

CONSTANTIN  
BRANCUSI

MASTERPIECES  
FROM  
ROMANIAN  
MUSEUMS

This 2011 publication reproduces and updates Gagosian Gallery's 1990 edition, which was published on the occasion of the exhibition

## BRANCUSI: MASTERPIECES FROM ROMANIAN MUSEUMS

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BRANCUSI'S MASQUERADE:  
SOCIAL STANDING, SELF-IMAGE, AND  
PHOTOGRAPHIC IMPOSTURE

Anna Chave

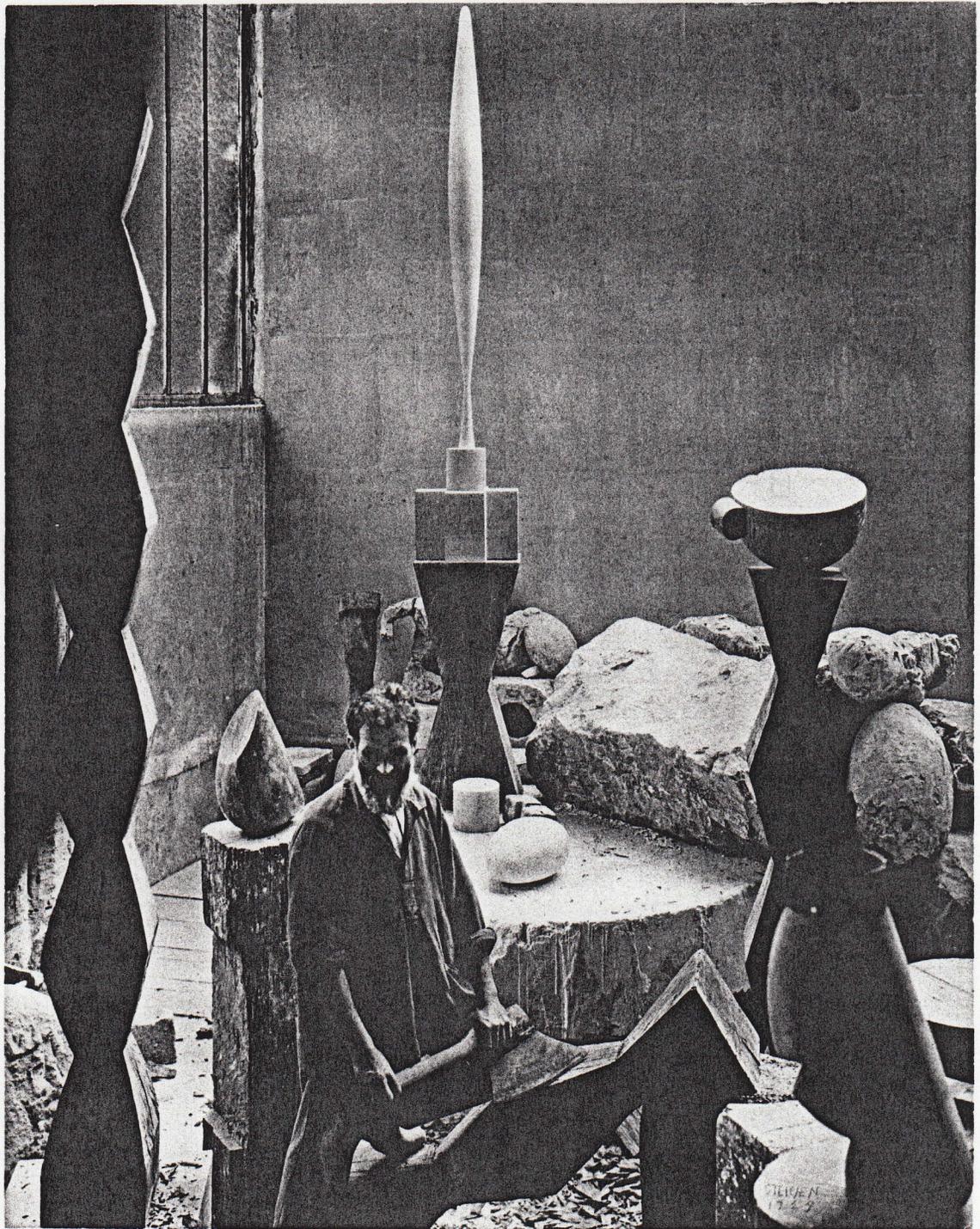


Fig. 13 Brancusi in his studio at 8, impasse Ronsin, 1927, photographed by Edward Steichen.

