

LBRIS

We know
books

ALEXANDRU BUICAN

BRANCUSI

A LEGENDARY LIFE



ACTAEON BOOKS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

(9)

PROLOGUE: A SENSATIONAL TRIAL AND A FAMOUS ARTIST

(17)

Book One

THE VIOLIN

1876-1904

1 Hobita 1876-1888

(27)

2 Craiova 1889-1894

(39)

3 "In Craiova I was born again." 1894-1898

(49)

4 Bucharest 1898-1904

(61)

Book Two

THE LONG ROAD

1904-1907

5 Paris, France 1904-1905

(91)

6 École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts 1905-1906

(105)

7 In Rodin's shadow 1907

(121)

Book THREE
"ONE LONG SEQUENCE OF MIRACLES"
1908-1918

8 Friends 1908-1912
(147)

9 Fame 1913-1914
(193)

10 War 1914-1918
(233)

Book FOUR
"LES ANNEES FOLLES"
1919-1929

11 "Americans in Paris" 1919-1921
(289)

12 "Dinner at Brancusi" 1922-1925
(341)

13 "Ton Ton" 1926
(415)

14 "How They Know it's «A Bird»
And Are Sure It Is «Art»?" 1926-1929
(475)

Book FIVE
"THE UPROTED TREE"
1930-1939

15 The studio 1930-1934
(521)

16 Endless column 1935-1937
(565)

17 Indore 1937-1939
(605)

Book Six
"I CAN'T DELIVER MY SOUL IN MY OWN CONTRY"
1940-1957

18 War again 1940-1945
(635)

19 French citizen 1946-1951
(665)

20 "I'm not expecting anyone any more" 1952-1957
(705)

Posthumous destiny "You don't know what i'm leaving you here"
(747)

Portrait "I am a prince paysan"
(758)

NOTES
(763)

Bibliography
(825)

INDEX of PERSONS
(833)

PROLOGUE

A SENSATIONAL TRIAL AND A FAMOUS ARTIST



One day in the late autumn of 1927, more precisely on November 22, at the U.S. General Consulate in Paris, a rather short man presents himself to deliver a deposition to serve in a New York trial. He is Constantin Brancusi, the sculptor. In this deposition, Brancusi says that his sculpture, *The Bird in Space*, which he has but recently sold to his American friend Edward Steichen, is a work of art, an original one, of which no other copy exists.

The trial taking place in New York at this very moment, known in the press as *Brancusi vs. United States*, is of the oddest nature. The sculptor, supported by his American friends and admirers, has sued the U.S. Customs for having classified his dearest work as a mere "industrial object." Steichen, who had bought the piece of art from Brancusi for six hundred dollars, found himself taxed 40% of the price under a law that has very little to do with art.

As a result, only a few days ago, in the big American metropolis, inside the U.S. Customs Court building, whose windows from the 9th-floor look over the Hudson River, has unfolded a real drama of modern art, with characters so colorful reminding of Hollywood productions. There, *The Bird in Space*, that piece of bronze, polished by the sculptor with his maddening patience, under the juridical name "Evidence no. 1," has made the object of arguments between the Brancusi's and U.S. Custom lawyers. "What makes you call it a bird, does it look a bird to you?" Judge Byron C. Waite asked its owner Steichen, who answer: "It does not look like a bird but I feel that it is a bird, it is characterized by the artist as a bird."¹ So the reporters present in Court, drown the conclusion—printed with capital letters on the pages of their newspapers—that "Art, it Seems, is Art if One Thinks it is."² No verdict has been reached. The trial has been postponed for the moment, awaiting the deposition, which Brancusi is now handing in at the U.S. General Consulate, requested by the lawyers working on his behalf in New York.

