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Against Biographical Essentialism: Re–evaluating Class and National Identity in the Early Reception of Brancusi

Abstract: The paper argues that it is time to rewrite the biography of Constantin Brancusi, moving away from the classic narrative that casts him as a "Romanian–born peasant". I trace this narrative to the early Brancusi scholarship that saw his national identity and class status as definitive of his aesthetic. Rather than relying on aesthetic categories such as "primitive", "archaic", "rural", "simple", etc., it is time to come up with a more nuanced and historically accurate account of Brancusi's early life and to develop a new vocabulary that would allow us to do justice to his life and to his art. A new account is not possible without a critical re–examination of the existing concepts in terms of which his origin story is told.

Keywords: aesthetics; Brancusi; sculpture; nationalism; cosmopolitanism.

Introduction

"Only when I am dead, Petre!" This was Brancusi's reply to his close friend, Petre Neagoe, in response to the suggestion of writing his biography. Brancusi's fame, success, and international appeal were such that an eventual need for a biography was apparent even before he grew old, and Neagoe was by no means the only one who was eager to get started. But because Brancusi took "biography" to mean more or less "eulogy", he insisted that no biography be published during his lifetime. After Brancusi's death in 1957, however, there was no shortage of biographical narratives. When these did start appearing, a certain origin–story gradually was created, according to which A Romanian–born peasant, Brancusi came from Hobița. He learned the art of woodcarving from local craftsmen, and after receiving his education in Bucharest, he traveled to France on foot in 1904. While in Paris, he studied art at the *École des Beaux–Arts*, and then briefly worked for August Rodin. He left Rodin, however, realizing that 'Nothing grows under the shadow of a big tree', and he spent the rest of his life in France developing his own sculptural aesthetic and forging his own artistic path. The cluster of concepts that speak to Brancusi's roots invariably includes: "peasant" and "Romania".

The main goal of this paper is to problematize these notions and to reopen the inquiry into Brancusi's origin story. The narratives that made concepts such as "peasant" and "Romanian–born" so prominent in understanding Brancusi's life and work

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were offered by his critics in the 1960s and 1970s, and so my focus will be on the literature from that time period. It was around that time that many of Brancusi's younger friends and acquaintances (who outlived him by some 30 years) published their recollections, memoirs, and reflections. This was also the time when some of his countrymen and expatriates responded to publications in the West with their own interpretations of Brancusi's early years. Petre Pandrea, Vasile Paleolog, and Petru Comarnescu (to name just a few) argued that Brancusi's life story has been simplified and misinterpreted, and that it ought to be understood in a more complex and historically accurate set of concepts. After this initial dialectic of the 1960s and 1970s, however, these discussions died out, and the Brancusi narrative became what we today know it to be: every biography starts with "born in Hobița, Romania, to a family of peasants", etc.

The focus of my inquiry will be on the accounts of Brancusi's art and life that were offered in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, some earlier narratives about his life began to appear in the press while he was still alive, but as Brancusi explicitly rejected offers from those who wanted to write his biography, these early accounts were usually short literary vignettes that offered little more than anecdotes about meeting Brancusi at his studio.[1] Brancusi's origin story congealed, as it were, shortly after his death in 1957. Many who knew Brancusi personally and understood both his art and the trajectory of his life were compelled to write biographies of their friend[2]. The preservation of his studio at *11 Impasse Ronsin* and the later relocation of it to *the Center Pompidou also occasioned reflections and publications dedicated to his body of work and* national identity.[3] The relatively short period from 1957 to the early 1970s was therefore a significant historical moment when the name "Brancusi" came to mean what it still does today. During the half-century that followed, literature on Brancusi has grown exponentially, but the dominant biographical narrative remains essentially the same, juxtaposing his humble origins in the village of Hobița with his eventual recognition, fame, and financial success in Paris.[4]

[1] See, for instance, Oscar Chelimsky, "A Memoir of Brancusi," *Arts* 32, no. 9 (1958): 18–21; Angus Wilson, "A Visit to Brancusi's," *New York Times*, August 19 (1923); M. M., "Constantin Brancusi: A Summary of Many Conversations," *The Arts*, July (1923): 15–17; Christian Zervos, *Constantin Brancusi: Sculptures, Peintures, Dessins, Témoignages* (Éditions Cahiers d'Art), 1957; Malvina Hoffman, *Sculpture Inside and Out* (Bonanza Books, 1939); Dorothy Adlow, "Brancusi," *Drawing and Design* 2, no. 12 (1927): 37–41.

[2] See Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Constantin Brancusi* (George Braziller, 1959); Peter Neagoe, *The Saint of Montparnasse* (Chilton Books, 1965), and Christian Zervos, *Constantin Brancusi: Sculptures, Peintures, Dessins, Témoignages*.

