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ACTA TERRAE SEPTEMCASTRENSIS

XV

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RECOLLECTIONS OF BRÂNCUȘI; OM MARE – A GREAT MAN

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Abstract: *Some reflections arising from meetings in 1952 at his Paris atelier in the Impasse Ronsin with Constantin Brâncuși [1876-1957]. His humanity and his values are contrasted with some other systems of thought. His forms are Platonic. His culture is European ; not simply by virtue of his friendships with major creative figures, but as an expression of the European identity of pre-communist and even prehistoric Romanian culture.*

Key words: *Brancusi / Brâncuși, Romania, Sculpture, Montpartnasse, Raschevskaya, Gate of the Kiss, Eternal Column, Maiastră, Isamu Noguchi, Max Ernst, Apollinaire, Maramureș, Grigore Nandriș, Paul Neagu, Pompidou Centre, Doina Lemny, Impasse Ronsin, Steichen, Jheronimus Bosch, Marxism, Nazism, Buchenwald, Vorkuta, Ain Sakhri, FTN, Dacians, European Culture.*



Fig 1. *Kiss; by John Nandriș ©.*

Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957) is the greatest and most original European sculptor of the twentieth century, with little need for qualification. One hundred and forty years after his birth there is no call for another Art-Critical biography of the Romanian peasant boy from Oltenia who mostly walked across Europe to join, and then to transcend and abandon, the atelier of Rodin. There is a mass of material, easily available in print and on the internet to illustrate his creativity. I can only offer some personal impressions of the man, arising from my visits to him in his atelier. I would like to place the work of this Master of Ideal Forms in context as an archetype *sub specie eternitatis* of the category of *Oameni Mari*²¹ recognised in Romanian culture.

Near the boundary wall of the great national Pantheon of the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris stands the tomb of a young Russian girl, Tania Raschevskaya. Her tomb is crowned by an early sculpture of the embracing couple which came to lie at the very focus of the creative achievements of Brâncuși. She is relegated to the margins of the cemetery²², because she killed herself in 1908, her heart broken by a hopeless love. It is moving to recall that the entwined couple on the grave in Montparnasse cemetery was created as a memorial to this young woman, who had taken her own life in despair. The desire to universalise the passions such as those which drove young Tania to her death, and not merely to represent them, pervades Brâncuși's work. In reference to this *Kissing Couple* [for he created many more], Brâncuși stated : "*In effect, I wished to create a work which would express not merely the idea of a*



Fig. 2. Tania Raschevskaya.

21 Great Men.

22 The tomb lies in Division 22 of the cemetery, Section 22 towards Bd.Raspail.

particular couple; but to say something about all those couples who have ever loved each other and walked upon this earth²³, until they were driven to forsake it" ... like young Tania whose pale anxious face speaks to us from the enamel on her grave.

In the long-term perspective of human development Brâncuși does not stand alone. It is possible to point to echoes, from earlier millennia, of this highly-developed human capacity expressed in art for *coherent concentration on the general concept, rather than on the particular percept*. This does not mean that his art is to be defined as “conceptual”, any more than it is “abstract”. His pupil Isamu Noguchi [1904 -1988] said of him (Apostolos-Cappadona, Altshuler 1994, 114) that :“*he brought with him something more than learning*” derived from the momentous precepts of his upbringing in a Romanian village; it was “*the difficulty of making, and the limits imposed by the medium to which his concepts in turn must fit*” which were important to him.

The topic of his influence upon such important disciples as Isamo Noguchi, and upon the whole course of development of twentieth century sculpture, is too great a venture to examine here. Nor should we forget that Brâncuși was an accomplished photographer, and a capable engineer. We shall examine something of his tremendous capacity for the generalisation of ideal forms, and look at its long-term antecedents.

The ploughed fields of Brâncuși’s ancient homeland still yield the wonderfully stylised female figurines of clay fashioned by his Neolithic forebears. Under what imperative did they do so? At a very early stage mankind acting in and for society, developed an extraordinary aptitude, in no way inferior to our own, for expressing concepts and perceptions artistically. For example the copper or gold discs which are found in the Neolithic culture of Cucuteni, during the 5th Mbc and later, are the continuation of an imperative to express concepts iconographically through the human form, which is present in humanity far back in time.

Such symbols enabled what was significant to be made more concrete. Symbolic realism in the representation of ideal forms already characterises Palaeolithic artefacts of the later Glacial periods. The well-known cave paintings of Lascaux are now usually dated c.19,000 years ago. Newly-discovered paintings from a cave in the Ardèche are scientifically dated much earlier, to 34,000 years ago. There is extraordinarily expressive mobiliary art from Germany dating to 36,000 years ago, both symbolic and realistic. The tradition continues with female and animal figurines made by Gravettian mammoth-hunters ten thousand years later, whose creations are unsurpassed in quality and ability to express emotion; and then with numerous figurines of the Neolithic. One should not forget such stylised master-

²³ Author’s italics.

pieces as the Cycladic figurines of the third millennium BC. The expression of ideas in cave art and small-scale mobiliary objects, extended over a time-span of some 40,000 years, which is not easy to grasp. As the eighteenth century art historian Winckelmann observed, "*Not everything is possible at any one time*". Archaeology itself, and the history of art, are encapsulated in this rather powerful principle. Neanderthalers had no use for oil wells.

In prehistoric and traditional societies we are often effectively dealing with people who, while every man or woman was an artist, had no *Art* as such. Their creativity was embedded in their beliefs, and *vice versa*. Everything which they undertook was done as well as they possibly could. One could say the same of Brâncuși.

The "artists" of Classical Greece, or of Song China, were often ordinary craftsmen, even commercial; sustained by emulation and competition. They could do no wrong, and were apparently incapable of creating an ugly or unworthy thing, in part because it would have been impossible for them to meet with social approbation for any insensitivity. They conformed to the unenforceable social limits of their culture. They could not approve poor quality work in themselves or others. The Song Dynasty potters, like the Swordsmiths of Japan, were not "artists" in our sense, but they created objects out of common iron and clay which have become, to us at least, works of art worth their weight in gold. They were craftsmen operating under quasi-commercial constraints, and embedded within a well-defined cultural and religious framework.

