

Introduction

Paris in the Fifties

# A Golden Age in the City of Light

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## Redon's Studio Becomes Mine

For most of the Fifties, I lived and worked at 11 Impasse Ronsin, a ten-minute walk from Montparnasse. Impasse means dead end street. Flanked by magnificent plane trees, Impasse Ronsin was a collection of five rows of artists' studios built of salvaged lumber and other materials from the Paris World's Fair of 1889. It was constructed as a moneymaking scheme but also apparently reflected the builder's interest in art and artists. The land itself was owned by a nearby public assistance hospital.

The studios were attached to each other and were four to a block. Each one was a space measuring twenty-five by forty-five feet, with twenty-foot skylighted ceiling. All faced north. Some artists combined two or more studios into one larger whole. Each studio was a single room: no kitchen, no bedroom, no bathroom, just a sink with a cold water tap.

My introduction to Impasse Ronsin came on a visit with a friend to the studio of Constantin Brancusi, the Romanian sculptor. When I walked into Brancusi's space, I was stunned. I was seeing the gods of an unknown civilization. I had seen an occasional Brancusi sculpture, and reproductions of his work, but I wasn't prepared for this vast accumulation of what seemed to be hierarchal and totemic objects of an ancient civilization. The studio seemed a hermetic fragment of time with Brancusi himself as the high priest. We visited an hour and a half, during which Brancusi whisked things into view and out of view like a magician. He was gracious and charming. Afterward, I told the concierge if ever a studio became available to let me know.

I made it my business to visit the concierge every now and then and one day more than a year later she said I could buy the key to a studio adjoining Brancusi's occupied by a young woman, ex-mistress to the artist who owned the studio but did not live there. "Buying the key" meant in effect buying a lifetime lease. The price was 20,000 francs, then about \$75. The rent was \$7 a month. The place was a ruin, the ceiling half fallen in, the walls rotting. As a condition of obtaining the studio, I agreed to find the woman a better place to live, and eventually did.

The walls were painted clay pot red and I learned they had been painted that color by a former occupant of the studio, Odilon Redon. I was immensely proud to be occupying the studio of an artist so revered as Redon.

I spent three months making my space livable, mixing cement to rebuilt the walls, repairing the fallen ceiling, glazing the skylight. A lot of the material I scavenged by night at construction sites. I used to fill up the two carriers on my bicycle with sand to make the cement.

Since I wanted a lot of water for a hot water shower in the studio, I enlisted the help of a Russian laborer and a French plumber and one Sunday afternoon, when few people were

about, we dug a seventy-five foot trench to a water main, laid pipe in it, illegally connected the pipe to the main, filled in the trench, and hid the traces. I had a lot of water from then on.

The communal john, used by Brancusi and all the rest such as Max Ernset, Jean Tinguely, and Xavier Lalanne, who later became famous for his rhino skin desks, was at the edge of the Impasse Ronsin. With lots of water, I brought modernism to my studio. Outside it, I built a she which contained what the French call *une fosse sanitaire*, a chemical john. I secreted it in a three-foot passageway. Although the walls went up to the full height of the studio, there was no roof to it so one sometimes got rained on. It had its own tank, which emptied into a gravel pit I built.

I introduced a third not of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism by installing a cooking system using bottled gas. I transported the heavy bottles back and forth on my bicycle.

Under an angle of the roof inside the studio, I constructed a platform and this is where I slept.

I scraped all the red paint off the walls and painted them white. It took four coats. The pristine white of modernism is what I wanted.

Constantin Brancusi----1

## The Ranting Old King

My studio was beside Brancusi's. We shared a wall in common. He had put three studios the size of mine together and thus had an immense studio space some one-hundred-twenty by one-hundred-sixty feet, with towering ceiling and skylights. He lived in an adjoining section. The main block was filled with his lifetime's work of some sixty large sculptures in wood, plaster, stone and metal. The bronzes such as *Bird in Flight*, *Mlle. Pogany* and *The Sleeping Muse* you didn't see until he whisked off their dust sleeves and the highly polished surfaces, lit by rays of sunlight, suddenly presented one with a numinous split-second suggestion of the infinite. The place was very dusty and had an organic look, not at all arty.

Brancusi had placed pots of flowering plants on *The Kiss*. Bouquets of flowers given by admirers rested on other works. From one wall jutted a stove Brancusi had constructed from clay and ceramic firebricks. In his hands, this functional object became a piece of arresting sculpture.