[3] See Jean Cassou, "Brancusi," *Cahiers d'Art* 31–32 (1957): 11–12; Pierre Guéguen, "Témoignage: L'aventure Brancusi," *Aujourd'hui: Art et Architecture* 28 (1960): 14–21; Ionel Jianou, *Brancusi* (Éditions d'Art, 1963); Michel Seuphor, *La Sculpture de ce siècle: Dictionnaire de la sculpture modern* (Éditions du Griffon, 1959).

[4] There are some notable exceptions to this narrative that either move away from the 'Brancusi myth' or that put emphasis on Brancusi's rigorous formal training in Romania. See Sidney Geist, "Brancusi," *Artforum* 7, no. 5 (1969): 24–29; Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: The Kiss* (Harper & Row, 1978), and Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (Hacker Art Books, 1983) as examples of moving away from viewing Brancusi as a simple Romanian peasant, and Sanda Miller, *Constantin Brancusi* (Reaktion Books, 2010) for a detailed biographical account that does justice to the Romanian educational system. Still, as I will show, Geist too sees Brancusi as an "intuitive" sculptor, and a large portion of Miller's book is dedicated to the village life of Romania—a life that Brancusi left behind at 11.

In what follows, I argue that it is time to re–examine the significance of Brancusi's national origins and to look at the claims concerning his "peasant Romanian roots" through a critical lens. This re–examination will allow us to better understand Brancusi's aesthetics and reflect on the role that his national identity played in it. In Section (I), I go over the narratives constructed shortly after Brancusi's death and show that they rely on a set of notions that supply the conceptual backbone of Brancusi's life, namely, notions such as "Romanian peasant", "child–like simplicity", and "primitive folk–art". My goal here is to draw explicit attention to how Brancusi's national identity was conceptualized, and how this conceptualization was seen as helpful in understanding his art. In Section (II), I turn to an early rebuttal offered to this conceptualization of Brancusi's life and art, offered by his compatriot Petre Pandrea. In a series of works, Pandrea sought to contextualize the concept of a "peasant" and to show that the West systematically misinterprets it. In Section (III), I turn to another aspect of Brancusi's identity that gets misinterpreted, namely, that he was a "Romanian" sculptor. Here too, following Pandrea's early critical narrative, I argue that it is time we take a more nuanced understanding of Romanian culture seriously and that we look more closely at regional identities (such as "Oltenian") instead. The paper concludes that a critical reflection on how we understand Brancusi's socio–economic status and his national origins shows that the time is ripe for a different narrative that no longer casts him as a humble "Romanian peasant".[5]

(I) Brancusi's "peasant" roots

From as early as the 1960s, in the eyes of the French public and art critics, Brancusi was understood as a "Romanian–born peasant" who left his native country and became a serious sculptor in cosmopolitan Paris. Jean Cassou, a major art critic and the founding director of the *National Museum of Modern Art* in Paris, had this to say about Brancusi:

> Brancusi was a Romanian peasant. Although his native country lies close to those from whence our own Mediterranean civilization sprang, his own country preserves an appearance which is anterior to all civilizations. It still maintains an essentially prehistoric appearance. It remains at the stage of the primitive herdsmen, of gods and fables. A man issued from such beginnings must forge his own destiny. Brancusi's is an odyssey of the mountain–dweller who sets out for the town and meets on his way trees, animals, and spirits. He comes at last to the City of Cities,

[5] This analysis of Brancusi's origin story is meant to be a case study into how national interpretation might influence our aesthetic appreciation of a sculptor's work. In Brancusi's case, this national interpretation was often coupled with assumptions related to his socio-economic origin as well. A full study of 'othering' of Eastern European and Balkan sculptors would go beyond the scope of this paper, but re-opening inquiries into the work and the life of sculptors such as Ivan Meštrović, Geta Brătescu, Dimitri Paciurea, and Boris Schatz is certainly warranted.

> the giant Paris. The Wallachian shepherd, the friend of the stars and the flocks, has undergone a gradual metamorphosis.[6]

In his overall positive and in fact appreciative account of Brancusi, Cassou nonetheless refers to him as a "Wallachian shepherd", "the herdsman from the mountains", and "the primitive". Cassou certainly aims—but hardly succeeds—in using these as terms of praise for someone whose sculptural insight was both profound and authentic. Brancusi, Cassou concludes, stands in his studio as "a Vulcan at his forge", a "Jupiter on Olympus"—he is a creator in the primordial sense of the term, namely, free of all artistic influences and of all worldly trivialities. This "earthly demiurge" creates "essences", "souls", and "archetypes" of things because his vision is unpolluted by culture or civilization.7

