

Berlin, 17 March 2026

## EXHIBITION TEXTS

Neue Nationalgalerie

### **Brancusi**

20 March – 9 August 2026

#### Wall texts

Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) is seen as the founder of modern sculpture. After beginning his academic studies in Romania, he left his native country to settle in Paris. Living in the French capital, he began refining his inimitable artistic expression in 1907; his work went on to revolutionize sculpture of the time.

In his search for the ideal form, the artist limited himself to a small selection of motifs, experimenting with formal variations and a range of materials and surfaces. Brancusi's themes, for instance *The Kiss*, the *Sleeping Muse*, and *Bird in Space*, evolved over time and occasionally over several decades. This often went hand in hand with an increasing degree of abstraction. Fragmentary elements and a radical simplification of form are central to his art. Brancusi created his sculptures in *taille directe*, directly out of the material. The surface treatment was of prime importance to him: through polishing, he created surfaces, some of them highly reflective, with a variety of effects in light and material. Brancusi presented his works on pedestals of his own making and often employed multiple elaborately crafted components. He regarded the bases not merely as something serving the work's display, but as integral parts of the sculpture itself.

Early on, Brancusi began incorporating light and movement to stage his sculptures and set them in motion, recording the dynamic situations in photographs and films. Starting in the 1920s, he presented his works for the most part in his Paris studio on Impasse Ronsin, which was not only a place of work, but also an exhibition and living space where friends, artists, and collectors gathered. Brancusi designed his studio as a work in its own right and bequeathed it, along with everything it contained, to the French state after his death in 1957. This outstanding ensemble, which belongs to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, is presented in this retrospective, the first devoted to the artist in Germany in over 50 years.

In addition to Brancusi's major sculptures, a partial reconstruction of the studio, complete with its tools and furniture, forms the centerpiece of the exhibition. Surrounding it, a rich selection of objects, documents, photographs and films tells the story of this exceptional artist's life and work in the manner of an illustrated biography.

#### **The Essence of Things**

A few years after arriving in Paris in 1904, Brancusi broke with academic sculpture and liberated himself from his mentor, the sculptor Auguste Rodin, with whom he worked briefly in 1907. He abandoned clay modeling

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NEUE NATIONALGALERIE

Potsdamer Straße 50  
10785 Berlin

**MARKUS FARR**  
HEAD OF PRESS

Mobile: +49 151 527 53 886

presse@smb.spk-berlin.de  
www.smb.museum/presse

altogether and began creating his sculptures directly in stone or wood, in the manner of *taille directe*. In his search for the “essence of things,” he developed a radically new, organic formal language derived from the fragmented body and reduced to its essential components. Beginning with his sculpture *Sleep*, in which a human head still emerges from the marble in the tradition of Rodin, Brancusi gradually dispensed with realistic details, for instance in his *Sleeping Muses* and the *Heads of a Sleeping Child*. He found his ideal in stylized, sometimes highly polished heads resembling eggs or cells. These works are reminiscent of archaic sculptures and of pebbles smoothed by the sea: universal symbols embodying the search for life’s origins and synthesizing antiquity and modernity, nature and culture, figuration and abstraction.

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Potsdamer Straße 50  
10785 Berlin**MARKUS FARR**  
HEAD OF PRESS

Mobile: +49 151 527 53 886

presse@smb.spk-berlin.de  
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### **The Ambiguity of Form**

For Brancusi, the simplification of form and the suppression of details were a source of ambiguity. In 1909, he began experimenting with the motif of the female torso. Unlike Rodin, Brancusi didn’t treat the torso as part of a larger whole, but allowed it to remain an autonomous fragment. In his *Torso* of 1912, roughly hewn surfaces contrast with carefully polished parts. The sculpture *Princess X* represents the culmination of his exploration of the theme, which began with the 1909 sculpture *Woman Looking into a Mirror*, a classic female nude back view that today only exists in the form of a photograph. In the subsequent works of this series, Brancusi gradually dispensed with details until only the curved form of the back with a hint of head and breast remained. In the radical stylization of *Princess X*, feminine and masculine attributes merge. It’s unclear what the sculpture depicts—is it an idealized female nude or a phallus? Brancusi often played with ambivalence and metamorphosis in his works, for instance in the *Torso of a Young Man* whose gender remains undefined. In calling the symbolic order of binary gender into question, the works echo the Dadaist spirit of protest, which was the guiding principle Brancusi’s friends, among them Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Tristan Tzara, lived by at the time.