There was an enormous couch Brancusi had carved from a large section of an oak tree and the yellow satin cushions on it were one of the few notes of bright color in an otherwise white studio. Brancusi used to recline on this couch and read the newspapers avidly. Largely unconcerned with politics, he was deeply interested in crimes of passions, indications to him of the folly of humanity.

Only about five-six in height, he gave the impression of being much taller. He wore bulky clothes: a white worker's jacket, white pants, white sailor's cap cocked at a rakish angle and wooden sabots. In cool weather, he draped a shawl around his shoulders. He walked with a limp, the result of an incorrectly set leg break decades earlier, and carried a cane. Although in his mid-seventies, he retained immense authority and presence. He *commanded* the Impasse Ronsin. He had beautifully drawn features, an elegantly sculptured nose, bushy eyebrows, penetrating eyes, a large mane of hair, a long great beard. In his youth as a redhead he had been so beautiful he was called "The Fox." He spoke a French marked by unorthodox word combinations, but with agreeable tone of voice and with an accent I recall as "delicious." It was "delicious" because it was original and witty. He would combine words in a most charming way. Instead of saying, for example, "*Je vais un promenade*" ("I'm going for a walk"), he'd say "*Je vais faire mon promenade*" ("I'm now going to take my useful walk.") The unusual juxtaposition came out as picturesque speech.

He told me many times how he had been the star pupil at an arts academy in Budapest at the turn of the last century and there had done an anatomy after Donatello which won him first prize in a competition. With the stipend he received, he promptly set out for Paris, "drawn like a magnet," as he put it, and walked all the way as a form of pilgrimage. He was very poor at first and worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant.

Brancusi was immediately friendly to me and pleased that a studio in the complex was being resuscitated, but he had second thoughts when Alexis, my Russian laborer, discovering that branches of the lilac bush at my doorway had penetrated the roof tiles, cut away most of the large bush. When Brancusi saw this outrage, he shouted: "How could you do that? You are not an artist!" Alexis laughed. Brancusi turned on his heel and I barely saw him again for months.

Because I was able to live a relatively affluent life on the GI bill, I married Hannah Ben Dov, an Israeli artist. Brancusi like beautiful young women with long hair and Hannah was lovely and had long hair. He came periodically to visit, banging on the door with his cane. He commented on our work in progress, always agreeably, and commented on food we were preparing or eating, but only stayed five minutes or so. He never accepted our invitation to eat or drink, apparently feeling this would obligate him.

Once when my wife was about to cook lung, Brancusi examined it with distaste and left abruptly. Twenty minutes later he returned, just as the lung was ready to be eaten. Without preamble, Brancusi removed it from the table with the observation it was fit only for cats and produced a leg of lamb he had just roasted in his forge and proudly set it in the center of the table. My wife said: "Ah, you are also a cook." Brancusi laughed delightedly and declared he was one of the greatest cooks in the world.

When he invited us to visit him, he served asti spumante, his favorite drink, and biscuit Lu shortbread cookies. He had a simple kitchen with a two-burner stove, using bottled gas, and ate the simple food of his peasant background, preparing his own yogurt. For us and other guests, he would play old vinyl records from his enormous collection of ethnic music.

Sometimes he asked me over to help him. He'd bang on the door with his staff, which he had carved out of a twisted root. He'd say, "Come with me," and I'd follow to see what he wanted. Sometimes he invited me over just to talk. Even though he lived next door, he would call on the phone. "Bonjour, darling," he would say, "would you come over and have some biscuit Lu with me?" When he was in a good mood his eyes twinkled.

He used to sing a song he thought was very witty. The words were "*Bonjour Madame de la Fontaine, bonjour Monsieur le Robinet.*" Or "Good morning Mrs. Fountain, good morning Mr. Faucet." It was a sexual allusion and he had a whole repertoire of such songs. He'd walk his fingers up your arm and say, "*Voila les petis berts, qui montent, qui montent, qui montent.*" Or "Here are the little bugs that climb and climb and climb." He'd do it with women as well as men. There was always the implication that he was sexually open to anyone attractive. Even in old age, when I knew him, his allure was pronounced. Most women responded to him. It was partly because of his fame. His philosophical calm and good judgment were highly attractive.

He liked to recall the good old days. He had been very fond of Amadeo Modigliani, the artist, and Erik Satie, the composer. Modigliani was very beautiful and sought after by

women. Since Brancusi was remarkable looking in his youth, they must have made a striking pair. Brancusi had invited Modigliani to work in his studio and that's where Modigliani carved some of his carytids. This was before the First World War. Brancusi's early sculptures recalled Modigliani's. Whether he influenced Modigliani or Modigliani influenced him is a point I reflected on. He had great admiration and respect for Satie. They used to party together and eat in fancy restaurants. He thought Satie was a great, inventive thinker. By the time I knew Brancusi, of course, Modigliani and Satie were legendary.