Such embedded values were strong in the society from which Brâncuși emanated. When a Romanian peasant demonstrates the finer points of making and decorating any object to you, for example an embroidery pattern or a humble bark salt-cellar, he or she may say "*Făcut așa este frumos*": "Done this way it is beautiful". Another way is not so acceptable, not socially consistent. Cultural integrity is a completely different matter to "political correctness". It was creative transmission and social acceptance which, along with social emulation, ensured the quality of classical Greek art.

Together with my father, Professor Grigore Nandriș, I visited Brâncuși at his Paris studio in the Impasse Ronsin, in the quartier of the Institut Pasteur and the Boulevard Montparnasse, on 27th August 1952 and subsequently. It was five years before he died, and I was fourteen years old. Brâncuși bequeathed the studio and all his works to the French state, after rejection by the Romanian authorities. In accordance with the conditions of his will, the studio still exists as a museum piece, although it has more than once been moved and re-assembled.



Fig 3. Bark Salt Cellar by Daniil of Sarmizegetusa: "*Făcut așa este frumos*".

At his *atelier* in the Impasse Ronsin Brâncuși filed his papers in an old cardboard box which he kept under his bed. There are various opinions on his date of birth. His Birth Certificate indicated to us at least that he was born in the *cătun* of Hobîța, in the commune of Peștișani and the *județ* of Gorj, on the 21st February [4th March new style] 1876. In 2016 the Romanian Government designated the 19th March as a national Brâncuși Day. He died in Paris on the 19th March 1957 aged 81. Grigorescu [1980] gives his dates of birth as 19th February = 2nd March 1876. Peering into this cardboard box during our visit Prof. Grigore Nandriș, as a philologist, was struck by the fact that the final "i" of "Brâncuși" is present in the Romanian documents. The name "Brâncuși" can equally be written "Brâncuș" in Romanian, and is in any case pronounced as two syllables.

For practical reasons Brâncuși gallicised his name after coming to live in France. "Bran-cu-si" with three syllables is a concession to the absence of "ș" in European languages other than Romanian. It is as "Bran-cu-si" that he has become known in the history of art. The old orthography of "Brâncuș" is quite attractive and its re-animation would be perfectly acceptable. The Ancient Europe from which he came was not a standardized place.

Brâncuși was an archetypal sculptor, one who wrestled obsessively and physically with the properties of primary materials. Art is hard work. But ever since prehistoric man became aware, there has been no great art without intellection, and he rose to this. Art is also perhaps the most difficult branch of philosophy, and certainly not about the expression of inchoate feelings. In person he was gnomic and his utterances were often shrewd and thought-provoking. For example :

“Împrejurul nostru operează alte sfere ale existenței de care suntem separați doar prin cele mai subțiri fire”... “Trupul omului nu este diferit de structura universului”.

“We are surrounded by other realms of existence, from which we are separated by the thinnest of threads” ... “The human body is no different from the structure of the Universe” [cited by Petre Pandrea, 2009].

Even today it is fashionable to talk of “*Thin Places*”, external or internal, through which we may experience intimations of the transcendent.

He could be dismissive, but was not pretentious. He knew well enough how to present himself, and this has sometimes been held against him ; as if naivety were a virtue. He continued to project an impression of solid integrity which is not easy to fake, reminiscent of a certain kind of Romanian peasant who even now has not wholly vanished, although it may have become as rare a phenomenon as the English Gentleman.

As a boy I was not in a position to record the these occasions verbatim; but the clarity of my recollections from sixty-four years ago is a testimony to the force of Brâncuși's character, which made a deep impression. This was one of several visits to Brâncuși in the early 1950's of which Prof Grigore Nandriș has published an account (Nandriș 1963). The personal details which he recorded seem to me to contribute something to our overall picture of the sculptor. The 1963 paper contains some details of Brâncuși 's life, of which there are now many systematic accounts, with observations upon his work.

I thought to recapitulate some of them briefly here, but from another perspective with some comments and modifications.

Both the man and his *atelier* were very much as they appear in the photographs which have come down to us. The floor was covered in marble chips and other debris, and the high but dusty main studio was full of looming presences of metal, wood and stone. Many of these certainly echoed the culture of the Romanian peasant within which Brâncuși originated. It was a culture which had evolved in much the same way as the great prehistoric civilizations which were its forerunners; that is to say through slight successive favourable variations in the operation of human choice, without benefit of social theorists.

The studio itself was such an evolved work. It was the deliberate artefact of a freely creating personality. If it was indeed designed to create an impression, as some art critics assert, then in this it was like any other human artefact; not excluding the writings of the critics. It is refreshing, in an age of much Criticism, to recall Brâncuși's matter-of-fact exegesis of his own works, his acceptance of his own creativity and his lack, not of any theoretical framework, but of naïve pretensions to theoretical interpretation.

This is not to say that he was not incredibly shrewd. He was certainly one of the greatest initiators of modern "abstract" art; but he himself said quite clearly that only a fool could call his sculptures abstract. It would be more accurate to describe his capacity to generalize as a power of coherent universalisation. He possessed this to just as remarkable a degree as Picasso did his powers of visual comprehension based on the after-image.

These faculties stand opposed to the incoherent anti-figurative disintegration, and the rejection of craftsmanship, to be found in the twentieth-century creative intelligence. "Conceptual Art" yearns to pass for abstract thought; too often it ends up as an unmade bed. As for Art which is Progressive, it is best avoided. Art, unlike science, is not progressive. It does not make cumulative advances in disclosure of the inevitable. The discoveries of the sciences are ultimately inevitable, because they are there; and not least they can avoid the difficult question "Why?".

If one scientist does not make a given scientific discovery, then another will inevitably do so. But without Brâncuși or Michelangelo their very art would not exist, whatever the economic or political circumstances within which they operated. Without good and bad there can be no excellence. Their creative excellence is theirs alone. It is elite. What a man²⁴ puts into his work is not attributable to any economic base or set of political circumstances however permissive, or perhaps more often obstructive. It seems all the more necessary today to reflect on the significance of the millennial echoes to be found in the art of Brâncuși. They signify a perspective on humanity.

In his *atelier* the sculptor wore the floppy hat and loose clothes which have become his familiar image. He did not so much explain his work as lead one to see it, either figuratively but sometimes also literally, by the hand. We conversed in Romanian, not in English or French.

