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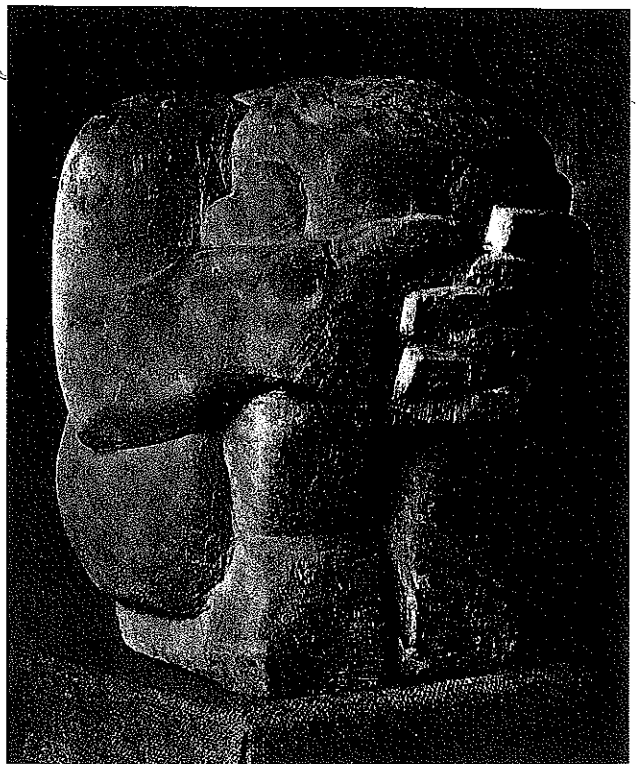
The Figurative Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century Sculpture

Auguste Rodin lived until 1917, his reputation increasing until, by the time of his death, it had become worldwide. Aristide Maillol did not die until 1944 and he continued to be a productive sculptor until his death. Antoine Bourdelle lived until 1929. The figurative tradition of these artists was, as we saw in chapter 6, reinforced by the growing recognition accorded the sculpture of older artists such as Edgar Degas and Paul Gauguin. While these men challenged some of the most time-honored sculptural traditions, they did so within the confines of the figurative mode. In his startling *Little Dancer Fourteen Years Old* (see fig. 6.2), Degas's introduction of actual materials heightened the psychological relationship between object and viewer. Subsequently, in major works such as *The Burghers of Calais* (see fig. 6.8), Rodin explored new spatial concepts to break down traditional barriers between sculpture and its audience. Gauguin, in his painted wood reliefs or ceramics such as *Oviri* (see figs. 3.18, 6.3), moved away from the notion of sculpture as a public art form toward one of hermetic, Symbolist content that drew on non-European sources. These tendencies proved critical to virtually all of the artists discussed in this chapter.

Despite revolutionary experiments being carried on by Cubist and abstract sculptors in the early twentieth century, the figurative tradition was central to the development of modernism, and it continued to dominate the scene in Europe and the United States. Unlike early twentieth-century experimentalists in construction and assemblage, who regarded sculptural form as a means of shaping space (see figs. 10.27, 10.31), the artists discussed in this chapter held to the notion of sculpture as mass or volumes in space. They used traditional methods of creating those volumes—modeling clay or carving marble and wood. In their hands, the figure is a source of seemingly inexhaustible expression, ranging from the relatively conservative efforts of Georg Kolbe to the radical innovations of Constantin Brancusi. While Kolbe still belongs within the classical tradition, others among his contemporaries, namely Derain, Matisse,

and Brancusi, deliberately turned to nonclassical sources, such as Oceanic or pre-Columbian art, for inspiration.

Among the twentieth-century painter-sculptors, Matisse depicted the human figure throughout his life, while Picasso began to desert naturalistic representation with a group of primitivist wood carvings, dated 1907, in which the influence of Iberian, archaic Greek, and African sculpture is even more explicit than in his paintings of that year. Also in 1907, André Derain carved *Crouching Man* (fig. 9.1), transformed from a single block of stone—a startling example of proto-Cubist sculpture. David Smith, one of the outstanding American sculptors of the twentieth century (see figs. 19.39, 19.40), frequently contended that



9.1 André Derain, *Crouching Man*, 1907. Stone, 13 × 11" (33 × 27.9 cm). Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris.

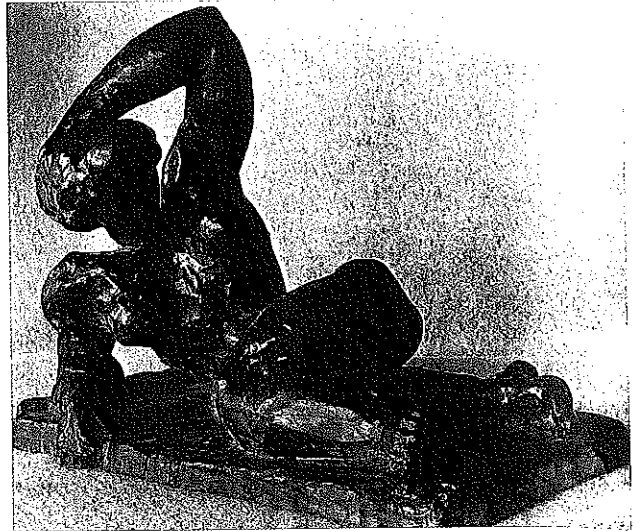
modern sculpture was created by painters. Although this cannot be taken as literally true, given the achievements of Rodin, Brancusi, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and Jacques Lipchitz, major contributions to sculpture were certainly made by such painters as Degas, Gauguin, Picasso, Amadeo Modigliani, and Matisse.