"Wearing white pajamas and a yellow, gnomelike cap, Brancusi today hobbles about his studio tenderly caring for and communing with the silent host of fish, birds, heads and endless columns which he created. The old man leads the same humble life he led as a peasant boy in Romania before the turn of the century." Thus *Life* magazine conjured Constantin Brancusi for the country that had consistently shown the greatest interest in his art, on the occasion of his first museum retrospective, in New York in 1955.<sup>1</sup> Supporting *Life's* characterization, a photograph by Bernard Moosbrugger [Fig. 15] reveals a bent and bearded septuagenarian surrounded by oddly timeless objects, at once folkish or archaic-looking and modernist. Here was, either/or, a sage gnome tending his unusual treasures or a backward Romanian shepherd dwarfed by a copse of strange trees.

That Brancusi dressed in something like an Eastern European peasant's Sunday garb, posing as an exotic for a mass-market U.S. magazine both was and was not an act of imposture on his part. Unlike the other important avant-gardists of his era, Brancusi alone was born a peasant. For that matter, as an elementary-school dropout he worked intermittently as a (reputedly inept) shepherd.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, Brancusi kept various farm animals (chickens, rabbits, a goose) on the grounds of the Parisian cul-de-sac where his studio stood, housing his various sculpted creatures (birds, fish), which prompted many visitors to ruminate about the artist's rural origins. But since his shepherding days were nearly seven decades behind him when Moosbrugger arrived for this sitting, Brancusi's choice of attire was in a way symbolic, or a form of masquerade.

The role that Brancusi played for Moosbrugger's lens—that of the artist-genius miraculously found in the guise of a lowly shepherd—is a familiar one in the annals of art history epitomized by an apocryphal story about Giotto: that he was discovered by chance by the painter Cimabue while tending his farmer-father's flock, and that he made his immanent genius known by drawing animal forms in the dirt.<sup>3</sup> As Brancusi's life story is usually told, a grocer-restaurateur is generally given credit for discovering his teenage employee's skill in crafting wood—notably a violin fashioned from a crate, as legend has it—and for arranging his full-time enrollment in a regional school of arts and crafts.

Brancusi's process of "social ascension"—the fact that he managed to travel from a remote Romanian hamlet to the epicenter of the cultural life of his time, from menial toil to shaping perhaps the most celebrated sculpture of the twentieth century—did not follow automatically from his being "discovered," of course. It was a testament to his formidable ambition and effort, including an extended course of art schooling. He began taking classes at the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts around 1889 (before his boss noted his talents) from which he graduated in 1898; he studied sculpture at the Bucharest School of Fine Arts until 1902 [Fig. 14], and resumed his training in 1905 at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, reportedly leaving in 1907 only because he had exceeded the student age limit of thirty.<sup>4</sup> Though he had by then undergone roughly fifteen years of art education, the provincial aspirant sought further guidance still, and so secured an assistant's position in Rodin's studio—where he did not stay long, however. During this time, when he was struggling to overcome his past and to demonstrate his bona fides as a fully acculturated European artist, Brancusi certainly did not pose for cameras in peasant "pajamas." Rather, he is typically seen in conventionally tailored

suits, jackets, and uniforms, which were sometimes covered by an artist's smock.

His student work and other early objects included in Gagosian Gallery's 1990 exhibition "Brancusi: Masterpieces from Romanian Museums," are not typically counted among the sculptor's highest achievements. (Arguably excepting the site-specific sculptures at Târgu Jiu, his very best works have never been held in Romanian collections.) The show's title is apropos, however, inasmuch as Brancusi was demonstrating his mastery of the modes of sculpture in which he had been instructed, or which were held up to him as exemplary, in various of the works in question. For example, the 1905 work *Pride* was a *tête d'expression*, a standard exercise in rendering effectively a specific emotional state, and 1908's *Sleep* shows Brancusi displaying his prowess in a Rodinian vocabulary. Perhaps on account of his humble origins Brancusi continued to feel the imperative to prove his proficiency in established sculptural paradigms throughout his career. Thus, a capstone of the studio tours that he regularly gave to visitors (always preferring to show his art in his workplace rather than at a commercial gallery) was the showing of photographs of his academic work.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1907 *Kiss* (also shown at Gagosian), however, we find Brancusi not content to prove his command of academic sculptural languages, but rather he is forging a language of his own. Here is an object—a blocklike glyph of the upper bodies of an embracing couple—that might almost be mistaken for artisanal, if not untutored, carving. Only after acquiring an elaborate battery of artistic skills did Brancusi find the courage to sublimate that knowledge in an alternate concept of what aesthetic achievement might consist of; an alternate expressive vocabulary. And once he admitted to his sculptural practice certain radical acts of simplification, which to some degree correlated with received notions of primitive or "folk" art, Brancusi would reportedly at times reenact the role of a peasant while gradually turning his combined home and studio into something that could pass, in Paris, for a rural Romanian abode. Brancusi saw that the naïf or the exotic held an allure in a bohemian milieu that embraced African masks, say, or vaunted the self-taught painter Henri Rousseau.