To illustrate his gnomic disposition, I recall that he took hold of my hand and looked at it carefully, turning the fingers over and examining especially the pads and the nails. Finally he grunted to his diffident fourteen year old visitor: "*Ai putea fi fost mare*": "*You could have been great*". The fact is that we all might have been great; just as in their humanity our prehistoric ancestors were great. Perhaps what he meant was that I have large hands suitable for making things, and that this was simply a quality of which he approved. With this typically cryptic utterance Brâncuși was in a wider sense intimating that it is open to all of us as human beings to become great, within our own parameters, given a sufficient degree of application, and a certain amount of luck.

It is much to the credit of Brâncuși as a Great Man that he paid as much attention as he did to a boy of my age. I thought that worth recalling here because it

²⁴ *In legal terms, man embraces woman.*

seems to say more about his character than about mine. I in no way resented my relegation to normality, in which he was perfectly correct.

I later recalled a passage which Brâncuși himself wrote, about the "*Piramida Fatală*" of life: "*Men conceive the world in the image of a deadly pyramid, over which they swarm, trying to elevate themselves as far as possible towards the summit. To this end they tear each other to pieces, and make themselves altogether miserable. Whereas on the contrary, if they would only develop and fulfil themselves naturally, ripening like an ear of wheat in the fields, each would become what he must or what he is able to become.*"



Fig 4. The vanity of social aspiration; Jheronimus Bosch, *The Hay Wain*.

Never seek to clamber too far up this deadly pyramid. There are plenty of free places lower down. Few arrive at the summit, and all too soon they are thrown down and dashed against the ground. That is where life truly runs its course, down on Earth".

Put more simply : "*Dans le monde d'aujourd'hui tous veulent arriver au sommet de la pyramide [fatale de la vie]. Une fois là-haut, on tombe fatalement de l'autre côté.*"

Brâncuși here precisely recapitulates the values of the post-mediaeval European mind expressed by Jheronimus Bosch in his painting of The Hay Wain [c.1500-1515]; or the “Waggon of Nothingness” (Fischer 2016, 259). Deluded by the glint of the hay, men scramble and grasp for the Fools’ Gold of social aspiration and material things. Brâncuși and Bosch were equally great men who captured the Eternal Forms in very different media.

Brâncuși was indeed fond of aphorisms, but he avoided un-necessary exposition. His art has been saved from devaluation by the concern of his heirs to control vulgar replication. They cannot always hope to succeed; as is shown for example by the political rather than artistic exploitation of his work by Lucy Skaer²⁵, who reduces the shining spirituality and individuality of the brilliant *Bird in Space* to dull black mass-produced replicas of compressed coal dust. These she marshals into an oppressive, collectivised, offensive, trivial, openly disdainful travesty of the spiritual nature of the original ; in spirit more like something North Korean. Her superficially leftist ideology is dignified as „*irony ... foregoing the spiritual transcendence of Brancusi’s originals for a potent materiality*”. Her work is, by self-definition: „*loaded with political and cultural baggage*”²⁶. If Brâncuși really has such importance for her she should perhaps acknowledge the fact more liberally. Work such as her “98 pieces of ballast in the form of Brancusi’s Newborn, reduced in size and cast in aluminum” betrays an astonishing contempt for sense or beauty in favour of ideology, so that she has to rely on verbose explanations. Precisely what Brâncuși avoided.

If we listen instead to Brâncuși: “*When one is immersed in beauty, there is no need for explanations*”.

Brâncuși has sometimes quite wrongly been characterised as lacking political conviction. So much the better. But in his impartial inequality he is the true egalitarian, transcending the inadequate world where what professional egalitarians really want is to feel superior. He strips away the inessential differences between human beings without categorizing them, just as his sculpture purges form to reveal true individuality without destroying it.

The contrast with the Marxism which had decimated his country could hardly be greater, although apparently this still needs to be spelled out. Marxism exactly like its *doppelgänger* National Socialism, or Nazism, sought to categorize and demonise whole classes of humanity: “*Bourgeois, Fascist, Upper Class, Lower Class, Kulak, Warmonger, Capitalist, Imperialist*” ... like a child counting prune stones on his plate.

²⁵ Cf., eg., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lagtoDaDyIA>

²⁶ Her commercial galleries seem to share her compulsion for verbosity.

Those who feel themselves inferior are helplessly attracted to professions of equality... "*I'm as good as you are*". The religion of hatred symbolized by the Marxist clenched fist was the very anti-thesis of humane equality, indeed impeded it. Its facile catchphrases were disastrous in their actual application.

The Marxist plausibly mouthing "... *to each according to his needs* ..." stands without apparent embarrassment under the cynical slogan of the Nazis hanging above the gate of Buchenwald: "*Jedem das Seine*". Indeed in their world of mirrors, after the Red Army had raped its way across northern Europe the Soviet Russians continued to make good use both of the Nazi death camps, and the slogan. Marx, a part-time economic journalist, supplied their pyramidal serf society not with a reputable political philosophy, but with *a vocabulary*, designed to reinforce a newly professional sense of grievance and ensure conformity²⁷. Political correctness survives today, to inhibit freedom of speech and reinforce political control. It was apparent early on that the shibboleth of class having failed to unite the left, it would be replaced with issues of race and gender.

Something Brâncuși said of these people during our visit to his studio has remained with me: "*Ce-au facut din țara noastră !*" ... "What have they done to our country!". To quote his nobler vision of humanity once again: "*Dans mon monde à moi, il n'y a plus de lutte pour une place plus haute - la pyramide est démolie, le champ est infini - ici chacun est avec ce qu'il est venu - à sa place, il n'est ni plus grand, ni plus petit, il n'a plus de mérite, ni plus de défaut - il est ce qu'il est.*"

Brâncuși's mature works number about seventy, excluding variants, and one might distinguish some seventeen thematic pre-occupations. There are *eg.*, some eighteen versions of the Bird in Space. There is a large collection of his work in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The burnished bronze edition of the Maiastră in the Tate Gallery in London [T.1751] is mounted on a pillar so that, like the Winged Nike of Samothrace, it should be viewed from below as originally intended.

