
TRACKING THE SAINT OF MONTPARNASSE. 150 YEARS OF CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUȘI

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Abstract: *The present article represents an homage to Constantin Brancusi, the sculptor of Romanian origin, who left the citizens of the town Targu Jiu the great Monumental Ensemble. It is an overview of his road to success with reference to Paris and some important moments in his life. The article is mainly based on two books, namely, The Saint of Montparnasse of Peter Neagoe and Brancusi of Ionel Jianu, as well as on the confessions of an art addict in the person of Peggy Guggenheim. Comparatively to the value of Brancusi’s legacy, I consider the attention we pay to him as insignificant.*

Keywords: *Brâncuși, sculpture, sculptor, Paris, monumental ensemble*

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Motto:

*Don’t look for hidden formulas and mysteries. I give you pure joy.
Look at my sculptures until you really see them. Only those close to God have seen them.*
Constantin Brâncuși quoted by Ionel Jianu [Jianu: 2003, 19]

1. Introduction

Many were those who wrote about Brâncuși (or Brancusi, as the French people called him). Among these, two deserve special attention. They were Ionel Jianu, Stark with his real name, and Peter Neagoe. Both emigrated at a certain point of their lives. Yet both knew Brancusi. What other trustful sources, than people who knew the man and sculptor, Brâncuși, who defied his master, Rodin? Who can write better about a person, except for that who knows him and lived close to him at a certain moment? These are Peter Neagoe and Ionel Jianu and, of course, the confessions of Peggy Guggenheim.

Peter Neagoe did not write about Romanians, but he wrote for foreigners about Romanian people. (Curelar: 2010, 67).



Even though no one can say he knows a person better than anyone, because that person has an inner life, Ionel Jianu and Peter Neagoe are an exception. Peter Neagoe wrote his book *The Saint of Montparnasse* from the viewpoint of a former colleague at the School of Belle Arte in Bucharest and a close friend of the *father of modern sculpture*, (Ioan Aurel Popa, Preface, 5), Constantin Brâncuși.

In his *Preface* to his book, Ioan Aurel Popa quotes the English aesthete, (Ioan Aurel Popa, Preface, 9) John Ruskin in saying that peoples write their biographies in three books. They are the book of deeds, the book of words and the book of art. Yet none of them can be clearly understood without reading the other two. Of the three books the most trustworthy is the book of art.

Ionel Jianu Stark, the other biographer (though the first if we judge after the year of publication – 1963, 6 years after the sculpturer’s death in Paris) declares as the sculptor’s birthday 21 of February, though the official day is 19. As an excuse, the biographer puts it that the day was the one the birth certificate was issued (Jianu: 1963, p.79). So, Constantin Brâncuși’s official date of birth is 19 of February, village Hobîța, Pestișani commune in Oltenia, the country of outlaws. Young Brancusi carves his first works in iced snow, according to the memories collected by Jianu. The biography written by Jianu refers to facts thoroughly documented and terms pertaining to the domain sculpture, like “meplat”, “basorelief” or “relief”.

Besides the two biographies, I laid my hands on *The Confessions of an Art Addict*, written by Peggy Guggenheim.

2. Life and Work in Paris

I have no intention to reiterate the biographical information on the great sculpture. Not even to remind the reader that among his first works in Romania were “Ecorșeul”, commissioned by Dimitrie Gerota. The anatomical model was then acquired by Belle Arte School in Bucharest aimed to serve as a model for the Romanian sculptors who learned anatomy. Nor that the same Dimitrie Gerota found Brancusi another order to execute: the bust of general physician, Carol Davilla, the founder of the Romanian medical education. The bust is located now in the courtyard of the Central Military Hospital in Bucharest.

I intend to speak about Brancusi in Paris and about how he reached “from rags to riches” to quote Benjamin Franklin. The desire to leave his native village and Romania was hidden in his soul. But for his peasant’s perseverance and resilience, Constantin Brancusi would have never succeeded in walking his way to Paris. His way to Paris through Europe was long and tiresome. To earn his living all along, Brancusi got petty jobs, sometimes in questionable places. It was difficult indeed, but the image of the wonder city was more powerful than the obstacles he met.

Leaving from Bucharest for Paris, the sculptor had short stops among which his native village, where he took his goodbyes from his mother and especially grandmother who was his rock during childhood. Then he passed the border to Austria, and it took him a yearlong to reach Viena (Neagoe: 1977, p. 47).

