SHAMAN AND SHOWMAN

An intimate portrait of the legendary Rumanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, by the artist who was his next-door neighbor in Paris.

By Reginald Pollack

During the eight years I lived next door to Constantin Brancusi there were many times I would have loved to photograph him and his studio, but I never dared to ask. As he had it, only Brancusi could photograph Brancusi, only he knew how to capture the magic. But shortly after his death in 1957, before the contents of his studio were carted off to Paris's Musée d'Art Moderne, I snapped a few pictures with my Rolliecord, documenting the room as it then was. These photographs, never published before, provide the last glimpse of Brancusi's work as he left it, unedited, as were very few aspects of a life and work that have now attained the status of myth.

When I first met Brancusi, I was dazzled by this artist who seemed, in his studio, to be a sorcerer in his temple. But as the years passed and we grew friendlier, I realized that the sage and prophet was an official persona Brancusi had created and nurtured along with his art. He maintained this public image so skillfully that posterity has accepted it at face value, remembering him as a modern-day artistic shaman, a holy man as mystically in tune with the primal cosmos as he was impervious to the strains of ordinary existence. The myth captures a part of Brancusi that truly was larger than life; it also obscures the human side of him I knew.

For most of the 1950s I lived and worked at 11 Impasse Ronsin, a ten-minute walk

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Mlle Pogany, *one of Brancusi's early breakthrough pieces. Above is the entryway to the* maitre's *studio, next door to the author's at 11 Impasse Ronsin.*

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from Montparnasse. Flanked by magnificent plane trees, the Impasse, a dead-end street, was a collection of five rows of artists' studios built of salvaged lumber and other materials left from the Paris World's Fair of 1900. It was constructed as a moneymaking scheme but apparently also reflected the builder's interest in art and artists. The studios were attached to each other, four to a block, each a single room of about twenty-five by forty-five feet with a high skylighted ceiling but no kitchen, no bedroom, and no bathroom, just a sink with a cold-water tap.

My introduction to the Impasse came on a visit with a friend in 1948 to Brancusi's home. When I walked into his studio I was stunned: I was facing 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 appeared to be the hierarchical and totemic objects of an ancient kingdom. The studio felt like a hermetic fragment of time, and Brancusi himself the high priest of it. We visited an hour and a half, during which Brancusi whisked things into 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; one day a year later she said I could buy the key to the studio adjoining Brancusi's. "Buying the key" meant in effect buying a lifetime lease. The price was 20,000 francs, about $75. The rent was $17 a month. The place was a ruin, the ceiling half fallen in, the walls rotting. The walls were painted clay-pot red, and I learned they had been painted that color by a former occupant, Odilon Redon. I was immensely proud to be occupying the studio of an artist so revered as Redon.

I spent three months making the studio livable, mixing cement to rebuild the walls,

A corner in which Brancusi stacked versions of The Kiss *to look like a temple's columns (above), and two* Endless Columns *(below), left where Brancusi built them.*

cushions on it were one of the few notes of color in the otherwise white studio. Brancusi used to recline on this couch and read the newspapers avidly. Unconcerned with politics, he was deeply interested in crimes of passion, indications to him of the folly of humanity.

Since many of the bronzes—*Bird in Flight*, *Mlle Pogany*, and *The Sleeping Muse*—were hidden beneath dustcloths, the dramatic impact of the room was not at first apparent. During the course of a visit, as he talked, Brancusi would whisk away the dust sleeves with a long pole, and the highly polished surfaces, lit by rays of sunlight, suddenly presented one with a numinous split-second suggestion of the infinite. *Bird in Space* was set before a deep-red rectangular canvas. Unveiled, its beveled top would catch a beam of sunlight and throw it back into the viewer's eyes in a blinding flash. One had to check an impulse to fall to one's knees before the sculpture. But on the whole, the place was dusty and had an organic look, not at all arty.

His anger may have been that of an old man. I saw it as the ranting of a king.

Brancusi felt a deep connection with Greek and Coptic sculpture, the monolithic forms of early civilization, as well as his own Rumanian heritage. Presenting himself as a sort of medium who had introduced the primordial to the twentieth century, he spouted aphorisms like a prophet, spoke of Leda, Socrates, and Milarepa (an eleventh-century Tibetan monk), as if they were all personal friends, and the lost city of Atlantis as if he'd been there. At times, talking to him in his studio, I had the feeling that he wanted me to believe all his work had sprung into existence as the direct consequence of some secret, magical act. He was charming, impressive, and fearsome, but, above all, a wizard who delighted in his ability to bewitch and confound.

