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Neglected Sculptor Gets a French Platform at Last : Art: The first-ever retrospective in Paris of influential artist Constantin Brancusi will be in Philadelphia in the fall.

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PARIS — Constantin Brancusi was to 20th-Century sculpture what Picasso was to modern painting—a force of nature breathing life into the moribund world of academic art. The Romanian artist influenced sculptors ranging in style from Alberto Giacometti to Richard Serra.

Like the Spaniard Picasso, Brancusi (1876-1957) lived most of his life in Paris, yet his work was largely neglected by French museums, galleries and collectors.

The opening of the sculptor's first-ever French retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou, is, therefore, an event of some significance. The Paris show continues through Aug. 21 and will make only one other stop, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art next fall.

As if to atone for a century of Gallic oversight, the Brancusi opening was attended by many of the highest-placed ministers of the government, including the Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon, as well as Madame Pompidou and the U.S. Ambassador to France, Pamela Harriman.

Organized by Margit Rowell, former curator of sculpture at the Pompidou (currently chief curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York), and the Philadelphia Museum's curator of 20th-Century art, Ann Temkin, the exhibition features slightly more than 100 of Brancusi's sculptures, as well as drawings and photographs.

The Philadelphia Museum's involvement stems, at least in part, from the fact that it owns a large cache of Brancusi sculptures, which ironically, might once have been headed for Los Angeles. In 1947, Walter and Louise Arensberg, who lived in West Hollywood for some 20 years, tried to donate their extensive holdings of modern art by Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp and others to the University of California as well as other local institutions. They were rebuffed. The city was too conservative for modern art. Duchamp, who acted as Brancusi's promoter and placed much of his work in American collections, advised the Arensbergs to give their collection instead to the Philadelphia Museum, in 1950.

The Brancusi installation at the Pompidou begins with early works reflecting the influence of Auguste Rodin. Brancusi worked for the master in 1907 but quit after a month saying, "Nothing grows under big trees." By 1910, Brancusi had developed his own style, of reductive forms using luxurious materials.

Re-creating the feel of Brancusi's studio, the works in each gallery here are gathered chronologically and sometimes thematically on a concrete pad. The forms play against one another: The elegant curve of a woman's neck is echoed in the elongated arc of a bird in space; smooth shapes of the marbles are reflected in the mirror-smooth surfaces of the bronzes; the roughly hewn oak bases offer startling contrast to the jewel-like quality of the finished sculptures.

Temkin, in Paris for the opening, pointed to a gleaming and streamlined bronze bird, explaining, "Brancusi felt that it was a new century and he had to become

a new artist." The artist's use of elemental shapes, inspired by Art Deco and symbolism, recur throughout his career. Brancusi eschewed the Modernist mandate to push on to new styles. He made some 400 sculptures between 1908 and 1940, returning again and again to the same beloved forms in marble, bronze or wood. Most of these were drawn from the shapes of birds, fish, infants or portraits of women, such as the timeless "Mademoiselle Pogany," modeled after a young Hungarian painter.

One of Brancusi's innovations involved a return to direct carving instead of casting. Even his bronzes were sand cast and painstakingly polished by hand in a method that rejected the 19th-Century academic notion of sculpture made in multiple editions. Pointing to his famous "The Kiss," a stone block etched with two embracing lovers, in what was thought of as an "archaic" technique, Temkin said: "He was willfully removing his ability to make a perfect copy. He felt that sculpture had to (once again) become the expression of one person.

"The most historically important value of his work is in the pedestal," Temkin said. "He wanted the sculptures to be a part of our life and for the pedestal to not be a part would have invalidated that concept."

This exhibition is the first to demonstrate the importance of sculptural bases to Brancusi's larger enterprise. It is also the first to include Brancusi's own photographs of his work, which show that during the last 17 years of his life he concentrated mainly on arranging and rearranging the works and bases in relation to one another in his studio. It could be said that he was the first installation artist.

Although Brancusi was friends with artists such as Fernand Leger, Amedeo Modigliani and Henri Matisse, he was never a commercial success in Paris. He was embraced by Americans, however, after the 1913 Armory Show, which brought modern art to New York for the first time. Temkin explains, "There is a certain idealism and industry in his work that there was a sympathy for in America."

Brancusi's relationship with America was not entirely smooth, however. In 1926, U.S. Customs refused to accept as legitimate works of art a shipment of Brancusi's sculpture and ordered a 40% duty. After two years of legal wrangling, the judge wrote in the artist's favor that "while some difficulty might be encountered in associating (Brancusi's sculpture) with a bird, it is nevertheless pleasing to look at and highly ornamental."

The modern art world celebrated its triumph.

In France, however, the struggle continued. It was not until 1956 that the French state accepted the gift of Brancusi's studio contents with hundreds of sculptures, drawings, negatives and some 1,250 photographs. The artist never married and there were no heirs. Brancusi died the next year at age 81. The contents languished in partial storage until the studio was re-created at the Pompidou. The contents and tools have been reassembled as part of the exhibition. Brancusi's studio will reopen with the renovated Pompidou for its 20th anniversary in 1997.