

Burton on Brancusi : April 7-June 28, 1989

Author

Burton, Scott

Date

1989

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2133

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

ARTIST'S CHOICE
Burton ON Brancusi

April 7–June 28, 1989



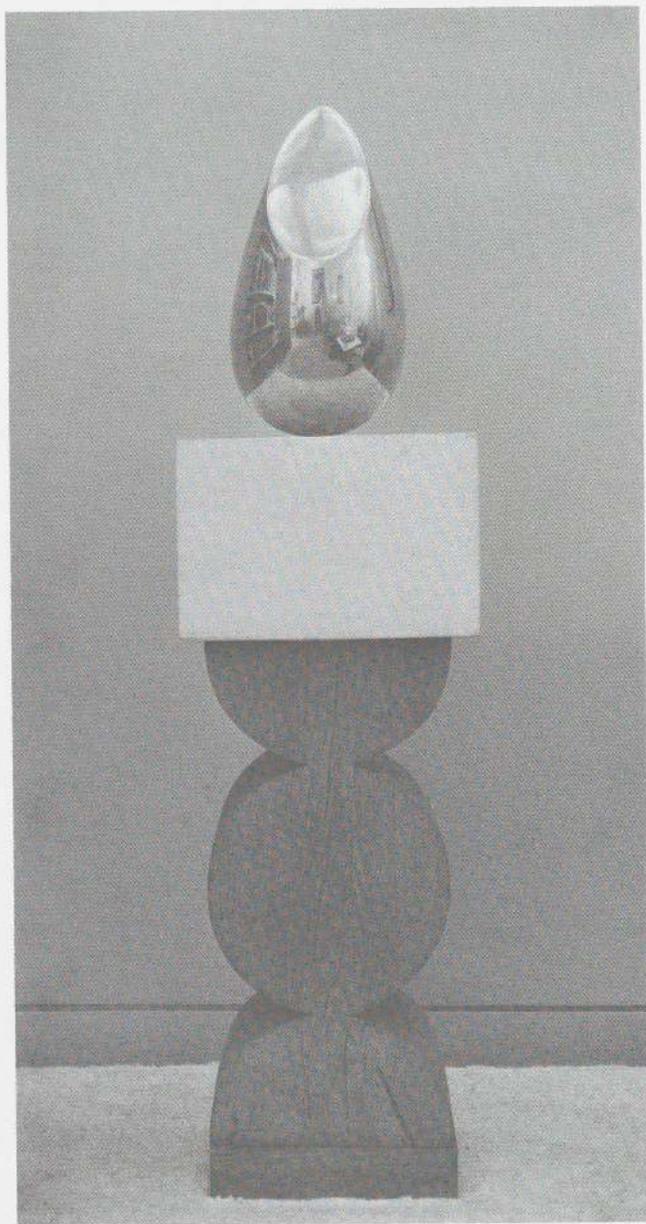
This exhibition has been made possible by grants from Agnes Gund
and Daniel Shapiro, and The Contemporary Arts Council
of The Museum of Modern Art.

My Brancusi by Scott Burton

The Table and Its Double

My excitement over Brancusi focuses not on his works with human and animal subjects, but on the architectural elements and works of furniture he created. The various kinds of seats and tables he made are especially fascinating. Although I am hardly the first to celebrate Brancusi's famous bases, I see them in a slightly different light from that in which they have been discussed before.

Archive
MoMA
1514

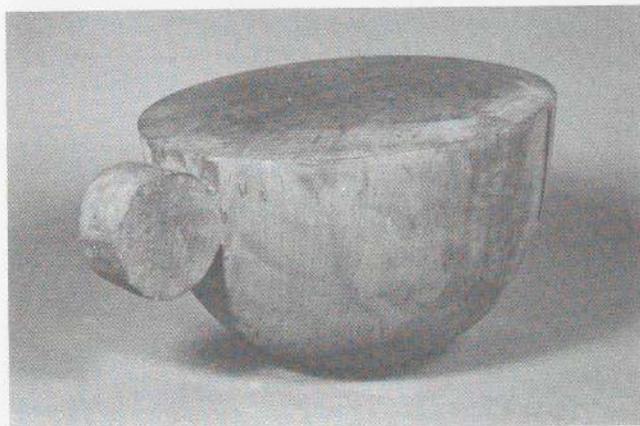


* **Young Bird.** 1928.
Bronze, on two-part pedestal
of stone and wood, overall
35 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York. Gift
of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M.
Burden.

(An asterisk indicates that the work is
included in the exhibition.)

The base, or pedestal, is a specialized form of table, and we can call Brancusi's objects of support pedestal-tables. I do not claim that all of them are major works of art, as wonderful as the heads or birds. But I do feel that a number of them are very fine and complex—works of the same order as his other sculptures. William Tucker has declared bluntly, "The bases are not works of art" (*Early Modern Sculpture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). More liberal and interested but of the same judgment is Sidney Geist, who states in his

indispensable book on Brancusi that "the pedestals are not works of art," characterizing them as "decorative objects of the same kind as picture frames" (*Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture*, New York: Grossman, 1968). Most advanced in the interpretation of Brancusi's functional objects is Pontus Hultén. His 1983 essay on Brancusi brings us—almost—to a late-twentieth-century point of view. He reiterates the by now old case for Brancusi as the first Minimalist, but he also lays the groundwork for the case of Brancusi as the first furniture artist and the first modern public artist. Hultén admirably embraces a Brancusi even greater than the Brancusi of the sculptures proper; he emphasizes the artist's "passionate concern for the rapport of his sculptures with the space around them" and demonstrates how around 1915 "the distinction between the sculptures, the works commonly referred to as their bases, and the other objects in Brancusi's studio became ever more blurred." This is a progressive assessment, but even Hultén says that the pedestal-table "should not by its nature be quite the same as what it supports" (Pontus Hultén, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, *Brancusi*, New York: Abrams, 1987).