Following Brancusi's successful 1926 exhibitions in New York galleries and at a peak of his career, the poet E. E. Cummings wrote a pseudonymous spoof of the sculptor and his reception in local "society"—one that might seem to be a parody *avant la lettre* of *Life's* idyllic characterization: "Ivan Narb remains just as simple and sincere ... as when he was hoeing his father's potatoes on the solitary outskirts of the tiny hamlet of Blurb, in Latvia ... No one realizes better than Mrs. Harry Payne Vanderbilt how unspoiled and naïf this ultramodern Michelangelo has remained... Naturally she decided to give a little dinner for this social lion and invite everyone of intellectual prominence." Narb arrives at the posh affair clad in "a pair of B.V.D.s," apparel that was called a "disappointment [to] many present."<sup>6</sup> But photographs taken during Brancusi's trip to New York, such as an image captured at the Wildenstein Galleries [Fig. 16], generally reveal a well-groomed man impeccably turned out in British tweeds. And photos of the sculptor consorting with moneyed supporters (including his first major patron, John Quinn) typically show him similarly attired, whether in the United States or in France.

In 1949, Brancusi reminisced fondly about the elegant outfits he had sported when traveling by ocean liner to the U.S. and elsewhere: "He said



Fig. 14 Brancusi in the studio of the National School of Fine Arts, Bucharest ("à la Venus de Milo"), ca. 1899-1901.

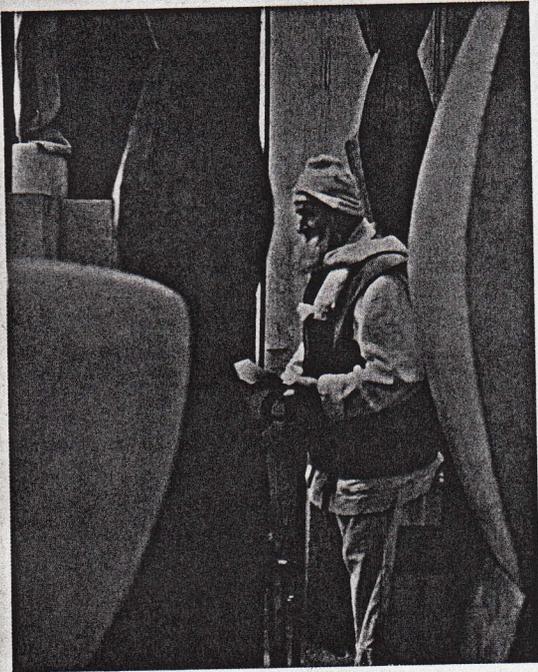


Fig. 15 Brancusi in his studio, reproduced in *Life* magazine, December 5, 1955, with the caption, "A Humble Life of Pure Joy."  
Fig. 16 Brancusi with *Bird in Space*, ca. 1923-24, at the Wildenstein Galleries, New York, 1926.

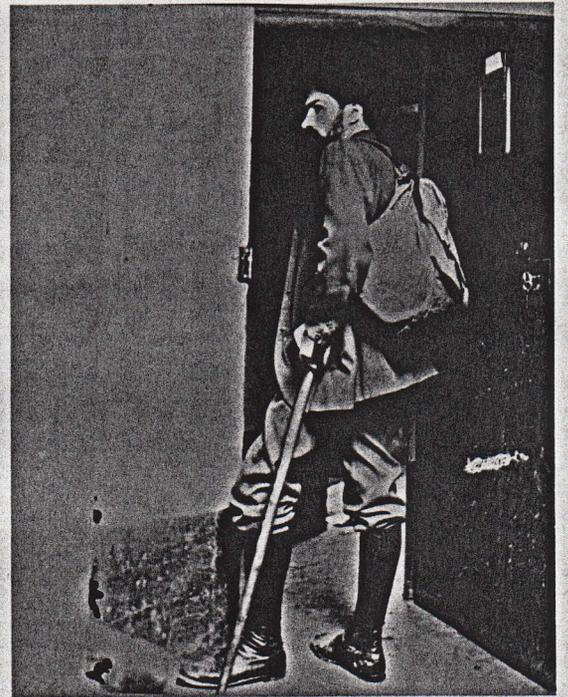
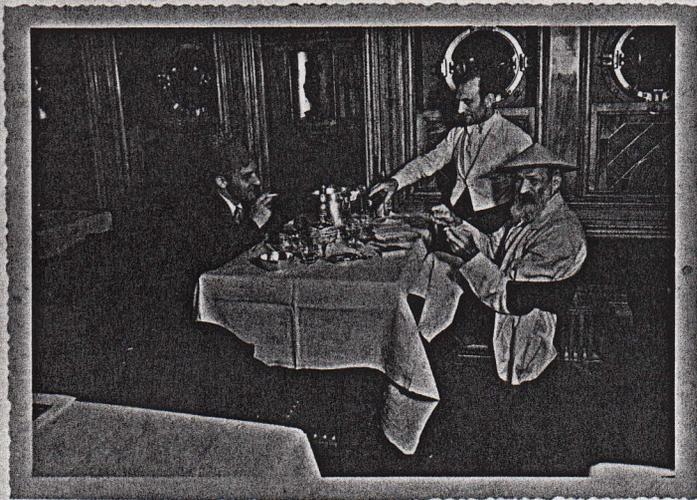


Fig. 17 Brancusi returning from India by boat, ca. 1938.

