

constantin
brancusi

the essence of things 29 january – 23 may 2004

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Teacher and Group Leaders' Kit

Information and practical ideas for group visits

1. Introduction to the Exhibition

Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things is the first major exhibition in the United Kingdom of the work of one of the most important and influential sculptors of the 20th century. Made up of around forty of his sculptures, it includes examples of his work in a variety of materials – wood, stone, marble and bronze, as well as his own photographs of his work *in situ* in his Paris studios and in Romania.

For a concise introduction to the exhibition, read the accompanying exhibition guide in this kit.

How to use this kit

This kit aims to help you carry out a successful visit to the exhibition. It includes useful contextual information and thematic cards to use with your students in the gallery or classroom. Although it is aimed primarily at teachers visiting the exhibition and planning work with school students, Tate Modern welcomes group leaders from adult education, community education and many other learning organisations across many varied disciplines. We have aimed to write this resource in a way that we hope will be useful to these wide audiences and do welcome your comments.

Any visit to an art gallery should be primarily concerned with looking, and we will explore Brancusi's ideas in relationship to the visual evidence in the exhibition. However, in order to ground the experience the kit includes factual information concerning Brancusi and his career, placing him within the context of the art world in the first half of the twentieth century.

We suggest ways in which your visit could be linked across the schools curriculum, and ways in which a visit to the Brancusi exhibition can be expanded by considering other artworks – both within the Tate Collections and elsewhere. There is a 'Ways of Looking' sheet focussing on one work – but which can be adapted to apply to the majority of works in the exhibition, and a series of sheets on different themes covered by the exhibition. There is also practical information about structuring your visit, as well as information on booking your tickets. There is an exhibition guide which gives an overview of the display, as well as a full listing of all the events related to the show.

Visiting the exhibition

Tickets are available in advance from Tate Ticketing, tel 020 7887 3959, school and group bookings line. Price for school groups: £4.00 per head.

Please ask Tate Ticketing when you book tickets if you would like to book locker and lunch space for your group (there is a limited amount available).

As all exhibitions at Tate can be busy, please do not lecture to groups of more than six students at a time. If you have a larger group we suggest that you divide into smaller groups and follow the suggestions in this kit.

How to structure your visit

We suggest you introduce the exhibition to your group in one of the concourse spaces, the Turbine Hall or the Clore Education Centre (see the Tate plan, available throughout the gallery). The information in the kit should help you to create an introductory discussion about some of the issues which arise through the sculptures and photographs on display. Work in small groups when you are in the exhibition, using the thematic sheets to prepare tasks and discussion topics, or hand them out as they are to older students. You can later get back together in one of the spaces mentioned above to discuss the exhibition as a whole class and let each of the small groups share their ideas.

Tate Modern's approach to learning

Tate Modern's approach to learning encourages students to think not of one correct reading or interpretation of an artwork, but of plural readings. These will depend on who the viewer is, and when, where and how he or she encounters a work of art. To construct meanings, therefore, the viewer needs to be aware of the experiences they bring to looking, as well as the information an artwork holds. This methodology underpins all our workshops, InSET and study day programmes here at Tate Modern.

This methodology and the ideas mentioned above are developed more fully in the *Tate Modern Teachers' Kit*, available in the gallery shop.

2. Bibliography and Web Links

As well as the catalogue of the exhibition, *Constantin Brancusi, The Essence of Things*, there are a large number of books written about him. The following are just a few suggestions:

Brancusi, by Radu Varia (2002), Rizzoli International Publications; ISBN: 0847825256 (hardback, £50.00)

Constantin Brancusi, by Pierre Cabanne (2002), Editions Pierre Terrail; ISBN: 287939242X (paperback, £14.99)

Constantin Brancusi, by Eric Shanes (1991), Abbeville Press, Modern Masters Series, ISBN: 0896599299 (paperback, £10.95)

Great Modern Masters: Brancusi, ed. Jose Maria Faerna (1997), Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; ISBN: 0810946939 (hardback, £7.95)

To put Brancusi in his context you could also try:

Modern Sculpture, by Herbert Read (1964), Thames and Hudson (World of Art Series); ISBN: 0500200149 (Paperback, £8.95)

Sculpture 1900-1945: After Rodin (Oxford History of Art), by Penelope Curtis (1999), Oxford Paperbacks (Oxford History of Art); ISBN: 0192842285 (Paperback, £11.99)

You could also look up the following websites:

www.artchive.com/artchive/B/brancusi.html

www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_works_22_0.html

www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/brancusi_constantin.html

www.philamuseum.org/pogany/

www2.centrepompidou.fr/english/museum/brancusi/

3. Brancusi – His Life and Career in Context

Constantin Brancusi was born in Romania in 1876, and it was there that he learnt how to carve stone and wood. By 1894, when he was admitted to the School of Arts and Crafts in Craiova, he had already made a violin – no mean feat in itself – and rapidly gained a reputation for his ability to work with wood.