Not only is this trial odd, but it is also totally unprecedented. Using esthetic arguments, Brancusi's lawyers must prove that Brancusi's work is a piece of art, maybe even a bird. Thus it is appropriately categorized as the piece of art that it is and consequently free of all Customs duties. On the other hand, the U.S. Customs defense must prove that the work is not unique but an item of mass production and that its polishing isn't the result of handwork by the artist, for any worker could do it using mechanical tools and techniques.

In his deposition, Brancusi answers point by point all the questions raised in Court:

I have conceived and created [*The Bird in Space*] in my studio in Paris, during the years one thousand nine hundred and five and one thousand nine hundred twenty-six...

It is an original work of art, and I am currently busy creating the first reproduction of this bronze...

I have sketched the first idea of this bronze in the year one thousand nine hundred and ten, and from then on I have thoroughly thought it over and studied it. I have conceived it as a bronze creation and I have molded a copy out of gypsum. Afterwards I have given it to a foundry, together with the formula of the bronze mixture and other necessary indications. When the raw molded piece was brought to me, I had to cover the venting holes and the interior one, in order to adjust the various defects and to polish the bronze with files and fine

emery paper. All these have been handmade by my own person; this artistic process takes a very long time and is the same as starting over the creation of the work. I have let no one else make any polishing operation, as the subject of the bronze was a special creation of mine and nobody, except for myself, could have finalized it satisfyingly...

There is no doubt that the bronze is a unique piece of work, as it is the only one I have made with this subject, and its first replica is not yet finished—I also state that no similar bronze exists; the sold bronze is the original one...

The polishing I have hand-made myself. It would have been impossible to do it with the aid of a brush or any other polishing device...³

Nothing is more repulsive to this artist than scandal. And yet it would seem that scandal is always and everywhere pursuing him. And scandal, much to his annoyance, has increased his fame. A few years ago, at Le Salon des Indépendants, one of his works had been removed, having been accused of "pornography." This interference of the authorities in esthetic matters gave rise to the solidarity of artists around the sculptor. Artists and many French public figures signed a protest, and Brancusi's work was afterward replaced on its pedestal at the Grand Palais, that giant glass exhibition hall.

But let us take a closer look at the man. He wears a beard that is now almost entirely white, only around the mustache, a few black hairs being still noticeable. The beard has yellow blotches around the mouth, showing the heavy smoker that the artist is. The sculptor may appear older than he is (he has turned fifty this year) because of the whiteness of his beard, but if we take a closer look, we can see that without the beard, he may even look younger than his age. Brancusi's black eyes have an intense light, but it is the childish look, filled with cordiality, though not lacking a certain irony, that impresses us. He is dressed according to the latest fashion, but one may notice that the sculptor is not comfortable in this city outfit. Out of the artist's whole appearance comes a certain exotic air within Paris's ambiance.

If we follow him on his way back from the U.S. General Consulate, along the grand boulevards of Paris, after arriving in the Montparnasse district, on the left bank of the Seine River, we will soon turn to more modest streets, all the way to the old fortifications of the city. Here, the sculptor will lead us on a cul de sac along which can be found studios of several other artists. The atmosphere is one of extreme modesty, a rather rustic one. Nearing one of the barred doors scrawled wryly with the letters

Brancusi, the sculptor opens the heavy, fortress-like lock (as Brancusi is worried about thieves) while an immaculate white dog greets him with his joyous barking. It is very probable that Brancusi will find one of his many friends here, awaiting him. And this friend must be very surprised, not only at not having seen the sculptor at home, for this studio is also the artist's home, but even more at not having found him working. And this friend, who has patiently waited for the sculptor's return, is very likely a young woman, exquisite and, more than certain, an American.

Is Brancusi married? No, he's not. Although a woman could always be found beside him, Brancusi is far too long, too dedicated to his art to involve himself in a solid, long-term relationship. At the moment, his new muse is Marthe Lebherz, a beautiful (and very young) blonde Swiss for whom, this time, Brancusi appears to want to go further in his passion than he has ever done before.