In Viena, Brancusi had a fruitful experience. He was delighted to see the exhibition dedicated to Rodin, the sculptor, Brancusi mostly admired. Thus, the Romanian future great sculptor was impressed by Rodin’s work. Brancusi considered it full of life, expression and feeling. One of Rodin’s sculptures drew Brancusi’s immediate attention. It was “Man walking”. It was for the first time he saw such an endeavour without a head - a face to express something - embodying such a powerful idea. In Viena, Brancusi attended some drawing lessons, which were useful to the future sculptor.

After Viena episode, he went on his voyage, reaching Munchen. There was a revolt of artists there and saw change everywhere. Despite all these, he never changed his idea regarding Rodin’s superiority.



Passing the border to Switzerland, he reached a small town and from there to Zurich, where he got sick of typhoid fever. The sickness delayed his journey a few months. During this time, he was taken care of by the nuns in a hospital. There, like in all the places he had a stop, he carved small wooden objects. While in hospital, a patient from a nearby bed gave Brancusi a book. It was “Enlighten Isis”, a book in French, which Brancusi used as a textbook to learn French. The author of that book was Mme Blavatsky. In the same book, while learning French, Brancusi found the answer to an existential question, whether the egg or the bird was the first. And the answer was, the cosmic egg. The book stirred Brancusi’s imagination and even more brought to the forefront something that was to accompany him all along: the egg or bird. As his entire work was full of birds and eggs.

The above-mentioned book taught him about Anima Mundi – Nirvana. At this point, I can establish a connection between the Romanian sculptor and the Irish poet W. B. Yeats. The connection is in the common interest for mystery and mysticism.

On the other hand, Brâncuși’s confidence in Blavatsky’s book became even greater when the universe sent him a guardian angel in Mihai Romanov’s person, who helped him to reach Paris and even more.

In an April afternoon, Brâncuși finally got to his destination - Paris. The air felt fresh, not only because it was spring, but because a new life was awaiting him. The wind of change delighted him and brought him joy. Walking on the streets of Paris, Brancusi gave a thought to the people in Bucharest strolling in the streets at a leisure pace, with nothing else to do. While those in Paris, were walking in a hurry as if they had something important to do. Then, Brancusi told to himself, there were too many holidays in Romania, which is true to these days.

The helping hand of Mihail Romanov gave Brancusi the name of another helping friend, Alexandru Dragan, who had reached Paris 6 months earlier by train. When Brancusi told him that it took 2 years to him to get to Paris, Alexandru pointed out that the long voyage was a pilgrimage for him to get to his Mecca-Paris, the sacred city and perhaps, he himself was a saint (Neagoie: 1977, 52). Dragan also let Brancusi know that *ecorșeul* (anatomical model) made him famous among sculptors (*ibidem*).

Alexandru Dragan found him a place to live, a room close to the sky, which was in the same building where he lived. The concierge of the building gave Brancusi all the information he needed (told him where to buy milk and bread). She reminded Brancusi of his grandmother, which made him long for his native home. Nonetheless, he told to himself that he was in the place he wanted to be – in Paris. It was 1904 and life was about to begin for him (Neagoie: 1977, 54), with good and bad, but mostly good things to happen.

3. Women in Brâncuși’s life

Peggy Guggenheim was an important art collector. Her father, who disappeared in the shipwreck of Titanic, left her a huge legacy, which Peggy destined to buy works of art and open exhibitions. At a certain moment in her life, while in Paris, she knew Constantin Brancusi. The relation between them had to do with her hobby, collecting artists and their works.

Many were those who said on the 19 of February 2026, when there were 150 years since Brancusi’s birthday, that Peggy Guggenheim was the muse of Brancusi. Out of pure curiosity, I acquired the book *The Confessions of an Art Addict* by Peggy Guggenheim, translated into Romanian by Ciprian Șiulea.

The book contains fleeting references to the Romanian sculptor. On pages 83 – 85 of the Romanian translation, I found a longer fragment on Brancusi. Peggy Guggenheim called him her friend saying also that he dedicated his life to his work and that he had given up women for his work. She



told the reader that Brancusi visited India and that he placed three "Păsări în spațiu" in the Indore Maharajah: one in white marble, one in black marble and one in bronze.