Soon after, he began making wooden furniture, before going on to study sculpture at the National School of Fine Art in Bucharest between 1898 and 1902. He travelled to Paris in 1904, and although he had already received commissions for sculpture in Romania, he continued his studies at the School of Fine Arts.

Paris at the turn of the century

At the beginning of the 20th century Paris was widely acknowledged as the capital of the art world, in large part due to the developments which had taken place in the second half of the 19th century.

In the 1870s and 80s, the Impressionists had been criticised for their lack of finish. Their sketchy, spontaneous style looked unfinished to the public of the time, but this was effectively the beginning of a change in the function of art, away from the precise reproduction of the visible world, to a more interpretive and personal approach.

By the late 1880s, several artists were already dissatisfied with the aims of the Impressionists, finding their work to be insubstantial and superficial – and still mainly concerned with the imitation of real life rather than anything more profound. Artists such as Paul Gauguin wanted to get away from what he described as ‘the abominable error of naturalism’. Rather than showing us the world in which we live, he wanted his paintings to be a spur to the imagination, and to take us away from this world.

He was wary of the sophistication of traditional artists (as the Impressionists had been before him) and to avoid this he first moved out of Paris to live among and paint the peasants of Normandy, and then left Europe altogether, travelling to the islands of the South Pacific. In 1906, a couple of years after Brancusi’s arrival in Paris, there was a retrospective exhibition of Gauguin’s work, allowing the young Romanian to see the influence of different cultures, and in particular the apparently primitive wood sculptures Gauguin had carved in Tahiti.

The year before that – 1905 – another group of artists, including Matisse and Derain, had caused an outcry, which led them to be called the Fauves, or ‘Wild beasts’. Apart from being even more freely painted than the work of the Impressionists, their colours were not only shockingly bright, but also bore no relationship to the colours seen in nature. Again it served to emphasize the fact that the artist’s role was no longer to imitate the appearance of nature, a lesson which was of huge importance for Brancusi.

Rodin, ‘direct carving’ and ‘truth to materials’

It was logical that Brancusi should be drawn towards the most important sculptor in Paris, Auguste Rodin. He worked for the older French master, if only for a month, in 1907, leaving, as he said, because ‘Nothing can grow in the shadow of a great tree’. His work, in that brief period, was carving Rodin’s marble sculptures. It had become traditional for artists to create plaster or clay models of sculptures, which would be given to specialised stonemasons to reproduce in stone, often using mechanical devices such as a pointing machine.

Brancusi carved his sculptures himself, a process which became known later as ‘direct carving’. This meant that the artist himself would need to know the properties of the material he was working with: how hard a certain type of stone was, for example, or how well it could be polished. Knowledge of the materials and their properties would therefore help to define the appearance of the work, and the artist would attempt to use these properties, making the sculpture express them as clearly as possible. This idea became known as ‘truth to materials’.

The implications of these two ideas, ‘direct carving’ and ‘truth to materials’, were elaborated and given a theoretical basis later in the 20th century by artists such as Henry Moore, and became seen as some of the fundamental ideas of modern art. However, the extent to which Brancusi followed them as theories cannot be judged: he may well have been using techniques and materials in a more or less instinctive way.

The ‘medieval’ and the ‘primitive’

The notion of direct carving put the artist back into the realm of the craftsman, a notion which had started to be lost during the Renaissance. In the same way that the medieval craftsmen had worked through faith and honest labour to create the great gothic cathedrals, so the artist could take on a spiritual role in the 20th century, and this is very much the position that Brancusi adopted. Using his physical strength and technical skill combined with intellectual discipline, Brancusi worked on his own with the materials to release something from them. The sense of devotion to the task, and what was seen as the basic ‘honesty’ of the ideas of ‘direct carving’ and ‘truth to materials’, could also be seen as conforming to medieval ideals. This notion had been important in the second half of the 19th century, particularly expressed by for example the Arts and Crafts movement in England. It was also important across Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1907, the same year that Brancusi was working for Rodin, a group of Expressionist artists in Germany founded a group called *Die Brücke*. Similarly inspired by medieval craftsmen, they produced woodcuts and wooden sculptures because the energy required for the technique and the rough-edged effects it created were considered a more direct, honest and (appropriately) expressive way of working. Again it was far from the sophistication of the traditional artist.

The year 1907 was also important as the year that Picasso painted one of his most important works, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. An extremely expressionistic work in its own right, this painting of five women is particularly important because some of the faces are based on African tribal masks. Like Gauguin, Picasso was looking away from Europe to find a form of expression that would have a greater emotional impact than the controlled and detailed depiction of traditional artists. Many other artists in Paris, including Matisse and the writer Apollinaire, were also interested in the work of these apparently primitive cultures, and built up substantial collections of masks and sculptures.