Brancusi was understood in a similar way by art critics and historians in the United Kingdom (Sir Herbert Read), Germany (Carl Einstein), and Switzerland (Carola Gedion–Welcker). Alongside praise for his original, authentic, and pure sculptural vision, there is an origin–story that casts him as a peasant, whose humble beginnings connect him to some primordial aesthetics of the mountains, rivers, fields, and to the folk wisdom of a country untouched by civilization. Herbert Read, one of the leading supporters and promoters of modern art in the UK from the 1930s to the 1960s, held Brancusi in very high esteem. And yet, this is how he expressed the admiration of his new artistic vision:

> His strength derives from the opposition of two determining principles: a childlike *naïveté*, which observes the world through innocent eyes, and a studied wisdom, deeply rooted in the past. Brancusi accepts existence as children do; at the same time, however, he penetrates intuitively into the sphere of Essence.8

The "studied wisdom" (which accompanies the childlike *naïveté*) is, for Read, the wisdom granted to Brancusi through intuition and not through cognition, reflection, clarity of thought, and concept, and contemplation. Even Brancusi's most ardent admirer in the US, Sidney Geist—a sculptor himself—echoed this latter sentiment, saying that "*intuition* rather than *intellect* guided his hand"[9].

Accounts such as these were prevalent in receptions of Brancusi, both early in his career and later, after his death. They position him conceptually closer to "outsider art" than to professional art. Of course, Cassou, Read, and Geist do not use the term "outsider art", but the tone of their praise of Brancusi is tainted by their emphasis on his (by their accounts) modest background. His training at the leading Romanian art

[6] Jean Cassou, "Foreword", in *Brancusi*, ed. by Ionel Jianou (Tudor Publishing Company, 1963), 7.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Herbert Read, "Homage to Brancusi," in *Brancusi*, ed. Christian Zervos (Éditions Cahiers d'Art, 1957), 34.

[9] Geist, *Brancusi: A Study or Sculpture*, 143; emphasis added.

schools is downplayed in favor of his love of woodcarving, which he seems to have inherited from his native culture. He is said to have worked not for profit, but for the sheer love and joy of the activity. He is said to have a "pure", "raw" vision in his communication of his "inner world", and to have turned to unconventional (at the time) materials (such as wood) and methods (such as direct carving) to express this inner vision. Concluding his otherwise excellent study of Brancusi's sculptural oeuvre, Geist says: "His intelligence is sweet, and his sweetness is intelligent."[10] All these concepts are precisely the ones that today are reserved for "outsider artists"—the children and the elderly, prisoners and the unhoused, in short, the self–taught artists who lack skill and education, but who make up for this by their dedication and enthusiasm.

Even some of Brancusi's compatriots shared this conceptual approach. Ionel Jianou, one of Brancusi's most devoted critics and admirers, discussing "The Mystery of Brancusi", wrote that Brancusi's "peasant extraction enabled him to express his solidarity with the spiritual universe of the prehistoric Man"[11] and that his sculpture is "reminiscent of primitive idols"[12]. Jianou took Brancusi's method of work (his direct carving) to be inherited from his culture in a mystical sort of way: "wood carving came easily to him, for it had been a time–honored tradition in his native region" and "oak was his favorite wood because he knew it well—he had only to recall the huge forests growing along the mountainsides on which her had spent his childhood."[13] Perhaps Jianou used these turns of phrase rhetorically only—surely, a craft does not come easily to us merely because we grew up in a particular culture, and it is not enough "to recall the forests" of one's native land in order to be able to excel in direct carving. But Jianou adds the following reflection: "A man's deepest and most lasting impressions are those of his first contact with reality. Brancusi was seven years old when he began to work as a shepherd in the Carpathian mountains. At night he looked up at the stars […]"[14] etc. So, for Jianou, not only does Brancusi appear to be essentially and fundamentally a peasant, but he also had virtually no chance of *not* being one—for the rest of his life—because this was his "first contact with reality", which supposedly established a "deep and lasting" impression on him. On this account, Brancusi's life is that of "a primitive" or "a peasant" because this was his destiny.

Today, accounts such as Cassou's and Jianou's might appear to be self-undermining.[15] What they say about "peasants", about the Carpathian region, and about

[10] Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of Sculpture*, 181.

[11] Ionel Jianou, *Brancusi*, 12.

[12] Op. cit., 36.

[13] Op. cit., 47.

[14] Op. cit., 12.