Fig. 18 Brancusi in a traveling costume, 1904.

he preferred big boats really, the luxury of them was stimulating. He liked the way clothes were brushed and laid out." Contemplating a potential trip to Philadelphia, Brancusi mused that while his "tails" had become moth-eaten, he might yet resurrect his smoking jacket. At the "captain's dinners," the sculptor reportedly recalled, "everyone hesitated to put on paper hats for fear of looking ridiculous. 'And yet,' he said, 'that was the only purpose of those hats.'" <sup>7</sup> A 1938 photo of Brancusi in a Chinese "coolie's" hat, taken during a return voyage from India, confirms his participation in such foolery. [Fig. 17]

"Brancusi loved masquerading," recalled his friend, art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker. In Paris in 1907, for example, this émigré from the Far East—of Europe—attended "a masked ball at the Beaux-Arts... Armed with a musical instrument shaped like an alhorn, with tinkling bells on his arms and legs and a metal strainer on his head, he walked about with comical dignity, sandwiched in between two Oriental rugs, one of which trailed behind him in a long train."<sup>8</sup> Given this penchant for attention-getting costumes, it is not inconceivable that the sculptor showed up in peasant mufti (if not in B.V.D.s) at a patrician New York party. Brancusi seemingly liked Americans in part on account of their relative class-blindness. And in 1914 (that is, in the wake of the notorious Armory show that first made him a sensation with U.S. audiences), critic Henry McBride invoked a vision of social leveling—of "an age whose rallying word is 'liberty' [...] An age in which all barriers are down; an age in which the women wish to be men; every country wishes to be like its neighbor, and an expert is required to tell the difference between an aristocrat and a democrat"—in an appreciative review of Brancusi's first solo show, at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery.<sup>9</sup>

As McBride perceived him, Brancusi was "suave, witty, elegant."<sup>10</sup> To poet William Carlos Williams, by contrast, he seemed to be a "Romanian shepherd." But when (during a 1924 studio visit) Williams remarked to Brancusi about the great "tolerance" of the French, who had let him settle among them, the sculptor reportedly cautioned that such tolerance was only to be found "in a certain class. Among the aristocracy in France you will find a rigidity of manners greater than anywhere in the world."<sup>11</sup> Unlike in the U.S., then, in France—where his art was largely treated during his lifetime as the excrescence of a peasant or, at best, a provincial—Brancusi had something to prove (except, of course, to such broad-minded intimates as Marcel Duchamp).<sup>12</sup> The heiress Peggy Guggenheim related, "Brancusi liked to go to very elegant hotels in France and [arrive] dressed like a peasant, and then order the most expensive things possible."<sup>13</sup> And numerous stories are told of the sculptor spontaneously masquerading as some type of underclass figure in France, such as a "professional street-singer," rewarded with spare change during the final years of World War I.<sup>14</sup> In another anecdote (told in similar terms by various raconteurs), architect David Lewis describes having been unsure of the identity of the "scruffy" man he encountered outside of Brancusi's studio on his first visit, in 1956, as the sculptor initially acted the part of the concierge (thus, incidentally, testing the reach of Lewis's social graces).<sup>15</sup>

When Oscar Chelimsky first met Brancusi at his studio in 1948, "he was wearing a beautiful English tweed suit which, curiously enough, I never saw again; in our subsequent encounters he invariably wore the sculptor's blouse and trousers."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, visitors' accounts normally have Brancusi dressed (practically enough) in work clothes while in his

atelier. These outfits were also costumes of a kind, however, which varied from an un-tucked "sculptor's blouse," which appears in a romantic photograph by Edward Steichen, for instance [Fig. 13], to a butcher's or chef-type cotton coat<sup>17</sup> tucked into sashed pants in a group of self-portraits, ca. 1922 [Fig. 21], to a fishermanlike sweater worn in another series of self-portraits, ca. 1933–34 [Fig. 19], to gray or white coveralls, seen in numerous self-portraits as well as in images from 1946 by Wayne Miller, a Magnum photojournalist [Fig. 20]. For his feet, the sculptor generally favored peasant clogs. (At 1920s Parisian parties with Americans, the music-loving Brancusi "pranced about as the spirit of the jazz age, although at times wearing wooden sabots."<sup>18</sup>) His accustomed studio headgear was either a white-brimmed "canvas beach hat" or a stocking cap, as seen in the *Life* article. Pragmatically, for a man often covered in marble and plaster dust, "his attire was always white" in the memory of many, including sculptor Isamu Noguchi (who served as Brancusi's assistant in 1927).<sup>19</sup> But some reported finding him flamboyantly clad "in a suit that is as yellow as the sun"<sup>20</sup>—clothing color-coordinated, that is, with the signature golden color of his bronzes.<sup>21</sup>