The modesty of the place and the apparent modesty of the man are greatly divergent from the sculptor's celebrity. This sensational trial has raised a lot of interest on both sides of the Ocean, and these days Brancusi's is the most frequently found artist's name in the press. However, this explosion of interest does nothing but consolidate a celebrity that is not in the least newly found. His American admirers, that immense wave of the American intelligentsia, also known as the "lost generation" (considered lost for having expatriated themselves to Paris on a self-search), have long brought their homage. One of the numerous "expatriates" magazines, *This Quarter*, in its no. 1 from 1925, wrote:

Constantin Brancusi is too well known to need a presentation within these columns ... He is the artist who is the most written-about around the world ... No notorious critic can permit himself do anything but honor his genius. Composers, dancers, painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, collectors, actors and actresses, journalists, and lovers of beautiful things have all passed through Brancusi's studio on Impasse Ronsin in Paris. Maybe there is no other artist as loved, respected, and appreciated as Brancusi.⁴

These Americans, now revolving around Brancusi's studio on Impasse Ronsin, experienced more than a decade ago, more precisely in 1913, in New York, the shock of Brancusian shapes on the occasion of the by now famous Armory Show. In that massive building on Lexington Avenue between 24th and 25th Streets, a generation of Americans made contact with the art not only new but also bewildering, heart-taking. Henri Matisse, Constantin

Brancusi, and Marcel Duchamp were only a few of the most important names that filled the columns of the American newspapers at that time. On most occasions, mentioned derisively or with anger, they kept on obsessing that young generation and, after the war, many of its members would go to Paris following the traces of art that appeared to them as belonging to the future. Brancusi's celebrity around the time of the Armory Show was an immediate one. Now, after the war, these Americans, "expatriated" in Paris, or more precisely in Montparnasse, see in Brancusi, paradoxically, one of their links with America, with the moment of the revelation of the new art that had then shocked them. These Americans, writers, graphic artists, or mere bohemians, have turned their visits to Brancusi's studio into a mandatory ritual. After a shorter or longer time following the landing in Le Havre (which is the port-of-call for French ocean liners making the Transatlantic crossing), brought in by mutual friends, they will necessarily make their visit to this living museum. They are hoping, naturally, to catch a glimpse of the famous *Mademoiselle Pogony*, that "leading lady" of the Armory Show, who has bewildered and enchanted the immense wave of visitors of that time.

The fame and attraction of this studio became so ample that the sculptor found it appropriate to send, not so long ago, to an exhibition a bit of Impasse Ronsin over the Ocean. In the catalog of his show at the Brummer Gallery in New York, held between November 17 and December 15, 1926, the French writer Paul Morand invited the visitors to Brancusi's studio.

Let us visit his studio. Studio? This stone quarry? Where are the big, declamatory subjects only waiting to be set up in some forum? Where are the picturesque clays, the 'lost waxes'? Nothing here but great blocks of building stone, beams, trunks of trees, boulders, and rocks, and here and there, the highlight of a polished bronze. One of these primitive forms detaches itself from the rest and advances toward us massively. It is Brancusi. A gray beard which recalls Walt Whitman's; the clear eyes of the Latin, and a look of kindness, courageous and certitude—so Brancusi appears to us.⁵

The sculptor traveled twice to New York last year in order to meet his enthusiastic public, but also in the interest of his works, left in an uncertain situation after the death of his patron, the American collector John Quinn.

The fact that Brancusi's fame is so great in America, unlike the appreciation, limited only to the circles of artists, he receives in France, will also be underlined by a critic, Louis Vauxcelles (nevertheless one who

has become despicable to the artists). He would write, not long from now, in May 1928, on the occasion of the resuming of the trial in New York, regarding the famous *Bird in Space*:

This bird is a kind of long copper cigar, meticulously polished and set upright on its tail, precariously poised on a pile of paving blocks. 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 Despiau, he will remain an unsung hero!⁶