Cup II. 1917–18.
Wood, $7\frac{3}{4} \times 14\frac{3}{16} \times 11\frac{7}{16}$ ".
Brancusi Studio, Musée
National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris. Photo: Brancusi.

(All photographs by Brancusi are
courtesy Musée National d'Art
Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris)

I think, though, that some of Brancusi's pedestal-tables are of the same conceptual order as any of his busts or torsos. His best pieces of furniture are not only functional objects but also representations of functional objects. We have here *sculptures of tables*, close in character to Brancusi's other sculptures. They are both object and subject.

Brancusi's Cups and Vase are pertinent here. As Geist states: "After the head as object and the torso as object, Cup is



Vase. Late 1930s.
Wood, $12 \times 14\frac{3}{16} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Brancusi Studio, Musée
National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou,
Paris

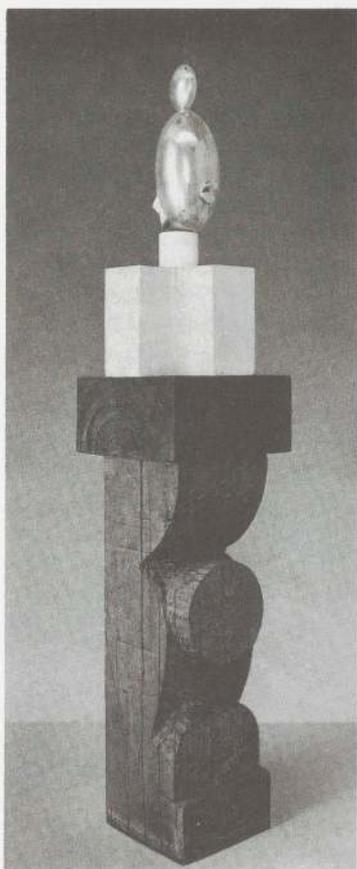
the object as object." In these terms, the pedestal is object as object—but with a role the nonfunctional works do not have. Unlike the various versions of *Cups*, the Brancusi table is an object simultaneously performing a function and acting as its own sign. It is a *usable* meditation on utilitarian form, as are the fireplace and doorframe in his studio. The pedestal-tables are not merely applied art, but can be seen as autonomous sculptures of objects, with all the stylistic devices Brancusi brings to the representation of organic form.

The model for them is, of course, a classic form or type occurring at least since the Egyptians, and beyond neoclassicism. In an important photograph of an early studio, taken by Brancusi around 1907, we can see a commonplace nineteenth-century wooden pedestal, complete with concentric disks. Is this the starting point for his later re-imagining of the form?



View of the Studio
(detail). c. 1907.
Photo: Brancusi

How can we look at Brancusi's pedestal-tables to see their doubleness? What are the elements of transformation? First, and characteristically, simplification. Just as he treats a face, he rejects central features of a typical table, namely legs and top. Now tables have one great formal problem: an antithetical relation between the legs and the top or "table" proper (the tablet or tableau, the board laid across the trestles in early European examples). Brancusi's pedestal-tables never have developed legs or conventionally proportioned tops. He seems to take the shape of a normal tabletop, broad but thin, and squeeze it into a chunky, thick little mass. You can sense a physical gesture, a kinesthetic impulse. The resulting relation between the monopodal support and the small block is one of unity between parts. Rather than being contrasting and dialectical (as is vertical against horizontal, leg against top), the relation is additive. In Brancusi's tables it is impossible to tell where the grounded support stops and the top (itself a support) begins.



Blond Negress, II.

c. 1933.

Bronze, on marble footing and three-part pedestal of limestone and two wood sections, overall 71 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Philip L. Goodwin Collection

