



ORIGINAL PAPER

Rien ne pousse à l'ombre des grands arbres: Constantin Brâncuși and the Politics of Cultural Heritage¹⁾ Selma Kozak²⁾

Abstract:

The year 2026 marks the global commemoration of Constantin Brâncuși's 150th birth anniversary. Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957) stands as one of the founding figures of modern and avant-garde art. He transformed 20th-century modernism through an abstractive approach to form, establishing an original and distinctive artistic style. Consequently, a reassessment of Brâncuși's aesthetic legacy assumes critical significance, demanding renewed analysis within both cultural and political frameworks.

Brâncuși began his artistic education at the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts in Romania, before relocating to France and spending the majority of his life at the center of the modernist art milieu in Paris. While Brâncuși positioned himself at the heart of international modernism, he simultaneously became an emblematic figure of Romanian national identity. During the Communist period, the artist was approached with caution due to the tensions between abstract art and the regime's ideologically framed conception of art. However, in the Post-Communist era, he was reappropriated as a strategic reference point in the reconstruction of cultural heritage. Brâncuși's contemporary significance within the realm of cultural heritage stems from his position as an Eastern European artist at the core of Western modernism and his symbolic role in the global redefinition of Romania's cultural legitimacy; as such, he constitutes a figure whose work warrants analysis within the ideological intersections of contemporary art and cultural memory.

This study aims to examine Brâncuși's artistic practice within the framework of the ideological framing of cultural heritage and its post-communist reinterpretation. It seeks to analyze Brâncuși's vision through the lenses of modernism, visual culture, cultural heritage policies, cultural memory, and public art, adopting a detailed and multifaceted approach. The artist's formal investigations, abstractive methodology, atelier organization, photographic production, and exhibition strategies will be explored through selected examples, with particular attention to his public artworks, including the Constantin Brâncuși Ensemble of Monuments in Târgu Jiu, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2024. In this way, the study discusses how Brâncuși's legacy has been repositioned within the interplay between national and global visual cultures in the Post-Communist era.

Keywords: *Constantin Brâncuși, Cultural Heritage, Avantgarde Art, Public Art, Modern Sculpture Art*

1) "Rien ne pousse à l'ombre des grands arbres," translated as "Nothing grows in the shade of great trees" is attributed to Constantin Brâncuși and is reportedly associated with his decision to leave Auguste Rodin's studio in Paris.

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Introduction

What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things.
Constantin Brâncuși

The year 2026 marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Constantin Brâncuși, one of the most influential and transformative figures in the history of modern art. The exhibitions, scholarly conferences, and commemorative events organized by leading museums, art institutions, and cultural organizations around the world to celebrate Brâncuși's sesquicentennial not only reaffirm his profound contribution to the development of modern art but also pay tribute to his enduring artistic legacy. This renewed international attention demonstrates that Brâncuși remains not only a pioneering figure of the avant-garde but also a universal cultural icon whose artistic legacy occupies a central position in contemporary debates on cultural heritage and cultural memory.

Brâncuși's artistic practice embodies a multilayered intellectual legacy. Thus, his oeuvre has also become a shared field of inquiry within studies such as public art, environmental art, cultural heritage, and cultural memory. The inscription of The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2024 represents a significant milestone of both national and international importance. Accordingly, this recognition has prompted a renewed interpretation of Brâncuși's legacy, not only within the history of modern art but also as an integral part of humanity's shared cultural heritage.

Constantin Brâncuși was born on 19 February 1876 in the village of Hobîța, Romania. His early engagement with traditional woodcarving and vernacular craftsmanship laid the foundation for the reductive and essentialist sculptural language that would later define his artistic practice. In 1894, he was admitted to the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts, where he received training in decorative arts, woodcarving, and modelling, before continuing his academic education at the Bucharest School of Fine Arts in 1898. The Craiova years should be understood not merely as a period of technical training but also as an intellectual phase during which Brâncuși began to establish a dialogue between Romania's traditional cultural heritage and the emerging language of modern art. Works such as *The Bust of Vitellius* (1898), *Head of Laocoön* (1900), the anatomical study *Écorché* (1902), produced in collaboration with the anatomist Prof. Dr. Dimitrie Gerota, *The Kiss* (1907), and *Miss Pogany* (1912-1913) reflect successive stages in Brâncuși's artistic transformation from academic figuration to a reductive and essentialist conception of modern sculpture. Today, a significant number of these works are preserved in the collection of the Craiova Art Museum, where they stand as important documents of the artist's formative development. At the age of twenty-eight, Brâncuși left Craiova in 1904 and embarked on his journey to Paris. More than a geographical relocation, this journey represents a symbolic passage toward the avant-garde that would profoundly reshape the course of modern art. Covering nearly two thousand kilometres, it has become one of the most compelling metaphors for the break with academic tradition and the embrace of avant-garde modernism. Although he worked briefly in Auguste Rodin's studio after arriving in Paris, Brâncuși chose to preserve his artistic independence, a position encapsulated in one of the most frequently cited statements in the history of