A Parallel Medium: The Sculpture of Henri Matisse

Matisse said he “sculpted like a painter,” and that he took up sculpture “to put order into my feelings and to find a style to suit me. When I found it in sculpture, it helped me in my painting.” Throughout his career, Matisse explored sculpture as a medium parallel to his painted oeuvre, often setting up a dialogue between the two. He studied for a time with Bourdelle (see fig. 6.14), and was strongly influenced by Rodin, then at the height of his reputation. Matisse’s *The Serf* (fig. 9.2) was begun in 1900, but not completed until 1904. Although sculpted after a well-known model, Bevilacqua, who had posed for Rodin and of whom Matisse also made a painting in a Cézannesque style (see fig. 7.2), it was adapted in attitude and concept (although on a reduced scale) from a Rodin sculpture called *Walking Man*. In *The Serf* Matisse carried the Expressionist modeling of the surface even further than Rodin, and halted the forward motion of the figure by adjusting the position of the legs into a solidly static pose and truncating the arms above the elbow.

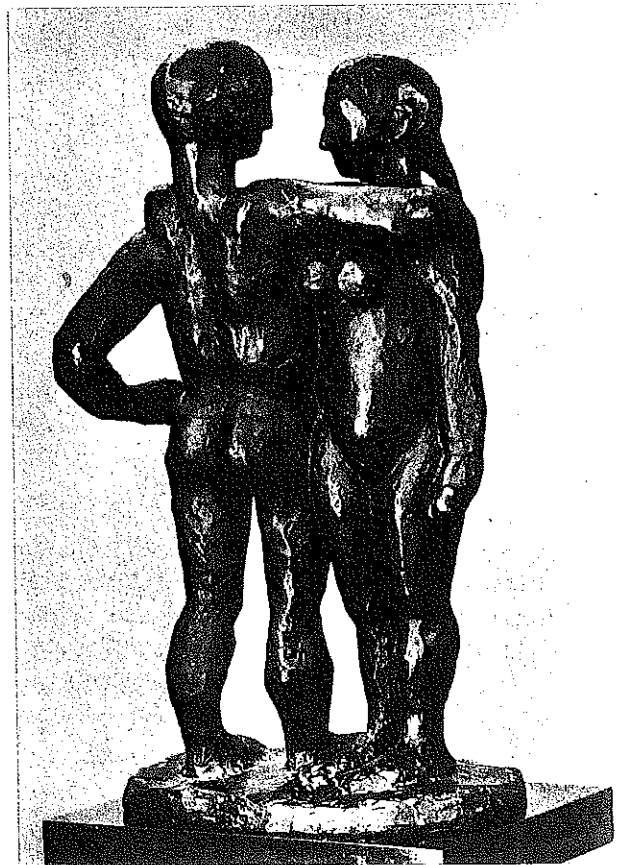


9.2 Henri Matisse, *The Serf*, 1900–4. Bronze, 36 × 13¾ × 12¼" at base (91.4 × 35.3 × 31.1 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

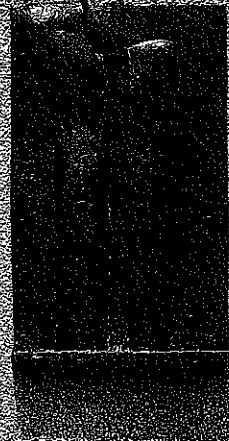


9.3 Henri Matisse, *Reclining Nude, I* (*Nu couché, I; Aurore*). Collioure, winter 1906–7. Bronze, 13½ × 19¾ × 11¼" (34.3 × 50.2 × 28.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Aside from the great Fauvist figure compositions seen in chapter 7, Matisse in the years between 1905 and 1910 was studying the human figure in every conceivable pose and in every medium—drawing, painting, linoleum cut, and lithography, as well as sculpture. The sculpture entitled *Reclining Nude, I* (fig. 9.3) is the most successful of the



9.4 Henri Matisse, *Two Women*, 1907. Bronze, 18¾ × 10½ × 7¾" (46.6 × 25.6 × 19.9 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



9.5 Henri Matisse, From left to right: *Back I*, 1909. Bronze relief, 74" × 44" × 6½" (188.9 × 113 × 16.5 cm). *Back II*, 1913. Bronze, 74" × 47" × 8" (188.6 × 119.4 × 20.3 cm). *Back III*, 1916–17. Bronze, 74" × 44¼" × 6" (188 × 112.4 × 15.2 cm). *Back IV*, c. 1930. Bronze, 74" × 45" × 7" (188 × 114.3 × 17.8 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

early attempts at a reclining figure integrated with surrounding space through its elaborate, twisting pose. Working under the influence of African sculpture, Matisse used this pose to dramatic effect in *The Blue Nude* (see fig. 7.7), painted at about the same time; it is interesting to compare his resolution of this spatial problem in the two media. Matisse was to experiment over the years with a number of sculpted variants of this reclining figure, generally more simplified and geometrized, and she frequently appeared in his later paintings.

Matisse also tried his hand at a very different kind of sculptural arrangement in the small *Two Women* (fig. 9.4), which consists of two figures embracing, one front view, and the other back view. Although it may have some connection with Early Renaissance exercises in anatomy in which artists depicted athletic nudes in front and back views, its blocky, rectangular structure has a closer connection with some frontalized examples of African sculpture. This influence is not surprising, given that Matisse began to collect African sculpture shortly before he made *Two Women*, which is based on a photograph from an ethnographic magazine depicting two Tuareg women from North Africa.