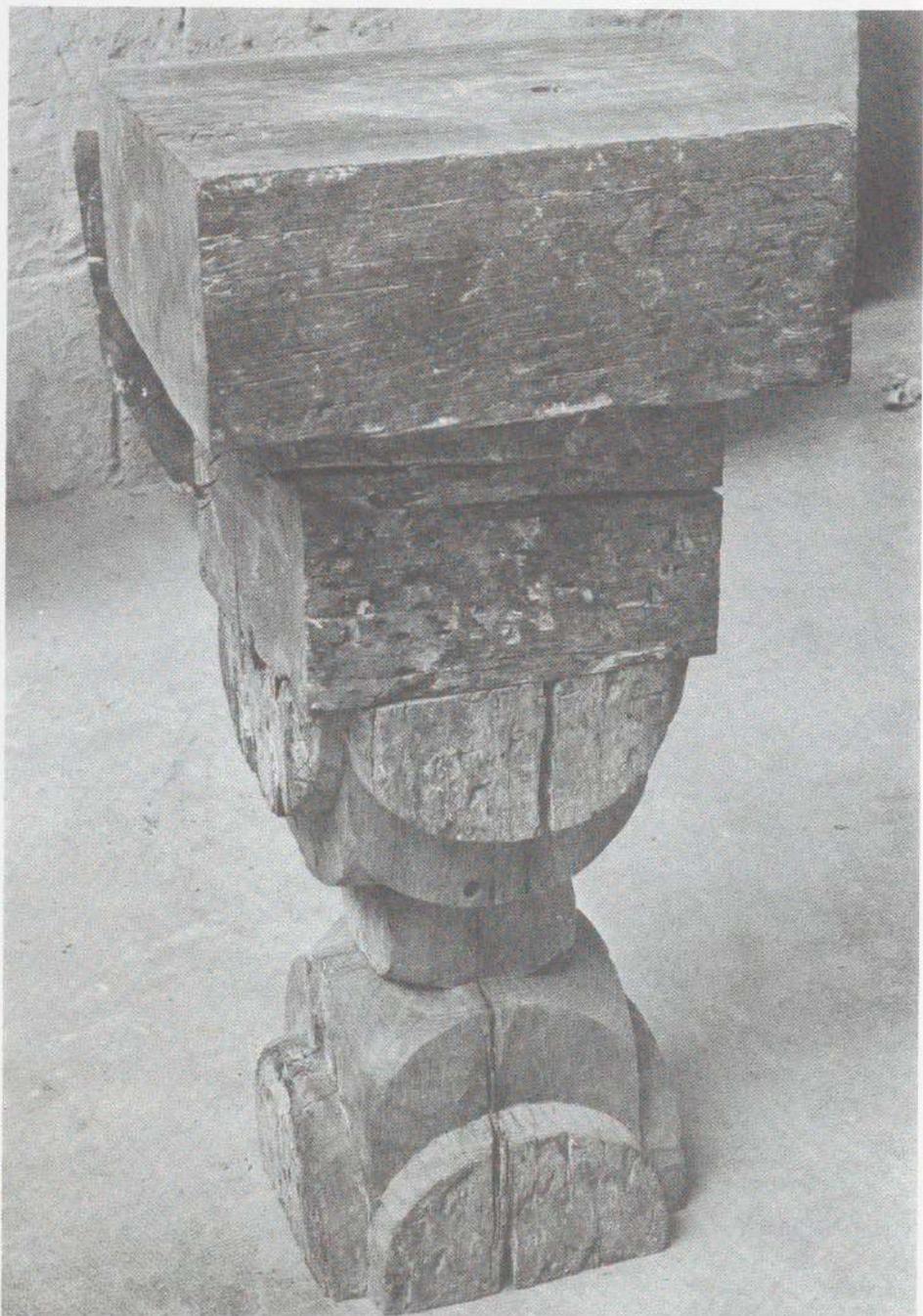
He often elides the distinction between the tablets and what I will call the footings: smaller elements, usually stone, that recur as cylindrical or near-cubic solids attached to the bottoms of the works they support. These necessary footings probably first inspired the thick tablet form below.

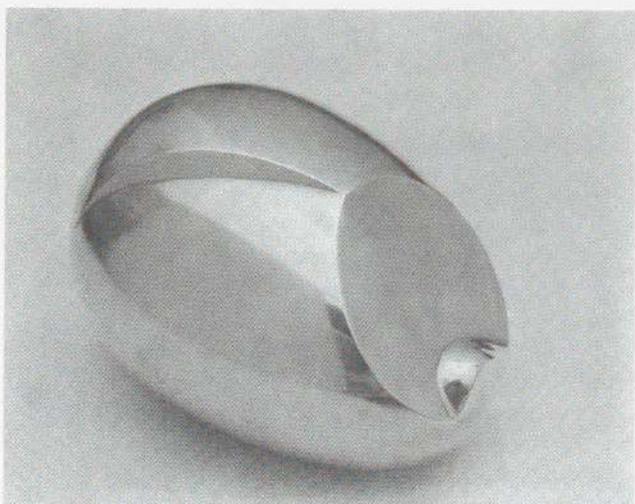
In addition to the two major forms and one special kind (to be discussed below), Brancusi made two or three other types of pedestal-tables. One group takes a form which is pilaster-like, with a flat back suggesting architectural alignment against a wall, and with motifs that connote living (though not human) creatures. The Museum of Modern Art has one of these, used for the *Blond Negress*. Another group consists of roughly carved, scored works in wood—asymmetrical, improvised, often cantilevered. (These, via the work of Isamu Noguchi, are a partial source for American craft-furniture makers of a certain generation.) Not many of Brancusi's pedestals depend on the appeal of carving; most are geometric forms—a vertical stack of spheres of different sizes, for example.

Some pedestal-tables are all wood, some all stone or plaster, some combinations of stone and wood. Some are of one piece, some make a point of having several parts. Many are top-heavy. All are monopodal. Some are pierced; a few are pierced to the bottom and almost suggest incipient legs. In some all the sides are identical, but others have strongly distinguished fronts, sides, and backs. Some are vertically symmetrical, the top repeated at the bottom. Some are square in section, some round. The motifs can occur in two- or three-dimensional variations, as triangles and circles or pyramids and spheres. Some have a very different kind of top, thin disks of metal or glass, usually for the unsupported heads. Many of the tables are primitivising, rustic. Dumitresco and Istrati (Brancusi's assistants from 1948) describe his style of "rugged furniture that discourages indolence." It has a touch of the exotic. A typology of Brancusi's pedestal-tables will reveal a richness of variations as great as that in his other groups of work.

Compare The Museum of Modern Art's head of *The Newborn* with an important pedestal (now in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), which Brancusi singled out for photographing by itself. The respective elimination of facial features and structural features is the same, and the signs for mouth and eye of the bronze head are clearly from the same repertory of motifs as the disks or semicircles of the wooden table. (Note also the double top of this beautiful table.) The heads are negatively important to the pedestals: in their portability and instability, their baselessness, they polarize comparison. The autonomy of the head confirms the autonomy of the pedestal.