The American photographer Edward Steichen saw the shining bird at the Salon des Indépendants in 1910 or 1911, and purchased it after the exhibition. Brâncuși helped Steichen find a square-section baulk of timber in a lumber yard, and they set the Maiastră three metres high on this pillar in his garden at Voulangis. The golden bronze gleaming against the sky came to be known around Paris as "*l'Oiseau d'Or*". The surface may indeed originally have been gilded, like the surface treatment of the Unending Column at Târgu Jiu. For Brâncuși, eternity shone like the background of an ikon. Steichen's garden also saw the erection of a first version of

²⁷ Sartre made great play with the absurd ; but the contortions of many French intellectuals after the war outdid him in their absurd anxiety to conform to Russian communism. This is soberly documented by Antony Beevor and Artemis Cooper 2007.

the eternal column in wood. Grigore Nandriș made a note of some of the sculptures which were present in 1952 during our visit to the *atelier*. They included:

Lebădă	The Swan
Pește	The Fish
Pasărea Maiastră	Maiastră The Mythological Bird
Stâlp de Hotar	Boundary Pillar
Coloana Nesfârșită	The Unending Column
Poartă de Lemn	Wooden Gate
Capul Muzei Adormite	Sleeping Muse
Rugăciune	Prayer
Noul Născut	The Newborn
Oul	The Egg

If memory can be trusted, looming among the white dust of the studio I also saw dark versions of other figures, including *Cocoșul*, the Cockerel; and a wooden King figure incorporating the great carved wooden helix which may derive its inspiration from the massive wooden oil and fruit presses used by Romanian peasants. Brâncuși had shown himself decisively immune to the powerful contemporary influence of Rodin, while the facile idea that African sculpture had any significant influence on him may be easy to understand, but is difficult to believe. At least I never saw any in his studio.

Comparing his *Cup*, or the *soclu* [base] of his Socrates, to the *căuc* [the wooden drinking cup carried by the Romanian shepherd] the resemblance is clear. It was to the image of the likeness of the Platonic form of a *căuc* that Brâncuși addressed his gaze.



Fig 5. Căuc; Shepherd's drinking cup. Collection JGN.

In the ethnoarchaeology of Oltenia and the Maramureş, or in the remote highland villages of Romania, and higher still among the shepherds at their *stâne* [sheepfolds] on the summits of the Carpathians, one finds forms which compelled Brâncuşi. It may be in small portable wooden artefacts such as the *căuc* ; or in the larger structures, the water mills, oil presses, barns, and gateways; or in the carved post called a *stâlp* which is used to support the typical wooden balconies.

One function of the *stâlp* is as a marker for the graves of the dead; perhaps in the cemetery, but endearingly also in orchard, forest, or mountainside²⁸. An unmarried youth or maiden was given a slender white bird to surmount their burial *stâlp* and to symbolize the partner whom they never found in life. These are not the tribal carvings of African *juju*, but the image of a likeness of a conception of a Platonic eternity which was finally resolved in the Eternal Column of Târgu Jiu, and supremely in the *Bird in Space*.



Fig 6. Stâlp, by John Nandriş ©.

²⁸ If the *Baciu* or head shepherd should die during the summer, he would not be carried down [‘over the flowers’ - *trecut peste flori*] but would be buried upon the mountain, under a cairn ; lest the wildflowers and the pastures should wither. (Latiş, 1993).

They fulfil the crying need which Brâncuși so compassionately supplied for poor Tania Raschevskaya, and referenced in his *Bird in Space*. An image of the likeness of the bereft soul that says: “*I am that I am*”.

The grave marker of the tragic young Tania Raschevskaya was no less central to Brâncuși's cultural perceptions than the *Maiastră*, the magic *Oiseau d'Or* set high on its *stâlp* in Edward Steichen's garden. This in its turn relates to the slender wooden birds on *stâlpi* which mourn for celibacy in the rural cemeteries of his homeland. They culminate in the blinding perfection of his *Oiseau dans l'Espace*.

An extensive mechanization of rural industrial processes based on water power existed in Romania and other eastern and northern European countries. Romania's water-powered industrial revolution anticipated the steam-driven one of western Europe. Water-power was used not just for milling corn, but was essential for *vâltoare* [whirlpools] to finish, fluff out, and felt the heavy woollen textiles such as *pănura*, which are essential in peasant dress. The great water-powered hammers, carved into steps, which turn over the textiles as they compress them in water, are echoed in the figure of Brâncuși's Cockerel - *Cocoșul*.

The *Gateway of the Kiss* by Brâncuși at Tîrgu Jiu leads the mind into the courtyards of homesteads in the Maramureș, the dignity of whose entrance is proclaimed by a massive wooden gateway, a repository for apotropaic carvings. The great central double gate is for carts, and the small side door is for humankind. It was the smaller door which most often bore apotropaic carvings such as snakes or human figures. These are guardians of the threshold, a numinous and liminal place which was treated with caution, in Classical Antiquity and in the Pythagorean philosophy to which the Iron Age Dacians reputedly adhered. The sophisticated modern couple involuntarily subscribe to it when, all unthinking, they carry the bride across the threshold.

The rope-like reliefs are found on the main gate in regions where the raw material is oak, rather than pine. They refer us to the explicit bisected circle motif of Brâncuși in the Gate of the Kiss, or the decoration on wedding bread [the *colac*] of the Maramureș.

In the Maramureș, Transylvania [the Land across the Forests], or Bucovina [the Land of Beech Trees] there existed until recently villages based overwhelmingly on wood, each making use of their local species. A single plank could be twenty or thirty centimetres thick, a metre or more wide, and ten metres long. The use of wood in his native Oltenia, as in the Maramureș, was on a massive scale, reflecting the availability of great timbers from the parklands of the Carpathian foothills in Oltenia, or from the Transylvanian forests.



Fig 7. Spinning flax at the Gate of the Woodworker.
Maramureș. Photo JGN ©.

In my own lifetime and in the ordinary course of my fieldwork, elderly couples were still to be found inhabiting a house which they had themselves built, working in clothing which they had themselves made and embroidered, and using artefacts which they had also made. Homes garlanded with suspended plants and artefacts symbolic of the culture, decorated with carefully graded clusters of garlic or onions, threaded with strings of sun-dried mushrooms or beans, were scattered among their own gardens and orchards, like those of the Iron Age Dacians. With these signs the dwelling and the old couple are transformed into an *eikon* of a way of life, as telling as any Neolithic house model; and just as lost in Time.

