romanian folk art. Recent research does not assume such a close connection between folk art and Brâncuși's

avant-garde, sublimated forms as previously thought. Modern artwork does not organically stem from folk culture but engages with it reflexively. Even if the basic theme is of local inspiration, it is eventually raised to a universal level.

The curator revealed Brâncuși's Romanian connections more in terms of his academic background and his early works created for Romanian commissioners living either in France or in the country. Since many of these sculptures are housed in the collections of Bucharest and Craiova, it was much easier to borrow them, than it was for his major works. Starting the exhibition with the *Ecorché*, a piece that demands high professional skills, was a good introduction. This cast plaster sculpture, made for didactic purposes at the demands of the anatomy professor Dimitrie Gerota, approaches the human body from both artistic and anatomical perspectives. By featuring this work created in 1902, the year Brâncuși graduated from the National School of Fine Arts in Bucharest, the exhibition outlines the path of sublimating figurative elements into pure form that the sculpter traversed in his oeuvre.

The same process is noticeable in the next section of the exhibition, focusing on child heads. One can clearly trace how the artist purified, more or less conventional child heads (e.g., *Pride*, 1905, Craiova Art Museum), freeing them of all unnecessary elements until achieving the pure oval form seen in *Head of First Step* (1907) or *The Newborn II* (before 1923).

In 1907, Brâncuși spent a few months in Rodin's studio, and we consider his work *The Kiss* (1907) as one of the first milestones in his liberation from Rodin's influence. The work is regarded as a rediscovery of the direct stone carving technique and a key piece of modern sculpture in general. The artwork radically breaks with the classical canon. The exhibition borrowed its first version from the museum in Craiova. *The kiss* is the first motif that the artist had developed into a series, having engaged him for nearly 40 years. The exhibition mirrored this fact by displaying *The Boundary Marker* (1945) and various drawings on the theme.

A subsequent section presents Brâncuși's muses, showcasing iconic works such as the gleaming bronze "portrait-sculpture" of Renée-Irana Frachon, the *Sleeping Muse* (1910), the early stone work inspired by the features of the Chinese actress Hanako (1907-1909), and its later variant, a bronze *Danaide* (1918) or *Mlle Pogany I* (1950). The latter, often referred to as a *modern Madonna*, portrays the Hungarian painter Margit Pogány. A common feature of these works is that the prominent eyes of the figures turn inward, enveloping them in a sense of mystery.

The plaster version of *Torso of a Young Man* (1923) holds a special place in Brâncuși's oeuvre since the artist was less concerned with male anatomy. The torso, simplified to the extreme and stripped of all unnecessary details, could have been influenced by the Platonic philosophy and is a good example of how Brâncuși envisioned the representation of the *idea*.

The following section of the exhibition stepped out of the human world, as the artist himself was concerned more and more with dimensions beyond humanity, particularly focusing on fish and birds, or more precisely, on their movement, which fascinated him. The motif of the fish rarely appears in sculpture, and although the gleaming bronze artwork, borrowed from the Tate in London, remained motionless, the visitors could see it spinning in a film made by the artist. While the essence of fish is swimming, that of birds is flying. Among the 28 bird sculptures created by Brâncuși, the bronze version of *Măiastra* from 1911 (Tate, London), connected to Romanian folk tales, and the bronze *Bird in Space* (Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice), considered one of Brâncuși's main work and featured on the exhibition poster as well, reflect the artist's interest in flight.

The above-mentioned *Bird in Space* is connected to a story – quite amusing from our perspective – that was presented in the exhibition through reproductions of contemporary newspapers. It happened in 1926, on the occasion of an exhibition in New York organized by Marcel Duchamp, where the work *Bird in Space* was supposed to be displayed. During the transportation, the U.S. Customs refused to recognize it as an artwork, thus subjecting it to import duties. The trial that emerged from this situation involved not only Brâncuși and his artwork but also a broader discussion on modern art. It concluded with Brâncuși's victory in November 1928.

The exhibition recalled the artist's greatest undertaking, the monumental ensemble in Târgu Jiu, through photos, film fragments shot by Brâncuși and the wooden version of *The Endless Column*. Erected in memory of the fallen heroes of World War I, the 29.35-meter-high *Endless Column* has become a symbol of ascension and transcendence. Along with the triumphal arch-like *Gate of the Kiss*, *The Table of Silence* and its 12 hourglass-like seats, it has become a suitable place for meditation on death and love.

Among the 16 bilingual studies (Romanian and English) of the impressive exhibition catalogue, published by Art Encounters, there are comprehensive writings as well as studies presenting new results and interpretations. While the exhibition promised a bit more than it delivered – I am referring to the fact that among the 100 artworks, that had been announced, only 22 were sculptures – it undoubtedly enriched and nuanced the knowledge the average Romanian visitor had of one of the greatest Romanian artists, Constantin Brâncuși.

Translated from Hungarian by Klára P. Kovács

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