* Pedestal for
The Sorceress. 1916.
Oak, overall 40¹/₁₆" high.
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York. Photo:
Brancusi





*** The Newborn.**

Version I, 1920.
Bronze, $5\frac{3}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{4} \times 5\frac{3}{4}$ ".
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Acquired through
the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

We know that Brancusi had a vital interest in furniture. He must have thought about it from adolescence; Dumitresco and Istrati tell us that while still a student at the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts in Rumania, "he built some pieces of furniture for an examination." Around the same time, 1896 or 1897, he made a summer trip to Vienna, where he worked either in a carpenter's shop, for a cabinetmaker, or—the most intriguing suggestion—"in a furniture factory, probably the house of Thonet" (see the chronology in Radu Varia, *Brancusi*, New York: Rizzoli, 1986). (Incidentally, Viennese Secession style later had a great influence on some of Brancusi's work.) It is tempting to take a typical bentwood table as Brancusi's starting point for his amazing transformation of the type, a masterful conversion of line into mass. Later on, Brancusi's two largest works express the importance of furniture to him. I refer to the studio and to the complex that sums up his life's work, the park in Tirgu-Jiu, Rumania.



Bentwood table from the
1904 Gebrüder Thonet
sales catalogue

Brancusi's enlargement of the nature of the art object is as original as Duchamp's new kind of object, the Readymade, or Tatlin's Utilitarian-Constructivist works. And in today's artistic climate Brancusi's embrace of functional objects seems as absolutely contemporary as his invention for our century—long before Earthworks, installation art, and public art—of sculpture as *place*. In a Warholian context, Brancusi as the mystic saint may not appeal, but his conceptual side—his imaginative and intellectual questioning of the limits of art—is a legitimate, available, and welcome model.

One Major Form of Brancusi's Tables

This is the double-drum form, a stacked pair of unequal cylinders or disks. It occurs in numerous pedestal-tables of stone, in several studio tables of plaster, and, supremely, in the *Table of Silence* in the park at Tirgu-Jiu.

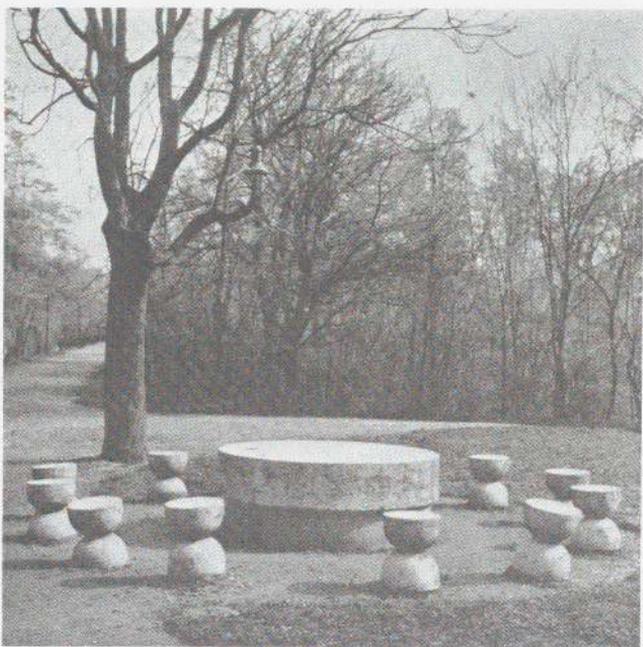


Table of Silence.

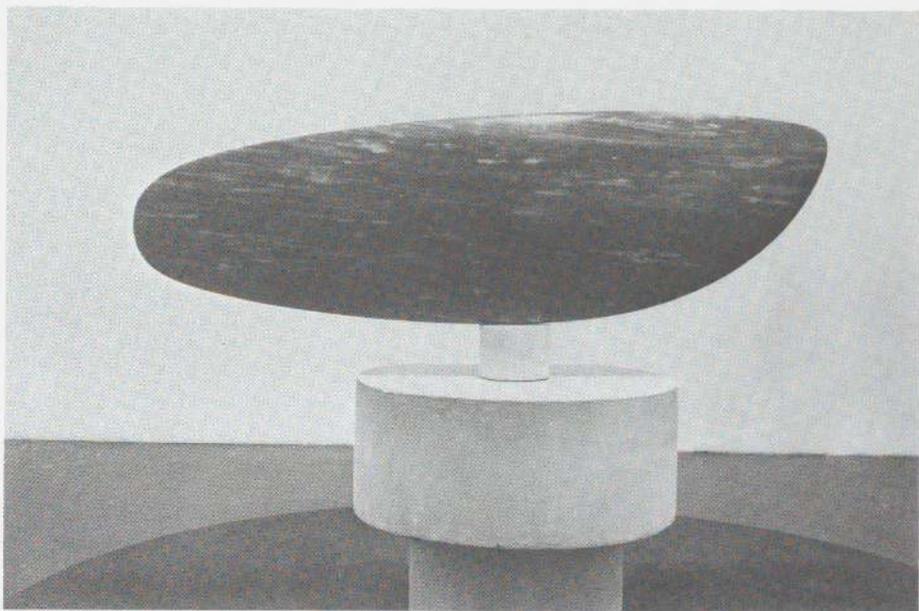
1937–38.

Bampotoc limestone,
35" high x 7' ⁵/₈" diameter
at widest point.

Tirgu-Jiu, Rumania. Photo:
G. Serban

The Museum of Modern Art's *Fish* base is a choice one. Istrati and Dumitresco have provided us with its background: "In the studio on Impasse Ronsin, the blue-gray marble *Fish* was atop a big slab of plaster. When *Fish* was sent to The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the sculptor designed smaller bases for it. Alexandre Istrati carved these in 1948 in accordance with the new measurements. The sculpture lost none of its presence." In some sense it is foolhardy to separate the *Fish* from its base even temporarily, given the thematic relation that the two elements may have: it has been suggested that the stone circle over which the fish floats may be a representation of a pool, lake, or ocean. But the base alone surely holds its own as sculpture.