Brancusi didn't have any use for Picasso. He met Picasso in the early days and they had an agreeable discussion. This was before the First World War. Picasso invited him to his studio. They made the date after a night of carousing. On the day, Brancusi walked from Montparnasse to Montmartre, not having money for a cab. It took him probably three hours. When he arrived at the Bateau Lavoir, Picasso's studio, Picasso wasn't there. Brancusi was scandalized and highly irritated that Picasso didn't keep the appointment. After that, he had no use for Picasso. It was known if he broke off with someone he was adamant. Once he had had it with someone, it was usually final.

Brancusi used to talk with pleasure about the medical students at Necker hospital, which was right next door. They'd have a celebration----a bacchanal, Brancusi called it----and he'd cook up a gigote of lamb on his forge. He remembered escapades with the interns when they would all dance around his studio drunk and naked.

Brancusi liked America and Americans. He recalled fondly his visit to the United States in the 1920s. He spoke of John Quinn, the collector, with great pleasure and said Quinn's support early in his career had helped him a great deal. He remembered living in Greenwich Village, eating in Mama Leone's restaurant, playing golf with Quinn. He recalled discovering masses of mussels coating a pier somewhere on Long Island. Learning that Americans didn't eat them, he gathered bushels of them, cooked them up with garlic and served a feast of mussels. He liked to talk about going to Chicago to supervise construction of one of his "Endless Column" sculptures, this one so big it would have an elevator inside it. It was clear to me he was too old to go to Chicago, but he liked to fantasize.

Move move move

When he went shopping, the mid-afternoon ritual for everyone in the Impasse----he called these sorties his *promenade utile*----he would don his alpine borsino hat and pull the brim down so he looked like a Tennessee mountaineer. At the shops he irritated the shopkeepers by squeezing the fruit. Natalia Dumitresco, a shy Romanian painter in her thirties who lived in one of the Impasse studios with her professor husband, helped Brancusi with the errands and cleaning. It was believed in the Impasse that Brancusi helped her and husband, Alexandre Istrati, whom we did not like, financially and socially.

## The Yawn of an Aging Male Lion

Although by the early Fifties, Brancusi was reputed to be wealthy, there was no sign of it. The concierge did claim to have been shown a box of gold coins by him and when the studio was ripped down workmen searched the walls as they demolished them, looking for hidden treasure, but no find was ever reported or rumored.

By this time, Brancusi had apparently pretty much quit working. He had dealers and collectors as visitors, but he didn't seem to sell anything. Brancusi preferred timing tours of his studio to the appropriate season and hour of day, so that sunlight would work for him. He sometimes postponed appointments if the day turned too cloudy.

He had no dealer of his own. A postwar sale of art to James Johnson Sweeney of the Guggenheim Museum in New York may very well have given him all the money he needed for the rest of his life, and his thoughts now were on creating a Brancusi museum.

Sometimes through the wall my wife and I would hear him roaring like a lion, perhaps raging at his inability, or lack of desire, to work. He sometimes said: "I've become nothing more than a guardian of my own museum." When he was having a few drinks, I would hear him chanting his Gregorian repertoire. He told me as a young man he had a superb baritone voice and used to sing in an Orthodox church to earn money. Often, after he would sing a song, there would be a silence, then there would be a loud yawn. I realized he was bored. It was the yawn of the aging male lion, a cross between a yawn and a roar----"NyannnnnnhhhhHHH!"

Because of my high energy and optimism, neither of which he had then, Brancusi got angry at me sometimes. He would chide me talking to him with my hands in my pockets, for my failure to address him as *maitre* (master). From there he would go into his litany on the human race as being nothing more than a band of fornicating monkeys (obscene gestures by Brancusi at this point). He predicted the imminent coming of a catastrophe: "*Vous allez voir cette onzième deluge qui viendra.*" (You shall see, the 11th deluge will come.") This to cleanse the world of its evils. It may have been just the anger of an old man, I saw it as the rantings of an old king.

Between these incidents of choler, there would be fascinating conversations when Brancusi told me yet again of his friendships with Modigliani and Satie, of his meeting with the sculptor Auguste Rodin when Rodin invited him to join his atelier. Brancusi replied: "*Rien ne pousse sous grands arbres.*" ("Nothing grows under mighty trees.") He said he had his own direction to follow and declined. As he said many times, for him the great fight was to strip his sculpture down to its essence, to get rid of the *biftek*---beefsteak---and get to the bone. That was his credo.