[15] The concept of "primitive" has been largely retired from art criticism today. Although it was historically widely used to describe non-Western art (especially art from African nations, Oceania, and the Americas), it is considered dated and offensive today. The term is not as commonly applicable to the art of the Balkans, but it was used by Brancusi's early critics during the 1950s and 1960s. The body of scholarly literature both on the original use and connotation of the term "primitive" and on the subsequent critique of this term is quite extensive; see, for instance, Louis Lagana, "The Primitivism Debate and Modern Art," in *IV Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics* (2008): 1–10; Susan Hiller, ed., *The Myth of Primitivism* (Routledge, 1991); Colin

Romania is in poor taste, and we therefore may perhaps be tempted to treat them as benign expressions of the prevailing sentiments of their time. But this would be a mistake. It is well worth noting that any biographical sketch of Brancusi (not only in the 1960s but also in contemporary scholarship) typically mentions that he was "a peasant" and then weaves the story of his successes in light of this fact—as though tacitly we still think that "a man's deepest and most lasting impressions are those of his first contact with reality". In other words, the insistent labeling of Brancusi as "a Romanian–born peasant" (or saying that "his father was a Romanian peasant" and that Brancusi "came from a peasant stock") invites the audience to consider these labels as capturing his artistic essence and as permanently attached to his character, whether he himself was aware of this or not.[16]

This classism becomes all the more evident if we reflect on the fact that this is not commonly done in biographical notes on Brancusi's contemporaries. Rodin's father was a clerk at a police department; Duchamp's father was a notary public; Maillol's father was a vintner; and Epstein's father was a real estate broker. These facts, however, do not profoundly shape our understanding of their art in the way that Brancusi's origins are supposed to help us understand his sculpture. Jianou's chapter—"The *Mystery* of Brancusi"—casts Brancusi's story as a *mystery*, namely, as a journey from "low", "humble", and "uncultivated" childhood to an eventual success in a worldly, sophisticated, and cultured Paris. There are no books with titles such as "The Mystery of Rodin", "The Mystery of Maillol", or "The Mystery of Epstein"—we do not seem to think that there is anything especially mysterious about a son of a police clerk, a vintner, or a real estate broker becoming a sculptor.

It is no wonder that many of Brancusi's close friends saw accounts such as these as deeply offensive. Petre Pandrea, for example, dedicated his three–volume discussion of Brancusi's legacy almost entirely to debunking the myth of his friend being a "Carpathian shepherd" who—at best—channeled folk–wisdom and childlike aesthetic simplicity, and whose work was to be understood as an extension of a "crude", "primitive", and "uncivilized" culture. Pandrea saw accounts such as these as offensive to Brancusi (and to his memory), to himself and to other Romanian intellectuals (who often shared similar backgrounds), and to Romanians more generally. His account of Brancusi's life and artistic legacy spans over a thousand pages, and it includes numerous reflections on the term "peasant" and on the implications this term has for aesthetic categories that critics use in talking about Brancusi's works.

Rhodes, "Unmasking 'Others', Ourselves (and Others)," *Art History* 15, no. 3 (1992): 383–87; and Fred Myers, "'Primitivism', Anthropology, and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christoper Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Küchler, Michael Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (Sage, 2006), 267–84.

[16] To say that all scholarly work on Brancusi is guilty of classism would be a mistake, but there are numerous sources that link his aesthetics to his national (humble) origins. Usually, the conceptual bridge that makes this link possible is the claim that Brancusi's vision was "intuitive" (see Sidney Geist, *Constantin Brancusi, 1876–1957: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1969) or the claim that he was working essentially in dialogue with other "primitive" cultures. See Katherine Jánszky Michaelsen, "Brancusi and African Art," *Artforum* 10, no. 1 (1971): 72–77, and Amelia Miholca, "Brancusi's Involvement with African Art in New York," *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2015): 179–90.

(II) Early Romanian responses: Petre Pandrea

Romanian intellectuals, who knew Brancusi well and understood Romanian culture, history, and socioeconomic reality, were skeptical of the "peasant" narrative from the start. As early as the 1960s, Brancusi's friends (such as Pandrea and Vasil Paleolog) fought against classist interpretations of Brancusi in earnest, but they usually engaged the issue from the factual point of view, namely, by pointing out that the term "peasant" (if applicable at all) has connotations of which French or German critics were simply unaware. From as early as the 1960s, Pandrea, specifically, made it his mission to shed light on the social makeup of Romanian society and to put to rest the emerging narrative of a "peasant genius Brancusi". In its massive undertaking, Pandrea's three–volume analysis of Brancusi's life and work stands out in the Romanian intellectual canon: it includes personal memories of a friendship spanning nearly three decades, but it also reflects on Romanian national identity, rich history, and distinct ethos. Brancusi was one of the most famous Romanians in the world, and in Paris he was widely seen as a *Romanian* artist. And yet what "Romanian" meant was poorly understood in the West, or so Pandrea argues. His three–volume answer to the question: "What is a Romanian artist?" was fortuitously occasioned by a long friendship with one of the greatest sculptors of the century.[17]