The two-cylinder works, whether broad and low independent tables, or smaller and more vertical sculpture bases, are all powerful abstractions of tables. Geist suggests that the *Table of Silence* is "possibly intended as a monumental version of a little, low, round wooden table, with three or four legs—the *masa joasa*—found in some Rumanian peasant cottages." Another great transformation, the *Table of Silence* must surely be as monumental as the *Endless Column*. Carola Giedion-Welcker wrote, "it was Brancusi's intention that the *Table of Silence* be used for the leisurely repasts and friendly gatherings of the people" (*Constantin Brancusi*, New York: Braziller, 1959). Thus it is both a functional work and a moving and elevated work of art.



Fish. 1930.

Gray marble, 21 x 71"; on
marble footing, 5 1/8" high, and
* two-part limestone pedestal,
24" high by approx. 32 1/8"
diameter at widest point.

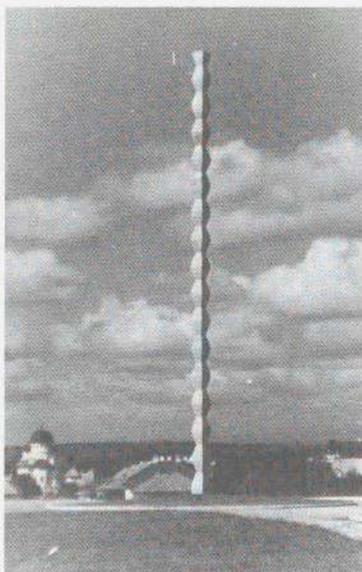
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Acquired through
the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest



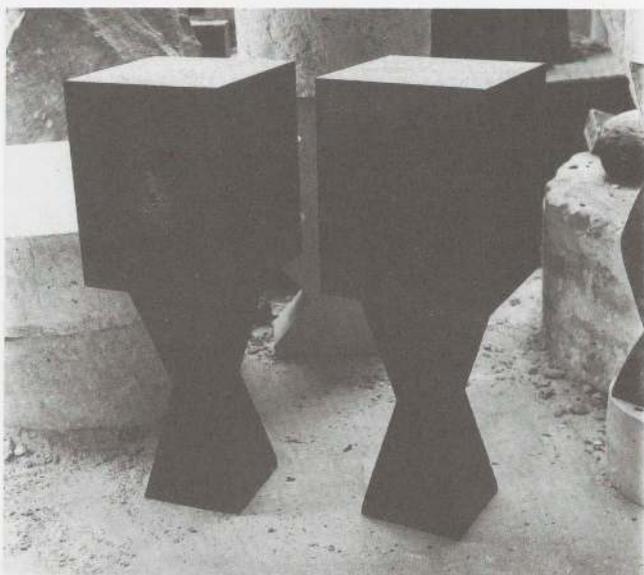
View of the Studio.
c. 1933–34.
Photo: Brancusi

Another Major Form of Brancusi's Tables

This is the "square hourglass" in wood. Geist describes the module as "paired truncated pyramids now apex to apex, now base to base." If you see the basic unit in the latter way, you have no table; but the apex-to-apex form is of course Brancusi's most classic pedestal-table form. It is the clearest transformation of a traditional pedestal, with its spreading foot and top, and its waist. The pair of such forms in a photograph by Brancusi of around 1921 or 1922, with their extremely thick tablet tops, looks as if it was one of his most successful table sculptures.



Endless Column. 1937.
Cast iron, copper coating,
overall 96'3" high.
Tirgu-Jiu, Rumania.
Photo: Brancusi



View of the Studio
with Bases (detail).
c. 1921-22 (?).
Photo: Brancusi

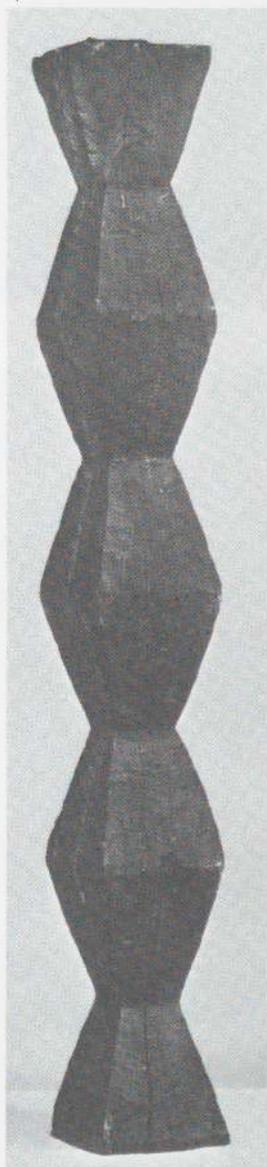
The Museum of Modern Art is fortunate to have the only *Endless Column* outside of the studio and Tirgu-Jiu. (Another, installed in Edward Steichen's garden, was cut up and dispersed.) The single module which makes a base for the bird-like figure in *Chimera*, joined to it by the artist and inseparable



* **Chimera.** 1918.
Oak, overall 59 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high.
Philadelphia Museum of Art.
Louise and Walter Arensberg
Collection

from it, is a one-unit *Endless Column*. (The pierced form in the middle is also characteristic.) Which came first—the *Endless Column* or the single module? Hultén has “no doubt that the module of the *Endless Column* was first a base, or part of a support.” However, Geist and others say the opposite, supposing the emergence of the module originally in multiple. If Hultén is right, the *Endless Column* might be seen as a mighty *étagère*, a quantity of little tables stacked on top of each other. This is an unlikely image. The more likely genesis of the work can be seen in a good print of Brancusi’s photograph of the well-known *Groupe Mobile*, 1917 (reproduced in *Brancusi, Photographer*, New York: Agrinde, 1979, plate 9). In it, the column holding the cup is an example of his two-dimensionally serrated motif, but discernible on one side are chalk marks indicating additional cuts to be made—which will result in the definitive truncated pyramids. The *Endless Column* appeared sometime after 1915. We may have here a documentation of its origin.

