

## A Visual & Critical Analysis of Brancusi's *Blond Negress II*

By Nina Chohan

What constitutes the human body? Is it the organs and intestines that allow us to function as living, breathing, sentient beings? Or is it the forms and shapes we hold and occupy? Perhaps it is all of the above. Through his sculptures and artistic processes, Constantin Brancusi explored these questions and turned the role of sculpture as an artistic medium over on its figurative head by creating artwork that is dipped in mythological forms, African influence, and the search for the truest, purest form. Using his 1933 sculpture titled *Blond Negress II*, this essay will explore Brancusi's influences, the significance of his artistic practice, and how these enabled him to become one of the most important modern sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Constantin Brancusi was born in 1876 in Romania. He studied art in Craiova and Bucharest, and after hearing of the famous Auguste Rodin, he moved to Paris in 1904 to further his artistry and be closer to the epicenter of the European art scene. He first entered the *École des Beaux-Arts*, where he worked in the workshop of artist Antonin Mercié. After exhibiting his work for the first time at the salon in 1906, he was invited to study under Rodin himself. Brancusi refused the offer, famously stating that “one can do nothing beneath great trees.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, within the span of about five years, Brancusi developed an artistic direction of his own. His sculptures began to take on a more radically abstract approach, challenging the very essence of sculpture as a medium.<sup>2</sup>

About twenty-five years later, when he created *Blond Negress II*, Brancusi was all too familiar with the avant-garde scene of modern sculpture. The sculpture belongs to a series of works that the artist started in 1923 with a white marble version titled *White Negress I*.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Macholz, Kaitlin. “How Constantin Brancusi Brazenly Redefined Sculpture | Artsy.” Artsy, July 20, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-constantin-brancusi-brazenly-redefined-sculpture>

<sup>2</sup> Selz, J.

<sup>3</sup> “White Negress [I].” Philadelphia Museum of Art. Accessed October 21, 2024. <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/51078>.

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piece was apparently inspired by an African woman whom Brancusi saw at the French colonial fair in Marseilles in 1922.<sup>4</sup> *Blond Negress II* stands vertically, with two oak pieces carved by the artist at the base.<sup>5</sup> On top of the oak base sits a thick slab of limestone, carved into the shape of a cross. On this rests a smaller cylindrical marble base. Finally, at the top of the structure lies a bronze sculpture of an almost bowling pin shape; the round oval shape on top tapering widely at the bottom to create the illusion of the human shape and adorning embellishments that are suggestive of the female mouth and genitalia. The bronze has been polished until it shines like gold, and balances on the small marble base precariously, almost as if a single breath of air will knock it down.

During the beginnings of his maturity as an artist, Brancusi mostly worked with bronze, marble, limestone, and wood.<sup>6</sup> His mastery of materials was key to his revolutionary practice. He was often praised for his meticulous treatment of these materials, with much of his work in bronze polished to the point of mimicking gold, and with stonework that carved in sleek and elegant angles. Brancusi enjoyed the act of carving itself, and was extremely diligent in his handling of his materials (this is despite the tendency of his work to be destroyed, by him or otherwise). He began most of his sculptures by carving directly into his materials, as opposed to initially making casts or models. Brancusi was especially meticulous with his woodworking, displaying a deep respect for the material and allowing for the natural qualities and imperfections to show. It is this sort of treasured treatment of his materials that became central to his practice,

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<sup>4</sup> "White Negress [I]."

<sup>5</sup> "Constantin Brâncuși. *Blond Negress II*. Paris 1933 (after a Marble of 1928) | Moma." Museum of Modern Art.. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80936>.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, Shira. "Constantin Brancusi: A New Kind of Form." *Artland Magazine*, March 27, 2023. <https://magazine.artland.com/boundary-breaking-sculptors-of-the-20th-century-brancusis-radically-reductive-sculptures/>.