Pandrea begins by noting that the very term "peasant" (*moșnean*) has a complex meaning (let alone connotation). The Romanian term "*moșneni*" (singular, *moșnean*) refers to the class of free hereditary landholders of southern Romania, with origins dating back to the Middle Ages. *Moșneni* owned their land and passed it on from one generation to the next through inheritance, tracing ownership back to the original owner. Importantly, *moșneni*, were not bound to a feudal lord (as *serfs* would have been), and they were essentially free and autonomous. *Moșneni* had a robust set of rights and duties, and they were sharply distinguished from the subjugated peasantry in their social and economic status. According to Pandrea, Brancusi's family were *moșneni*, not serfs. This means that they were self–employed, relatively well–off, and certainly literate and educated. As they were still living off their land, they were still "peasants" in the more general sense of the term, namely, as people whose primary source of income was agricultural, who were tied to a specific location (*via* ownership of land), and who lived in accordance with the seasons. The latter, however, does not

[17] Pandrea's work on Brancusi includes: *Brâncuși: Amintiri și exegeze* [Brâncuși: Memories and Exegeses], 1967; *Brâncuși: Pravila de la Craiova: Etica lui Brâncuși* [Brâncuși: The Craiova Rule: Brâncuși's Ethics], 1976; and *Brâncuși: Amicii și inamicii. Sociologia lui Brâncuși* [Brâncuși: Friends and Enemies. The Sociology of Brâncuși], 2010. It is worth noting that Pandrea's volumes are rather poorly edited—most of his work was written while he was a political prisoner, and some of his works were published after his untimely death in 1968 without editorial changes, let alone improvements. Still, the body of his work is remarkable in its scholarly ambition: although Brancusi remains the focal point of his discussion, the scope of his inquiry makes his work an intellectual history of Romania rather than a memoir of a friendship. Pandrea's legacy has been attracting more attention recently, with the publication of the three-volume study of Brancusi and other works; for a brief overview of his philosophy of freedom, see Zamfir Ciceu, "Petre Pandrea și Spiritul Libertății," *Saeculum* 40, no. 1–2 (2015): 215–21.

entail some mystical communion with the mountains, the forests, and the lakes, let alone believing in spirits and in fairy tales. Rather, living off the land structured family tasks around agricultural pursuits, which, in turn, were seasonal. For a young boy to be born into a family of *moșneni* meant being responsible for a set of regular tasks, one of which was to look after the livestock during the summer. So, if Brancusi had to look after the sheep when he was 7 years old, it did not make him a "Carpathian shepherd" or a "herdsman".

Of course, we need not stop here—we could go further and ask: What is so lowly about being a "Carpathian shepherd" or a "herdsman"? And is it simply impossible to make a lasting contribution to modern art for someone who comes from a truly disadvantaged social and economic background? For Pandrea, however, it suffices to show that there is a sharp line demarcating *moșneni* from other social strata in Romania. Brancusi's family certainly met the standards of status and wealth that were compatible with worldly aspirations, including artistic ones. Put differently, it was no more "mysterious" for Brancusi to have risen to his prominence and fame than it was for Rodin, Maillol, or Epstein.

Pandrea, however, goes further—he wants to defend the very notion of a "peasant" and to reclaim it as a term of praise rather than that of (tacit) contempt. To be clear, *contempt* is what he reads in accounts such as Cassou's, Read's, Jianou's, etc. Understood correctly, the notion of a peasant reveals virtue, not vice. In its normative sense, namely, as a synonym to "authenticity", "integrity", "diligence", "unaffectedness", and "incorruptibility", the term "peasant" very well could be applied to Brancusi. (In fact, Pandrea proudly calls himself a peasant, because his own origins were similar to Brancusi's.) So, what is the normative connotation of the term? Pandrea's narrative spans hundreds of pages, but his answer essentially boils down to two heads.

First, peasants are hardworking, self–reliant, and self–sufficient. As their work is essentially seasonal, after the autumn harvest, they turn to tasks related to the upkeep of the homestead—from carpentry and repair work to various crafts, from making new tools to caring for livestock and preserving food. Brancusi, as it is well known, was essentially self–sufficient in just this way: he made his own furniture, he put together his own stove (that he used both for cooking and for metalwork), he crafted his own tools, he prepared most of his food, he distilled his own plum–brandy, and he made structural repairs to his studio (from doorframes to water drainage). His studio was his "heaven", and it was somewhat similar to a peasant homestead. Their similarity is not primarily in the "primitive" character, but rather in their self–sufficient and well–maintained functional order. Maintaining a studio space and living quarters constitutes an important part of a working sculptor's lifestyle, and rather than employing help or delegating these daily tasks to others, Brancusi was the sort of sculptor who did not separate his sculptural work from other, more practical and auxiliary aspects of his life. This certainly would not have been the lifestyle of Mercié or Rodin, but it suited Brancusi. As Pandrea puts it, peasants possess "inventive and inquisitive spirit reaching genius" and "energetic naturalness" with which they work.[18] And

[18] Pandrea, *Brâncuși: Amicii și inamicii. Sociologia lui Brâncuși*, 60.

this is exactly what so many visitors to Brancusi's studio noticed—he was energetic, inventive, and fundamentally self–sufficient. To many, no doubt, there was something quaint and eccentric about "fashioning his own stove, carving benches for sitting", or "frying his meat" in front of his guests. But arguably, Brancusi's craft and work come close to what we today consider a model of a versatile sculptor.