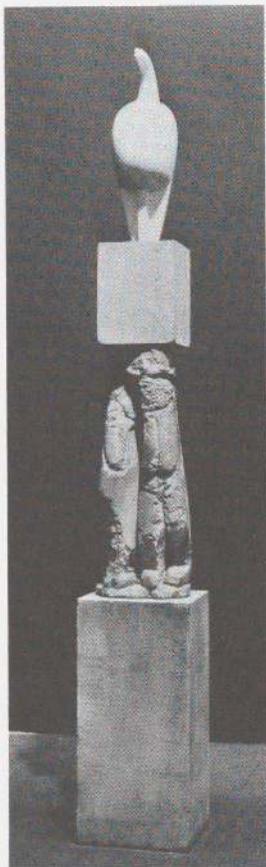
Geist does not dismiss the *Endless Column*; he values it greatly but still calls it “a work of high decoration.” I think another layer of interpretation is possible; we can look at it as the depiction of a column, as another sculpture of a thing. Of course it has a mute modernist distance from its model, the classical commemorative monument. It was unnecessary for Brancusi to put a figure on top: the column bears its own image.



* **Endless Column.**
Version I, 1918.
Oak, 6'8" x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 9 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Gift of Mary Sisler

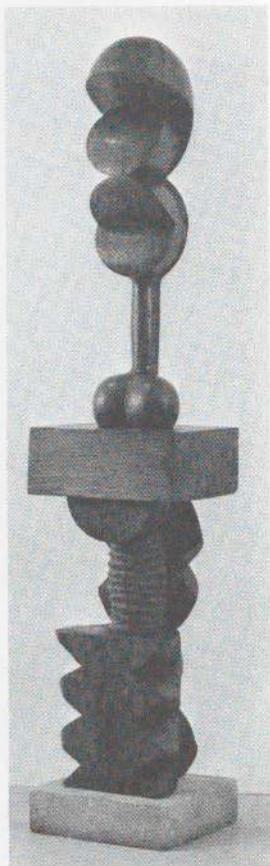
A Special Case: The Figurative Pedestals

Brancusi made two large caryatids, freestanding full figures in wood; several small strange wooden full figures; and two other key works that include reduced, or even miniaturized, full figures as bases. One is The Museum of Modern Art's *Magic Bird*, 1910–12, another of its most important holdings. The Gothic stone carving of the two figures is deliberately unfinished—more a sketch of a representation than a representation. It was made around 1908, and later the bird was joined to it. (This is Brancusi's first bird, a subject of which the Museum has a variety of examples.) The conjunction creates a thematic relation between the two orders of being: lowly, sagging, half-formed humanity; lifting, perfect, supernatural force above.



* **Magic Bird.** 1910–12.
White marble, on three-part
limestone pedestal, overall
7'8" x 12³/₄" x 10⁵/₈". The
Museum of Modern Art, New
York. Katherine S. Dreier
Bequest

* **Adam and Eve.** 1916–21.
Oak and chestnut on
limestone base, overall
7' 10¹/₂" high. Solomon R.
Guggenheim Museum, New
York. Photo: Carmelo
Guadagno



An even more special case of the thematic use of the table as a figure is the extraordinary *Adam and Eve*. Again, the lower half was done first (1917), and the upper added a few years later (1917–21). But this work belongs entirely to the order of mortal humanity. It is Shakespearean in its comedy. The sexual politics are far from those of the near-equal, androgynized couple in *The Kiss*; suffice it to say that *Adam and Eve* is pronouncedly heterophile. Difference between the male and female is its most important note. The Adam is submissive, secondary—a table—and the Eve triumphant and erect. The psychology is fascinating (the erotic theme generally in Brancusi is intense), but in the present context Brancusi's multiplicity of purpose is also fascinating. He adds a third layer to his construct of table as sculpture and sculpture as table, a figurative layer with a point. The hierarchical works with their figurative bases are special cases, and in their top-to-bottom, almost narrative completeness, are among Brancusi's most eloquent.

The Studio and the Self

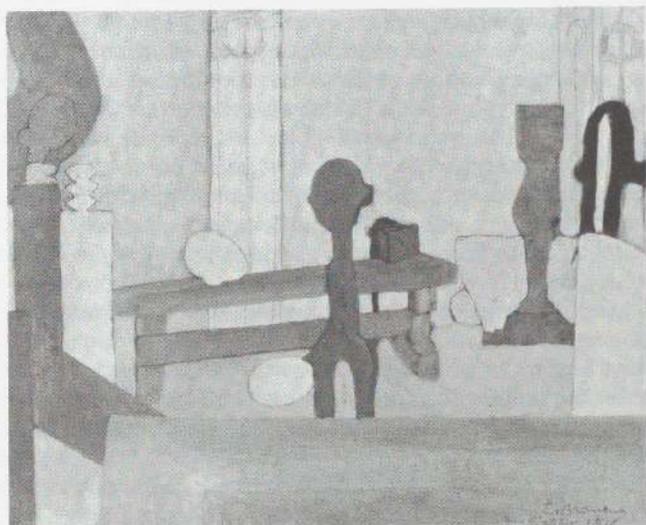
An in-house comparison between Brancusi's 1918 gouache of his studio and the Museum's *Red Studio* by Henri Matisse is irresistible. The latter work, large and important, and Brancusi's small and minor one are equally imbued with the romance of the artist's studio as metaphor for the world of the imagination. Although the Matisse sweeps you into its center and the gouache firmly bars you with the edge of the drawing board, both are intoxicating landscapes of the dreamy interior of the artist's mind. Both the *Red Studio* and the "white studio" are visions of rapturous, hypnotized states. On their filmy planes of color are projected the poetic objects—chairs as well as paintings, benches as well as sculptures—that are the glamorous totems of these two similar imaginations.