### **Portraits?**

Portraiture is central to Brancusi’s work. Over time, even as the sculptor increasingly distanced himself from outward appearances, he never entirely abandoned the human figure. Many of his portraits were sparked by female models. Some bear the names of friends and companions who inspired him, such as Margit Pogany, Eileen Lane, and Nancy Cunard, although their individual personalities recede into the background as Brancusi reduced his models’ features to simple lines and universal abstract forms. The oval heads differ by only very few elements, for instance almond-shaped eyes or hair in a bun. The individual bases Brancusi designed lend the works additional presence. The artist sculpted his portraits from memory; the fact that he almost entirely forwent all facial resemblance raises the question of what constitutes a person’s likeness—perhaps it’s a certain distinctive trait, a particular gesture, or a silhouette.

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### **Sculpture as Architecture?**

Throughout his life, Brancusi dreamed of creating monumental works. This is particularly evident in his ongoing exploration of the motif of *The Kiss*. The first version, from 1907, depicts two highly reduced figures facing one another, their features no more than outlines. In its oneness, the compact block symbolizes the couple's emotional commingling. Over the next four decades, Brancusi returned to the motif unflinching, stylizing and refining it and eventually incorporating architectural elements such as friezes, columns, and gates. The *Endless Columns* he created from 1917/18 onward also convey this desire for monumentality. Starting with a wooden base, Brancusi stacked units of the same module one on top of the other, producing numerous variations of the work over the years that followed, with the tallest reaching a height of nearly thirty meters. This monumental ensemble was completed in 1937/38 in Târgu Jiu, Romania; together with the *Table of Silence* and the *Gate of the Kiss*, it commemorates servicemen who lost their lives in World War I. For Brancusi, the *Endless Column* symbolizes the connection between heaven and earth.

### **The Studio**

"The first time I went to see the sculptor Brancusi in his studio, I was more impressed than in any cathedral. I was overwhelmed with its whiteness and lightness. [...] Coming into Brancusi's studio was like entering another world." Man Ray, 1963

Brancusi's studio is a Gesamtkunstwerk. It served as his living space, workspace, and room to exhibit his work. In early 1916, he moved to Impasse Rosin, an artists' colony close to Montparnasse in Paris—initially to number 8, and finally, in 1928, to number 11, where he spent the rest of his life and created most of his works. Virtually everything in Brancusi's studio is of his own making—the monumental limestone fireplace, the wooden stools, the round plaster tables that doubled as furniture and as pedestals for his sculptures. The oak archway he crafted, reminiscent of traditional Romanian architecture, separated the studio's public and private spheres. Artists, friends, and collectors came and went. Brancusi arranged his sculptures in the space in such a way that they entered into a dialogue with one another. When he sold a work, he replaced it with a corresponding plaster or bronze model to keep the studio ensemble intact. From the 1940s onward, he created very few new works. Before he died in 1957, Brancusi bequeathed his entire studio to the French state. One of the four areas of the studio—the room with his tools and forge—is reconstructed here in its original dimensions.

### **Staging Sculpture**

"Why write about my sculptures? Why not simply show their photographs?"