modern art: “Rien ne pousse à l'ombre des grands arbres.” (Nothing grows in the shade of great trees.) This conviction remained a defining principle of his artistic career. Within a remarkably short period, Brâncuși became part of the same intellectual milieu as Marcel Duchamp, Amedeo Modigliani, Man Ray, Edward Steichen, Ezra Pound, and Henri-Pierre Roché, and through exhibitions held across Europe and the United States, he emerged as one of the most influential figures of international modern art. Brâncuși continued to live and work in Paris until his death on 16 March 1957 (Selz, 2000; Brezianu & Geist, 1965; Marcoci, 2000; Guggenheim, 2026; MoMA, 2026).

Brâncuși is a patriot. Consequently, his international success never weakened his cultural ties to Romania. On the contrary, he continued to draw inspiration from Romanian folk culture, traditional woodcarving motifs, and local symbols in his works. Therefore, he is regarded not only as one of the pioneers of international modernism but also as one of the foremost representatives of Romania's cultural identity and artistic memory. Nevertheless, Brâncuși's legacy cannot be understood independently of the political transformations of the Twentieth Century. Due to his commitment to abstract art, his works and artistic approach became the subject of different ideological interpretations during the Communist period. Following Romania's democratization after 1989, however, Brâncuși was reappropriated as one of the foremost symbols of national identity and cultural diplomacy. Today, the collections of the Craiova Art Museum, the preservation of the Atelier Brâncuși in Paris, and the inscription of the Târgu Jiu Monumental Ensemble on the UNESCO World Heritage List constitute some of the most significant examples that reveal the multiple dimensions of the artist's cultural legacy extending beyond national borders.

This study examines Constantin Brâncuși's artistic production, his avant-garde vision, and the transformation of his artistic legacy into cultural heritage from historical, cultural, and political perspectives. Moreover, this study aims to explore Brâncuși's international artistic journey from Craiova to Paris, his role as a pioneer of avant-garde art, and the reinterpretation of his legacy through the Communist and Post-Communist periods. Particular attention is given to The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu as a distinctive example of the intersection of public art, cultural memory, and UNESCO World Heritage. Based on qualitative historical and descriptive research, the study draws upon art historical literature, archival sources, museum publications, and official UNESCO documents.

Craiova stands as one of Romania's leading cultural, historical, and academic centres. The Craiova Art Museum, which houses Brâncuși's works, further reinforces the city's significance in relation to the artist's life and artistic legacy. In this context, this study, prepared within the framework of the 16th International Conference, After Communism. East and West Under Scrutiny (CEPOS), held in Craiova on 20-21 March 2026, also serves a commemorative purpose on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Constantin Brâncuși's birth, paying tribute to his enduring contributions to avant-garde art and cultural heritage.

Brâncuși's Journey as an Avant-Garde Art Pioneer

Within the history of Twentieth-Century art, Constantin Brâncuși emerged as a pioneering figure who not only initiated the formal transformation of modern sculpture but also redefined its ontological boundaries. His artistic practice radically departed from the representational tradition of nineteenth-century academic sculpture, introducing a new aesthetic paradigm that sought to attain the essence of form. In this respect, Brâncuși

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stands as one of the founding pioneers of the avant-garde, fundamentally transforming the production, perception, and modes of display of the sculptural object.

Avant-garde art, unconcerned with continuity, is grounded in a critical stance toward established aesthetic norms and institutionalized conceptions of art. Rejecting the continuity of tradition, the avant-garde emerged as a dynamic movement that sought to redefine the social function of art. "It was Malraux who observed that the origins of modern art coincided with the artist's repudiation of bourgeois culture" (Poggioli, 2024: 161). Thereby, "The experimental aspect of avant-garde art is manifested not only in depth, within the limits of a given art form, but also in breadth, in the attempts to enlarge the frontiers of that form or to invade other territories, to the advantage of one or both of the arts (Poggioli, 2024:175). The avant-garde represents a historical rupture that seeks to dissolve the boundary between art and life. "For an art that has been reintegrated into the praxis of life, not even the absence of a social purpose can be indicated, as was still possible in Aestheticism. When art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art's purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end" (Bürger, 2019: 102). Brâncuși's artistic practice occupies the intersection of these two approaches. His works not only introduce new formal possibilities but also challenge established assumptions about what sculpture is, how it is created, and how it should be experienced.