Henri Matisse.
The Red Studio. 1911.
Oil on canvas, 71¼" x 7'2¼".
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York. Mrs. Simon
Guggenheim Fund

Hultén has called Brancusi's studio "a combination of domicile and temple." We know of Brancusi's impulse to create temples, but there is also a more worldly aspect to the artwork of his studio: it is that of the *mise-en-scène*. Geist reminds us that the studio was "intended to be visited. [Brancusi] had no dealer in Paris and prospective buyers had to seek him out in his studio." In other words, the artifact of the studio represents the professionalization of the interior life. The traditional idea of the artist's studio as public location is given a twentieth-century twist by Brancusi. It is presented as its own opposite, an authentically private place. A Duchampian stage set.

Matisse's studio was subject matter for pictures (of pictures), but Brancusi's studio, like his individual pieces of furniture, became its own double. It was simultaneously itself and a representation of itself, for the benefit of others as well as for his own benefit. Perhaps his narcissistic photographic self-portraits were one way of being alone in the studio, with no one there to make it into decor but himself.



* **View of the Artist's Studio.** 1918.
Gouache and pencil on paper,
13 x 16¼". The Museum of
Modern Art, New York. The
Joan and Lester Avnet
Collection

Scott Burton

Born 1939, Greensboro, Alabama.

Studied painting with Leon Berkowitz, Washington, D.C., and with Hans Hofmann, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1957–59.

Columbia University, New York, B.A., 1962.

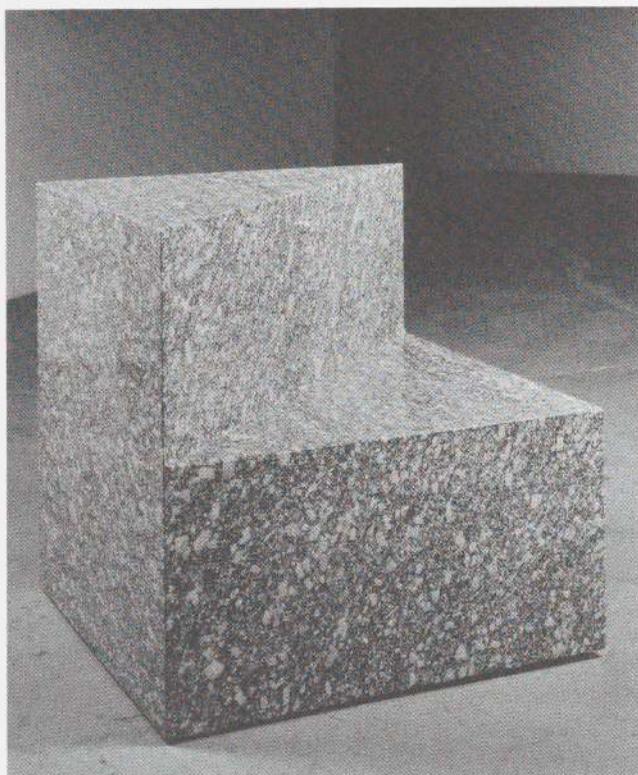
New York University, M.A., 1963.

Lives in New York.

Pair of Rock Chairs. 1980–81.

Gneiss, a: $49\frac{1}{4} \times 43\frac{1}{2} \times 40$ "; b: $44 \times 66 \times 42\frac{1}{2}$ ".

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Philip Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., and Robert Rosenblum Funds



Three-Quarter-Cube Bench.

Designed 1985, fabricated 1986.

Serizzo Ghiandone polished granite, $30 \times 30 \times 30$ ".

Variation 2/5. Courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles

Pair of Two-Parallelogram Chairs.

Designed 1987, fabricated 1988.

Ruby Blue polished granite, each $33 \times 24 \times 18$ ".

Variation 3/5. Courtesy Mary and Al Shands

These sculptures by Scott Burton are installed in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden and accompany the exhibition *Artist's Choice: Burton on Brancusi*.

Scott Burton extends special thanks to Thomas Abate-Marco and independent curator Nina Felshin for their help with this project.

Burton on Brancusi

Art that stays alive through generations is necessarily art that inspires different people for different reasons, supporting a series of various, even contradictory interpretations. It is easy to see this process at work through the centuries in, say, the shifting responses to Shakespeare. But it also goes on all around us now, in current reconsiderations of early modern art. The masterpieces in The Museum of Modern Art are important to us not only as enshrined, "understood" monuments to the past but because, to the degree that they are masterpieces, they may always be understood again, and give rise to the new. For inventive pioneers, continuing reinvention is one of the highest forms of homage.

