

New Creative Conceptions of Eliade and Brancusi

**Carmen SABĂU,
Mircea SABĂU**

Argonne National Laboratory, Illinois, U.S.A.

Keywords: *commemoration/anniversary, (Romanian) visionaries/innovators, comparison, abstractization, redefining art, the new Humanism*

Abstract: This year commemorates two important anniversaries: Fifty years since the death of Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) and One Hundred years from the birth of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). This paper presents these two great Romanians, and discusses the main contributions of these visionary creators in their own fields and their impact on the development of art and culture.

1. Introduction

The twentieth century, with all the wars, revolutions and horrid crimes, which have shaken the world, was also the century of renewals and progress in all fields. The progress realized was due to the contribution of many people and numerous nations, transcending national, political or ideological frontiers and barriers, in order to outline what remains a human and humanist permanence.

Brancusi and Eliade belong to the genial creators group, the first one in the Arts, the second one in the explanation of the essence of religious phenomena, the nature of the sacred and profane, myth and magic. Both left their native Romania, were successful and became recognized in foreign lands as pioneers of the universal culture of our times, but not in their native Romania.

2. The purpose of the paper

In this paper, we present a parallel between Brancusi's vision of art, as a new, modern sculptor of pure forms and Eliade, the scholar and interpreter of religious phenomena and myths, who also had a vision for a new humanism. Eliade was impressed by the works of Brancusi and although he never met the artist, during his discussion ¹ with

¹ Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth - Conversations with Claude Henri Rocquet*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, p 99-100.

Rocquet and in the appendix of the book *Ordeal by Labyrinth - Conversations with Claude Henri Rocquet*, he offers us a valuable and original interpretation of the creation of the great Romanian sculptor.

Brancusi's works suggest and urge us to look for the absolute and eternal forms and elements in the real world, in which the passing of time and permanent change and evolution cannot be stopped. The forms created by Brancusi are the result of his continuous search for a new expression in Art. Starting with the real form of objects and figures, he worked constantly to eliminate one after the other, the secondary aspects of the image that represented the object. In the sculptures he was creating, his artwork evolves by purifying the image and retaining only the essential and absolute features, which characterize the object or the figure. This process of simplification produced sculpture which for an uneducated eye, lost the resemblance with the original object, yet through the simplification of the forms succeeded in representing a kind of essence of that object. Brancusi created numerous artworks whose initial inspiration came from a study of birds and flight and which began by distilling the outward appearance of the bird and ultimately arrived at the "*Bird in Space*", which takes on the appearance of a rocket rather than a bird. The final form is attractive and incorporates all the main elements of art – a harmonious design, a balanced composition, beauty and simplicity of form, and the highly polished surface which enhances the impression of flight. Yet, when the work was sent to be displayed at an exhibit in America in 1926, it was considered a mere mechanical object possibly part of some type of machinery and the customs officials charged the sculptor with a tax for "importing metals". It was necessary to settle the problem through the judicial process which also at the end of the trial changed the standard definition of the artwork to include the changes that occurred in art at the beginning of the twentieth century. This famous controversy and the trial which followed, forced a new understanding of the meaning and appearance of art works and ushered in the modern conception of art in America.²

Following his own unique vision, Brancusi created an Art of indivisible forms, simple and pure, which often approaches abstract, mathematical forms. During the process of producing a sculpture Brancusi carved numerous variants until he arrived at representing what for him was "the ideal form or the acceptable form". Following this process, the bird is reduced to the idea of flight, an ideal way with minimal resistance from the air and the vanquishing of any obstacle in his way, including the pull of gravity. Similarly, the sculpture representing a fish is reduced to a sharp form that penetrates the water with maximum efficiency and minimum effort. The same continuous evolution can be seen in the study and creations of Brancusi's Mademoiselle Pogony's portraits. In this series, Brancusi, in a number of successive portraits eliminated the superficial details, to reach the essential form of the oval, the egg – one of the absolute elements and primordial forms of the world. In his process of creating a sculpture of an object the final art object represented an essence of the original object which suggested the action connected to the original or a geometrical form characteristic of the original. Radu Varia in his book about Brancusi published in 1986, reproduced the explanation and the meaning given by Brancusi himself about his art: "For what my work is aiming at is above all realism: I pursue the inner, hidden reality, the very essence of objects in their own intrinsic fundamental nature; this is my only deep preoccupation"³.

