

Constantin Brancusi—Master of Abstract Sculpture

Constantin Brancusi, French, born Romanian (1876–1957), *A Muse*, 1917, polished bronze and limestone, 19 5/8 x 11 11/16 x 9 5/8 inches, gift of Mrs. Herman Brown and Mrs. William Stamps Farish, 62.1.

Constantin Brancusi's work is characterized by:

- Cast bronze and stone sculptures with simplified, almost abstract forms.
- The influence of Asian, African, and other non-European cultures.

Artist

Born in Hobita, Romania, Constantin Brancusi left his abusive family at age thirteen to find work in a nearby city. The young Brancusi soon enrolled in the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts, where he studied academic subjects such as math and physics. He continued his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest, although he received no formal training in sculpture there. In 1903 Brancusi began a two-year walking journey from Romania to Paris. When he reached Paris he studied under Antonin Mercié, a premier French sculptor of the time, at the Académie des Beaux-Arts.

Brancusi, like many 20th-century artists, gathered inspiration from non-European cultures. His work underwent a drastic stylistic change in 1907, when he turned away from sculpture representing realistic objects and toward simplified block-like forms. Brancusi continued working in this style that eliminated detail and utilized a characteristic ovoid human form for the next several decades. Even though Brancusi continued to create works for Romanian patrons, he maintained his Paris residence until his death in 1957.

Subject

In Greek mythology, the Muses were the nine daughters of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Mnemosyne, the titan of memory. The Muses served as patron goddesses of the liberal arts and sciences, thus the ancient Greeks prayed to them for assistance with their own academic pursuits. Ancient sculptures of the muses often included secondary objects, such as lyres or scrolls, that identified the muse and indicated her specialty.

A Muse is an example of Brancusi's simplified human figures that are characterized by the absence of personalized detail. Unlike a painted portrait, the figure does not represent an individual human identity. Instead, the minimal features and varying texture represent the essence of the figure, creating the form with nominal formality to make the object hardly recognizable to the viewer.

Style/Technique

The ovoid, or egg-shape form, used in *A Muse* is characteristic of Cycladic sculpture. Cycladic civilization thrived around 3,000–2,000 B.C. during the same time as ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, and is believed to be the precursor of Classical Greek civilization.

Brancusi enjoyed creating sculptures of the Cycladic style, and held a great interest in Greek philosophy, especially that of Socrates and Plato. He was particularly attracted to Plato's theory of forms or ideas that states that "all objects in the universe are but imperfect imitations of supreme models". The lack of detail in Brancusi's rendering of physical objects comes from his desire to make the meaning of his works implicit. The fusion of modernist abstraction with pre-Grecian and ancient Greek made Brancusi a truly innovative artist of his time.

Context

In the early 20th century, preceding the first World War, Paris was the premier site for culture, entertainment, and economic prosperity. However, the entrance of France into the war in 1914 rendered the city lifeless and deserted, its population diminishing by a third in a matter of years. And like the rest of the world, poverty and social disorder plagued Paris in the years following the war, making rebuilding costly and challenging. Many Parisian artists' work alluded to war-inspired themes during this time, but Brancusi chose to avoid thematic reference to social problems, and to represent the natural essence of the human being.



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Discussion Questions

- What is a muse? How does this sculpture define or capture the term?
- Why did Brancusi choose to eliminate the details of the head in this sculpture? How would this sculpture look different with prominent eyes, lips, ears, and other features?
- Consider the materials Brancusi used to create this work. This bronze is incredibly shiny. How does the actual sculpture look different from an image of the sculpture? Consider the highly polished surface and the qualities of bronze. How would *A Muse* look if it contained a reflection of the viewer?

Classroom Ideas

- Research Greek Cycladic period sculpture. Compare the figures and heads to *A Muse*. Which sculpture looks older? Which looks more modern? Could it be argued that both were made at the same time? How?
- What are the characteristics of bronze? What does it look like when it is unpolished? How would it look if it were weathered, for instance if *A Muse* were placed in an outdoor sculpture garden? How would this change the appearance and mood of the sculpture?
- Compare this work to Alberto Giacometti's *Large Standing Woman I* (see MFAH Art Card for *Large Standing Woman I*). How do both artists treat the human form? What do their choices say about the artists? Which do you prefer?

For Further Study from the MFAH Kinder Foundation Teacher Resource Center

CS723

*The Body in
20th-Century Art*

6 slides

M/H/A

In the 20th century, artists began to see the human body as a reflection of self and society. Examine the common themes of abstraction and fragmentation in this packet.

BK140

*D'Aulaires' Book
of Greek Myths*

Book: 192 pages

E

Meet the mighty Zeus, the cantankerous Poseidon, the elegant Athena, and others in this introduction to Greek mythology.

VC152

Introduction to Sculpture

Video: 11 minutes

M/H/A

This video surveys major stylistic periods in Western sculpture, from the medieval era to the 20th century, and includes footage of a sculptor demonstrating several techniques.