Matisse's most ambitious excursion in sculpture was the creation of the four great *Backs*, executed between 1909 and 1931 (fig. 9.5). While most of his sculptures are small-scale, these monumental reliefs are more than six feet high (1.8 m). They are a development of the theme stated in *Two Women*, now translated into a single figure in bas-relief, seen from the back. But Matisse has here resorted to



9.6 Henri Matisse, *Jeannette V* (Jean Vaderin, 5th state), Issy-les-Moulineaux, 1916. Bronze, height 22¾ × 83¾ × 10¾" (58.1 × 21.3 × 27.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

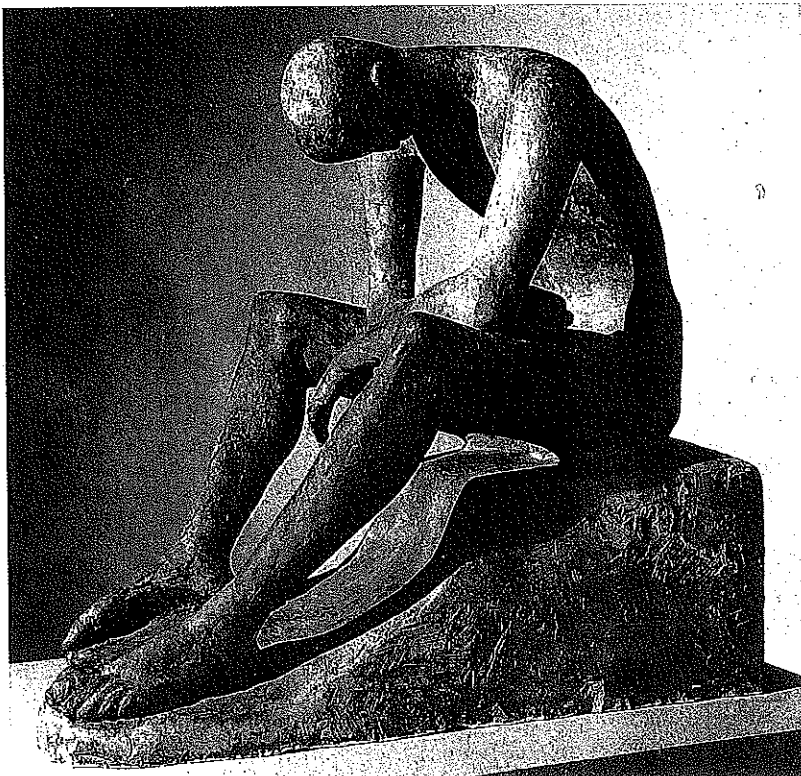
an upright, vertical surface like that of a painting on which to sculpt his form. *Back I* is modeled in a relatively representational manner, freely expressing the modulations of a muscular back, and it reveals the feeling Matisse had for

sculptural form rendered on a monumental scale. *Back II* is simplified in a manner reflecting the artist's interest in Cubism around 1913. *Back III* and *Back IV* are so reduced to their architectural components that they almost become abstract sculpture. The figure's long ponytail becomes a central spine that serves as a powerful axis through the center of the composition. Here, as in *The Blue Nude*, Matisse has synthesized African and Cézannesque elements, this time, however, in order to acknowledge, as well as resist, the formal discoveries made by the Cubists.

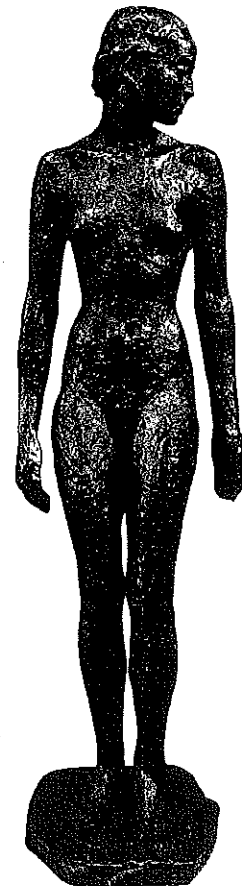
Matisse's other major effort in sculpture was a series of five heads of a woman, done between 1910 and 1916. *Jeannette I* and *Jeannette II* are direct portraits done from life in the freely expressive manner of late Rodin bronzes. But with *Jeannette III*, *Jeannette IV*, and *Jeannette V* (fig. 9.6), he worked from his imagination, progressively transforming the human head first into an Expressionist study, exaggerating all the features, and then into a geometric organization of shapes. Picasso had produced his Cubist *Woman's Head* in 1909 (see fig. 10.15), and this work may have prompted Matisse's experiments. In turn, Picasso probably had Matisse's examples in mind when making his so-called Bosgeloup heads in the early thirties. In Matisse's work, serial sculptures such as the *Backs* and the *Jeannettes* do not necessarily constitute a set of progressive steps toward the perfection of an idea. Rather, they are multiple but independent states, each version a definitive solution in and of itself.

Developments in Germany: Lehmbruck, Kolbe, Banlach, and Kollwitz

With the exception of such older masters as Maillol, the tradition of Realist or Realist-Expressionist sculpture flourished more energetically outside France than inside, after 1910. In Germany the major figure was Wilhelm Lehmbruck (1881-1919). After an academic training, Lehmbruck turned for inspiration first to the Belgian sculptor of miners and industrial workers, Constantin Meunier (1831-1905), and then to Rodin. During the four years he spent in Paris, between 1910 and 1914, Lehmbruck became acquainted with Matisse, Modigliani, Brancusi, and Aleksandr Archipenko. His *Standing Woman* of 1910 reveals the influence of Maillol, as well as classical Greek sculpture. The emotional power of Lehmbruck's work, however, comes not from his studies of the past but from his own sensitive and melancholy personality. His surviving works are few, for the entire oeuvre belongs to a ten-year period. In *Seated Youth* (fig. 9.7), his last monumental work, the artist utilized extreme elongation—possibly suggested by figures in Byzantine mosaics and Romanesque sculpture—to convey a sense of contemplation and withdrawal. This work represents a departure from Maillol and from a nineteenth-century tradition that emphasized volume and mass. Lehmbruck's figure, with its long, angular limbs, is penetrated by space, and exploits for



