

“Brancusi’s Influence: Sculpture as a Visual for Modernist Concepts of Form and Originality”

Certain journals of the early 1900’s circulated new and often subversive ideas—the shift they reflected being perpetuated, in part, by Victorian culture’s collapse and WWI. This form of media is uniquely able to characterize whatever era produced it, and while other documents do possess this ability, magazines offer insight through both function and method of distribution. Each journal creates its own cross section of society; a Modernist journal could not escape its genre’s dependence on sales and appealed to an audience by asserting the ‘subscription value’ of its subculture, in this way walking the line between popular and counter-cultural interest. *The Little Review* is an ostensible exception, considering Ezra Pound’s motto: “[m]aking no account with the public taste” (Scholes 13). Editions distributed regularly, responding to other magazines and current events. This intertextual dialogue developed new definitions for art as well as literature.

Constantín Brancusi was one such artist: his name appeared in multiple periodicals. In “Using Brancusi: Three Writers, Three Magazines, Three Versions of Modernism,” Richard N. Masteller says that “debates about [the sculptor] raged in the cafes and bars of Paris” even as journals “reproduced and discussed” his artwork (Masteller 47). The medium of the magazine served as a closer parallel to organic conversation. Editors reviewed his exhibitions, poets found inspiration in his work, and society magazines wrote about his lifestyle. Critics like Pound aired their opinions, but their interpretations served the culture they attempted to shape. Brancusi features in *Camera Work*, the *Little Review*, the *Dial*, *The Soil*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times*, and *transition*. The treatment of Brancusi’s work in so many magazines speaks to how circulation during this time not only accelerated the evolution of art and literature, but also

allowed for plasticity regarding aesthetic taste. Brancusi, an influenced artist as well as an artistic influence, is one example of how the modernists split from tradition in the name of originality—all while drawing from other cultures or their contemporaries.

Ezra Pound exemplifies the rapid shifts made possible by the periodic publication of a magazine; his original view on Brancusi left little to the imagination: he wrote to Anderson, editor of the *Little Review*, calling the artist “sperm untempered with the faintest touch of intelligence” (Masteller 49). He had no desire to waste a single page on him; however, this had changed by the *Little Review*’s eight volume. Masteller describes his newfound interest: “Pound suggested a dramatic portfolio of visual art consisting of twenty reproductions of Brancusi’s sculptures... [and] offered to write the preface himself” (Masteller 49). This edition was titled the ‘Brancusi Number.’



Images from modjourn.com

In the edition’s preface, Ezra Pound associates Brancusi’s work with the vorticist movement: “I don’t mean to imply that vorticist formulae will ‘satisfy’ Brancusi, or that any formula need ever satisfy any artist, simply the formulae give me certain axes (plural form of axis, not of ax) for discrimination. I have found, to date, nothing in vorticist formulae which

contradicts the work of Brancusi, the formulae left every man fairly free” (Pound 3). This jarring switch in Ezra Pound’s opinion on Brancusi in the *Little Review*, when considered alongside these other writings about the sculptor in *Camera Work* and the *Dial*, reveals how dialogue within a rapid print culture contributed to the explosion of new concepts and theories about art and literature. Pound had little interest in circulating Brancusi’s work until he found a way to frame it as an emanation of vorticism and original thought.

But if we are ever to have a bearable sculpture or architecture it might be well for you sculptors to start with some such effort at perfection, rather than with the idea of a new Laocoon, or a “Triumph of Labour over Commerce.” (This suggestion is mine, and I hope it will never fall under the eye of Brancusi.) –But then Brancusi can spend most of his time in his own studio, surrounded by the calm of his own creations, whereas the author of this imperfect exposure is compelled to move about in a world full of junk-shops, a world full of more than idiotic ornamentations, a world where pictures are made for museums... where the sense of form which ought to be as general as the sense of drouth or any other clear animal pleasure, is the rare possession of an “intellectual” (heaven help us) “aristocracy” (Pound 7).

In this way, art was a visual vehicle for the concepts put forward by magazine editors. Magazine readers subscribed to these ideas, creating a market for opinions and ‘original thought.’