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and he believed that he needed to work directly and meticulously with his materials in order to bring forth the true essence of both the material, and of form.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at *Blond Negress II*, one can immediately see the ways in which the artist focuses on the essentials of form. He does not use any element that suggests symbolism, and only concentrates on the shape and movement of the figure.<sup>8</sup> Sculpted from polished bronze with a smooth, reflective surface, the head of the figure atop *Blond Negress II* is reduced to its most basic elements: a minimalistic ovoid shape with subtle hints of facial features. The contrast between abstraction and representation is central to much of Brancusi's work, allowing the viewer to recognize the human form. Furthermore, by combining "blond," a term typically associated with European features, and "negress," a derogatory word historically used to eroticize and exoticize Black women, Brancusi introduces a complex, layered reflection on cultural identity.<sup>9</sup> This title may be seen as challenging the viewer's assumptions about race and beauty, offering a critique of traditional Western ideals. Despite the reduction and simplification of the implied human form, *Blond Negress II* retains a powerful sense of the human presence.

"Simplicity is not an end in art," Brancusi said, "but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves, as we approach the true sense of things."<sup>10</sup> This statement is right at the very heart of his artistic practice. Brancusi did not set out to create portrait-like sculptures. Instead, he focused on the materiality of his pieces, the movement they embark on, and the spirituality they possess. Sidney Geist, a leading authority on Brancusi, mentions this as well, saying "One of the chief keys to the understanding of Brancusi's mature oeuvre is his treatment of the sculpture as an

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<sup>7</sup> Gale, Matthew, and Carmen Giménez. *Constantin Brancusi: The essence of things*. London: Tate, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Gale

<sup>9</sup> MoMA

<sup>10</sup> Geist, S. (1969). *Constantin Brancusi, 1876-1957: a retrospective exhibition*. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

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object.”<sup>11</sup> In other words: Brancusi treats his sculptures as one whole object in relation to its surroundings. Traditionally displayed sculptures are typically displayed on some sort of pedestal or base. In Brancusi's case, the base is part of the sculpture itself, and therefore, the entire work is not just piece on display, it is a whole object on display.

Moreover, is important to acknowledge and further delve into Brancusi's interest in African and non-Western art. Brancusi's first known wooden carving that reflected African influence is titled *The First Step* (1913).<sup>12</sup> The sculpture has recognizably African features, resembling wooden figures from the Ivory Coast and the Mali Republic<sup>13</sup>. Geist noted that the artist often fought against this influence despite the seemingly obvious influences on some of his woodwork, and whenever he felt like a work of his was becoming too influenced, he destroyed it.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, much of the art from the African continent often reduces the image of the human its essential elements, like the eyes and breasts. Regarding *Blond Negress II*, one can also come to the conclusion that the bronze figure at the top of the structure is a depiction of the “essential elements” of a human female figure, and therefore heavily influenced by native African art.<sup>15</sup> However, after considering Brancusi's body of work and the intentions he had in place, it becomes clear that this influence is not central to Brancusi's goal as an artist, which is to explore the purity and essence of form. The influence of African art enabled Brancusi to experiment outside of the Western realm of symbolism, and develop forms that challenged the notions of beauty, and even the art of sculpture itself.

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<sup>11</sup> Geist

<sup>12</sup> Michaelsen, Katherine Jacutnsky. “Brancusi and African Art.” Artforum, September 26, 2023. <https://www.artforum.com/features/brancusi-and-african-art-213215/>.

<sup>13</sup> Michaelsen

<sup>14</sup> Geist

<sup>15</sup> Gale

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*Blond Negress II* is a quintessential example of Brancusi's quest to capture the essence of form and material. Through his direct manipulation of his materials, Brancusi was able to transform human form and spirituality into pure shapes. Viewers can see by looking at *Blond Negress II* how Brancusi stepped out of the Western artistic tradition and embraced new, more abstract forms. In doing so, Brancusi altered the trajectory of modern sculpture.

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