One of the clearest manifestations of Brâncuși's avant-garde character and pioneering spirit was his decision to leave Auguste Rodin's studio. Consequently, the statement that has become one of the most frequently cited remarks in the history of art, "Rien ne pousse à l'ombre des grands arbres." (Nothing grows in the shade of great trees.) (Benhamou, 2011: 1), symbolizes not only Brâncuși's pursuit of artistic independence but also the emergence of the new aesthetic orientation of modern art and the artist's symbolic journey toward the avant-garde. "In 1907 he began working in the studio of Auguste Rodin, only to leave after a month. Reflecting on this time later, Brancusi said, "These were the hardest years of all, the years of research when I had to find my own path; I left Rodin; I must've angered him but I had to discover my own way" (MoMA, 2026: 2). Therefore, Brâncuși's departure from Rodin should be understood not merely as an artist's separation from his master, but as the construction of a new intellectual and conceptual understanding of art.

At the core of this rupture lies Brâncuși's conception of form. The artist never embraced the characterization of his works as "abstract"; rather, he consistently maintained that his aim was not to simplify outward appearances but to reveal the essence of being. This approach demonstrates that modernist abstraction constituted a philosophical inquiry into the ontological reality of the object. Brâncuși's recurring motifs - such as birds, fish, human heads, and the kiss - are not literal representations of nature but visual expressions of their timeless and universal essence. Together with this innovative artistic vision, Brâncuși also fundamentally transformed the way sculpture was presented and experienced. In this respect, his approach may be regarded as a significant precursor to later developments in environmental sculpture, Minimal Art, and site-specific art. Brâncuși's avant-garde vision made it possible to rethink the relationship between art and space, establishing one of the key theoretical references for the subsequent development of public art and site-specific artistic practices.

Similarly, Brâncuși's studio was not merely a place of artistic production but a work of art in its own right, conceived as an artistic composition. By continually

rearranging the placement of his sculptures, the artist reconfigured the visual relationships among them, making elements such as light, space, and perspective integral components of the creative process. In the studio, conceived as a large-scale installation, “Brancusi considered the relationship between sculptures and the space they occupied to be of crucial importance. In the twenties the studio became an exhibition space for his work, and a work of art in its own right: a body consisting of cells that all generated each other. This experience of looking from within the studio at each of the sculptures, thus perceiving a group of spatial relationships, led Brancusi to revise their positions every day to achieve the unity he felt most apposite” (Centre Pompidou, 2026:3-4). In this context, Brâncuși’s studio may be interpreted as one of the avant-garde precursors of spatial curatorial thinking and, consequently, of contemporary installation art. Moreover, the studio also functioned as a multilayered site of artistic production where Brâncuși photographed his works, documented their modes of display through photographs and films, and consciously recorded his own artistic legacy (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1. Wayne Miller, Sculptor Constantin Brâncuși in his studio. Paris. France 1946.

© Wayne Miller, Magnum Photos (2026), <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/constantin-brancusi-studio-sculpture-icon-wayne-miller/>

Figure 2. Constantin Brâncuși, Night View of the Studio, 1929. © Succession Brancusi.

Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Dist. RMN-GP, (2026), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/offre-aux-professionnels/enseignants/dossiers-ressources-sur-lart/constantin-brancusi/brancusis-studio>



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Another noteworthy dimension of Brâncuși's avant-garde approach is his relationship with photography. The artist went beyond using photography merely as a means of documenting his works, employing it instead as a creative medium that redefined the perception of sculpture. Brâncuși's photographs are distinguished by carefully arranged lighting, varied viewpoints, and meticulously composed compositions. In this way, photography became an autonomous mode of expression that complemented Brâncuși's aesthetic thought. This approach makes it necessary today to consider Brâncuși's artistic practice from a broader conceptual perspective, together with his photographic archive and the spatial organization of his studio (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Figure 3. Constantin Brâncuși, Untitled (self-portrait in the studio with Endless Columns I, III, III and Fish), 1933-34. © Succession Brancusi - (ARS) 2018: MoMA (2026), <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57671>

Figure 4. Constantin Brâncuși, Untitled (Endless Column), 1937. © Succession Brancusi - (ARS) 2018: MoMA (2026), <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57665>



