

Modern Sculpture, Essence, and Difference (London, 26 Apr 24)

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Apr 26, 2024

Deadline: Jan 15, 2024

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Modern Sculpture, Essence, and Difference: Reflections of the Work of Constantin Brancusi. Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957) set out to capture what he described as 'essences' in his work. These archetypes of form and concept have since become synonymous with the idea of modern sculpture. The densely ordered language of his œuvre and its simplified, compact objects may at first appear remote from contemporary discourses around alterity, identity, embodiment, and social constructions of class, race, gender and place. Yet key strands of art-historical thought have sought to challenge this assumption, and even suggest that such concepts and categories form the raw materials of Brâncuși's work, from Anna Chave's feminist study of the gendered construction of sculptures like *Princesse X* to explorations of the colonial contexts of early twentieth-century art networks in Paris and New York by John Warne Munroe and Yaëlle Biro. Such readings suggest that structures of difference were just as central to Brâncuși's practice as the pursuit of essences, and invite similar questions of modern sculpture as a whole.

This symposium will bring together new research and creative responses that engage with these issues, exploring and complicating Brâncuși's position in current thinking around twentieth-century art and culture and inviting broader consideration of the way structures of essence and difference are represented in modernist discourses. As well as interrogating social constructions, Brâncuși's sculpture undermined categorical divisions between art and 'the decorative', between the art object and its attendant apparatuses (the plinth, the camera), and between 'High' culture and an expanded, global range of formal vocabularies. In scholarly and creative terms, how should we approach this complex body of work today? What can we still learn from Brâncuși's pioneering material processes, his attempts to control the photographic representation of his work, his interest in repetition and folklore and his self-presentation as a Romanian peasant? How do these social and imaginative tactics resonate with other practices of Brâncuși's time and since?

This symposium will be held as part of the Henry Moore Foundation's 'Brâncuși and Britain' research season, which will examine Brâncuși's reception in Britain and coincides with the Centre Pompidou's major exhibition of Brâncuși's work in 2024. This exhibition will be the final time the contents of the Atelier Brâncuși are accessible to the public until Centre Pompidou reopens in 2027 following a multi-year programme of renovation works.

The day will culminate with an Artist Talk reflecting on Brâncuși's influence today: Lucy Skaer in conversation with Hannah Hughes, chaired by Dr. Rosalind McKeever.

This event has been supported by The Courtauld Institute of Art and The Courtauld Gallery.

Topics and themes of discussion

We invite submissions for 15-minute academic papers or creative responses related but not limited to the following themes:

Forms of structural difference – classed, geographic, gendered – that have been expressed or critiqued through modern sculpture and its legacies.

Contemporary art practices related to any aspect of Brâncuși's sculpture.

Alterity, repetition, assimilation, and difference between parts and wholes of a sculpture, and works in series.

UK-Eastern European exchange and points of contact in both historical and contemporary sculpture.

Cultural differences in international writing about Brâncuși's sculpture.

Brâncuși's significance to the critical histories and afterlives of modern sculpture, 'primitivism', abstraction, modernist narratives of exceptionalism and novelty.

Analysis of sculptural process and technique: direct carving, print making, tools, studios, and homes.

Submit a proposal

To submit a proposal, please send a 250-word abstract and 100-word bio to research@henry-moore.org by 15 January 2024.

Speakers will be notified by 9 February. Travel and accommodation costs within the UK will be reimbursed.

Reference:

CFP: Modern Sculpture, Essence, and Difference (London, 26 Apr 24). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 6, 2023

(accessed May 12, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/40770>>.