In 1909, Brancusi was introduced to Amedeo Modigliani, and together they visited a number of ethnographic museums, perhaps also looking at the works owned by Matisse and Apollinaire. Both were enormously influenced by the way in which tribal masks and sculptures simplify facial features, and rely on a symbolic representation of the face. We can read facial features not just from their life-like appearance, but also from their position on the face (a pair of eyes could be represented by two squares for example). The same is true of the different elements of the body itself (for example, we recognise the head as the part at the top of the body, whatever its shape).

The growth of abstraction

By this time Brancusi had more or less all the tools he needed for his career: a training in wood and stone carving, the influence of Romanian craft work which he had seen in his youth, and which he continued to see on his return visits to his homeland, and the influence of art both from the European tradition and beyond. He was also aware that not all artists considered representation as their prime aim, and from a realistic if impressionistic style inspired by Rodin he very soon developed into an original and highly influential artist.

The Russian artist Kandinsky claimed that by 1911 he had painted the first ever Abstract painting, but the truth is a little more complicated. In the first and second decades of the 20th century a number of artists were developing forms of abstract art for similar reasons. In many ways this goes back to the Impressionists, who were interested in light and colour more than precise details. The move away from realistic reproduction was taken further by artists such as Gauguin, who wanted art to take us beyond what we see into the world of the imagination. This 'transcendent' idea was effectively developed by a number of artists, including Kandinsky, Malevich, Gabo and Mondrian. They became aware that the reproduction of the visual appearance of things could only serve to keep us rooted in this world – and that if we wanted art to be uplifting it must try to represent a spiritual truth. The only way to find an inner truth beyond this world would therefore be through abstract art. The style of all four artists evolved gradually from realistic to abstract, and it would be hard to pin down precisely when truly abstract art was achieved.

Brancusi followed exactly the same path – the development of abstraction from nature – although he denied that his art was abstract as the qualities he was trying to represent were, he claimed, very real. In his own words:

'There are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.'

Art and scandal

Whatever Brancusi's own ideas about his sculpture, the way in which they were seen by other people caused controversy on more than one occasion. His series of works entitled *Princess X* was based on a marble sculpture of a long-necked woman looking down at her reflection in a mirror. Brancusi re-worked this piece to create a sculpture of extreme geometrical simplicity, and went on to make other versions in bronze. He himself later said 'I made my material express the inexpressible' – but by this stage a scandal had erupted, unfortunately prompted by another artist, Henri Matisse. On seeing the work in an exhibition in 1920 Matisse stated abruptly 'Why, it's a phallus!' – and before long the local chief of police had it removed as an offence to public decency.

This sort of scandal was not unknown. Only three years before a work by Marcel Duchamp – who was a friend of Brancusi – had been removed from an exhibition in America. Entitled *Fountain*, the sculpture was made of a urinal, placed on its side. Duchamp was making a number of points – that as an artist, anything he did could be considered art, and that an artist's job was to make you look at things from different point of view. He also wanted to puncture the pomposity of some self-important people who claimed to be interested in art.

Duchamp was really challenging not only the role of the artist, but also the nature of art, an argument which before long Brancusi would be adding to, albeit unwittingly. 1926 marked the sculptor's 50th birthday, and as part of the celebrations two exhibitions were held in New York. One of the sculptures to be exhibited, *Bird in Space*, was stopped by the customs officials, who did not know what it was. If it was a work of art, then no tax would be levied on its import, whereas if it was classed as a functional object, or for that matter, decorative, then it would be subject to a tax of 40% of its value. Eventually they decided it must be the latter. Together with Duchamp – who knew how to argue about the status of an art object – the owner of the sculpture, Edward Steichen, decided to take the matter to court. The resulting case, which took place between 1927 and 1928, helped to define precisely the nature of abstract art, and led Brancusi to assert his individual authorship of the different versions of his work.

New ideas for old sculptures

Although Brancusi continued to introduce new forms and ideas into his sculptures, by the 1930s most of his subject matter was fixed. However as early as 1917 he had introduced a completely new idea – what he called the 'mobile group'. This could be made up of two or more sculptures which existed as independent works, but which could be exhibited in groups as a single new work, which would then have different implications or meanings.

Towards the end of his life Brancusi became mainly concerned with the finish of his sculptures – re-working or re-polishing them for example – and with their arrangement in his studio. Effectively the studio itself became an extended form of the mobile group – an idea which can be seen as lying at the origins of installation art. In this, as in his working methods, his outlook and, above all in the work itself, he has proved to be one of the most important and influential sculptors of the 20th century.

4. Links across the Curriculum

Works of art can be used as the starting point for the discussion of issues in almost all subjects. The following are just some suggestions.

English

Brancusi's works are increasingly poetic, as they develop from a realistic depiction of a recognisable image, to a simplified evocation of an idea or mood. They have inspired a number of writers. Your group could discuss vocabulary related to these ideas, and use this in order to write poems which are, in a similar way, evocative of an idea or mood.