For Brancusi, photography, and later film, played a crucial role as mediums for documentation; they were also methods for influencing how his works were perceived. In the early 1910s, Brancusi began photographing his sculptures himself. After he met the photographer Man Ray in the 1920s, photography increasingly became a medium for the artist to con-

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template sculpture in space. During this time, he also discovered film as a way to “bring life” to the staging of his sculptures. Brancusi imbued his works with a special aura through an interplay of light and shadow or tight framing. Reflections of light on the highly polished surfaces dissolved the boundaries between an object and the space surrounding it, elevating the works to something immaterial and even mystical. At the same time, the photographs and films evoke a high degree of dynamism and a certain weightlessness—aspects that were particularly important to Brancusi, because to his mind, sculpture is defined as “a form in motion.”

### **Smooth and Raw**

The majority of Brancusi’s sculptures are characterized by uniformly polished surfaces from which all traces of manual labor have been erased. However, his use of various tools such as sanding wheels and files lends each work its own individual character. To achieve an interplay of tactile and visual contrasts, Brancusi combined the smooth forms of his sculptures with raw or roughly hewn sections, which can be seen particularly in the base elements he crafted from wood or stone. These consist of simple geometric elements that can be stacked and combined, lending the pedestals a dynamic character. For Brancusi, the base wasn’t merely a platform that elevated his sculptures and set them apart from their surroundings; he regarded them as an integral part of the work itself. In 1916, he began selling the sculptures and pedestals together. On several occasions, he even transformed pedestals into autonomous works. Conversely, some of his sculptures also serve as pedestals—a practice that reflects Brancusi’s rejection of all artistic hierarchy.

### **Birds in Space**

“It’s not the bird I want to express, but the gift, the flight, the momentum.”

For over three decades, Brancusi explored the motif of the bird, creating more than thirty variations in marble, bronze, and plaster. It began in the early 1910s with his *Maiastra*, a magical bird borrowed from Romanian folktales. Throughout the 1920s, Brancusi increasingly simplified the bird’s form. The sculptor’s *Young Bird* from 1928 is shaped like an egg; over time, he continued to elongate later versions, making them slimmer. While his marble bird of 1923, with its sawtooth-like base, is still firmly anchored to the base, in later versions the artist increasingly emphasized the birds’ verticality. With their elongated, slender bronze bodies and the narrow pedestals on which they perch in delicate balance, they appear almost weightless, poised for takeoff. Their highly polished, gleaming surfaces lend them an almost otherworldly aura. For Brancusi, flight symbolized humanity’s dream of escaping earthly existence—it was an ascent to spirituality.

### **World of Animals**

Fish, roosters, birds, seals, swans, and turtles comprise Brancusi’s world of animals, which defies the modern sculptural canon. Throughout his life, the artist worked on multiple series of animal sculptures, creating numerous formats and variations in material ranging from marble and plaster to wood and bronze. Brancusi was less interested in depicting the animal

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realistically than portraying it in motion; he aimed for its symbolic meaning and achieved this through smooth, reflective surfaces and a formal reduction to essential lines representing the movement and dynamism typical for the animal. As he explained: "When you see a fish, you do not think of its scales, do you? You think of its speed, its floating, flashing body seen through water." Brancusi's photographs and films are additional evidence testifying to his quest to capture the animals in their living presence.

### **Form in Motion**

Brancusi painstakingly polished his bronzes until the surfaces were shiny and mirror-like; the ensuing reflections allow the sculptures to move beyond their material boundaries into the surrounding space. The works reflect and distort the environment. In addition, the artist sometimes mounted his works on ball bearings to further enhance the dynamic impression. Brancusi created a system of this kind for his sculpture *Leda*. In 1920, he designed a first version of the mythological figure in white marble. After it was sold, he produced another in polished bronze, which remained in his studio. He installed this work on a polished metal disc and, a few years later, attached a small motor to make it turn slowly in perpetual motion. It's this movement that lends the sculpture its ongoing state of transformation. The sculptor puts a twist on the Greek myth: it's not Zeus who transforms himself into a swan here, but Princess Leda herself who rejects the god's advances. The film, shot with Brancusi's own camera, shows this new metamorphosis: the myriad reflections endlessly erasing and recreating its image, doubled by the polished mirroring disc representing the smooth surface of still water.