A directness of spirit lamentably foreign to sophisticated western experience is lent to this culture by the integrity of such lives. The old couple are fading fast, if indeed they are not already dissipated by change, like the smoke which filters

through their high-thatched or shingled roof, and hangs in wisps among the boughs about their house.



Fig 8. The Home as *eikon* of Antiquity. *Atque in Arcadia ego.*
Călinești, Maramureș. Photo JGN.

To give due recognition to this organically-based and antique culture of ancient Europe is not an exercise in sentimentality. It is a functional expression of modes of behaviour of fundamental historical importance which were once more widespread in Europe. The Mediaeval village was founded ultimately on the innovations of the Neolithic, and this underpinned European civilisation. It was no Utopia, which after all means an impossibly perfect place which does not exist; it was an Arcadia, or place which may never exist again. *Atque in Arcadia ego.*

The strengths which Brâncuși derived from it are incalculable, but they demand an effort of understanding from the sophisticated. Romanian peasant culture was the humble embodiment of phenomena which extend even unto prehistory. We can still see the vestiges, but not for long. It is not necessary to idealize it, but it is necessary to understand it. Its unassuming decency long ago resolved some of our own problems of social interaction.

Precisely because it is unassertive it is important to understand this culture for its own sake. The Romanians have never subjugated other peoples. The Dacians

indeed made a half-hearted attempt in the Iron Age to conquer Vienna, found that it did not yet exist, and went home. It is no accident that recent studies show the children of Romania to be now among the very happiest in the world. The orphanages of Romania were the outcome not of Romanian culture but of a Soviet socialist system. The echoes of millennia of human development formed part of the inner consciousness of Brâncuși, and we are now able to appreciate what he made of them. Perhaps he is himself an echo from antiquity. Brâncuși said to us that *Oul* [The Egg] was the most highly evolved of his forms, the beginning and end of all things. Grigore Nandriș, thinking again like a philologist, responded to this that "*oon*" is almost universally related to the verb "*to be, to exist*", whether in Sanskrit or in Indo-European languages.

Brâncuși went on to say that he had worked for forty years on the mysticalbird of Romanian mythology, to whom Stravinsky quite properly pays homage to the miraculous *Firebird*, none other than the *Pasărea Maiastră*. One day in a New York art gallery, Brâncuși recounted that he came across a woman weeping and praying on her knees before his *Maiastră*. He said that this had been one of the most rewarding moments of his life, and that he passed quietly by so as not to disturb her.

Brâncuși was far from unsophisticated, but he did seem truly indifferent to some forms of publicity. He did not seem to know the names we mentioned of various Americans, let alone any British, who had written books about him. 1952 was the time of the great Festival of Britain Exhibition on the south bank in London, one of whose most striking symbols was the Skylon, a cigar-like shape suspended vertically in the air on tensioned steel wires. To a comment by Grigore Nandriș that this seemed to be derived from Brâncuși's *Bird in Flight*, he replied "Let them imitate; they will not succeed".

Like every great artist Brâncuși knew his antecedents and his place. He was not arrogant, but equally without false humility. He was like that most renowned of Japanese swordsmiths Masamune who, unusually for thirteenth century Japan, never signed his blades because he knew that no one could possibly mistake his work for that of anyone else. The unsurpassed blade of the Japanese Sword can be decoded as a functional sculpture, and an object of contemplation transcending utility. In that sense it was a perfect form derived from the very same Platonic heaven as Brâncuși's *Bird in Flight*. They stand comparison side by side.

Brâncuși was emphatic that it was in the *cățun* of Hobița that he spent his childhood. This is now a small village some twenty kilometres from Tismana, the oldest Oltenian monastic foundation. Seen in ethnoarchaeological perspective, *cățun* sites (Nandriș 1985) such as Hobița were one of the most ancient forms of settlement in the Balkans, provisional and effectively Mesolithic in composition, pre-Neolithic. During their seasonal movements the Aromâni and related Sarakatsani still inhabited

such ephemeral hut sites last century. The *cățun* comprised whole families and their animals; as opposed to the great stone-built houses in the high Pindus, or the monocultural *mandras* of the shepherds.



Fig 9. The porch of the restored home of Brâncuși in Hobîța. Photo Caroline Juler.

These sites form part of a hierarchy of specifically European seasonalities, ranging from the intermediary horticultural *sălaș*, to the all-male pastoral hut settlements and *stîne* of transhumant shepherds at high altitude. The form is more ephemeral than the Neolithic village, perhaps even more ancient, but no less important (Nandriș 1985). Brâncuși did return to Hobîța, in the company of Eileen Lane [whom he judiciously presented to the village as a relative]. She was an extraordinarily beautiful Irish girl who had forsaken Ireland for Romania following an unhappy love affair; exactly as did my own mother, with the indeterminable consequences of which I still happily exist. On the *lunca*, among the crystal pools and idyllic trees of the water-meadows, near the water mill which is still there, they walked together: “*Like all those couples who have ever loved each other and walked upon this earth*”.

From Hobîța in his youth he initially reached Craiova where he worked for a poor cooper [*dogar*], and where he often went hungry. At Craft School significantly

enough he made a violin, which like the Japanese Sword is a functional sculpture. His own violin is preserved in the reconstruction of his studio at the Pompidou Centre, focus of the Brâncuși scholarship of Doina Lemny [2009, 2012]. It must be remembered that he had a formal art training in representational sculpture, culminating in an *écorché* figure. He was enabled by the head of the school and its inspector to go to Bucharest. His father died before Brâncuși set out largely on foot across Europe from Romania in May 1904 aged twenty-eight, arriving via a train from Munich, Zurich, and Bâle, in Paris two months later, after hunger and great hardship.

The career of Brâncuși graphically illustrates the high degree of cultural integration of Romania within Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Romanian culture was in no way out of touch with the European experience, until the comradely theories of an Asiatic model of Socialism put a stop to human contacts, and to European culture. Romania did not need the Russian Empire [which was remarkable for the fact that the conquerors stood at a lower cultural level than the conquered] to introduce her to European culture. There are innumerable examples of the interconnections which serve to demonstrate that, like Brâncuși himself, Romanian culture was not merely receptive but engaged in a creative exchange within the European context, until it was stifled by Russian Imperialism. At the beginning of the twentieth century it was accepted practice for Romanian artists and scholars to travel and study in the great capitals and universities of Europe. Men such as Brâncuși, Mircea Eliade, Georghe Enescu, Tristan Țara, Eugen Ionescu, illustrate what it means to be one of Romania's *Great Men*. To them should be added another very great Romania sculptor who lived in London, Paul Neagu; with whom I shared a birthday and a friendship, as with the egregious creative genius Horea Bernea, Director of the Muzeul Țaranului. *Oameni Mari*.