His work is also related to different forms of literature, including folk tales (for example, see *Maiastra* and *The Sorceress*) and on classical mythology (the *Danaïdes* and *Prometheus*). You could research these, or similar stories, and discuss the extent of their relevance to Brancusi's work.

Music

Brancusi was friends with the composer Eric Satie. A visit to the exhibition could be preceded or followed by listening to Satie's music in the classroom, and a discussion of the ways in which the two art forms are similar or different.

Brancusi carved his first version of *Maiastra* in 1910, the year in which Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird* was first performed. Both works were inspired by folk tales about birds with magical properties, and as above, the different ways in which these ideas are present could be explored in class.

History

Brancusi lived through two world wars, although there is apparently little impact on his sculpture. As a 'foreigner' in Paris he was regarded with suspicion during the First World War, until Romania joined the allies in 1916. Brancusi was relieved, saying 'I was found unfit for military duty, but I am glad that my country has gone into the war'. His work in Târgu Jiu was a monument for those who had died during this war. You could use Brancusi's experience as the starting point for a discussion on the approach to 'outsiders' during war.

Geography

Brancusi was a Romanian sculptor working in Paris, and as such his inspiration was drawn from his own culture, notably Romanian folk art, from contemporary French culture, which at the time also led to an interest non-Western art. Brancusi's style and technique were therefore a result of his geographical situation.

Maths

Brancusi's determination to seek out 'the essence of things' results in the use of simplified geometric forms. You could analyse the works in the exhibition for their use of specific forms (spheres, cylinders, cubes) or shapes, and discuss the use of symmetry, for example. In the Târgu Jiu monument (illustrated in his photographs) the table uses a circle, implying wholeness and perfection, whereas the *Endless Column*, which he saw as a link between the earth and Heaven, is structured with a single repeated unit, two of which together are not unlike the mathematical symbol ∞ for infinity.

Science and technology

Brancusi constantly used a wide variety of different materials, and the doctrine of 'truth to materials' could almost be interpreted as a scientific investigation about how a certain material behaves: how is it structured? How hard or soft is it? Is it grainy or lumpy? Can it make sharp edges? Can it be polished, or is the surface too rough?

Bronze sculptures rely on the fact that metals can be melted and cast, wood on the softness of the material that makes them easy to carve. An investigation of the form and appearance of the sculptures could therefore be used to draw inferences about the nature of the materials used.

Religious Studies

Brancusi's sculpture contains a strong spiritual element. Rather than showing us the exterior appearance of things, he is looking for their inner nature. In addition to discussing this 'transcendent' viewpoint, works such as *Adam and Eve* and *The Beginning of the World* can be used as the starting point for an exploration of different creation myths. The symbolism of the Târgu Jiu monument – with its implications of birth, life and death – can be explored through photographs in the exhibition.

5. Links to other Artworks

In Tate Modern:

Still life/Object/Real life

In the *Modern Life* Room you can see a number of people working at the same time as Brancusi in Paris – notably Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, whose development of Cubism is visually more complex than Brancusi's reduction to basic forms, but do they have any ideas in common? Are any of the works in this room more closely related to Brancusi's interest in the 'essence of things'?

Richard Deacon is a contemporary sculptor whose work concerns itself with the act of making and the materials from which the sculptures are made – in what ways do you think his work is similar or dissimilar to Brancusi's? Do you think his works have their origins in a visible object?

Several of the artists in the room called *The Autonomous Object* were inspired by the simplicity of Brancusi's forms. 'Autonomous' suggests that they stand on their own, and do not refer to anything else: to what extent are the works like those of Brancusi?

Landscape/Matter/Environment

All of the artists in *The Geometry of Nature* are inspired by visible aspects of the landscape, often abstracting forms that can be found in the natural world or expressing their essence. Which are most closely related to Brancusi?

In the 1930s, members of the surrealist movement, whose works are exhibited in *Inner Worlds*, condemned Brancusi's work for being purely concerned with aesthetics – beauty for beauty's sake – even though artists like Francis Picabia and Hans Arp had been closely associated with him. Are there any works in this room which seem to share ideas or visual similarities with Brancusi's sculptures?

Nude/Action/Body (until March)

All of the works in the *Myth of the Primitive* are inspired in some way by art outside the Western European tradition. Which of these artists do you think is most closely allied to Brancusi?

Jacob Epstein, whose portrait of Iris Beerbohm Tree is exhibited in *The Fashionable Portrait* was one of the great exponents of 'direct carving' and the idea of 'truth to materials'. Which qualities of the material does he explore in this portrait?

Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss* is the subject of a small exhibition of its own. Brancusi worked for Rodin, after *The Kiss* was made, using specialised equipment to carve marble sculptures. It is not clear from looking at *The Kiss* that Rodin did

not carve it himself (it was carved by Rodin's assistants). Why not? And why does it seem to suggest that 'direct carving' is precisely what Rodin was interested in? How does Rodin's *The Kiss* compare with Brancusi's sculptures with the same title?

History/Memory/Society

Several artists exhibited in this suite were involved in the development of abstraction, in an attempt to take the visual arts beyond the constraints of the world we see and live in, and on to a more spiritual plane. Several of these, including Mondrian and Gabo, are exhibited in *Utopias*. Of these, which are more interested in the use of different materials? Do any of the works seem more 'spiritual' than others?

Other works

The Tate does not have the space to exhibit all its artworks at any one time. There are a number of twentieth century British artists who were particularly interested in the ideas of 'direct carving' and 'truth to materials', notably Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, all of whose works are regularly exhibited at Tate Britain. Their works can be studied on the Tate website, as can those of Brancusi's colleagues in France such as Amedeo Modigliani. You can also use this site to research the work of artists such as Naum Gabo, Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, all of whom started by creating representational art but developed different forms of abstraction during the same period as Brancusi.

After his death, the purity, deceptive simplicity and reduction to geometric form seen in his works was a great influence for Minimalists such as Carl Andre, Robert Morris and Donald Judd. The last of these is the subject of another Tate Modern exhibition running from 5th February – 25th April 2004; the others can also be investigated on the Tate website. In addition to their apparent simplicity the Minimalists, like Brancusi, build up works in series, and make individual works out of a number of separate units.

6. Aphorisms

Brancusi wrote many of his ideas about art in the form of aphorisms – short statements which are intended to encapsulate a basic truth. However, in terms of their reference to art the exact meaning may not be clear, and Brancusi intended them to set you thinking. The following are a selection of his aphorisms, and most are only part of an aphorism.

These could be used as an exercise in the exhibition – give each student one of the aphorisms to think about, and ask them to find the work in the exhibition which they think most embodies the idea which Brancusi wanted to express.

Direct cutting is the true road to sculpture

High polish is a necessity which certain approximately absolute forms demand of some materials

Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at it in spite of oneself, in approaching the real sense of things

Beauty is absolute balance

Beauty is the harmony of opposing things

Art is creating things one is unfamiliar with

If we limit ourselves to exact reproduction, we halt the evolution of the spirit

There are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.

7. Ways of Looking: *Maiastra*, 1911

You can adapt this sequence of questions to the majority of sculptures in this exhibition.

You don't need a great deal of knowledge about the works because the questions will help students to work with you to create their own responses and to decide what aspects they need to research further. Prompts, or suggested answers, are in brackets.

A personal approach – what do I bring?

- What are your first reactions to the work? Why do you think it makes you feel or think like that?
- Does the sculpture make you think of anything? (Students might suggest a bird, or possibly some form of trophy.)
- What do you think the artist wanted to communicate?

Looking at the object – what do I see?

- How many parts make up this sculpture? (Three – one for the 'bird'.)
- How has this work been made? What is it made of? (Bronze – cast, chased and polished – on a two-part limestone base – carved.)
- What are the differences of appearance between the various parts? (Students might use words such as polished, shiny, rough, unfinished, etc.)
- What is the work's scale? In what way would a different scale affect the work's impact?
- How is the work exhibited?
- Why has it been placed so high? (Brancusi originally placed it on a high wooden column in the garden of its first owner, Edward Steichen, to emphasize its connection with nature.)
- How does the work relate to the other sculptures in the room? (Does it dominate the space, is it part of a series of works, are there other works of the same colour or structure, or on the same theme?)

Looking at the subject – what is it about?

- Does the sculpture look like anything – if so, what? (Going back to the preliminary responses above, it is intended to represent a bird, although the trophy-like appearance might give the work some form of status.)
- Look at the different elements of the bird – which bits are 'bird-like' and which bits are more stylised?

- What is the bird doing? (Its beak is open – maybe it is singing.)
- What shape is the bird's body? (Perhaps egg-shaped – an idea about the bird's fertility.)
- *Maiastra* is made of polished bronze – but what other material does this look like? (Gold, perhaps.)
- What does this imply? (Gold implies wealth and status.)
- What is the effect of placing it on a rough, stone base?
- *Maiastra* was a golden bird with mystical powers that featured in Romanian folk tales. Which part of the sculpture looks more 'mystical' and which part more 'folksy'?
- How would the work change if you used different materials?

Looking at the context – relating the work in the gallery to the outside world

Researching the context within which a work was produced (for example the political climate, social history and culture of the time) can tell us more. It is also interesting to compare the work to others created throughout the artist's career, or to works by other contemporary artists (some suggestions for other works to which you might like to make links are included under 'Links to other artworks').

The public reception of some of Brancusi's sculptures for example could be compared to outrage at the contemporary artist Tracey Emin's *Bed*, which showed the artist's unmade bed in the Turner Prize display of 1999.