9.7 Wilhelm Lehmbruck, *Seated Youth*, 1917. Composite tinted plaster, 40" x 30" x 45½" (103.2 x 76.2 x 115.5 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



9.8 Georg Kolbe, *Young Woman*, 1926. Bronze, height 50½" (128.6 cm). Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

expressive ends the abstract organization of solid and voids. With its mood of dejection and loss, *Seated Youth* expresses the trauma and sadness Lehmbruck experienced in Germany during World War I—suffering that finally, in 1919, led him to suicide.

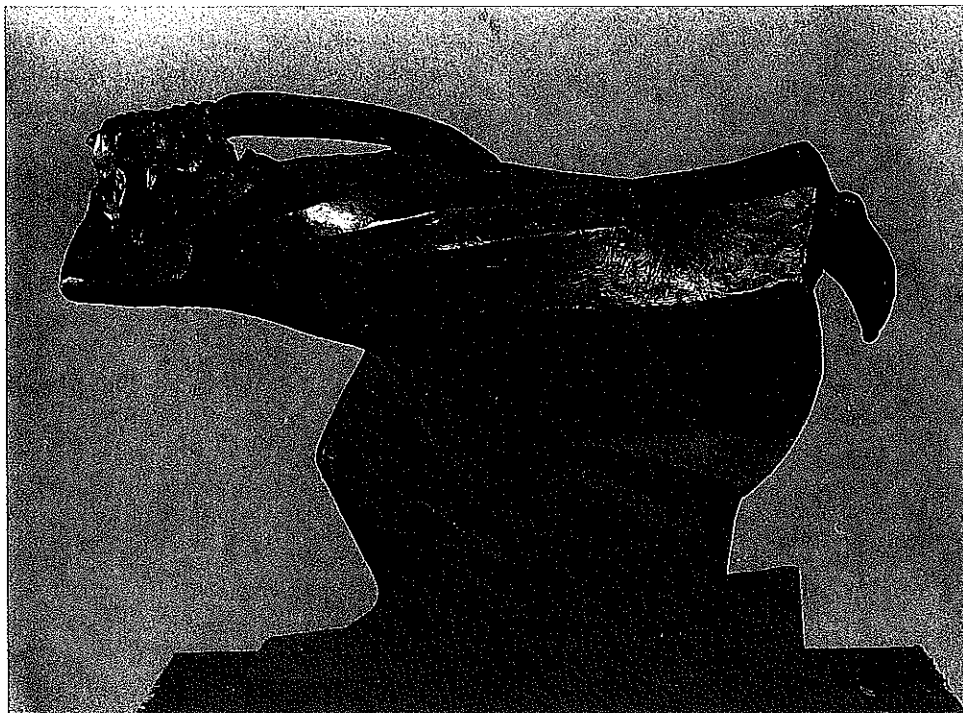
The human figure was so thoroughly entrenched as the principal vehicle of expression for sculptors that it was even more difficult for them to depart from it than for painters to depart from landscape, figure, or still life. It was also difficult for sculptors to say anything new about the subject, or startlingly different from what had been said before.

Other leading German sculptors of the early twentieth century included **Georg Kolbe** (1877–1941), Ernst Barlach, and Käthe Kollwitz. Kolbe began as a painter but developed an interest in sculpture during a two-year stay in Rome. His later encounter with Rodin's work in Paris had considerable impact on his work. For his figures or portrait heads, Kolbe combined the formal aspects of Maillol's figures with the light-reflecting surfaces of Rodin's. After some essays in highly simplified figuration, Kolbe settled into a lyrical formula of rhythmic nudes (fig. 9.8)—appealing, but essentially a Renaissance tradition with a Rodinesque broken surface. His depictions in the thirties of heroic, idealized, and specifically Nordic figures now seem uncomfortably compatible with the Nazis' glorification of a "master race."

In addition to making sculpture carved from wood or cast in bronze, **Ernst Barlach** (1870–1938) was an

accomplished poet, playwright, and printmaker. Although, like Lehmbruck, he visited Paris, he was not as strongly influenced by French avant-garde developments. His early work took on the curving forms of Jugendstil and aspects of medieval German sculpture. In 1906 he traveled to Russia, where he was deeply impressed by the peasant population, and his later sculptures often depicted Russian beggars or laborers. Once he was targeted as a "degenerate artist" by Nazi authorities in the thirties, Barlach's public works, including monumental sculptures for cathedrals, were dismantled or destroyed. He was capable of works of sweeping power and the integration in a single image of humor and pathos and primitive tragedy, as in *The Avenger* (fig. 9.9). His was a storytelling art, a kind of socially conscious Expressionism that used the outer forms of contemporary experiment for narrative purposes.