These men did not merely assimilate but made affirmative contributions to European culture, just as did the cosmopolitan Aromâni from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. We may recall how promptly the Manaki brothers of Bitolj, travelled to Paris the moment the Lumière brothers invented cinematography. They may even have been present for the *Première* in Brussels in March 1896, at the Café Meert in the Galerie St Hubert. They hastened to bring the new technique back to their Balkan communities (Nandriș 2001), where they recorded the entry of the Sultan into Bitolj and many domestic scenes from Aromân life.

In the early 1920s Prof Grigore Nandriș, "*pui de țaran*"²⁹ from a Romanian peasant family, attended university in Vienna, along with Lucian Blaga, Al. Busuioceanu, and so many other well-dressed³⁰ young Romanians. He also took a

²⁹ A peasant child [a 'chick'].

³⁰ Who could fault the half centimetre of shirt cuff on display?

PhD at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, and went on to the Sorbonne. His sister, my aunt Anița Nandriș, had no formal education beyond three terms at school [“*trei clase*”]³¹. She perfected her ‘education’ at the hands of the Russians ; deported with the family to the Arctic Ocean, at the mouth of the Ob, among the Nenets of northern Siberia, not far from the *gulag* of Vorkuta where more souls died than in Auschwitz. Her Homeric book, *20 de Ani în Siberia* (Nandriș A. 1998) a masterwork of clemency, wholly devoid of resentment, a proclamation of Christian European values, set in an asiatic Soviet wasteland.



Fig 10. Left to Right; Grigore Nandriș, Al. Busuioceanu, and other “*Young Romanian*”[‘*Romania June*’] Postgraduates at Vienna University in 1922³²

The art of Brâncuși came finally to transcend the external veneer of percepts, the outward beauty of human and natural forms, in its quest to express eternal concepts. An understanding of the beauty of the human form as a vehicle for more than percepts would have been familiar to the post-Byzantine painters of the monasteries of Athos and Bucovina. These were sophisticated painters, who knew

³¹ This was because she had to remain at home to tend her mother Maria, who had been beaten to paralysis by Russian soldiers wielding the knout.

³² The group included Lucian Blaga, who is not in the photo.

eg., that the shadows of the human face are greenish in tinge. The affinities of Brâncuși's art recall that of Romanian peasant craftsmen, powerfully abstracted and generalized, consistently devoid of an interest in literalism or figurative representation; and distanced by geometry from much other "folk art" with its pretty painted flowers – *cu flori*. This very concrete quality is equally true of the Neolithic or the Dacians. There is no need to appeal to African sculpture, even if this seems to have influenced some Parisian artists, driven by the meretricious lure of the exotic to seek out more expressive traditions.



Fig 11. The Inner Gaze; Portrait of Tamara Poniatowska, by John Nandriș.©

Brâncuși knew many important personages in Paris, including Max Ernst. As he says, "*La Paris, am fost prieten cu Matisse, cu Erik Satie, cu Modigliani și, în special, cu Guillaume Apollinaire ...*" (Pandrea, 2009). A few words which Max

Ernst himself has recorded on film are instructive. He was, he said, accustomed to close his eyes and look deep into himself. He would then open them and look at the external world; but during the creative process he advocated keeping one eye open and one closed. The Inner Gaze hints at the synthesis between inner and outer reality, conformable to what we now know of the left and right brain.³³

Brâncuși was not in any culturally disadvantaged position. His creative relationships embody solutions founded on innate reference to Platonic universals more clearly than they demonstrate direct external “influences”, even those of Romania. Eric Shanes [1989, Introduction & *passim*] gives a cogent and balanced refutation of spurious influences on his work.

The genius of Brâncuși lay not in abstraction but in a capacity for referencing solid Platonic forms, as Picasso in two-dimensions seized the after-image. Grasping the divine essence of things he produced a rich repertory of allusion to created facts. While his surfaces were perfect, he looked beneath the surface.

The fact that his mysterious bird may have one eye bigger or asymmetrical from the other is one of the hidden subtleties of Brâncuși's *Maiastră*. It is in fact difficult to see both eyes at the same time, but “*one eye of the Maiastră looks toward the sun, the other to the moon*”, recalling the dual vision of Max Ernst; and the Sun and Moon on left and right of the *stema Moldovei*³⁴.

To consider the implications for the development of humanity and for Brâncuși, let us look briefly at some prehistoric masters of abstraction. In the 1930's a small prehistoric figure of an embracing couple carved in calcite was found in Palestine (Boyd, Cook 1993; illustrated below). It is said to come from 'Ain Sakhri, a small cave in the Wadi Khareitoun in the Judean Desert, where Neuville claimed to have found Natufian artefacts. It may equally have been acquired by the Abbé Henri Breuil from a Bedouin in Bethlehem. It is assigned to the Natufian, an epi-Palaeolithic hunting culture of the Levant which dates from about 10,000 bc. A perhaps just credible alternative could be the "Pre-Pottery Neolithic A" of the eighth millennium bc. The figure is now in the British Museum [*Regn.No.*1958, 10-7,1]. The conceptual and formal resemblance between 'Ain Sakhri and the kissing couple which Brâncuși had created much earlier, in 1907, is quite striking, especially in the version of 1908 in the Cemetery of Montparnasse.

It appears that quite independently of one another, millennia apart and three decades before the discovery of the Natufian figures, Brâncuși felt the need to generalize the expression of a human relationship, groping towards a solution similar to that of the Natufian sculptor. The solution found by Brâncuși and by the Natufian

³³ Of which McGilchrist 2012 is the most brilliant and original recent summary.

³⁴ The fifteenth century coat of arms of Moldavia, with the head of an aurochs, and the Sun, Moon, and a Star. See endpiece.

carver for expressing the close erotic relationship between two figures is so similar that the literalist would surely hasten to imply a “connection” or “influence”. However Brâncuși had created his Kissing Couple a generation before the discovery of 'Ain Sakhri, and ultimately took the idea much further in several versions. There is indeed a nexus but it lies in the realm of human creativity. What is remarkable is how far his vision was shared by a remote anonymous Natufian living more than ten thousand years before.