"Costuming oneself as a peasant or fisherman was a common phenomenon" among artists in France, art historian Robert L. Herbert observes. It conveyed "a wish to associate oneself with the working class not the moneyed bourgeoisie"; for artists to masquerade in this way "had (and has) many shadings, from the preposterous to the heartfelt statement of solidarity... In the latter case, I think of Pissarro's and Cézanne's country/hunters' dress, and Léger's pullovers."<sup>22</sup> When Brancusi and the poet Raymond Radiguet took off for Corsica on a lark in the mid-1920s, "they fitted themselves out in fishermen's clothes for their return to Paris."<sup>23</sup> About a decade later, Brancusi photographed himself in a fisherman-type sweater and trousers [Fig. 19] with a (surfboardlike) marble *Fish* standing just behind his shoulders, suggesting a pair of wings, and an *Endless Column* appearing to grow from the top of his head in a telling extension of his very spine. By the latter compositional device, as well as by the stark frontality and centrality of his pose, Brancusi violated some elementary precepts of photographic portraiture, and his photographer friends sometimes derided his skill with a camera (not to mention as a printer who blithely embraced technical imperfection).<sup>24</sup>

Within the confines of his studio, Brancusi could, and mostly did, prevent others from taking pictures, whether of himself or of his work, a ban that eased only late in his life, when he largely ceased both sculpting and photographing. While Brancusi had principally used his cameras to record his atelier and its contents, he also (unusually) made many portraits of himself there, typically clad in workers' garb and posed just so, as if at work on his art or simply at leisure. In his self-portrait from ca. 1922 [Fig. 21], for instance, we find a somber figure artfully framed by and sandwiched between some old timber and a hunk of stone with the tools of his métier laid at hand (but his hands are held behind his back, however). Thus we have a portrait of the artist intent on mustering a vision with which to transform his raw materials—a vision incipient in the zigzag outline sketched on one piece of timber.

Brancusi's self-images generally appear quite calculated or staged, but the few professionals who managed to photograph him tended to even more theatrical portrayals. Steichen, for instance, shot from a high angle—the view of the Almighty on the Chosen, say, who assumes in this