During this process of searching for essences, Brancusi tried to show that all living creatures are unified through some essential forms; a brilliant intuition of a genius, which precedes the conclusions of scientific research and yet, confirms these same conclusions

² *Brancusi vs. United States: The Historic Trial, 1928*, Paris, Societe nouvelle Adam Biro 1999.

³ Varia, Radu. 1986. *Brancusi*, NY:Rizzoli International Publications Inc.

on a different basis, as for example by considering the use of minimal energy together with maximum efficiency of information transfer. The streamlined forms of Brancusi bespeak of a primordial time while remaining firmly grounded in the modern world. His creations initiated the universe of modern sculpture and liberated the sculptural object from the chains of the Western tradition of figurative forms and subservience to the human dimension.

3. The Universe of Eliade

Eliade grew up during a time when Romania had accomplished all its national aspirations. All Romanian provinces were successfully united to the motherland through their own will on the basis of the self-determination principle included in the 14 points presented by President Wilson in 1918 to the American Congress and then at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, following the conclusion of WWI. This union had been the aspiration of the peoples of Romania, who for centuries had been forced to live under foreign occupation and domination. The economy and culture in Romania were in full progress after the war. And for the first time in the history of their country the young generation did not have to accomplish any political task. It is important to mention that Eliade was among the first who stepped forward in 1927, at only 20 years and in an essay published as a feuilleton in the journal "Cuvantul", he presented the goals and the possible objectives of his young generation. Considering that the older generation of Romanians, through their struggle and fighting in the war had succeed to unite all the provinces inhabited by Romanians, Eliade proposed that the new, younger generation, should concentrate its efforts on the development of culture and spirituality, in order to reduce the gap that existed between Romania and other European countries.

Eliade, worked hard and his interest in the study of myth and the history of religions enabled him to succeed in obtaining a stipendium from an Indian maharajah to study Indian philosophy and Indian culture, with the renowned Indian professor Dasgupta from the Uni-versity of Calcutta. After three years of study in India, Eliade returned home and by using his research in India he concluded writing his doctoral thesis, obtaining in 1933 the doctoral degree with *magna cum laudae* from the University of Bucharest.⁴ Shortly after that, he was appointed assistant professor to Nae Ionescu, his mentor and professor at the University of Bucharest. He started teaching immediately and in 1940, Eliade was appointed as cultural attaché to the Romanian Royal delegation in London between April and September, while from 1941 to 1945, as cultural adviser at the Romanian Legation in Lisbon. During all these years of travel Eliade continued to research and study, benefiting from the various academic libraries of the countries he has visited.

The war years found him abroad, from where he would not be able to return to his native country, similar to Brancusi. At the end of WWII, Romania was occupied by the Red Army of the Soviet Union, who imposed a communist regime in the country following the order of Stalin. The taking over of the power by communists, condemned Romania to an immense loss and suffering, destroying many generations of intellectuals, plundering the wealth of the country and banishing all democratic rights warranted by the constitution, like the right to manifest and express ones view, the right to form associations, the freedom to travel, etc. The country was overtaken by uneducated and uncultured men, who were nominated by the communist party to lead, even though lacking the necessary qualifications. These mostly illiterate or semi-illiterate people who led Romania, were the faithful executants of Moscow's orders, unthinkingly looting and destroying the country.

In 1945 after the war, Eliade established himself in Paris where he continued to complete his research writing and publishing his scientific studies. In order to obtain some money to support himself, he gave lectures in Paris at the Sorbonne and Musee Guimet.

⁴ Handoca, Mircea. 1996. *Pe urmele lui Mircea Eliade*, Ed. Petru Maior, Targu Mures, p 77.

Between 1948 and 1956, seven of his important books representing his studies of myths and different religious phenomena were published one by one : *Techniques du Yoga*, *Traite d'histoire des Religions*, *Le Mythe de L'eternel retour*, *Chamanisme et les Techiques Archaïques de l'Extase*, *Images et Symboles*, *LeYoga: Immortalité et Liberte* and *Forgerons et Alchimistes*. These publications established Eliade as a recognized scholar and a specialist in the field of the History of Religions, his books being used for teaching at various universities. One of the professors who used Eliade's books for teaching his students, was professor Joachim Wach from the University of Chicago, in the USA. Wach invited Eliade to deliver a series of lectures at the University of Chicago and after that, for thirty years until his death, Eliade remained the distinguished and venerated professor in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Parallel with his scholarly publications, his literary activity continued successfully. His books were published in different languages, being awarded literary prizes and appreciated by both the public and the critics.