Only about five-foot-six, 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 when I met him, he retained immense authority and presence. He had beautifully drawn features, an elegantly sculpted nose, bushy eyebrows, penetrating eyes, and a long gray beard. In his youth as a redhead he had been so striking he was called "The Fox."

He'd been the star pupil at an arts academy in Bucharest at the turn of the century, and there had done an anatomical sculpture after Donatello that won him first prize in a competition. With the stipend he promptly set out for Paris, "drawn like a magnet," as he put it, walking all the way as a form of pilgrimage. He was very poor at first and worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant. Shortly thereafter he met Rodin. The master invited him to join his atelier but Brancusi declined. "Nothing grows under mighty trees," he said.

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. He would not sign his work. "They're already signed," he said. He made no editions—each piece was unique. And he categorically refused to talk art theory: "*Je fais pipi sur l'intelligence*," he'd say.

When I first moved in, 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 a vine climbing the lilac bush at my doorway had penetrated the roof tiles, cut away most of the large bush. When Brancusi saw this he was outraged. "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.

I was married to Hannah BenDov, an Israeli artist, and we were relatively well-off because of the GI Bill. Brancusi liked beautiful young women with long hair, and came periodically to visit, banging on our door with his staff, *continued on page 114*

The last photograph taken of Brancusi in his studio, shortly after his death in 1957 at the age of eighty-one, surrounded by flowering branches as tokens of love from his friends.

A MAVERICK'S MANSION

continued from page 80 of the arts became both friends and customers, sometimes accumulating whole rooms full of mantels, shelves, chairs, tables, and sofas in Esherick's dramatic, curvilinear style. After separating from Letty, it was through the theater that he met the actress Miriam Phillips, who was his companion for more than thirty years, brought him new inspiration and patrons, and fought to maintain his studio-home after his death.

Such personal and professional relationships overlapped through the years, contributing to a life increasingly rich in all but material assets. His friends (and patrons) represented, in fact, a broad cultural cross-cut of society: artists Henry Varnum Poor and Itzhak Sankowsky, writer Theodore Dreiser, composer George Rochberg (whose music stand Wharton made), concertmaster Alexander Hillsberg, architect Louis Kahn, and Judge Curtis Bok (who commissioned an entire floor from Esherick, including a staircase, library, and music room). Sherwood Anderson was a valued friend from the time they met in 1919; it was Esherick, in fact, who brought Anderson—and the premiere of his *Winesburg, Ohio*—to Hedgerow Theatre. When the author died in 1941, his family commissioned Esherick to produce a sculpture for the grave. Cut from stone, it's inscribed, "Life, not death, is the big adventure."

In 1967 Wharton suffered a stroke—not severe enough to impair his mind or coordination, but enough to reduce his stamina, energy, and creative drive. He continued to work, but on a shorter schedule. There was still the warmth, the responsiveness, the jaunty sense of humor, but muted. One day he spoke to his doctor about what lay ahead: "I'm not afraid of dying," he said, "but I want to know what it is. What happens?"

The doctor thought a moment. "Well," he said, "It's like going out of one room into another."

"That's all right, then. I won't mind that. I just don't want to get my foot caught in the door."

His fear of a long, debilitating illness never materialized and he worked productively until one week before his death. "Wharton was one of the few lucky artists," said a friend who came to pay his respects. "He finished his work." □

THE FABRIC OF TIME

continued from page 87 expression of materials, structure, and function brought into focus by the modernists. The aesthetic of the Peruvian textiles seemed to have more to do with modern life than the timeworn, courtly styles of China or Europe. The dualism that pervaded Peruvian theology and its expression in fabrics felt familiar to those of us who knew the sophisticated checkerboards of Frank Lloyd Wright or Paul Klee, or the fantastic symbolism of Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Stuart Davis, all of whom were aware that 2,000 years ago Peruvian artists had created the kinds of images they were now painting. Peruvian fabrics were not cut-and-sewn garments but flat rectangles woven with four selvages. Modern artists identified easily with their abstract, architectonic qualities, the surrealism of their imagery, and their strength as complete compositions.