In the same fragment, Peggy Guggenheim informs the reader that Brancusi returned to Romania, where the government (local authorities) asked him to carve "public monuments" (Guggenheim: 2025, 84). The readers also can find out that Brancusi was very proud for this. Peggy also confesses that she herself wanted to acquire one of the birds in space, but she couldn't because Brancusi asked a much too high price: 4000\$. Finally, she fulfilled her desire just when because the Germans were close to Paris, and she left the city.

Peggy Guggenheim speaks in her book about Brancusi's workshop, which could be found in a dead-end street; about Brancusi himself "half peasant, half god" (ibidem) and of course, about the women in his life, better said their absence. She says he sacrificed his life for his art, giving up women.

Peter Neagoe also speaks about the women in the sculptor's life, when the sculptor was younger. There was Marthe, who worked at *Le Lapin Agile*, who sometimes cooked for Brancusi and a model. She embodied the peasants' life he longed for. She was the beginning, when Brancusi was unknown artist. And there was the love of his life, Elaine, for us is enough to know, just Elaine. Brancusi had a crush on her and together lived a beautiful love story. The sculptor was commissioned to do some works due to Elaine and thus, the period of success and money began for Brancusi. She was like Peggy, an art and artists collector. She organized joyous parties for them to meet.

But Brâncuși never forget his art and dreams – his works were to represent the beginning of modern art, where he let the audience to watch his work with their soul.

4. Brancusi's Legacy in Targu Jiu

We cannot speak about the great sculptor without saying a word about his legacy in Targu Jiu. Ionel Jianu's book, *Brancusi*, dedicates a chapter to the sculptor's most important work. We, the citizens of Targu Jiu, are lucky enough to admire the assembly every day and to be grateful that Brancusi put the town on the map.

Ionel Jianu (Jianu: 2003, 69) points out that the Monumental Ensemble in Targu Jiu is the last and magistral work of Brancusi. At this point, it is important to mention that the National League of Women of Gorj was an important catalyst. Thus, on 20 October 1937, the National League of Women from Gorj, in its address no. 6330, informed the City Hall of Târgu Jiu that it had decided to donate to the city "a column and a stone portal, work of the great sculptor Brâncuși, who in this way pays tribute to his native county" (2). The above-mentioned article tells us about the League's intention, quoting from the relevant dossier 'The creation of a street to be named "Calea Eroilor", a path which will start from the area around the Jiu River, passing through the public garden, and go as far as the present soldiers' barracks [...] At the beginning of this path, the portal mentioned above will be placed, and on the promontory near the soldiers' barracks, the column of gratitude will be raised, thus linking the memory of the places for which the Heroes of Gorj fought, with the idea of endless gratitude symbolized by the column". Interestingly, the league backs up its words with deeds. Thus, the league will provide the sum of 750,000 lei to pay for the expropriations in question. The financial contribution of the Women's League of Gorj does not stop there. The amount with which the league backs up its words amounts to 2. 200.000. With this sum it is intended to pay for the monuments, the column and the portal, but at the same time the league assumes responsibility for the construction of the church of Holly Apostles on the street dedicated to the deeds of valour of the heroes of Gorj.

After doing some research (6), I learned from a publication for tourists in our county, I find that the church of Holly Apostles was built on the site of another church dating from 1777. The building was rebuilt between 1927 and 1938 and inaugurated at the same time as the Brâncușian monumental complex. The neo-Byzantine style painting was executed in fresco by the painter Iosif Keber from



Gorj, and the work was closely supervised by the architects Ion Antonescu, Anghel Păunescu and Iulius Doppellreiter. Nothing to say, a monument to the church itself, but was it really Brâncuși's wish that it should not come between Calea Eroilor and the Column?

The above-mentioned league understood "that the city of Târgu Jiu must always respect the donation in the form in which it was made". On the back of the address we find the holographic decision of the Municipal Council no 151 of 12 November 1937 (3) accepting the League's donation.

Reading further in the section dedicated to the commemorative monument in Jianu's book, I found out that the idea of the ensemble had in fact belonged to the great Brâncuși, only that it could only become reality with the help of the political forums of the time. And then he used the opportunity to leave us, the people of Târgu Jiu, an unparalleled legacy.