The second and, perhaps, a more philosophical aspect of "peasantry" consists, for Pandrea, in its connection to the notion of authenticity. Pandrea sees Western European cultures as succumbing to worldly epicureanism and hedonism: he equates Paris with Babylon and sees many trends of his day as signs of spiritual deterioration under the influence of materialism and immorality. Although not without its attractions, Paris came to represent for him urban decline. Brancusi's "peasant" way of living, on the other hand, Pandrea sees as a healthy, authentic alternative to the corruptions of the West. For Pandrea, Brancusi was a living epitome of this lifestyle and a personification of the ideas celebrated in rural identity.

There is little doubt that Pandrea's defense of the concept "peasant" is somewhat idealized. Although his political affiliations varied over the turbulent course of Romanian history, he always leaned toward "peasant populism" (*poporanism*).[19] This tendency is clear in his praise for Oltenian culture—he saw the peasant lifestyle as one of authenticity, stoicism, and integrity, and he hoped that rural Oltenia could become a stronghold against the corrupting modernized West. But Pandrea's idealization of the "peasant" is importantly different from the connotation that the concept acquired in the West and that was associated with Brancusi's lifestyle and art by critics such as Cassou. While for the latter, the term "peasant" signaled simplicity, naïveté, and a lack of sophistication, for "peasant populists" (such as Pandrea), the term connoted ethical opposition to a corrupt culture based on hedonism and superficiality. The types of idealization of "peasantry" that can be traced in early Western receptions of Brancusi can be faulted on epistemic grounds for their *naiveté*. But what makes them truly objectionable is that they betray a classist attitude toward an artist of lower social status; this, in turn, leads to an aesthetic interpretation of his work through a set of concepts aligned with this attitude. Pandrea's account, on the other hand, while being a case of romanticization, is not guilty of this latter mistake.

(III) Brancusi's Oltenian roots

We can now turn to the second aspect of Brancusi's origin story, namely his "Romanian" roots. There is not one biographical note on Brancusi that fails to mention that he was a "*Romanian* sculptor" who "established his reputation in Paris" and who "worked in Paris most of his life". Upon thought, there is something surprising about Brancusi's life in this light. He left Romania when he was 28 and never really

[19] For a brief history of populism in Romania, see Ovidiu Lungu, "The Populism in Europe: Historical Development, Political Speech and Supporters of the Radical Right," *Analele Universității din Oradea. Relații Internaționale și Studii Europene* 12, no. 12 (2020): 319–23. For a short note on Pandrea's political affiliations, see Aurel Sasu, "Petre Pandrea," in *Dicționarul biografic al literaturii române*, vol. 2 (Editura Paralela 45, 2006).

returned. Although he traveled back to Romania on at least four occasions, he never stayed for long periods. He lived in Paris for over 50 years, and he left his studio, with all its contents (over 100 sculptural works, some 2,000 photographs and prints, as well as his tools, furniture, and library) to the state of France. Why do we still call him "a Romanian sculptor who worked in Paris most of his life"? And what does it mean to be a "Romanian sculptor" rather than a "French sculptor" or, simply, "a sculptor"?

Nearly all art critics and art historians from France, England, or Germany emphasize that Brancusi was "Romanian"—a fact that is key to understanding his aesthetics, sculptural methods, and lifestyle in Paris. His *Bird in Space* is said to be the Romanian "firebird *Maiastra*", his *Endless Column* is said to be reminiscent of Romanian peasant–carved poles or village gates, and his method of direct carving (rather than modeling in clay) is said to be inherited from the traditional woodwork of his native land. Romania itself, on these accounts, is seen as an exotic country, which merits a special mention in the "Brancusi story"—it is a country of carved wood, of embroidered linen, and of altogether rustic charm. The roots of Brancusi's iconography, then, are traced to a place quite unlike France (or Italy or Germany), to a place that brings different aesthetic and sculpting methodology to what Paris had to offer. While his contemporaries were sketching in clay and plaster, Brancusi was carving shapes out of wood, stone, and marble, and while most French sculptors were still working within the narrative figurative tradition, Brancusi sought after "animal essences" (of birds and fish). Since all of these innovations were foreign to Paris and to French sculptural tradition, they were seen as having been imported to the West from the Balkans, from the rural setting of Hobița.