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Brancusi had an immense, instant appeal to women and although he never married was reputed to have had many lovers. There was the persistent rumor he might have been homosexual as well. Sometimes at night I would hear a cooing, almost a serenade-like call, in front of my studio and when I investigated would find some woman who had known Brancusi fifteen or twenty years earlier cooing through his window, saying, "Brancooooosi, Brancooooosi," trying to woo him out. By then he preferred that people telephone.

I remember one bizarre incident. The concierge had a tiny daughter, Monique, and one day decided that her hair was too long and cut it off without consulting her parents. Madam Graission, the concierge, and her baker husband were livid with rage. Brancusi said simply: "It was time for that girl to have her hair cut." Madam Graission was also not pleased when, in spring and summer, Brancusi used to come around to my side of the building where it was sunny to sunbathe in nothing but his stocking hat and his wooden sabots, stark naked as Bacchus himself. Watching the birds flying around in the lilac branches overhead, Brancusi would moan with pleasure.

## 'I Piss on the Intellectuals'

As Brancusi became more infirm, he sometimes asked me to come to the studio to help him. Once he sent me up a ladder to retrieve from the truss holding up the building an alternate version of "Bird in Flight" he wanted to examine.

Brancusi did not sign his work, saying: "*Ils sont deja fini*" ("They're already signed.") That is to say they're by Brancusi and thus unique. He made no editions of his work. They were all unique pieces. Brancusi categorically refused to talk art theory: "*Je fais pipi sur l'intelligence.*" ("I piss on the intellectuals.")

Brancusi died at age 83 or so of old age and problems caused by drinking binges and had a grand funeral in a Greek Orthodox church, complete with incense, choir, dignitaries from the world of art and politics, a crowd of the curious from the art world, photographers, and three seedy diplomats from the Romanian embassy sent to claim him as their country's son. A fist fight broke out when several Romanian artists tried to chase the interlopers away from the cemetery.

His studio was sealed by the French government to whose people he had bequeathed everything, having become a French citizen only a few years before in order to deal with his estate. All those years he had an alien's card. I recall taking the photograph of him with an old plate camera that was required when he applied for naturalization. He showed me his *carte d'identite* and proudly announced: "*Je suis French.*"

Some months after Brancusi's death, I heard sounds in his studio through my wall and went to investigate. The door was wide open. Inside was Professor Istrati, husband of Natalia Dumitrienko who had cleaned and taken care of Brancusi, and the director of the foundry where Brancusi had his works cast. I assumed it was an authorized entry and that Istrati and the foundryman were discussing editions of some of the sculptures.

Realizing this was the last time I might ever see the studio as Brancusi left it, I ran and got my Rollicord and snapped twelve photos documenting the studio as it was at his death. At this point I was invited *out* by Istrati and I reluctantly departed. The incident nagged me, however, and I called Madam Vienne at the *Musee d'Art Moderne* to let her know about it. The next day the seals were restored to the doors.

Although Brancusi specified that his studio be preserved as it was, as a museum, that was an unrealizable idea because the hospital that owned the land of which Impasse Ronsin stood needed the space for a heating plant. In due course the contents of the studio were transferred to the *Musee d'Art Moderne* and a duplicate of the original studio, more or less, was constructed except that, due to a space problem, the recreated studio was oriented to south light instead of north.

Impasse Ronsin with all its studios was later leveled and along with all the others I was forced to move out.

Alberto Giacometti

## A Poetic, Uncontaminated Spirit

Having seen Giacometti's post-war show at the Pierre Matisse gallery in New York City, I was very interested in meeting him when I moved to Paris. I had a woman friend who was a neighbor of his and she told me where his studio was, so I went there one day.

It was two-thirds of the way down an alley, of the Rue Hippolyte Maindron, in a really derelict section. There were piles of plaster outside, mountains of it. The communal outhouse was at the end of the alley. It was a typical street of artists' studios. The paint was peeling on the walls, the walls were cracking.

I felt relatively confident since I had heard from my friend that Giacometti was friendly to young artists and liked Americans. I knocked on the door. There was no answer. I hoisted myself up and looked in the window. There wasn't much to be seen, except more heaps of plaster. The place bore no signs of human comfort. It was a cubicle with a high ceiling and cracked skylight. There were sculptor's tools, a couple of chairs, an easel, a few paintings. Not much more.