According to Jianu, the Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu is made up of four parts: the Table of Silence, the Gate of the Kiss, the Endless Column and, absolutely amazing, the Path of the Heroes, which starts from the banks of the Jiu River and runs from one end of the city to the other, ending in the oval square where the Endless Column is located. Thus conceived, this ensemble brings together three arts: sculpture, architecture and town planning and can rightly be considered the most important monument, an homage to the heroes dead in the First World War (Jianu: *ibidem*).

The author also mentions that for a quarter of a century after its inauguration in 1938, the monument was ignored by critics, and the first mentions are found in *Brâncuși's Introduction à la sculpture* in 1976. The story of the ensemble begins like this. Brancusi had long been thinking about a monument dedicated to the heroes of the First World War, which the Gorjeanu does not mention. Jianu says the project had been in Brâncuși's mind since 1922. He had started drawing the gateposts, then engraving the motif of the kiss. He then carved several versions of the Endless Column.

In 1935, Milița Pătrașcu, a former apprentice of Brâncuși in 1920, invited Arethie Tătărăscu, the wife of Gheorghe Tătărăscu, then President of the Council of Ministers, to present a project for a monument dedicated to the heroes of the First World War to be erected in Târgu Jiu. Jianu's book gives us an extract from Brâncuși's letter to Milița Pătrașcu, dated 11 February 1935, in which he expressed the desire to see again the local village. In the same letter, Brancusi thanked Mrs Tatarescu for giving him the opportunity to fulfil his wish, to leave to the citizens of Targu Jiu the Monumental ensemble.

So it was Brâncuși's wish to create a monument to remember the sacrifice of the Romanian soldiers, a wish that could not have been realized without the contribution of the National League of Women from Gorj, led by Arethie Tătărăscu, wife of Gheorghe Tătărăscu, President of the Council of Ministers, and therefore without the contribution of politics. But, I think it is less important to point out who and how, rather the fact that an important monument was to be raised, made by the great Brâncuși himself.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that it took another two years for the Brâncuși projects to be accepted. Presenting a photographic montage of the column to the League Committee, Brâncuși was met with disappointment. Arethie herself would have preferred the Rooster for this monument (Jianu, *ibidem*). Brâncuși, however, intransigently stuck to his opinion that only the Endless Column could express a monument in memory of the fallen dead (which the women of the League considered a huge pillar similar to those of the houses in the area of Oltenia).

On 12 November 1937, the Communal Council of Târgu Jiu approved Brâncuși's project and he himself supervised the work. But he also makes a change. He includes in the project Masa Tăcerii, which originally did not exist. The gate marks the entrance and ends with the Column of Gratitude. Thus, in Brâncuși's design, the three component parts were supposed to be on the same axis. But there was one impediment, Jianu reports: the Church of the Holy Apostles. I wonder? Was it really Brâncuși's will that there should not be a church in the Heroes' Way to infinity? A church that,



according to Christian doctrine, would perform a memorial service for the departed of this world? So says Jianu:

But there was an impediment. In the middle of this alley is the Church of the Saints Apostles, which stands in the way of the perspective between the gate and the column. So Brâncuși took action, approached Arethie Tătărăscu and obtained a promise to move the church to another location. [...] But when Brâncuși returned in October 1938 for the inauguration of the new complex, to his great disappointment he discovered that nothing had been done. The church had not been moved, the railway had not been diverted, and the trees that were supposed to surround the column had not been planted. (Jianu: 74).

5. Conclusions

It is not totally wrong to end my essay in paraphrasing Ionel Jianu's conclusions to his biography about the great sculptor (Jianu: 1963, 81) and besides, it is truer than ever. Now when the civilization is threatened in a myriad of ways, Brancusi's work offers us an example of a vivid work expressing the joy of being and reveals the spiritual dimension of reality.

Constantin Brancusi started his carving career when he was a child, and his raw material was snow. Then, as a young man in Hobița, he learned to carve wood with a local craftsman.

But his hidden dream was to leave his native village. First, he went to Bucharest at Belle Arte School. During Bucharest period, he carved two important works, which still exist: the anatomical model and the bust of Carol Davila.

Then, there as Paris period, where he studied with his esteemed master, Rodin, then the apprentice surpassed his master. Brancusi surpassed Rodin. Along his way, Brancusi met some women, who, marked his existence.

The last most important work was the monumental ensemble in Targu Jiu. We cannot fathom its value in money, but as an important legacy left to the town Targu Jiu.



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