In spite of all these successes, Eliade remained and felt himself a Romanian, though forced to live in a foreign land. All his literary works are written in Romanian and whenever an opportunity occurred, he kept contacts with many Romanians, but refused to visit Romania dominated by the communists.

At the University of Chicago he had many students and collaborators and in order to encourage the publication of research and the exchange of ideas he founded, with the support of his colleagues, the publication of a new journal "History of Religions". In the very first number of this journal, Eliade presented his vision about the goals for the history of religions to become a basis for a *New Humanism*, destined to ensure a better understanding between various cultures and at the same time to open a new horizon for the understanding of human nature ⁵.

In the discussions between Eliade and Claude Henri Rocquet, published under the title "*L'Epreuve du Labyrinthe*" ⁶, Eliade spoke with pride about his affiliation with the Romanian culture and traditions. He considered the Romanian culture as a connection, a bridge between West and East, a place in which the two worlds coexist, in which there are confrontations – as for example between traditionalism and modernism, mysticism and religion, contemplation and action.

Eliade, who declared himself a Historian of Religion and an Orientalist, in the preface to one of his Journal volumes, published under the name "No souvenirs" ⁷, confesses that he follows the old tradition of Romanian culture, in which many of the Romanian scholars and scientists were at the same time writers and creators of valuable literary works. For him, writing literature proved to be a fascinating experience, as well as an organic necessity to express himself and uncover his life experiences of living in the world and be influenced by it. His literary works often show that the action presented in the novel is developed in a dual universe: one mythical, fantastic and sometimes dreamlike, while the other representing the real universe of every day experience.

Brancusi, the other important Romanian was also proud of his origin, preserving his Romanian and traditional way of living in the heart of Paris, in spite of his participation in the artistically innovating vanguard of the twentieth century.

Eliade, who was preoccupied with Brancusi's creations and universe, uncovered, in his small study dedicated to the sculptor, his secrets and method of investigation. Eliade discovered in Brancusi's creations an interiorization process and a search for the essences of life forms, grounded in the sculptor's own life experience, but revealing the

⁵ Turcanu, Florin. 2003. *Mircea Eliade le prisonier de l'histoire*, Edition La Decouverte, Paris, p 443.

⁶ Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth — Conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 92-101.

⁷ Eliade, Mircea. 1977. *No Souvenirs - Journal 1957-1960*, Harper & Row, Publishers NY, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London. Preface.

creative process of archaic times. Brancusi saw the world in the same way that the prehistoric creators of the remote past envisioned their world, a discovery close to Eliade's own investigations into the essential elements of myth and religion. Through the process of interiorization, the artist discovered what Eliade called "his presence in the world".

In his discussions about Brancusi, Eliade ascertained that the Romanian sculptor expressed his artistic ideas in the same manner in which we find them expressed in the Romanian folklore, except that Brancusi didn't create folkloric art, nor did he imitate the models of popular creation. Instead, he created and discovered new forms, which in fact were a re-discovery of archetypical forms, with their roots in the Neolithic tradition. In his searches, Brancusi discovered not only the forms, but also the forces which gave vitality to these primordial forms.

Eliade confessed that he regretted not having met Brancusi⁸, to whom he dedicated a small study, entitled "Brancusi et les mythologies"⁹. In this study, Eliade discovered in Brancusi's creation a process of interiorizing and a search for the essences of life, which started with his own life experience. This way, Brancusi discovered what Eliade defined as "the presence in the world", so typical and specific to the archaic man of Paleolithic and the Neolithic periods.

"Brancusi - says Eliade - succeeds to see the world in the same way as the prehistoric creators and as the folk art creators, through which these anonymous artists realize their artistic universe. Only through the interiorizing process, can we understand the extraordinary and wonderful originality of Brancusi"¹⁰.

4. The universe of Brancusi

Brancusi, the brilliant Romanian sculptor of genius is internationally recognized as one of the fathers of the modern art of the twentieth century, without whom the evolution of modern and contemporary art would not have been possible.

Born in 1876, in Hobita, a hamlet in Oltenia, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, Brancuși manifested already in early childhood the desire to be independent¹¹. He looked only for his way of life, running away from home at the age of 11 and working whatever he found to provide for himself. Later he became an apprentice to a carpenter, learning to work the wood and being appreciated by his master. Gifted with wit and intelligence, cleverness and with a remarkable willpower along with an abundance of intellectual curiosity he studied for three years at the School of Arts and Crafts in Craiova, where he stood out from start, and gained a fellowship for the Fine Arts Faculty in Bucharest¹². In Bucharest he also became recognized from the beginning, obtaining many prizes and awards for his works.