From the first, the Peruvian earth colors influenced my palette—they seemed curiously appropriate to the Northwest. I was also fascinated by the way the Peruvians modulated patterns, particularly in embroideries in which the same motif is endlessly repeated but the position and quantity of the colors never appears twice in quite the same way. In terms of essential structures, the Peruvians had woven crepe-spun gauzes and simple brocades in which I saw applications to modern furnishings. Forty years later, I haven't begun to exhaust their technical possibilities. Recently, for example, I've been encouraging the Indians I work with in Columbia to reintroduce Peruvian overspun crepe yarns, which kink and give fabrics bounce. (Such yarns take four times longer than ordinary yarns to spin, and then four times longer to weave, so the idea has been slow to catch on.)

If the weavers who created these textiles were to come back today, they would no doubt be amazed at our industrial technology, our synthetic yarns and dyes. But in some ways there's nothing we've learned they didn't already know. More than any other weaving culture, the Peruvians were aware that all phases of art and life are connected to the sacred, to the divine. The weavers made no separation between their lives and their art, and that's why I see their legacy as so good and true today. It's a legacy I strive to continue. □

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continued from page 98 which he'd carved out of a twisted root. He commented on our work, always agreeably, and on food we may have been preparing or eating, but never stayed more than five minutes or so and wouldn't accept invitations to eat or drink. Periodically he'd also call on the telephone and say, "Bonjour darling, would you come over and have some Biscuit Lu with me?" When we went to visit him, he served asti spumante, his favorite drink, with the shortbread cookies. He had a modest kitchen with a two-burner stove, and ate the simple food of his peasant background, preparing his own yogurt.

Brancusi was justly proud of his own cooking. Once he dropped in when my wife was about to cook a tongue, which he examined with distaste, leaving abruptly. Twenty minutes later he returned, just as the tongue was ready to be eaten. Without preamble, he removed it from the table saying that it was fit only for cats. He set a leg of lamb he'd just roasted in his forge in the center of the table. "Ah, you are also a cook?" my wife said. Brancusi laughed delightedly and declared that he was one of the greatest cooks in the world. He also used to reminisce with pleasure about the escapades—bacchanales, he called them—he had had with the medical students from Necker Hospital nearby. He'd invite the interns over, roast a gigot on his forge, serve it with asti spumante, and they would all dance around his studio, drunk and naked.

By the time I moved in, Brancusi had pretty much quit working. He had dealers and collectors as visitors, but didn't seem to sell anything. Brancusi preferred timing tours of his studio to the appropriate season and hour of day, so that the sunlight would work for him. If the day was cloudy, he postponed the appointment, and he thought nothing of turning people away—including Nelson Rockefeller—who had dropped by unexpectedly. He had no dealer of his own. A postwar sale of art to James Johnson Sweeney of the Guggenheim may well have given him all the money he needed for the rest of his life. For his guests, Brancusi would play old vinyl records from his enormous collection of ethnic music. He had carved loudspeakers out of stone for his phonograph to improve the quality of the sound.

He liked to recall the good old days, before the First World War. He had been

close with Modigliani and Satie, legendary figures to me. Since Brancusi was remarkable-looking in his youth, and Modigliani very beautiful and sought after by women, they must have made a striking pair. Brancusi invited Modigliani to share his studio, which is where Modigliani did the caryatid sculptures that resemble Brancusi's early work. Brancusi had immense admiration and respect for his friend Satie, whom he considered a great, inventive thinker. For Picasso, however, whom he'd also met in those years, he claimed to have no use. After a night of carousing, Picasso had once invited Brancusi to visit his studio at the Bateau Lavoir. Not having the money for a cab, Brancusi walked to Montmartre from Montparnasse, probably a three-hour trek. When he arrived, Picasso was not there. Brancusi was scandalized, and when he broke off with someone he was adamant. He would pretend never to have met the person, never to have heard of him. Once he had had it with someone, it was final.

Jean Tinguely, the sculptor, had a studio facing Brancusi's on my side of the alley. Tinguely, his girlfriend Ava, and a young guy named Yorkie, all Swiss, lived together in a ménage à trois. Tinguely was interested in random possibilites; he was fascinated by senseless machines, by wasted energy, but not at all by craftsmanship. He and Brancusi represented extremes, opposites. Brancusi, who had a strong sense of order and internal structure, refused to talk to Tinguely or notice him. He saw Tinguely and his friends as pigs—their studio had dirty laundry on the floor, and pieces of their sculptures spilled out the doorway. In warm weather, Tinguely made his assemblages out in the alley and left them there. At night you could walk into a sharp point on one of them and hurt yourself. Brancusi called what Tinguely did *bricollage*, tinkering; he thought Tinguely was some kind of Sunday mechanic who made things out of old garbage.