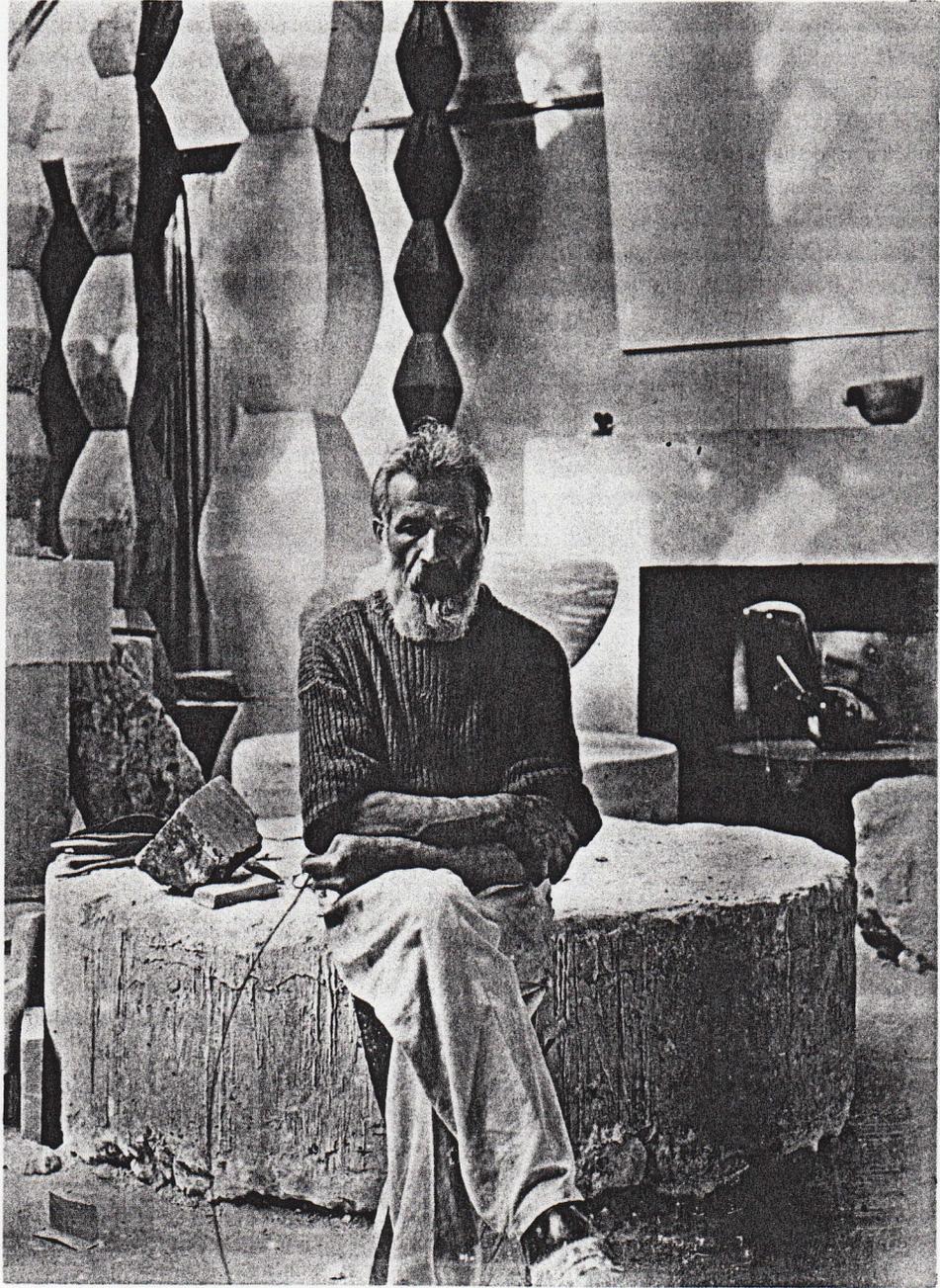


Fig. 19 Self-portrait of the artist in his studio, 11, impasse Ronsin, ca. 1933-1934.