Käthe Kollwitz is best known for her graphics (see figs. 8.15, 8.16), but she was capable of an equally intense expression in sculpture, with which she was increasingly involved throughout her last years. Given the intrinsically sculptural technique of carving and gouging a block of wood to make a woodcut, it is not surprising that a printmaker might be drawn to sculpture, though Kollwitz never actually made sculpture in wood. Like Lehmbruck, she learned of Rodin's work on a trip to Paris and admired the sculpture of Constantin Meunier, whose subjects of workers struck a sympathetic chord. But perhaps the most significant influence on her work in three dimensions was that



9.9 Ernst Barlach, *The Avenger*, 1914. Bronze, 17¼ × 23 × 8¼" (43.8 × 58.4 × 21 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



9.10 Käthe Kollwitz, *Lamentation: In Memory of Ernst Barlach (Grief)*, 1938. Bronze, height 10¼" (26 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

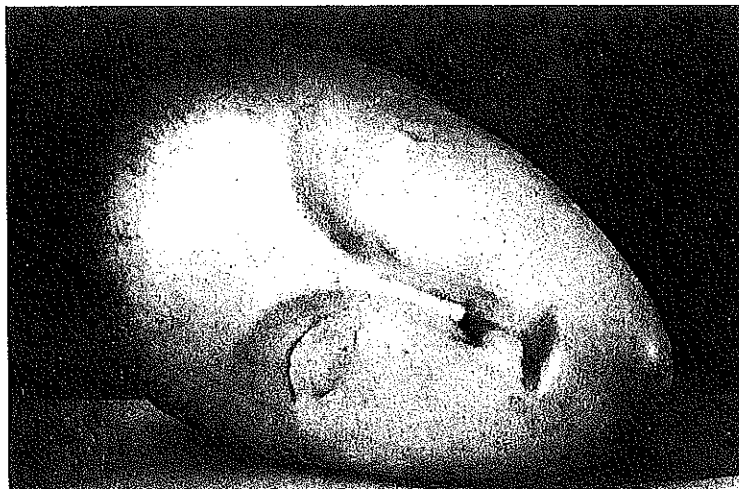
of her friend Barlach. The highly emotional tenor of her work, whether made for a humanitarian cause, or in memory of her son killed in World War I, arose from a profoundly felt grief that transmitted itself to her sculpture and prints. *Lamentation: In Memory of Ernst Barlach (Grief)* (fig. 9.10) is an example of Kollwitz's relief sculpture, a moving, close-up portrait of her own grieving.

Forms of the Essential: Constantin Brancusi

In France during the early years of the twentieth century, the most individual figure—and ultimately one of the most influential sculptors of the time—was **Constantin Brancusi** (1876–1957). Born in Romania, the son of peasants, he left home at the age of eleven. Between 1894 and 1898 he was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker and studied in the provincial city of Craiova, and then at the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts. In 1902 he went to

Germany and Switzerland, arriving in Paris in 1904. After further studies at the *École des Beaux-Arts* under the sculptor Antonin Mercié, he began exhibiting, first at the Salon de la Nationale and then at the Salon d'Automne. Impressed by his contributions to the 1907 Salon d'Automne, Rodin invited him to become an assistant. Brancusi stayed only a short time. As he later declared, "Nothing grows under the shade of great trees."

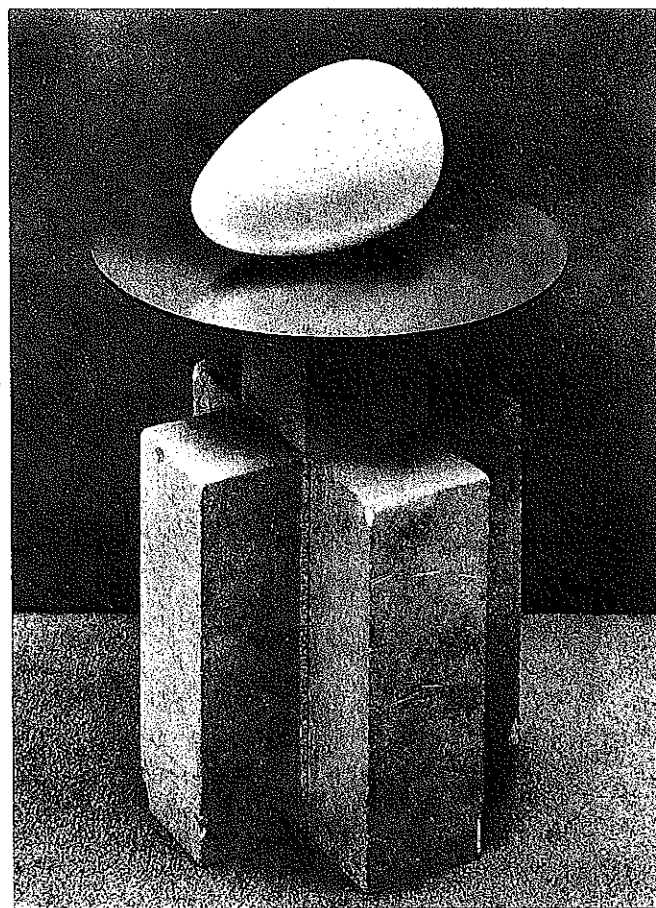
The sculpture of Brancusi is in one sense isolated, in another universal. He worked with few themes, never really deserting the figure, but he touched, affected, and influenced most of the major strains of sculpture after him. From the tradition of Rodin's late studies came the figure *Sleep*, in which the realistic form of a shadowed face appears to sink into the matrix of the marble. The theme of the *Sleeping Muse* was to become an obsession with Brancusi, and he played variations on it for some twenty years. In the next version (fig. 9.11), and later, the head was transformed into an egg shape, with the features lightly but



9.11 Constantin Brancusi, *Sleeping Muse 1*, 1909–10. Marble, 7 × 11½ × 8" (17.8 × 29.2 × 20.3 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

sharply cut from the mass. As became his custom with his basic themes, he presented this form in marble, bronze, and plaster, almost always with slight adjustments that turned each version into a unique work.