- Look at other works in this room. Does the work in focus have any features in common with them? Do they share a similar theme? (Most of the works in rooms 9 and 10 are birds.)
- Does it use similar materials? (*Bird in Space* is also polished bronze, but the others are marble.)
- Is it more or less realistic than the other works? (*Maiastra* may perhaps have more 'bird-like' features than the others – this could be a source of discussion)
- Is it earlier or later in date? What does this say about Brancusi's development? (*Maiastra* is the first of his bird-inspired works. Generally he developed towards a more idealised/simplified form – effectively becoming more abstract.)
- Where did the artist come from? (Romania.) Is there anything about his homeland that is reflected in the sculpture? (The subject matter is Romanian.)
- Artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich, Gabo and Mondrian were all moving away from representational art towards abstraction in the second decade of the 20th century. Does Brancusi do the same?

8. Thematic sheet A: Materials and Techniques

For Brancusi the materials of his sculptures and the way in which he made them were equally important – this was part of what his art was about. By the end of the 19th century it was common for an artist to make a clay or plaster model of a work, and then give it to stonemasons who would carve it in marble for him, often using a mechanical device known as a pointing machine.

This is certainly how Rodin, the great French sculptor of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, produced his marble sculptures. Brancusi was one of the ‘stonemasons’ who did this – although only for a month – in 1907. It was about this time that Brancusi started making it obvious in his own work that he was carving them by hand himself – rather than with the aid of a machine.

The idea that the sculptor carved his own works became known as ‘direct carving’. In order to do this the artist himself (or herself) has to have an understanding of the qualities of the stone – how hard or soft it is, whether it can be polished or should be left rough. The appearance of the sculpture is therefore determined in part by the nature of the stone itself, and Brancusi believed it was his role to bring out these qualities. This idea became known as ‘truth to materials’ – one of the fundamental principles behind a lot of modern art.

Room 1 – The Kiss

In the first room in the exhibition there are two sculptures based on the same idea – a man and woman in a tight embrace. Unlike Rodin’s famous sculpture of the same name (a marble version is in the Tate’s collection) Brancusi does not try to make the couple look realistic, nor does he try and suggest real textures – the skin does not look soft, for example. It is obvious that this is a block of stone, and that the figures have been carved from it.

- How do the different versions of *The Kiss* vary?
- What was the original shape of the block of limestone from which each sculpture is carved?
- Has Brancusi tried to disguise the shape of the block?
- Do all the surfaces have the same texture? If not, why has he varied them?
- We know that Brancusi was using direct carving for these sculptures. Would you say they were good examples of ‘truth to materials’?

Room 4 – Danaïdes

There are two sculptures in this room called *Danaïde*, and although the subject matter is apparently the same the sculptures look completely different. One is carved out of stone,

whereas the other was cast in bronze. The bronze casting technique is complex, involving the creation of a mould into which extremely hot molten bronze is poured. This is done at a specialised bronze foundry, and not by the artist – so the idea of direct carving is not relevant for bronze sculptures. However, Brancusi did make the original version from which the bronze was cast, and was responsible for ‘chasing’ the sculpture, which is the process of finishing the sculpture after the bronze has been cast. This might involve removing excess bronze, improving flaws, and polishing the surface, for example – everything which gives the work its current appearance.

- What different qualities of the materials has Brancusi explored in the two versions of *Danaïde*?
- Are they examples of ‘truth to materials’?
- How does the surface of the stone *Danaïde* differ to that of *Eileen Lane*, in the same room?
- In what way is this an example of ‘truth to materials’? (as a hint, do you think the limestone used for *Danaïde* could be polished as smoothly as the white onyx used for *Eileen Lane*?)
- Brancusi is also interested in the colour of the materials he used. What particular effects of colour does he use in this room?

Rooms 7 and 8 – Wooden sculptures

Wood sculptures, like stone, can be examples of direct carving. Like stone, wood can also be treated in different ways – left rough, or polished, to show the different textures and markings which are the result of the tree’s growth. Different types of wood also have different properties, and a good sculptor – like Brancusi – can exploit these.

In his wood sculptures Brancusi drew on his experience as a young man in Romania, and there is a strong influence from Romanian craftsmanship. This can be seen in the way that each sculpture is often made out of several distinct units which are stacked up on top of each other. In some cases what appears to be just a stand or support is in fact an independent, named sculpture, although some of them are simply known as ‘base’ (for example *Oak Base* in room 6)

Adam and Eve – named after the first man and woman created by God – is actually made of two sculptures – *Adam*, carved from chestnut, is on the bottom, and *Eve*, which is oak, is on top.

- What differences can you see between these two types of wood?
- Which of these differences are due to the nature of the wood, and which are due to the way in which Brancusi carved the two sculptures?
- Why do you think Brancusi used these differences? In what way is the appearance of the wood related to the subject matter?
- Where are the marks of the chisel most visible?