After finishing his studies in Romania, he left for Paris on foot, a journey that took over one year of travels throughout Europe. In Paris he enrolled at the "Ecole des Beaux Arts". Being noticed by Rodin, who saw his sculptures at the "Salon d'Automne" in 1906, Brancusi worked for a while in the studio of the great French sculptor, but soon he quit, saying that "nothing can grow in the shadow of a big tree!"

⁸ Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth — Conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 99.

⁹ Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth — Conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 193-201.

¹⁰ Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth — Conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p 193-201.

¹¹ Varia, Radu. 1986. *Brancuși*. NY:Rizzoli International Publications Inc.

¹² Varia, Radu. 1986. *Brancusi*. NY:Rizzoli International Publications Inc.

From that moment, he studied by himself, searching his way and unveiling his own unique artistic vision. Although he lived in the heart of Paris and took an active interest in the artistic vanguard of the time, the sculptor carries on an isolated and modest life, his living resembling that of his grandparents, forefathers and ancestors, peasants from Oltenia, working with earnestness and diligence. He exhibited continuously and began to gain the admiration of collectors and art dealers. In his studio – which was also his home – he often welcomed many artists, writers and other avant-garde thinkers, with whom he often had interesting exchanges of ideas. He read much and kept abreast of all artistic and cultural events in France's capital.

However, Brancusi, though interested and curious of the new currents and trends, did not affiliate with any of the schools or artistic developments of the time.

Although the sculptor lived in the middle of the artistic vanguard of the twentieth century, which influenced him and was influenced by him, he didn't belong to any school group, trend or artistic style. He remained a genius, a brilliant and independent creator, always working endlessly in the incessant search for essences and pure and absolute forms, discovering new horizons in the artistic creation process and offering a new art, profoundly original and innovative.

His works remain totally original, although one can guess an influence of the cubism, assimilated with much subtlety and fineness. The Romanian sculptor often treated and gained his inspiration from familiar subjects: a head, a bust, a bird, etc.... He began with the real image of the subject, and then proceeded to eliminate one by one the unessential elements, through an abstraction process, which purified the image, reducing it to a simplified form that best expressed the essence of the respective subject.

It is interesting to note that his intuition often lead him to discover those forms and surfaces which approach mathematical forms and best express specific functions with elegant simplicity. In this respect, *"Bird in Space"* is remarkable in its form resembling the aerodynamic shape of a rocket for the optimal realization of flight. A similar evolution can be found in the portrait of *"Mademoiselle Pogany"* and many other Brancusi's works: *"Head of a sleeping child"*, *"Prometheus"*, *"Sleeping muse"*, *"Sculpture for the blind"*.

Eliminating the superficial details of the human figure, Brancusi discovered the essential form of the oval: the egg – represented in his sculpture *"Beginning of the world"* - the absolute and original element of life, showing us the organic, profound connection, which binds all the creatures together, carrying the same origin that characterizes all life.

Brancusi had few students, but many generations of artists have been and continue to be influenced by him. From Modigliani to Arp, Isamu Noguchi, Henri Moore, Alberto Giacometti and so many others, Brancusi's vision and his methods of search and expression of essences have made possible new artistic horizons and the birth of modern sculpture.

Examining and exploring the works of these two great Romanians, we discover new values and new dimensions of the Romanian cultural horizon, which must be recovered and honored after their long absence, imposed by the unhappy and destructive communist experience. Nevertheless, in spite of the official attitude of the communist ideologues, who criticized the art of Brancusi and rejected his offers to install his atelier as a museum in Romania, there were numerous artists, art critics and writers, who deeply appreciated the works of the great sculptor. There were many studies and writings about him, but his atelier was donated to France, being included in the Musee Pompidou, after Brancusi's offer was rejected by the communist government of Romania some years before his death in 1957.

References

Brancusi vs. United States: The Historic Trial, 1928, Paris, Societe nouvelle Adam Biro 1999.

- Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth - Conversations with Claude Henri Rocquet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1982. *Ordeal by Labyrinth – Conversations with Claude Henri Rocquet*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Handoca, Mircea. 1996. *Pe urmele lui Mircea Eliade*. Târgu Mureș: Ed. Petru Maior.
- Turcanu, Florin. 2003. *Mircea Eliade le prisonier de l'histoire*. Paris: Edition La Decouverte.
- Varia, Radu. 1986. *Brancusi*. NY:Rizzoli International Publications Inc.