Seeing Brancusi as a Romanian sculptor, however, tends both to elevate and to degrade Brancusi's sculptural vision. On the one hand, he appears to be bringing fresh motifs into sculpture—"modern", "abstract', "avant-garde" are terms that take us away from the figurative sculptural traditions of France and Italy. In this context, "Romanian" means fresh and new, whereas "French" means stale and old–fashioned. But on the other hand, this artistic originality is seen as "pastoral", "rustic", "primitive", or "folk". Brancusi's sculpture is said to be "minimalist", "unaffected", and "simple". (By contrast, no one would call Rodin's, Maillol's, or Giacometti's works "unaffected" or "simple".) To be sure, critics add that Brancusi's simplicity is very deep—his simplicity is "complexity resolved", and so it is elevated to the level of artistic mastery. His works are "simple" in the sense that they get rid of all unnecessary details and reveal what is essential about his subject matter. Still, simplicity is seen as the direct consequence of Brancusi's *Romanian* roots.

Brancusi's compatriots, too, have always emphasized his background—in Romania, he is seen as a *Romanian* sculptor. He is celebrated as Romania's greatest artist, with many educational institutions, streets, boulevards, cultural foundations, and awards named after him. Of course, even to his countrymen, the issue of Brancusi's "Romanian" roots looked to be rather complicated—the story of his life can be seen through several different lenses in service of several different ideals. He is claimed to

be a quintessential Romanian artist by both Romanian nationalists and Romanian cosmopolitans, as well as by Romanian communists and Romanian democrats. Each of these ideologies sees him as Romanian for their own reasons and purposes. These interpretations are not borne of anything that Brancusi himself said—in the aphorism commonly attributed to him, he simply does not mention Romania. He does not mention France either. He talks about *sculpture*, but never about his origins. It is not that he concealed or denied his past—quite the contrary, all his life he was fond of Romanian food and music, and he went to the Romanian Orthodox Church every Sunday. But when he would speak of his art, he would never mention his roots, except for (on occasion) to compliment Romanian woodcarvers as being masters of their craft.

So, was Brancusi a "Romanian"? And if he was, what does it mean to be a "Romanian"? Pandrea says that a common joke between them ran as follows: "We are *not* Romanians, we are *Oltenians* and Europeans".20 It would certainly be an anachronism to call Brancusi "Romanian" in the present sense of the term. Romania today consists of three distinct regions, only two of which would have been "Romania" during Brancusi's youth. Wallachia, Moldova, and Transylvania have distinct cultures, and Brancusi would have identified with only one of them, namely Wallachia. Wallachia lies in the south of the country, but this is still too broad a term—both Brancusi and Pandrea came from "*Little* Wallachia" or "Oltenia", the southwest part of broader Wallachia. Bucharest, on the other hand, is part of "Greater Wallachia" and its culture is seen by Oltenians as not at all the same as their own.

These fine geographical and cultural distinctions are lost on most of us who do not come from Romania, but we can all relate to the concentric circles of regional identities we inhabit. In the late 1800s and the early 1900s, these local identities mattered quite a bit more than the national one that became much more prominent in the wake of the First World War. Brancusi, therefore, is likely to have thought of himself as "Oltenian" rather than "Romanian", if he thought of his roots as definitive of his identity in the first place.

An Oltenian himself, Pandrea insists on this Oltenian identity of his friend (along with his own)—they both, Pandrea writes, were from "Little Wallachia" first and foremost. Brancusi was born in Hobița (Gorj County), and Pandrea in Balș (Olt County), separated by only some 100 kilometers; they both studied in Craiova—the center of Oltenia—and went on to study in Bucharest, although neither identified with the big capital. Craiova remained the city closest to Pandrea's heart, and he remained convinced that Brancusi shared the sentiment. And so, for Pandrea, neither of them was *Romanian*—they were Oltenians, always. "Little Wallachia" is understood by Pandrea to have less French influence than "Greater Wallachia" (and, specifically, Bucharest). Romania, although it is very much its own country, had two historical European influences by the 1900s: Germany in the north and France in the south. When Brancusi studied in Bucharest, the city was known as "Little Paris"—its architecture and its culture were quite similar to those of France. By contrast, Pandrea argues,

[20] Pandrea, *Brâncuși: Amicii și inamicii. Sociologia lui Brâncuși*, 140 (emphasis added).

Oltenia managed to resist French influence and retain its own spirit. (This is debatable from the historical point of view, but this is how Pandrea saw his "Little Wallachia".)