9. Thematic Sheet B: Multi-cultural Influences

Brancusi met the Italian sculptor Amedeo Modigliani in 1909, and together they visited several museums which had collections of tribal art – including masks and sculptures from Africa and other parts of the world which were considered to be ‘primitive’. Tribal art was popular with a number of western artists at the time – Picasso and Matisse amongst others – partly because it seemed to be more direct and honest than the overly clever art which traditional European painters and sculptors were producing.

Another ‘unsophisticated’ influence on Brancusi was the folk art of his native Romania, which is seen most in his wood sculptures. The two influences are not necessarily unrelated, and an assistant once heard him say ‘Only Africans and Romanians know how to carve wood’. But Brancusi also retained an admiration for the traditions of western art – and in particular the idealisation which was seen in the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome.

Tribal Influence

Little French Girl (The First Step III) (room 8) is made from a single piece of wood, and Brancusi appears to be showing off his skill at carving. Imagine how easy it would have been to break the legs or the extremely long body and neck while carving them thinner and thinner.

Although it is not a realistic sculpture we can tell that it is meant to be a person from the fact that it has two legs beneath a stylised body. We also automatically read the upper, larger section as a head, even though the facial features are not obvious. We can see what the sculpture represents because of the way the different elements are related to another – where they are as opposed to what they look like. This is one of the ideas that Brancusi learnt from tribal sculpture.

The unusual, elongated proportions of the figure, and the way in which the wood is carved in simplified, geometric forms is also derived from African art (see, for example, the wooden sculpture exhibited in *The Myth of the Primitive* room on level 5 in Tate Modern).

- Which elements of the body has Brancusi included, and which has he left out?
- Part of the title of the work is *Little French Girl* – what tells us she is ‘little’?
- The second part of the title is *The First Step III* – how has Brancusi suggested that the girl is only just learning to walk?

Romanian Influence

Brancusi’s upbringing in Romania influenced his work both in its appearance and the subject matter he chose to depict.

King of Kings (room 8) is made up of a sequence of different geometrical forms, very similar to the ones used for wooden gate posts, or the decorated columns used to support the porches of traditional Romanian houses. Despite this the original title of the work was *Spirit of Buddha* – a sign of Brancusi’s interest in eastern religion.

- How would you describe the elements of *King of Kings*? What do they look like?
- What is the overall effect of the sculpture? How does it make you feel?
- Are there other works in this room which are also built up from a number of different elements?

Brancusi rarely discussed the origins of his works as he preferred to leave them open to interpretation. Nevertheless *The Sorceress* (also in room 8) is thought to represent a flying witch from Romanian folk tales. These stories were also the inspiration for *Maiastra* (room 9), a bird with beautiful golden plumage, whose song had magical qualities.

- What do these two works have in common?
- Is there anything similar about their appearance?
- In these sculptures is Brancusi telling you a story, or does he leave it to your imagination?
- What do you think a story connected to one of these sculptures might be?

Classical Influence

Brancusi’s interest in classical sculpture is perhaps best seen in *Torso* in room 5, in which the rough, apparently unfinished section not only emphasizes that the work is made of stone, but also suggests that this is part of a large work which has been damaged – a bit like an archaeological discovery.

His interest in the classical past was such that he gave himself the nickname Plato, while his friend, the composer Eric Satie, was called Socrates – both were Greek philosophers. Plato was also the name given to a wooden sculpture, a form of self portrait, which later destroyed. The only part that remains is *Head*, exhibited in room 2.

He named other sculptures after characters from Greek mythology. *Prometheus* (room 2) was punished by the gods for giving man the secret of fire, enabling mankind to advance beyond the animals. This has often been said to be the first step on the way to artistic creativity, which may explain Brancusi’s interest in the story.

- Is there a sense of punishment or suffering in this sculpture?
- If not, what aspect of the myth might Brancusi be illustrating?
- Do you think Brancusi is more interested in the story, or in the idealised forms of Greek sculpture itself?

10. Thematic Sheet C: Abstraction

The title of this exhibition, *The Essence of Things*, comes from one of Brancusi's statements about his own art:

"There are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things."

This tells us that Brancusi did not see his work as abstract – and most of his works have names which imply that they represent something from the visible world. Nevertheless it is not the appearance of things that he is trying to show us, rather he is trying to make visible the inner qualities of the subject which makes it what it is – what he calls 'the idea'. As a result many do not look like things we would see. Although they are based on something visible he has stripped away all the excess detail – it would be fair to say they are 'abstracted' from nature, without being completely 'abstract'.

Room 9 – Bird in Space

Bird in Space is just one of a series of about thirty sculptures which Brancusi made of birds. His approach is perhaps best explained by a statement which he made about another sculpture, *Fish*:

"When you see a fish you don't think about its scales, you think about the speed of its movement, its gleaming body seen through the water. That's what I wanted to express... I was searching for the spark that animates its spirit."