The sculptor Constantin Brancusi (b. Rumania, 1876; d. Paris, 1957) is a perfect case in point. In his lifetime, he cultivated the impression that his work was born from folk wisdom, encapsulating mystic truths. Yet many of his admirers felt that his gleaming, streamlined sculptures also epitomized the machine age. The conjunction of these opposites—the notion of the primitive and the ultramodern being in secret harmony—contributed to Brancusi's appeal in the 1920s and 1930s. But when his art was "rediscovered" after his death, it was for other reasons. Younger sculptors of the 1960s, dissatisfied with the older tradition of modeled form and with the Cubist-inspired lineage of constructed assemblage, found in Brancusi's works a systematic, logic-driven way of working that offered an independent alternative. They admired his work with repetitive geometric modules, and his questioning of the conventions (such as the pedestal) and the specific conditions (such as gravity) of his medium. In other words, the former "rustic" was rehabilitated as a grandfather of Minimalism.

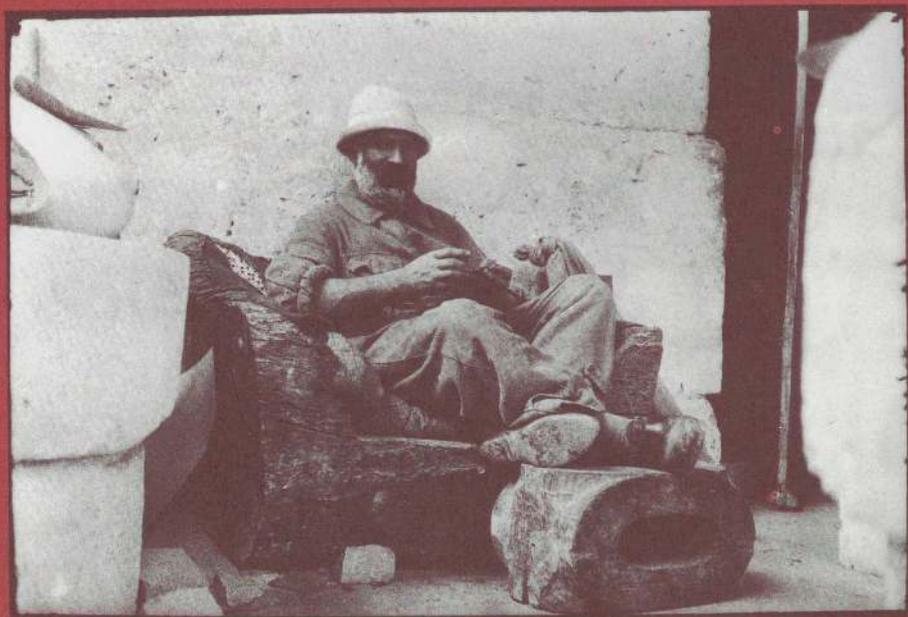
Scott Burton's work may recall Minimalism in its forms, but it has other roots as well. Beginning as a performance artist, Burton was primarily interested in social interaction. The furniture props of the performances were his first point of contact with the world of sculpture. His subsequent work, a unique cross between furniture and sculpture, has been informed both by a questioning of the nature of the art object (in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp) and by a passionate interest in artists such as the Russian Constructivists, who link attention to new forms with concern for their practical, social application. He sees, then, still another Brancusi. He focuses not just on specific objects or strategies, but on the studio environment Brancusi maintained, a theater of work in which there was a constant, ongoing interchange between the forms of architecture, furniture, bases, and sculpture. He sees Brancusi's work as a marriage between "pure" art and practical concerns, in which representation and abstraction are natural partners. Instead of remaining the prophet of a closed, essentialist purity, or the logician of reductive sculptural systems, Brancusi stands in Burton's view as a sculptor relevant to the concerns of 1980s art: his forms are made to shift import according to the context of their use, and he is involved in a self-conscious traffic between abstract and symbolic motifs, and between aesthetic and functional concerns.

The Museum of Modern Art is grateful to Scott Burton for showing us "his" Brancusi, and for helping us to understand more clearly not only the roots of his own work but an aspect of the larger dialogue between ancestry and innovation within contemporary art. In addition to conceiving this reinstallation of some of the Museum's Brancusi sculptures, he has designed brochure holders, seating elements, and new display bases especially for this exhibition. Our appreciation is extended also to Anne Umland, Assistant to the Director, Department of Painting and Sculpture, for overall organization of the project. Warmest gratitude should be expressed to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for lending from their own Brancusi holdings key works to fulfill the installation plan; to Mary and Al Shands and Daniel Weinberg Gallery for the loan of works by Scott Burton; and to the Max Protetch Gallery. Finally, special thanks go to Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum, for the generous support that made this exhibition possible.

Kirk Varnedoe
Director, Department of Painting and Sculpture

This photographic self-portrait not only shows one of Brancusi's best furniture pieces, a small wooden bench with arms but no back (used here with one of his frequent base and stool forms, the ovally pierced solid), but also provides wonderful information on the appropriate Brancusian posture. The artist presides cross-legged like a pasha, feet up, in a decidedly non-European way. How he is positioned on the seat is as important as the form of the piece.

Brancusi's seats are just as interesting as his tables. In addition to this studio bench there are several carved wooden studio stools; the *Bench*, 1915, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art; several stone stools and benches around the park in Tirgu-Jiu; and, above all, the twelve *Table of Silence* stools. They are ellipsoids halved and reversed, like the *Endless Column* module but round in section, perhaps derived from the flat pedestals with disks and half-disks stacked on edge, like *The Museum of Modern Art's for Young Bird*.



Brancusi in His Studio. c. 1923. Photo: Brancusi

In Brancusi's photographs and drawings of his studio we sometimes see a humble wooden side chair for kitchen or office, called "nondescript" by Dumitresco and Istrati. They recount: "Brancusi painted a gouache of this chair and showed it to us. 'Here,' he said, 'is the last trace of conventional furniture around me.'"

S.B.