### **Time line texts**

#### **From east to west**

Constantin Brancusi was born in 1876 in Hobița, a village located south of the Romania's Carpathian Mountains. Growing up in a rural environment, he was intimate with the local woodcarving tradition from a young age. It was above all the architectural ornaments from this tradition that he later drew on in his wooden sculptures and pedestals. Brancusi studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Craiova from 1894 to 1898, after which he enrolled in the sculpture class at the School of Fine Arts in Bucharest. He remained there until 1902; before long, he was already enjoying his first success with his work. In 1904, Brancusi received a scholarship and left his native country for Paris, traveling mostly on foot via Vienna, Munich, and Zurich.

#### **Becoming Brancusi**

Shortly after arriving in Paris, Brancusi enrolled at the National School of Fine Arts and soon began exhibiting regularly in the city's art salons. In 1907, he met Auguste Rodin and worked for a brief period in his studio. Rodin's approach of regarding the fragment as an artistic principle left a deep impression on Brancusi. Soon, however, he liberated himself from his role model and began creating sculptures directly from stone or wood, in the manner of *taille directe*. He was inspired both by traditional Romanian handicraft and the formal language of objects from antiquity, Africa,

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and the Far East, which he, like many other artists, studied closely on visits to the Louvre, the Musée Guimet, and the Musée du Trocadéro.

### **Brancusi circle**

In 1916, Brancusi moved to Impasse Ronsin, a quiet alley close to Montparnasse in Paris, home to a community of artists. His studio there was both a place to live and a workspace, where business was conducted and friendship and celebrations took place. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Amedeo Modigliani, Fernand Léger, and the composer Eric Satie were frequent visitors, as were collectors and admirers of Brancusi's work. Although Brancusi never joined an artists' group, he was well acquainted with the Parisian avant-garde, among them the Dadaists and Surrealists, and attended many of their events. His sociable nature is evident in his correspondence, which he carefully preserved. Music and dance also played an important role in Brancusi's everyday life; Lizica Codréano, Florence Meyer, and other dancers composed their choreographies in his studio.

### **Fame and scandals**

Brancusi's artistic success in the US began with his participation in the 1913 *Armory Show* in New York, at the time one of the leading exhibitions of modern art. After making his first sales there, he continued to present his work to the public. The American newspapers came down hard on him, while viewers were amused at his unconventional work. This lack of recognition carried over to Paris: in 1920, Brancusi was asked to remove *Princess X*, the sculpture he'd submitted to the *Salon des Indépendants*, which had deemed it obscene. Several years later, his attempt to import work for his 1926 solo exhibition at the Brummer Gallery in New York ended in a lawsuit: US Customs refused to accept his *Bird in Space* as art—an incident the press seized on and that sparked a wider debate over abstract art. Nonetheless, Brancusi's work found great acclaim, particularly among artists in the US and Europe, as evidenced by the many articles published in international avant-garde journals.

### **Legacy and eternity**

Beginning in the 1930s, Brancusi increasingly devoted himself to large-scale sculptures and monuments, only a few of which were carried out. In 1936, the Maharaja of Indore commissioned him to design a temple for the three *Birds in Space* he had acquired. While this project was abandoned in 1938, Brancusi's ensemble in Târgu Jiu, Romania, which commemorates servicemen killed in World War I, was inaugurated that same year. The first monograph on Brancusi's work appeared around this time; written by the Romanian Vasile G. Paleolog, it was the only book on Brancusi published during his lifetime, as the artist had always been wary of any attempts to translate his work into words. In 1955, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York honored him with his largest solo exhibition to date. It solidified his fame, as did Carola Giedion-Welcker's 1958 monograph, which came out a year after the artist's death on March 16, 1957 in Paris.

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