In a subsequent work, the theme was further simplified to a teardrop shape in which the features largely disappeared, with the exception of an indicated ear. To this 1911 piece he gave the name *Prometheus*. The form in turn led to *The Newborn*, in which the oval is cut obliquely to form the screaming mouth of the infant. He returned to the polished egg shape in the ultimate version, entitled *The Beginning of the World* (fig. 9.12), closely related to a contemporary work called *Sculpture for the Blind*. In this, his ultimate statement about creation, Brancusi eliminated all reference to anatomical detail. A similar work, as well as *The Newborn*, can be seen at the bottom of Brancusi's photograph of his studio taken around 1927 (fig. 9.13). The artist preferred that his work be discovered in the context of his own studio, amid tools, marble dust, and incomplete works. He was constantly rearranging his work, grouping the sculptures into a carefully staged environment. Brancusi left the entire content of his studio to the French state; a reconstruction of it is in the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris. The artist took photographs of his own works (a privilege he rarely allowed others) in order to disseminate their images beyond Paris and to depict his sculptures in varying, often dramatic light. His many pictures of corners of his studio convey the complex interplay of his sculptural shapes and the cumulative effect of his search for ideal form. "Why write [about my sculptures]?" he once said. "Why not just show the photographs?"



9.12 Constantin Brancusi, *The Beginning of the World*, c. 1920. Marble, metal, and stone, 29¾ × 11¾" (75.2 × 28.9 cm). Dallas Museum of Art.

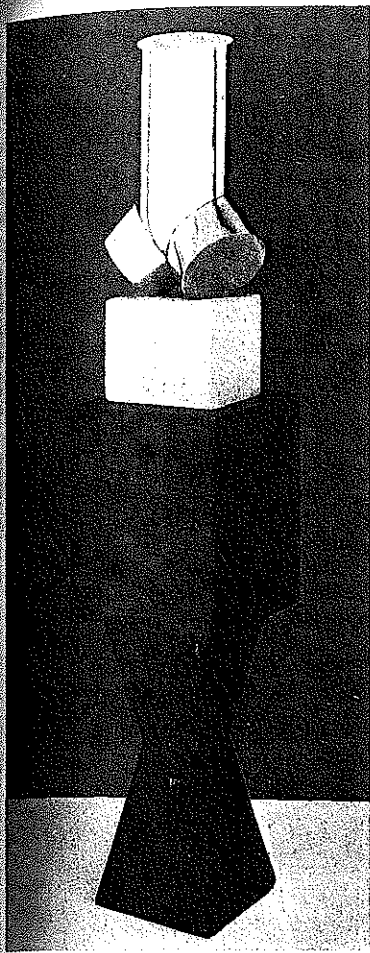


9.13 Constantin Brancusi, *The Studio*, c. 1927. Photograph, mounted on glass, 23¾ × 19¾" (60.3 × 50.2 cm). Pascal Sernet Fine Art, London.

This tale of the egg was only one of a number of related themes that Brancusi continued to follow, with a hypnotic concentration on creation, birth, life, and death. In 1912 he made his first marble portrait of a young Hungarian woman named Margit Pogany, who posed several times in his studio. He portrayed her with enormous oval eyes and hands held up to one side of her face. This form was developed further in a number of drawings and in later variations in marble and polished bronze, in which Brancusi refined and abstracted his original design, omitting the mouth altogether and reducing the eyes to an elegant, arching line of a brow that merges with the nose. *Torso of a Young Man* (fig. 9.14) went as far as Brancusi ever did in the direction of geometric form. In this polished bronze

from 1924, he abstracted the softened, swelling lines of anatomy introduced in his earlier wood versions of the sculpture into an object of machinelike precision. Brancusi was clearly playing on a theme of androgyny here, for while the *Torso* is decidedly phallic, it could also constitute an interpretation of female anatomy.

An artist who shared Brancusi's quest for the essence of things and discovered it in images of remarkable purity and cool elegance was the American photographer Edward Weston (1886–1958). Indeed, Weston's picture of a pair of gleaming nautilus shells, set against a velvet-black ground (fig. 9.15), seems to be nature's own organic version of Brancusi's formal concerns. Here the photographer truly achieved his goal of a subject revealed in its "deepest

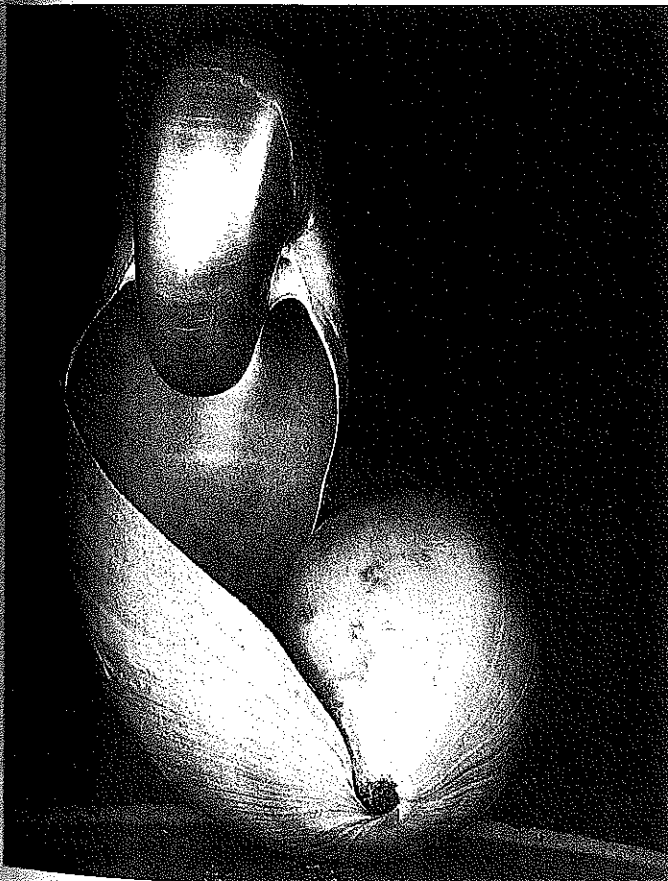


9.14 Constantin Brancusi, *Torso of a Young Man*, 1924. Polished bronze, 18 × 11 × 7" (45.7 × 28 × 17.8 cm), stone and wood base, height 40%" (102.6 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