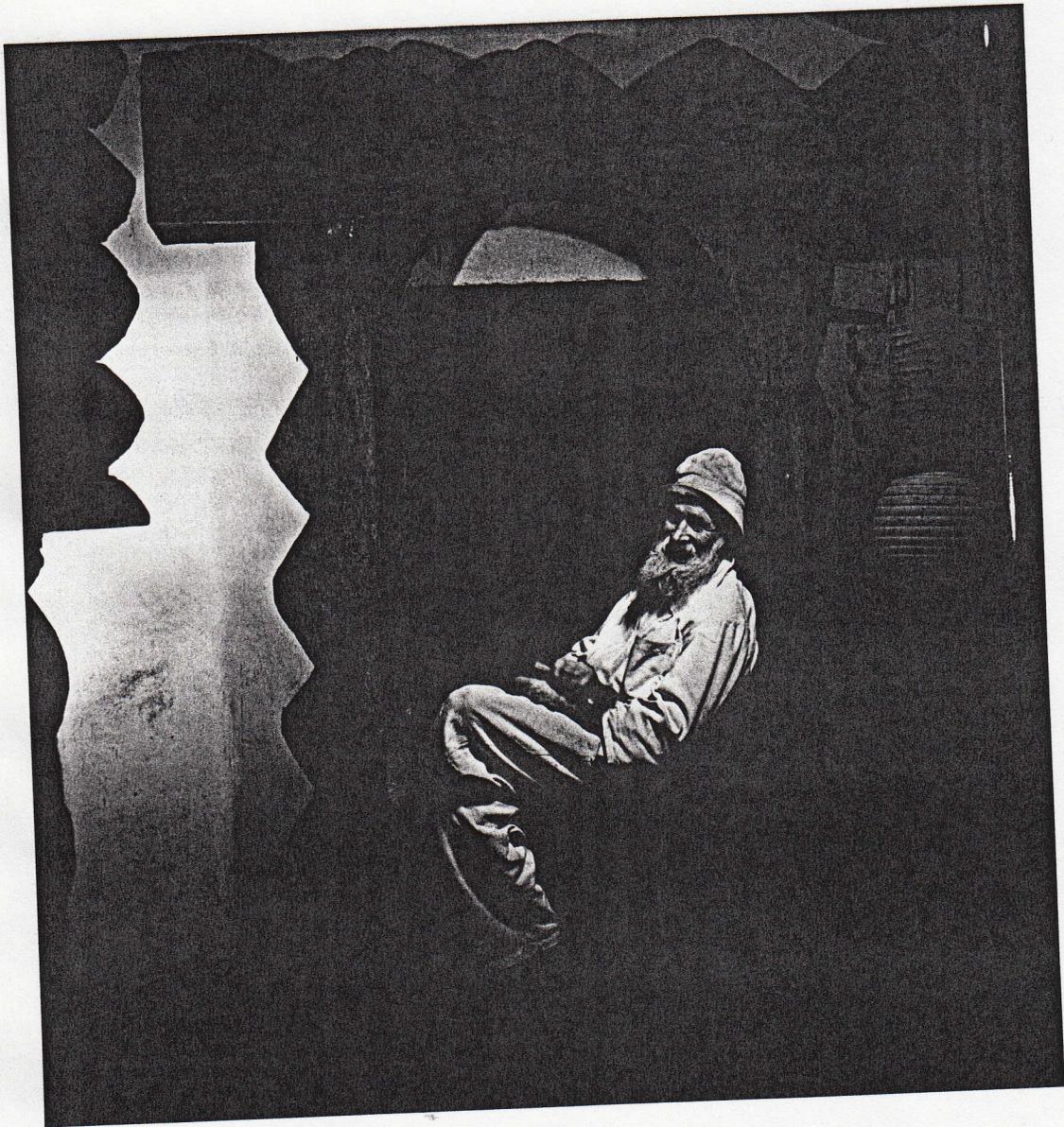


Fig. 20 Brancusi in his studio at impasse Ronsin, 1946.

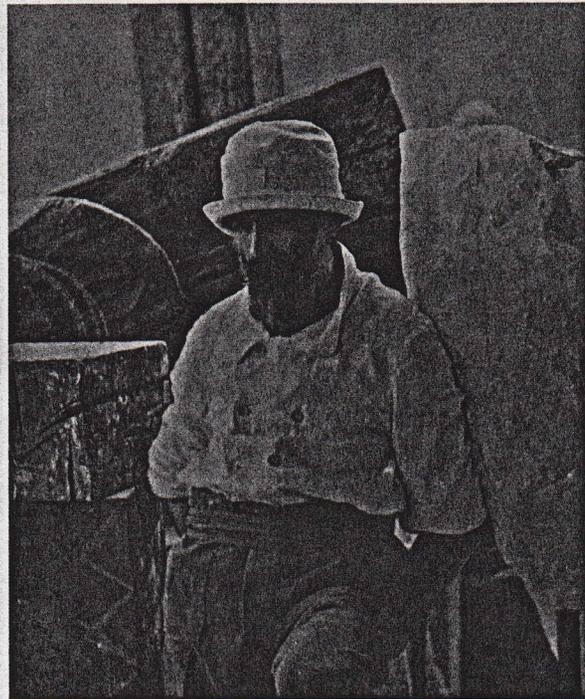


Fig. 21 Self-portrait of the artist in his studio, 8, impasse Ronsin, ca.1922.

instance the guise of an inspired carpenter pausing in his labors in the half-light. And Miller's masterful, tack-sharp image of the sculptor tucked gnome-like into a decoratively framed arch is elegantly, dramatically lit. By contrast, Brancusi typically positioned his camera at eye-level, as the "gaze" of an equal; sometimes left the lens slightly unfocused, and normally relied on available, natural lighting, whose permutations he experimented with endlessly. (In his high-ceilinged studio, the light mostly fell from above, creating flattering effects for human and sculptural subjects alike.)

Brancusi's long-running exercise in masquerade variously emerges, in sum, as an attempt to inhabit, to remake, and to challenge certain social stereotypes. Yet devotion to self-styling was not conventionally the province of a manly man (as the sculptor seemingly conceived of himself), but of the dandy or the feminine. "The masculine self has traditionally been held to be inherently opposed to the kind of deceit and dissembling characteristic of the masquerade," Harry Brod noted.<sup>25</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, for that matter, the masquerade is an undertaking that women are tacitly compelled to perform; thus, in Joan Riviere's classic 1929 account, a woman with stereotypically masculine professional ambitions shrewdly dresses and acts in hyperfeminine ways to deter male apprehension of her designs on a masculine domain.<sup>26</sup> While Brancusi was not, of course, a member of the "second sex," he was vulnerable to being subordinated in his adopted homeland on class and other grounds, so he may have acted to cloak his outside ambitions by assuming, or foregrounding, a distinctly humble wardrobe. Only at the conclusion of an eminently eventful, accomplished, and urbane life, however, did Brancusi conspicuously perform for the camera in a role that he had actually abandoned early on. By dressing as an archetypal peasant for *Life's* American readership, Brancusi not only took ownership of a fiction that counted as a kind of elitist slur in the socially hidebound context of France—"once a peasant, always a peasant"—but he also represented something romantic to the more mobile, urbanized United States (where peasantry remained a foreign concept).

For several decades Brancusi elected to sculpt certain subjects repeatedly, with more or less slight variations—his birds, "eggs," the Endless Columns, *The Kiss*—objects that can seem, paradoxically, at once archaic and modern. In other words, the sculptor came to cherish a vision of modernity or futurity that bore a resemblance to a halcyon past, one reminiscent of his early life in Romania as he came to idealize it.<sup>27</sup> Though he had once been so desperate to leave Romania that he (legendarily) walked much of the way to Paris, it suited Brancusi in the end to assume a role many had long reserved for him: the part, however incredible, of a simple yet sage soul whose life never changed, but instead—like his art—somehow transcended time.