And yet, the perception of this denigrator is a false one. In Brancusi's studio, are not coming, that's true, notorious academicians, but one can meet his French friends like Duchamp, and Fernand Léger, the classics of tomorrow's French art, not to speak of his many Dadaists and Surrealists friends. Not too long ago, this place used to be visited by the composer Erik Satie, no longer living now and regretted still (as he always will be) by Brancusi. This bohemian musician had been one of the friends whose presence the sculptor had most enjoyed. Brancusi had not had a closer friend ever since another one, the painter Henri Rousseau "Le Douanier" (custom-house officer), also now dead, had passed through the doors of his studio. "Le Douanier" Rousseau certainly wouldn't have caused such Customs troubles and such unwanted celebrity to his young friend.

Undeniably, the visits to this sculptor's studio have become a ritual for visitors from around the world. There is no name in the art world of even a little notoriety that had not passed through his studio. Here come sculptors, painters, photographers, architects, art critics, collectors, gallery owners, fashion designers, doctors, journalists, musicians, mundane people, adventurers—in one word, the world that gave birth to Brancusi's "two hundred friends." But let us enter the studio along with the sculptor. Here, our surprise will be a huge one. Let us allow one of his many American visitors to express the amazement which is ours as well.

It is the largest and the most unadorned studio you have ever seen before, all but white beams and white marble blocks, all covered with white dust like in a flour mill, full with little pits and traces of blows in those places where he had broken and hammered at his works—no tablecloth and, around the room, not one single piece of fabricated material, no curtains to hang, no kimonos thrown over his easels, no photos, absolutely nothing—only several wonderful carved figures placed on their pedestals, looking like nothing on earth, things so

complex and yet shaped in a deceiving simplicity,—and the small Brancusi with his delicate head, his dark hair, his white hairs, tousled, with his extraordinary black eyes, wearing large trousers and a rather feminine shirt and heavy shoes, which are or seem to be sabots—a small Romanian, a peasant and a great sculptor at the same time, shuffling his feet from the kitchen with bowls of soup and chicken he had boiled himself, stirring up the fire in the great, rough oven made of white stone, like those we improvise on the beach, which he had made himself, and the two of us chattering in two kinds of French and eating white horseradish cut as we cut the rape and drinking white wine.⁷

Is Brancusi a snob? Not in the least. Just as enjoyable to the sculptor are the daily visits of the shop boys who bring him his bread, his meat, his milk as those of the woman who brings his daily newspapers:

*"C'est une grande chose ce qu'il fait,"*⁸ they say.

Brancusi does things like Gustave Flaubert. When he had once invited the washerwoman to see his sculptures, she exclaimed, bewildered and delighted:

*"Well, this is more beautiful than a fireman's helmet."*⁹

Is Brancusi a wealthy man? Not exactly. He is only a tenant in Impasse Ronsin, and the hostile landlords' notes come through the mail regularly. Above all, his troubles increased this summer: because of the heavy rains, the floor of his studio at 8, Impasse Ronsin, had collapsed, and he was forced to move his blocks of stone, his bronzes, and his wood to the same Impasse Ronsin, only at no. 11. Not far at all, that's true. The rising fame couldn't have come without improving the sculptor's financial status. However, through his entire way of life, an extremely sophisticated one in its very simplicity, Brancusi had not ever let poverty stand in the way of his extraordinary hospitality. For that matter, Brancusi is also very well known for the dinner parties he holds in his studio, which have added to his fame as a sculptor and his fame as a cook.

If Brancusi had been renowned only for his "looking like nothing on earth" works, he would be only a famous artist, but he is by now starting to be shrouded in legend. The sculptor is also one of the most frequently met faces in the Montparnasse restaurants, where a huge party held by the American colony has been unfolding for over half a decade. Robert McAlmon, a young American writer and often a party colleague, gives us a description of this Brancusi: "At midnight, we did Montmartre and naturally, did the places where we could express ourselves freely. At about three in the morning, Brancusi was leading a parade of cabaret habitués