- What qualities of a bird was Brancusi interested in when he made *Bird in Space*?
- Can you re-write the first sentence of Brancusi's comments about *Fish* as if Brancusi were writing about a bird?
- What are the differences between this sculpture and the other birds shown in rooms 9 and 10?

Room 2 – Seven Heads

All of the sculptures in room 2 represent heads – Brancusi considered the head to be the part of the body which most expressed character. Together they help to illustrate the way in which Brancusi's style evolved, from impressionistic works which are similar to those of Rodin, to far more simplified and apparently abstract forms.

- Write a list of all seven works in this room.

- Next to the titles of the works put down a number, from 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most realistic head and 7 representing the most abstract.
- Check the dates of the works, and give them another set of numbers, with 1 for the oldest and 7 for the youngest.
- Are the two numbers the same? Is it true to say that Brancusi's work gets more and more abstract?

Room 3 – Beginning of the World

The development of abstraction at the beginning of the 20th century was related by several artists to an attempt to find a spiritual content to their work. Rather than painting or sculpting the normal, everyday things which we see around us they wanted to imply there was something beyond the world we see and live in. Like Brancusi they were effectively trying to explore the 'essence of things'.

Spiritual aspects of life are often associated with a sense of mystery – this is certainly true of *Beginning of the World*. At first glance, this appears to be a completely abstract sculpture – a smooth, highly-polished, egg-shaped piece of marble on a shiny silver disk, supported by a cross-shaped base.

- If this is an egg, in what way is it 'the beginning of the world'?
- Does it resemble any of the sculptures in room 2? If so, which?
- Do you think it is an egg, or is it another head? Is there anything else it could be?
- What do you think are the advantages of a sculpture which could represent more than one thing?

11. Thematic Sheet D: Men and Women

Brancusi's interest in 'the essence of things' included a long-going exploration of the nature of life itself. The origin of human life is centred on the relationship between men and women, and in attempting to express the nature of 'male' and 'female' he was inevitably also looking at the differences between them.

Room 1 – The Kiss

Both sculptures in room 1 have the same title, *The Kiss*, and show a similar couple embracing. Each is carved out of a single block of stone, with no attempt to disguise the block. As well as being practical, this also adds to the meaning of the sculpture as the union between the couple is expressed by the fact that they are made from one piece. Their arms are locked around each other, and their profiles appear almost stuck together. The profiles are symmetrical, with the eyes, lips and carving of the hair appearing the same. This is another way of expressing their unity and togetherness.

- How do the different version of *The Kiss* vary?
- How has Brancusi differentiated between the man and the woman in each couple? How many differences can you spot?
- In the 1916 version, from Philadelphia, what shape do the two eyes form when joined together?

Compare this sculpture with the photographs of *The Gate of the Kiss* in the corridor between rooms 4 and 6.

- Which elements of the gate correspond to the sculpture?
- Do these elements appear to be human?

Brancusi used the idea of *The Kiss* for a number of columns, the idea being that two people together have strength, and can be supportive.

Room 5 – Torsos

Rather than use the whole body, to express certain ideas, Brancusi would just use parts – and here he is using the torso, the trunk of the body without head, arms or legs. The earliest sculpture in this room, *Torso* (1912), is more realistic than the others.

- Would you say *Torso* is male or female?
- What are the reasons for your decision?

The later sculptures are more abstract. Compare *Torso of a Young Girl II* with *Torso of a Young Man II*

- Which of these sculptures is more recognisably part of a human body?
- Which is more like the two earlier works?
- Which would you say is more abstract?
- What are the differences between the 'Girl' and the 'Man'?
- Write a list of words describing what each of these sculptures looks like, for example, rounded, soft, hard (...remembering not to touch!). Would you say these are accurate descriptions of the differences between male and female bodies?

Room 8 – Adam and Eve

Adam and *Eve* are actually two sculptures placed on top of one another. They are made of two different materials, with Adam, carved from chestnut wood, on the bottom, and Eve, carved from oak, on top. Adam and Eve were the first man and woman in the bible, and so could be considered the best examples of what it is to be 'male' or 'female'. They also tie in with Brancusi's interest in the origins of things.

- Is either of the sculptures more clearly a depiction of a person?
- Are there any bits of the sculpture which appear to show parts of the body?
- How does Brancusi differentiate between Adam and Eve?
- Are these the same techniques he uses to distinguish the *Young Girl* and *Young Man* we saw earlier? In what ways are the characterisations similar or different?
- Considering all the works you have looked at, what do you think Brancusi is trying to say about the differences between men and women?
- Would you say that Brancusi preferred to carve male or female forms?
- Which – forgetting what you would rather see in real life – do you prefer in his sculptures?

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