Brâncuși's influence extended far beyond his own lifetime and became a defining force across different disciplines of Twentieth-Century art. The traces of his aesthetic legacy can be identified in a wide range of artistic developments, from the evolution of abstract sculpture and Minimalism to environmental art, conceptual art, and site-specific installations. Donald Judd's emphasis on the simplicity of the object, Richard Serra's focus on the physical presence of material, and Isamu Noguchi's reconsideration of the relationship between sculpture and landscape, as well as public art, each represent, in different ways, a continuation of the aesthetic discourse initiated by Brâncuși. Therefore, Brâncuși's pioneering position within modern art lies not only in his formal innovations

but also in his redefinition of the design of art, its spatiality, and its intellectual dimension simultaneously.

In this context, Brâncuși is one of the leading representatives of the avant-garde in the history of modern art. Moreover, he is one of the founding figures who transformed the ontological boundaries of art. His approach, which expanded sculpture from representation to essence, from object to thought, and from the individual artwork to spatial experience, profoundly influenced not only Twentieth-Century modernism but also the conceptual orientations of contemporary art. This aesthetic legacy subsequently provided the foundation for the reinterpretation of Brâncuși within the contexts of national identity, cultural memory, and cultural heritage. In this sense, Brâncuși's artistic journey ultimately led him to the most radical and transformative realm of avant-garde art.

Brâncuși and Cultural Heritage

In Article 1 of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted on 16 November 1972, UNESCO defines cultural heritage as follows: "Cultural heritage encompasses tangible cultural properties transmitted from the past to the present that possess Outstanding Universal Value from the perspectives of history, art, science, aesthetics, or social memory. This heritage is defined under three principal categories: monuments, groups of buildings, and sites. These categories encompass cultural properties of Outstanding Universal Value from historical, artistic, scientific, aesthetic, and anthropological perspectives" (UNESCO, 1972: 2). Furthermore, through the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003, UNESCO also addressed the concept of cultural heritage in terms of its intangible dimension. In brief: "Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts" (UNESCO, 2003:4-5). In this context, cultural heritage is understood as representing the shared memory, identity, and historical continuity of humanity, while its protection, documentation, and transmission to future generations are recognized as a universal responsibility. Accordingly, this framework provides a fundamental theoretical basis for understanding the inscription of the Târgu Jiu Ensemble on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2024.

Constantin Brâncuși's cultural legacy is a phenomenon that can be understood within the contexts of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. His artistic production not only represents the formal transformation of modern art but also constitutes a multilayered field of heritage in which cultural memory and historical continuity are continuously reconstructed. Beyond their aesthetic value, Brâncuși's works have been repeatedly reinterpreted across different historical periods, attributed with different meanings in different political contexts, and have gradually evolved into cultural references of both national and universal significance. In this respect, Brâncuși's work constitutes one of the major fields of inquiry within cultural heritage studies.

The search for essence, universality, and timelessness that lies at the core of Brâncuși's artistic practice plays a decisive role in the recognition of his works as cultural heritage. The artist never sought to appeal to the aesthetic preferences of a particular period; rather, he aimed to reveal the enduring essence underlying the changing appearances of nature. Formal simplicity, recurring forms, and his respect for the intrinsic qualities of materials reflect an effort to establish a lasting plastic language capable of

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transcending the effects of time. For this reason, Brâncuși's works have become living references of cultural memory that, rather than belonging to a specific historical period, can be continuously reinterpreted and endowed with new meanings by successive generations.

In this context, Brâncuși's works, photographs, films, spaces, and avant-garde vision all constitute integral components of his cultural legacy. "It is no coincidence that space assumes a central role in the 'culture of remembrance' and in the techniques through which social and cultural memory are reinforced. For this phenomenon, we may use the concept of 'sites of memory'" (Assmann, 2022: 68). Accordingly, Brâncuși established sites of memory through both his public art installations and the legacy of his studio.

Another aspect that makes Brâncuși's cultural legacy distinctive is his ability to bring together two approaches that initially appear to be contradictory: modernism and cultural heritage. Modernist avant-garde is founded upon an artistic vision that questions established aesthetic norms, challenges the authority of tradition, and constantly seeks the new. Cultural heritage, by contrast, is based on the preservation of cultural values inherited from the past and their transmission to future generations. Brâncuși's art offers a unique example at the intersection of these two approaches. The radical aesthetic position he developed in opposition to the tradition of academic art gradually evolved into a universal cultural value worthy of preservation. Thus, the modernist ideal of innovation and the principle of continuity inherent in cultural heritage converge within the same artistic practice. Consequently, this has established Brâncuși as one of the key points of reference in discussions on the relationship between artistic practice and cultural heritage.