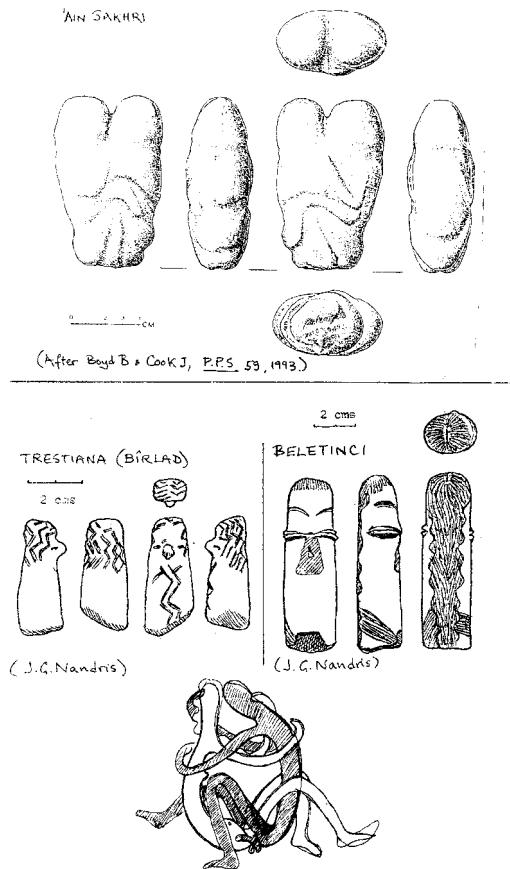


Fig 12. The Ain Sakhri position, with Rod Head figurines of the FTN Early Neolithic. JGN del. ©.

Lacking a secure archaeological context for 'Ain Sakhri we cannot say whether the figure falls into the same context of love and death as the grave of Tania

Raschevskaya. One thing is certain; like Brâncuși himself it deals not merely in percepts but in concepts. This is where Brâncuși swiftly parted company from Rodin, whose art he privately characterised as "*biftek*"³⁵. Considered in prehistoric perspective Brâncuși enables us to transcend the superficiality of "influences" and the vulgarity of the "progressive".

What we are really dealing with is the miracle of long-term developments in our common human consciousness. If indeed Prehistoric peoples had no Art, and simply made everything as well as they possibly could, the same might be said of Brâncuși, or in some instances of the Romanian peasant.

Brâncuși's embracing couples usually have long wavy and by definition fine hair which cascades down the back. The earliest Neolithic farming culture of temperate south-east Europe is the First Temperate Neolithic or FTN³⁶, which dates to the fifth millennium bc. In Romania this is represented by the Criș culture, with painted pottery of high quality and decorated figurines. From their "Rod Head" figurines we know that the Criș people had long wavy hair, falling down the back, and braided in a very specific way at the side of the neck. It was parted in the middle, and they wore a fringe. The eyes are represented by "coffee beans" of clay, slashed with a fingernail across the middle. Intriguingly they are often clearly represented as double eyes. The coffee bean not only recalls the *phi* motif of the Târgu Jiu Gate but was the original form of eye in many versions of Brâncuși's *Kiss*. The Rod Head figurines (Nandriș 1970, 192-213) of the FTN are often found broken off, perhaps symbolically destroyed.

When, as from Endrőd on the Tisza, a complete FTN figure exceptionally survives, it becomes an explicitly ambiguous symbolic expression of the male and female principles. The column of the neck becomes the phallus, and the buttocks metamorphose into testicles, or breasts. The braids which cross the neck of the figure even replicate the way the seminal vesicles cross the phallus near the base on their way from the testicles. The figurines' double eyes are indeed mysterious, but they hint at a synthesis between inner and outer reality, much like Max Ernst when he kept one eye open and one closed; or the asymmetrical eyes of the *Oiseau d'Or*.

It may be that these ideas were not consciously present to the figurine makers, but it is always dangerous to attribute ignorance to our ancestors. The ambiguities of human consciousness extend deep into the Palaeolithic. In the obscurity of a Neolithic hut the ambiguities of their figurines could easily be invoked; for example during initiation or coming-of-age ceremonies. The phallus too has a coffee bean eye at its tip, like a little mouth, or lips, a *phi*, or an eye; but only one eye. He is only interested in one reality.

³⁵ I am told that he actually referred to Michelangelo in this way, but it is truer of Rodin.

³⁶ This fully-formed temperate European Neolithic transcends modern national boundaries.

These ancient figures, with those of the 5th-4th millennia bc Cucuteni culture of Moldavia, or the Gumelnița and Vinča cultures, represent a body of concepts, now largely inaccessible to us, but in part perhaps functionally connected with *eg.*, initiation into adulthood. They were certainly not just a casual depiction of percepts. The figurine-makers and copper-smiths of Cucuteni in the later Neolithic were driven to create abstractions which can stand beside the work of Max Ernst or Brâncuși, or the Cycladic figurines, in whom they find common elements of generalization. This is no question of analogy or influence or relationship but of creative solutions to artistic problems. Artistic problems are demanding religious and philosophical problems. They speak alike over the long term to the common humanity of the creators of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, the First Temperate Neolithic, or Cucuteni, and through Brâncuși to ourselves.

We can see how the eyes of Brâncuși's figures, like those of the FTN, are originally represented as little coffee beans. They evolve ultimately into those great divided circles [the female *phi* motif] on the jambs of the Târgu Jiu Gate. This motif is so overpowering, so ambiguous, so expressive, so loaded with multiple significance, symbolic of femininity, that it draws our attention away from the little linear figures lightly incised as a frieze around the top of the Gate. These are the ultimate echoes of 'Ain Sakhri and the FTN, and of the embracing lovers in the Montparnasse cemetery, and the many versions of The Kiss.