There was a *maquis*, a trash heap, behind the Impasse in an abandoned lot. You could dig around there if you wanted a piece of stone or some metal scrap and generally find something that came close to your needs. Tinguely used the *maquis* often, and one spring he had the inspiration to plant sunflower seeds around it. Soon there were sunflowers—huge, glorious ones—decorating that section of the Impasse. From then on, Brancusi looked on Tinguely with greater favor. He talked to him; that was a big favor right there.

Brancusi had an immense, instant appeal to women, and although he never married was reputed to have had many lovers. Sometimes at night I would hear a purring, almost a serenading call coming from in front of my studio. When I investigated, I would find some woman who'd known Brancusi fifteen or twenty years earlier cooing to his window: "*Bmncooooosi, Bmncooooooosi*," trying to woo him out. By then he preferred people to telephone.

He used to sing me a song he thought was very witty. The words were "*Bonjour Madame de la Fontaine, Bonjour Monsieur le Robinet*" ("Good morning Mrs. Fountain, Good morning Mr. Faucet"). He had a whole repertoire of such songs. He'd walk his fingers up your arm, saying "*Voilà les petites bêtes qui montent, qui montent, qui montent*" ("Here are the little bugs that climb and climb and climb"). He'd do this with men as well as women; there was always the implication that he was sexually open to anyone attractive. Even in old age, his allure was pronounced.

Toward the end of his life, Brancusi became set in his ways. Donning a cap with the brim pulled down and looking very like a Tennessee mountaineer, he'd take what he called his midafternoon "*promenade utile*" and do his marketing. At the shops, he delighted in irritating the shopkeepers by squeezing every piece of fruit before making a selection. Brancusi was reputed to be wealthy but there was never any sign of it. The concierge, Mme Graission, claimed to have been shown a box of gold coins by him. When his studio was torn down, the workmen searched for this hidden treasure, but no find was ever reported or even rumored.

In the spring and summer, he would come around to my side of the building, where it was sunny, and sunbathe in nothing but his stocking hat and wooden sabots, naked as Bacchus himself. Brancusi would moan with pleasure watching the birds fly around in the lilac branches overhead. But when the chilly months kept him indoors, time hung heavily on his hands, and he drank with reckless disregard for his doctor's warnings.

When he was drinking at night, we could hear him through the studio walls chanting his Gregorian repertoire. (As a young man he had had a superb baritone voice and used to sing in the Orthodox church for money.) Often, after he would sing a song, there would be a silence, then a loud yawn: "*Nynaannnnnhh HHH!*" It was a cross between a yawn and a roar, the sound of an aging male lion bored with the loss of his power. I realized Brancusi was raging at himself for his inability or lack of desire to work any longer. "I've become nothing more than a guardian for my own museum," he said.

On occasion he would get angry with me for my high energy and optimism, both of which he had lost. He would chide me for talking to him with my hands in my pockets, or for my failure to address him as *maître*. From there he would launch into a litany on the human race as nothing more than a bunch of fornicating monkeys, accompanying his condemnation with obscene gestures. He predicted the imminent coming of a catastrophe to cleanse the world of its evils: "You'll see! The Eleventh Deluge will come!" This may have been just the anger of an old man; I saw it as the ranting of a king.

At the age of eighty-one, Brancusi died of old age and of problems caused by his drinking binges. There was a grand funeral in a Greek Orthodox church, complete with incense, choir, dignitaries from the world of politics and art, crowds of the curious, photographers, and three seedy diplomats from the Rumanian embassy sent to claim him as their country's own. A fistfight broke out at the cemetery when several Rumanian artists tried to chase the interlopers away.

Brancusi's thoughts at the end of his life had been focused on seeing that his sculptures be kept together and displayed so that their relationship to one another was evident. Ultimately, he entered into an agreement with the French government, leaving them the body of his work with the stipulation that it all be exhibited as it had been in his studio.

Three decades have since passed, and I've realized how right Brancusi was to orchestrate the way his work was shown. The integrity and power of his studio has never been duplicated in museums where his works are shown singly on pedestals. Behind the myth of Brancusi the great shaman, there was a visionary showman, an artist who knew exactly what he was after, and exactly how to get it. □