After this failure to meet the artist, I had an idea. I knew where Giacometti took his morning coffee and since my studio was close by I made it a point to take my morning coffee there too, and one day, looking haggard, covered with plaster dust, there he was. He was on his way home from a night out, having roamed the town. This was his pattern: To stay up all night and eventually wend his way home about eight or nine o'clock in the morning, stopping at the Café d'Alesia for his *pousse au crime*---literally "push to crime," in the argot of the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement where we lived. *Pousse au crime* was black coffee followed by an armagnac.

I introduced myself, told him I had seen his show in New York and had followed his work in the art magazines and he invited me to sit down and join him. By this time I could "babble" in French; "babble" is what we Americans called it. Our grammar was impossible and accents worse, but we could communicate fluently.

Giacometti was rather short, stoop-shouldered, of great physical power. He was starved-looking. He looked like his elongated sculptures. His face was astonishingly craggy, his voice was hoarse but he spoke with great eloquence, rapidity and animation, gesturing a lot. He had quick kind of Italian intelligence. His French was fluent but strongly accented.

His tweed jacket and pants were rumpled and dusted with plaster. I got the impression he wore the same clothes ever day. He had a great mane of hair, not very clean: one must recall the dulling qualities of plaster dust.

He struck me as a thoroughly romantic figure, someone who personified the idea of the artist, an absolutely open, poetic, deeply passionate, uncontaminated spirit, one who went directly to the essentials in thinking and conversation.

Giacometti immediately accepted me as an equal during our half hour of talk and I asked him if he had one of his matchbox sculptures in his pocket. They were already legendary. He pulled a matchbox out of his jacket---the French matchboxes are a bit bigger than American ones---and opened it and took out a sculpted man only about an inch and a half high. I told him it was wonderful but he didn't want to discuss it, saying it was not his preoccupation. Instead, he asked me if I'd come to his studio which was around the corner, and we went there. He was still wide awake and revved up after a night of talking. He pulled on of those big cast iron keys out of his pocket to unlock the door---anyone could have broken it down with a strong push----and we went into the studio. There on a stand in the middle was a bridge-like, two-level sculpture with figures walking toward each other from opposite ends on the top level.

He said he was struggling with the piece and asked me for a criticism of it. I thought it was superb and told him so, but he said: "*Faites-moi un critique, faites-moi un crit*"---- "Give me a critique, give me a critique." I felt it was presumptuous on my part, but I finally suggested he put figures on the lower level. "That's my problem," he said. "I want to put figures there, but I don't know where to put them." So I suggested he add a third tier, a large base in effect, and put the figures down there. He laughed and said, "It would be like an apartment house."

There were other sculptures in the studio and a painting on an easel. He said the painting was barely begun; actually, it was encrusted with paint. He said he found it impossible to finish works, because there was always more work to do on them. "*Je ne vois pas clair*" ("I don't see clearly"), he said several times, striking his forehead with his hand.

He invited me to come back and visit him. "We're neighbors," he said; "you can always find me at the café. Some day I would like to come and see your work." I saw him dozens of times over the years and he was always friendly, always interested in what I was doing.

I recall visiting the studio once where I found Giacometti and his devoted brother Diego, who helped him, preparing for a show at the Galerie Maeght. They were out in the alley working on a slab of plaster with spindly legs and a severe sag in the middle, which gave it the appearance of being about to break. They were discussing just how much sag they wanted. The exhibit was of plaster works and this one had ends of hemp used to buttress the plaster sticking out of the top. The skeins were unraveling at places. Referring to the sag in the tabletop, Giacometti said with a smile: "This is a contradiction in geometry, isn't it?"

While I was living in Paris through the Nineteen Fifties, Giacometti evolved from being a kind of underground figure to one of the most famous artists in the world, but he remained unchanged----same studio, same old outhouse, same cafes. I saw his wife

Annette sometimes and we exchanged cordial greetings, but she pretty much remained out of sight.

He lived so completely the life of an artist that it never occurred to me and my friends that he was now making lots and lots of money. If it had, we would have said no one deserved it more.

The last time I saw Giacometti was at a party for artists at the home of Guy de Rothschild. The baron was wearing a wine-colored, velvet dinner jacket and most of the artists were in their best clothes. Giacometti arrived wearing a trenchcoat and his usual rumpled clothes. As he walked across the room he left a faint trail of white plaster footprints on the Persian carpet.

## **Leaving the City of Light**

Paris in the Fifties was simply wonderful. The expatriates were back in force and we younger artists felt we were new blood helping keep the greatness of the School of Paris alive. In our own minds, we were brilliant successes.

Why did I leave Paris after eleven years for Rome, and eventually a return to the United States? I lost my studio, I lost my wife, I no longer had anchors. A phase of my life ended dramatically and it was time to move on.