1. "Great Recluse: Brancusi and Art Come from Hiding," *Life*, December 5, 1955. The exhibition premiered at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
2. For tales of young Constantin deserting his flock, see Barbu Brezianu, "The Beginnings of Brancusi," *Art Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Fall 1965): 15–16.
3. This narrative trope was (first?) identified as such in Ernst Kris, "The Image of the Artist" (1934), in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 68–69.
4. See the chronology in Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, Ann Temkin, *Constantin Brancusi 1876–1957* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 372–74. The term "social ascension" comes from Kris, as above, 69.
5. Regarding the ritual of the studio tour, see Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 274–84.
6. Gwendolyn Orloff (pseud. E. E. Cummings), "Ivan Narb: Abstract Sculptor of the Cosmic" (1927) in George J. Firmage, ed., *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. (New York: October House, 1965), 184–85. B.V.D. was a trademarked brand of men's one-piece long underwear.
7. John Goodwin, "Visiting Brancusi," March 15, 1949, unpublished typescript, Archives of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, n.p.
8. Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi*, trans. Maria Jolas and Anne Leroy (New York: George Braziller, 1959), 194. As a longtime friend of Marcel Duchamp aka Rosé Sélavy, Brancusi also liked to relate his adventures of dressing as a woman during carnival time in Romania; see *ibid.*
9. Henry McBride, "Brancusi," March 22, 1914, in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride*, ed. Daniel Catton Rich (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 57.
10. *Ibid.*, 56.
11. William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), 196.
12. When Brancusi showed a *Bird in Space* at the Salon des Tuileries in 1928, for example, prominent critic Louis Vauxcelles derided not only the "long copper cigar... precariously poised on a pile of paving blocks," but also those who valued it: "Apparently, North America is wild about objects of this sort. I fear for Monsieur Brancusi that in the land of Houdon, Rude, Barye, Carpeaux, Rodin, Maillol, and Despiou, he will remain an unsung hero!" Review in *Excelsior*, May 1928, cited in Pontus Hulten, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, *Brancusi* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 187.
13. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict* (New York: Universe Books, 1979), 211.
14. Giedion-Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi*, 194.
15. David Lewis, "Preface," to Edith Balas, *Brancusi and His World* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2008), xiii.
16. Oscar Chelimsky, "A Memoir of Brancusi," *Arts* (June 1958): 19.
17. Fred Dennis, Romy Golan, Robert Herbert, Lynda Klich, Kenneth Silver, Valerie Steele, and above all, Emily Braun have my gratitude for their astute answers to my queries about the distinctive garment worn in this self-portrait. (Brancusi considered himself an outstanding cook.)
18. Statement by Robert McAlmon, in McAlmon and Kay Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together: 1920–1930* (London: Hogarth, 1984), 112.
19. Isamu Noguchi, "Recollections of Brancusi" (Foreword), in Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1987), vii.
20. Dorothy Adlow, "Brancusi," *Drawing & Design*, vol. 2, no. 8 (Feb. 1927): 37. Jeanne Robert Foster noted finding Brancusi in "leather sabots overalls—yellowish coat" when she and her companion John Quinn dined at the artist's studio on July 29, 1921. Diary entry, Foster-Murphy Collection, New York Public Library, Box 4.
21. One visitor remarked of the rigorous color-coordination evident in Brancusi's environment: "the grey and white and yellow of his sculpture, the grey and white and yellow of the walls and cushions and bed cover and the faded daffodils... the only thing in the room that was not grey or white or yellow was the bright blue package of Gitanes from which he chain smoked." Goodwin, "Visiting Brancusi," n.p.
22. Robert L. Herbert, e-mail communication to the author, June 26, 2010. Brancusi was friendly with Léger—and with Braque, who has been called "an early exponent of proletarian dandyism... in the fastidiously chosen worker's clothes which he would always favor: Norman peasants' ties of narrow black cord, nonchalantly knotted; denim washed and faded to just the right faint tint and texture; caps and hats of all kinds worn with casual panache," per John Richardson with Marilyn McCully, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. 2 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 62. Thanks to Emily Braun for this reference.
23. Statement by McAlmon, in McAlmon and Boyle, *Being Geniuses Together*, 116.
24. See Friedrich Teja Bach, "Brancusi and Photography," in Bach, et al., *Constantin Brancusi*, 312–19, for a useful introduction to this topic.
25. Harry Brod, "Masculinity as Masquerade," in *The Masculine Masquerade*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 13.
26. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), reprinted in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35–44.
27. Some scholars of Romanian heritage have argued for the explicitly Romanian valences to Brancusi's practice (see especially Balas, *Brancusi and Rumanian Folk Traditions*), if in stronger terms than are generally accepted by other Brancusians.