Modernist art—like Brancusi’s—bore interpretation of a kind that shored up these new narratives; the visual arts became, intentionally or by association, symbolic of theories like vorticism, primitivism, and surrealism.

Some illusions of originality, however, require contextualization. While modernists reacted to a culture they felt had precipitated the Great War, the countercultures they founded were not made in a vacuum. Primitivism is one example: the movement framed appropriation of as a return to a simpler human state. Primitivism saw its beginning in the late nineteenth century as artists rejected European standards when it came to art and turned to other cultures for inspiration. Artists like Picasso and Brancusi borrowed the stylized figures, geometric lines, and dynamic postures from the African continent and other indigenous canons. Many within the

movement may have felt they were bringing marginalized works into the modern awareness, but even this rationale takes a Eurocentric view of progress and taste. Comparisons of Brancusi's figural style to African and Indigenous tradition are necessary to establish that there is, in fact, a precedent and that this aesthetic is neither a distant, simpler human state to be accessed nor a staged evolution.



Images (Fang-Nzimu/Djem Reliquary Guardian Figure, Fang "Ngil" mask, Fang reliquary figure)

The issue does not lie with Brancusi's art so much as with assertions of originality made by critics like Ezra Pound. As Pound posits in his glowing review of Brancusi's sculptures, formal arrangement as a skill should be easily grasped like "any other... animal pleasure;" he condemns imitation—no new versions of past masterpieces—and connects primitivism with the novelty of vorticist art. If Brancusi's art is new, then it is new only to western tradition. Emphasized brow ridges, simplified features, and an abstract "sense of form" all appeared in the images above: statuary and masks made by the Fang society on the African continent before Brancusi developed his style. Modernism redefined what art could be; in this expansion of the canon, however, lines blurred between innovation and appropriation at times. Later in life, Picasso denied any African influence on his own work. Images from his studio imply some connection.

Pictured below, Pablo Picasso sits in front of a collection of reliquary figures and objects that would have been visible as he worked.



Pablo Picasso in his Montmartre studio, 1908

To appropriate, then ignore other histories of form and frame the resulting movements as original creates an artistic culture that is no better than the “intellectual aristocracy” Pound criticized (Pound 7). This “new” eurocentric canon would then become an empire of aesthetics, colonizing other styles to feed its burgeoning culture. The primitivists acknowledged their inspiration, but set indigenous traditions against the decadence of society. In this way, they simplified other artforms even as they valued them. Brancusi’s popularity reveals that the artist cannot escape being influenced, which complicates definitions of originality.

Brancusi may have been influenced by cubism and non-western approaches to form, but he also influenced other artists. His position in the modernist canon as an original thinker led to greater visibility. His sculpture inspired others. The writer Mina Loy alluded to Brancusi’s work multiple times in multiple magazines, although her interest in his art has only recently come into focus. She often connected her prose and poetry to Brancusi’s sculptural legacy. Hugh Kenner proposed that “[t]o be the Brancusi of poetry... may have been her impossible ambition”

(Kenner 3). She translated the lines of his *Golden Bird* sculpture into a poem's lines. This ekphrastic work appeared in the *Dial* alongside a photo of its subject. She sketched his likeness, wrote about his artistry, and later formed a friendship with the Romanian sculptor.

Loy recorded her first reaction to the Golden Bird in her 1950 essay "Phenomenon in American Art:" 'Years ago at wonderful Mariette Mills' I came face to face, or rather face to flight with Brancusi's Bird.' She then described the 'long aesthetic itinerary from Brancusi's Golden Bird to [Joseph] Cornell's Aviary,' calling Brancusi's sculpture "the purest abstraction I have ever seen.' (Loy).

Brancusi and his aesthetic became shorthand for innovation, even the evolution of the modern form. He found inspiration in alternative traditions of composition, his art was co-opted to boost systems of thought like Pound's vorticism, and both artist and sculpture influenced parallel developments in literary media. As so much of this process has been documented by periodicals from the era, it becomes clear that the economy of influence and originality hinged on the consolidation of ideas under titles like the *Dial* or the *Little Review*. A rapid print culture allowed new themes to spread and change; influence was more diffuse, because a network of magazines linked text and image, artists and authors, critics and movements in dialogue.

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