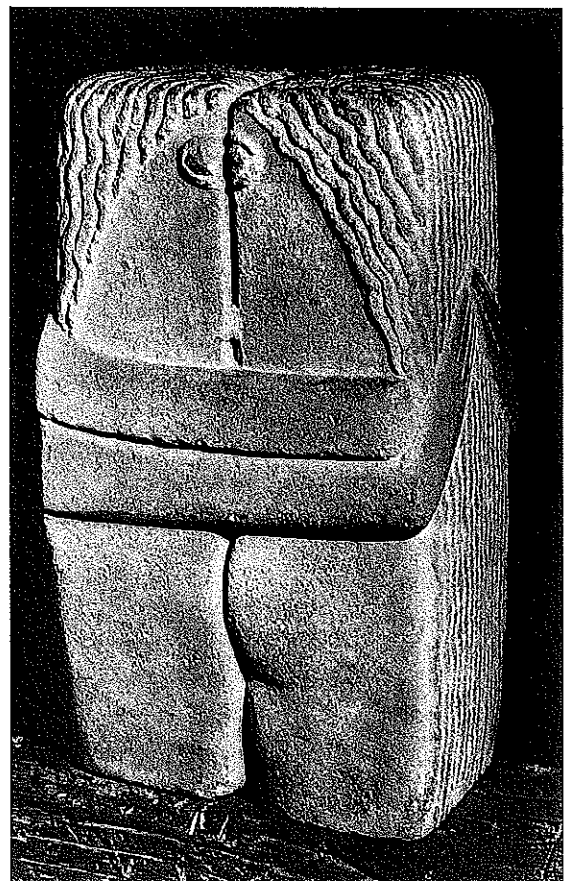
moment of perception." Weston rigorously controlled form through his selection of motif, exposure time, and use of the ground-glass focusing screen of a large-format camera. In this way he could previsualize his prints and eliminate the random effects of light, atmosphere, and moment. He created a timeless image, leaving behind the Pictorialism of earlier aesthetic photography and entering the mainstream of modern art.

The subjects of Brancusi were so elemental and his themes so basic that, although he had few direct followers, little that happened subsequently in sculpture seems foreign to him. *The Kiss*, 1916 (fig. 9.16), depicts with the simplest of means an embracing couple, a subject Brancusi had first realized in stone in 1909. Although this had been the subject of one of Rodin's most famous marbles, in the squat, blockish forms of *The Kiss* Brancusi made his break with the Rodinesque tradition irrefutably clear. He was also aware of developments in Cubist sculpture, as well as works in a primitivist vein, such as the crudely carved wooden figures of the German Expressionists and especially Derain (see fig. 9.1).

The artist was particularly obsessed with birds and the idea of conveying the essence of flight. For over a decade he progressively streamlined the form of his 1912 sculpture *Maiastrea* (or "master bird," from Romanian folklore), until he achieved the astonishingly simple, tapering form of



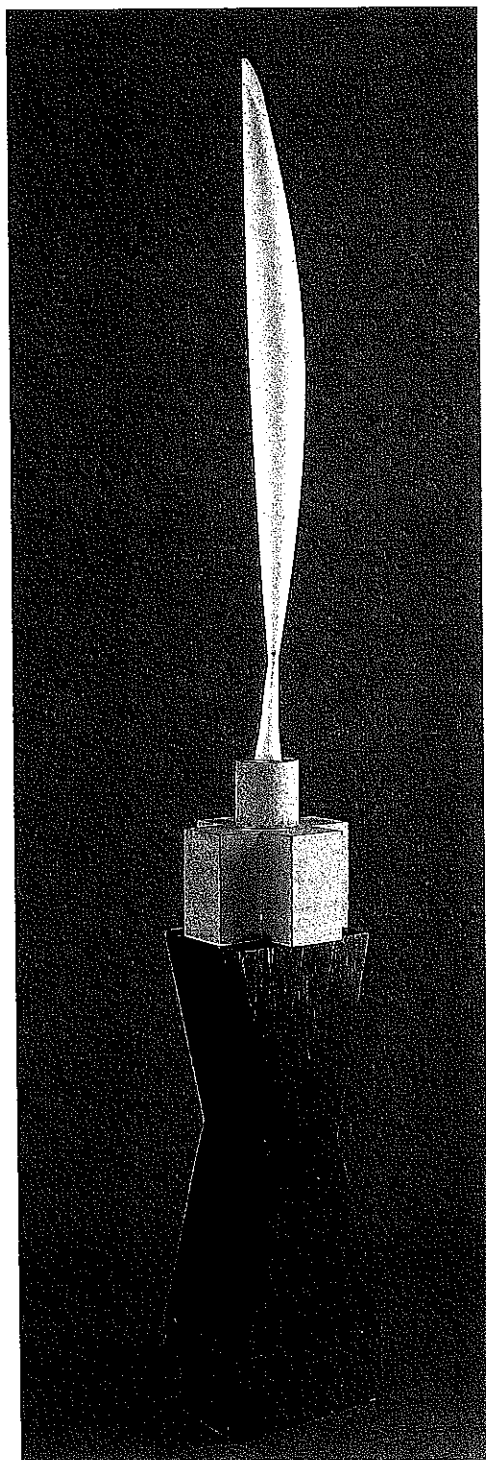
9.15 Edward Weston, *Shells*, 1927. Gelatin-silver print.