In his account of Oltenia, Pandrea very much wants to dispel the myth that rural Romania is fundamentally uncultured. Although few would describe Bucharest of the 1800s (let alone of the 1900s) as 'backwater' of Europe, when it came to Brancusi's and Pandrea's native lands—southwestern counties of Gorj, Dolj, and Olt—they were seen as decidedly less 'cultured' both by the Western art–critics and art–historians and by Romanians who came from the capital. Central to Pandrea's argument is that Oltenian culture was home to a certain set of values, a canon or ethos that deserves recognition and praise rather than being labeled a lifestyle in the 'backwater of Europe'.

Pandrea writes that he spent several decades developing a full account of the Oltenian system of value, and that he came to credit Brancusi for bringing this issue to his attention. When Pandrea made Brancusi's acquaintance, he wrote that he first heard Brancusi talk about the "Oltenian Code of Ethics," and, as a young jurist himself, he became interested in this turn of phrase. Could Oltenia have had a "Code of Ethics"—something that had its origins in historical sources, and that was passed on from one generation to the next? In the end, he came to see that Brancusi used the phrase more or less colloquially rather than in a scholarly way, but their way of thinking about Oltenian values has stuck with Pandrea for the rest of his life. His last work bears the title *Pravila de la Craiova*, where "Pravila" means canon, code, or ancient law. "This Code", he writes, "was formulated in proverbs, in fairy tales, in legends, and popular verses, as an ethical, stoic, and rural code. The sources of the code are eminently rural, in the primordial sources."21 The values of Craiova (or Oltenia) can be distilled into the following list:

- economy and temperance
- monogamous puritanism
- reverence for natural beauty
- reverence for greenery and wildlife
- good husbandry and resourcefulness
- regard for honest, productive work
- respect for familial and social authority
- commitment to real equality before the law
- understanding the need for sacrifice
- love, as a vital source of community and life more generally.

Pandrea saw Brancusi—both his life and his work—in light of precisely this list of values. He also saw them as uniquely *Oltenian* and, in many ways, as *not Parisian*. But to see these values as "Oltenian" is not to see them as parochial or primitive. There is nothing on the list of the Oltenian values that is not profoundly *human*, and many

[21] Pandrea, *Brâncuși: Pravila de la Craiova*, 23.

of them—he argues—can be traced conceptually back to Hellenic Stoicism of Seneca or Marcus Aurelius.

Pandrea's account of Oltenian Ethics, no doubt, is one of exalted praise—his native land of "Little Wallachia" is described by him in extraordinarily optimistic terms. Pandrea's friend Peter Comarnescu (who was from Moldavia himself) went as far as to call it "Oltenian chauvinism"—he thought Pandrea's analysis was inflated: for Comarnescu, Pandrea's account read "fantastic", "phantasmagoric", "superficial", and "simplistic". We would do well, therefore, to treat Pandrea's work with a grain of salt and to treat it, at best, only as a starting point of an inquiry into Oltenian culture. Still, as Pandrea points out, Brancusi shared with him this devotion to their land. In fact, it was from Brancusi that Pandrea first heard a mention of "ethics of Craiova"—a point of view that he made his mission to make into a systematic account. In other words, Pandrea offers an account of what Brancusi's ethos consisted of and of its origins (in Oltenian culture), and he claims that this is how Brancusi himself understood his commitments and national identity. Whether this account is "phantasmagoric" or not and whether it is unduly "chauvinistic", it certainly sheds light on what national origins, national identity, and national consciousness meant for a Romanian expatriate at the time.

Conclusion

In his reflection of Brancusi's legacy, Pandrea writes: "The most perfect and celebrated international art has the strongest national roots."[22] We enjoy connecting with artists from cultures other than our own, and in virtue of our shared humanity, we can relate to points of view that are quite different from what is familiar to us. No doubt, Brancusi is one of the world's most perfect and celebrated international artists, and it is no wonder that we are drawn to his Oltenian national roots. In order to engage his national roots, however, we would do well to stop using labels such as "Romanian–born peasant", "Carpathian shepherd", or "herdsman from the Balkans"—labels such as these should be left behind as unfortunate remnants of an essentially classist way of engaging artists whose social background does not fit into the expected mold. Commitment to ideals of internationalism and cosmopolitanism entails making an earnest effort to understand the meaning of artists' national roots, and looking into Brancusi's origin story should go beyond the stereotypical imagery of a "Romanian village". Even setting aside the complex question of what degree his Oltenian roots influenced his aesthetics, we need to understand what "Oltenian aesthetics" means in the first place: we need to go beyond the iconography of village gateposts and folktales. A new, richer, and more informed narrative will help us develop aesthetic concepts beyond simple, folk, archaic, intuitive, and instinctual ones, and it will allow us to develop a different way of talking about Brancusi's art. At long last, and "Only after he is dead", it is time to write Brancusi's biography.

[22] Pandrea, *Brâncuși: Pravila de la Craiova*, 49.

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