The highly resolved schemata which make up the incised frieze on the lintel of the Gate of the Kiss, which Brâncuși installed in 1937 and 1938 at Târgu Jiu, are the ultimate resolution of that early embrace created in 1907 and dedicated a year or two later to Tania Raschevskaya. In their sparse coherence they may also be seen as the culmination of an anonymous Natufian hunter's vision twelve thousand years earlier. In the Kiss of eternity the couple are mutually engrossed in one another, eye pressed to eye, her wavy hair falls over her shoulders, their arms reach around one another. What seems at first to be merely a decorative arcading beneath the frieze of the Gate represents their eyes and folded legs pressing against each other. But our brains govern this behaviour, and in the entire universe these are the most complex things of which we know. The complex language of the body gently expressed in a kiss is the most powerful statement of our humanity.

A Kiss is not just a Kiss.

A resolution of dualities between Sun and Moon, the left and right brain, is captured by the ambiguous and richly emblematic split circle, redolent of femininity itself, which Brâncuși engraved on the Gate of the Kiss at Târgu Jiu. It emerges directly from the depths of rural consciousness on the portals of the Maramureș. The incised frieze above the gate took its origins in his stone carvings of the "Embracing Couple". It is a solution, even more forceful than that embodied in the embrace of

the Natufian sculptor, to the problem of expressing the conjunction of disparates, the resolution of the unity between man and woman. Brâncuși himself harnessed the sequential rationalities of the Left Brain to the richly holistic landscapes of the Right Brain; a reconciliation of deep thought and profound feeling.



Fig 13. Maquette of the Gate of the Kiss. Photo JGN ©.

It became evident in conversation, during our visit to Brâncuși in April 1952, how closely the sculptor had been involved with the great Eternal Column, the *stîlp* of Târgu Jiu, from the original theoretical calculations to its final erection. We should recognize what a considerable technical feat it was. The free-standing column is 29.33 metres high, or 96.23 feet. It supports its immense height independently, by means of deep foundations and an internal steel structure. It stood like Shakespeare's Man at Arms, gilded like the sun, and Brâncuși supervised the whole project. This mastery of construction evokes the builders of the wooden churches in the Maramureș, who working by eye like a mediaeval cathedral builder, raise their spires on an internal lattice of massive beams which directs the thrust not down to the ground but into diagonal struts, like the framework of massive timbers which supports the many tons of bells in the towers of *Notre Dame* in Paris. That of Surdești reaches 54 metres [177 feet], and this is being surpassed by the new

monastery church at Bârsana. These Romanian craftsmen who still work from plans in their heads, or in other words embedded in their culture, are the living heirs of the master masons who built the European Gothic cathedrals.



Fig 14. The Union of Left and Right Brain, by John Nandriș. ©

The power of Romanian sculpture and the equivalent achievements of its architecture seem to derive from ancient talents of a spatial nature. There is an embedded capacity for concrete generalisation which is already present in the unrelenting abstraction of Dacian Iron Age art, and the predilection of the Romanians for sculpture. Within the European frame of reference it is a very individualised talent, even under the slow recovery of Romanian culture from reactionary authoritarian socialism. It is expressed in the sculptures which loom in the spacious sculpture park of Sighet Museum, and in the creative mastery of wood and textiles which is embedded in traditional Romanian life.

Another of the concrete qualities of Romanian culture is its musicality, which produced the conductor, composer gentleman, and violinist Georges Enesco: *"The greatest all-round musician of the century"* (Menuhin 1976, 212). *Om mare.*



Fig 15. Maquettes from Hobița of the Column and the Table of Silence.©

It was no Romanian but Yehudi Menuhin who described the Romanians in his autobiography as “the most musical people in Europe”. Too many of the creative talents of the Romanians go un-noticed in Europe. Perhaps greater care should be taken over their presentation. The strongly philological Romanian sense of humour is sadly difficult to convey in translation.

The enduring originality of the Romanian peasantry and their³⁷ mindfulness of their own artistic traditions, is illustrated by some maquettes of the Column and the Table of Silence, turned in bronze and rendered in perfect proportion, by a peasant of Hobița, living on the *lunca*. These were made entirely for his own satisfaction, and like the gates of the Maramureș exemplify the innate creativity of the Romanian spirit ; which is something they have in common with so many of

the peoples of Europe.

Brâncuși seems to have made use of the Golden Section in establishing relationships between the segments of his column, and indeed in creating the whole remarkable vision of the sculptural landscape which was inaugurated at Târgu Jiu in 1938. We would all be greatly enriched if he had finished this, and if he had created his proposed Indian *Temple of Deliverance*. We must be grateful for what we have.

Brâncuși's *Column* is made of cast iron plates, which have been given a very refined and individual surface treatment. The column was originally brightly burnished, and Brâncuși intended it to shine eternally on its hilltoplike the *Maiastră*. In bequeathing us this timeless Column of Eternity Brâncuși supplied a more powerful symbol than he could have imagined; of what was done under communism to his country. An attempt in 1953 by the department of Gorj failed to demolish the great Eternal Column with a tractor, but left it damaged; as communism left Romanian society damaged. Both were in fact deceptively well-engineered and survived to undergo restoration. The *Great Stâlp of Târgu Jiu* can equally be envisioned as a

³⁷ For it is women who are the strongest transmitters of social values.

Column of Infinite Freedom, which could well still be re-integrated with the sculptural landscape of Târgu Jiu, as Brâncuși conceived it, on an axis running for kilometres down to the Gate of the Kiss, the Table of Silence and the banks of the river Jiu.

Like its creator the column exhibits the characteristics of greatness; it repays continual re-examination, inspires new interpretations, and leads us to new conclusions. The profound change from the aesthetic of Rodin, which was the aesthetic of a past century, led Brâncuși towards a new dimension in art, that of the coming century. This imposed on him its own severe technical requirements of direct carving, solitude and concentration, chiselling wood and marble and polishing bronze until the light he needed came out of them; just as in his Thracian homeland Orpheus had made the rocks and trees to sing. The advantage of the sculptor's way over that of Orpheus and Euridyce lay in the fact that Brâncuși was not moved to look back. After a long period of incomprehension, the stature of Constantin Brâncuși as the most original and influential of twentieth century sculptors no longer requires vindication.

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Fig 16. *The Kiss* by Anne Hathaway;
Alexi Lubomirski for Harpers Bazaar US, November 2014.

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Stema Moldovei. The arms of Ștefan cel Mare [*Om Mare*] Prince of Moldavia [1457 – 1504] ; with the Aurochs, Sun, Moon and Star, and the symbolic designation IGĐ. {JGN del.} ©