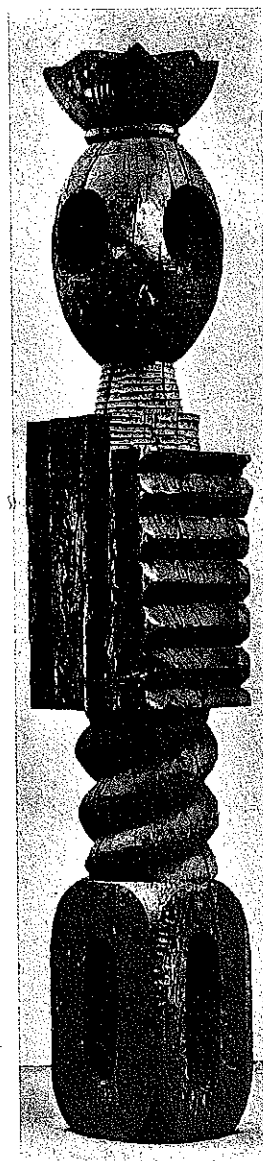
9.16 Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss*, 1916. Limestone, 23 × 13 × 10" (58.4 × 33 × 25.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Bird in Space (fig. 9.17). The image ultimately became less the representation of a bird's shape than that of a bird's trajectory through the air. Brancusi designed his own bases and considered them an integral part of his sculpture. In *Bird in Space*, the highly polished marble bird (he also made bronze versions) fits into a stone cylinder that sits atop a cruciform stone base. This, in turn, rests on a large X-shaped wooden pedestal. He made several variations on these forms, such as that designed for *Torso of a Young Man*.

These bases augment the sense of soaring verticality of the bird sculptures. In addition, they serve as transitions between the mundane physical world and the spiritual realm of the bird, for Brancusi sought a mystical fusion of the disembodied light-reflecting surfaces of polished marble or bronze and the solid, earthbound mass of wood. He said, "All my life I have sought the essence of flight. Don't look for mysteries. I give you pure joy. Look at the sculptures until you see them. Those nearest to God have seen them."

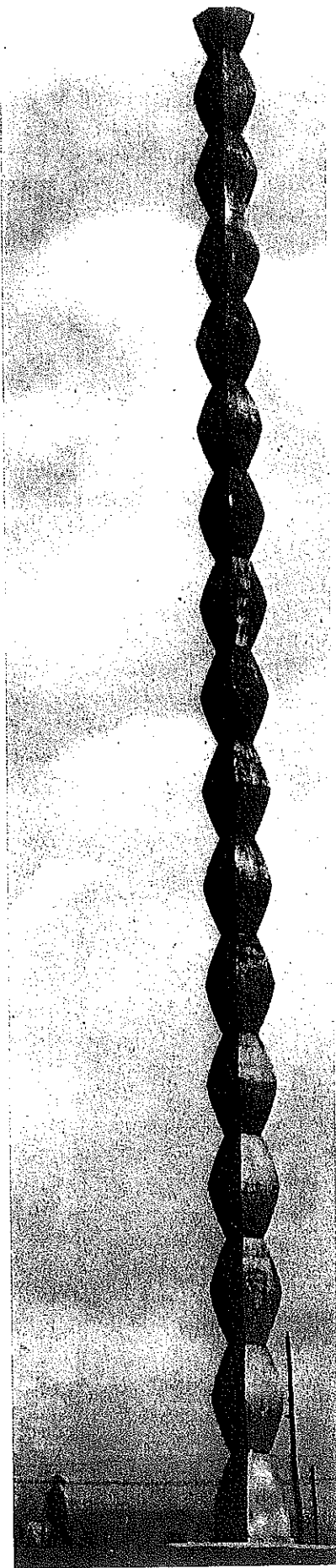


9.17 Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1925. Marble, stone, and wood, 71 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " [181.9 × 13.7 × 16.2 cm], stone pedestal 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ " [44.8 × 41.6 × 41.6 cm], wood pedestal 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 16 × 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ " [19.7 × 40.6 × 34 cm]. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



9.18 Constantin Brancusi, *King of Kings*, c. 1930. Oak, height 9'10" [3 m]. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

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In his wood sculptures, although he occasionally strove for the same degree of finish, Brancusi usually preferred a primitive, roughed-out totem. In *King of Kings* (fig. 9.18), which he had previously titled *The Spirit of Buddha*, reflecting his interest in Eastern spirituality, the great, regal shape comprises superimposed forms that are reworkings of the artist's wooden pedestals. Brancusi intended this sculpture for a temple of his design in India, commissioned by the Maharajah of Indore, who owned three of the artist's *Birds in Space*. The temple was never built. In fact, Brancusi's only outdoor work on a vast scale was a sculptural ensemble installed in the late thirties in Tirjiu-Jiu, Romania, not far from his native village. This included the immense cast-iron *Endless Column* (fig. 9.19), which recalls ancient obelisks but also draws upon forms in Romanian folk art. The rhomboid shapes of *Endless Column* also began as socle (pedestal) designs that were, beginning in 1918, developed as freestanding sculptures. Wood versions of the sculpture can be seen in Brancusi's photograph of his studio (see fig. 9.13). *Endless Column* was the most radically abstract of Brancusi's sculptures, and its reliance upon repeated modules became enormously important for Minimalist artists of the sixties.

9.19 Constantin Brancusi, *Endless Column*, 1937–38. Cast iron, height 98' (29.9 m). Tirjiu-Jiu, Romania.