The contemporary significance of Brâncuși's cultural legacy is also directly related to Romania's changing political history. Although Brâncuși was internationally recognized during his lifetime as one of the leading figures of modernism, following his death his legacy was interpreted in different ways within the context of Romania's ideological transformations. Particularly during the early years of the communist regime, modernist abstraction was regarded as incompatible with the collectivist and ideological artistic principles of Socialist Realism, and consequently Brâncuși's art remained at a distance from official cultural policies. "Between 1947 and 1965, Brâncuși's work was strongly rejected by the Romanian communist authorities due to their aversion to modernism, formalism and Western art" (Ghiu, 2019: 138). Beginning in the 1960s, however, as part of Romania's efforts to enhance its international cultural visibility, Brâncuși was once again promoted as a national cultural figure, and a new relationship was established between his universal identity as a representative of modernism and Romania's cultural identity. Especially, "The situation began to change in 1965 when Nicolae Ceaușescu took over the position of general secretary of the Romanian Workers' Party. There, he intended to restore nationalism, to recuperate local traditions, and to return to European values. In 1967, a big international colloquium dedicated to the artist took place in Bucharest, marking his official acceptance by the Romanian state" (Ghiu, 2019: 138). Following 1989, this process became even more pronounced. Brâncuși was repositioned both as one of the pioneers of modern art and as one of the symbolic figures representing Romania's cultural memory on an international scale.

Brâncuși's studio, the way he conceived it, and his approach to the display of his works also constitute integral components of his cultural legacy. For Brâncuși, the studio was not merely a physical space of artistic production but a holistic work of art in which sculptures, pedestals, photographs, tools, and spatial arrangements were brought into dialogue with one another. This holistic vision became even more evident through the

decisions he made during the final years of his life. Having acquired French citizenship, Brâncuși stipulated in his will, dated 12 April 1956, that his studio at Impasse Ronsin, together with all the works, pedestals, furniture, tools, drawings, photographic archive, and personal library it contained, be bequeathed to the French state. In his will, he requested not only the preservation of the collection but also the reconstruction of the studio according to its original arrangement (Centre Pompidou, 2026). In this way, Brâncuși sought to transmit his works to future generations not as independent art objects, but as inseparable components of an integrated whole.

In this context, Brâncuși's studio in Paris has become one of the most significant examples in the history of modern art of an artist's studio being recognized and preserved as cultural heritage in its own right.

The Târgu Jiu Ensemble as a Site of Cultural Memory

The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu is Constantin Brâncuși's most comprehensive public art project. The ensemble represents one of the most significant examples at the intersection of modern art, environmental design, public space, and cultural memory. Located in the city of Târgu Jiu, the administrative centre of Gorj County in southwestern Romania, the monumental ensemble is arranged along a conceptual axis extending approximately 1,500 metres along the Jiu River. As UNESCO also emphasizes, "this axis extends along the Avenue of Heroes, with the existing Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul forming the midpoint of the composition" (2024:56-57). The monumental ensemble consists of four parts: the Table of Silence (1938), the Alley of Chairs (1938), the Gate of the Kiss (1938), and the Endless Column (1938). However, these works were conceived not as independent monuments but as successive stages within an integrated spatial narrative extending from West to East.

Figure 4. Constantin Brâncuși, Gate of the Kiss, 1938. The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu, Târgu Jiu, Romania. UNESCO (2026), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1473/gallery/>



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The origin of the ensemble is rooted in the idea of creating a permanent commemorative space dedicated to the Romanian soldiers, police officers, and civilians who lost their lives defending Târgu Jiu during the First World War. Commissioned by the National League of Gorj Women, led by Arethia Tătărescu, the wife of Prime Minister Gheorghe Tătărescu, the project was completed between 1937 and 1938 and opened to the public in the same year. Brâncuși's proposal for the park represented an approach that went far beyond the conventional concept of a war memorial. Rather than creating a single sculpture or a vertical monument, the artist conceived the commemorative experience as a spatial sequence unfolding across the entire city (Ghiu, 2019; Marcoci, 1995). In this way, the visitor becomes an active participant who walks, pauses, reflects, and moves through a sequence of spatial experiences. In this respect, the Târgu Jiu Ensemble stands as one of the pioneering examples that transformed the idea of the monument from the scale of an individual object to that of the urban landscape.

This approach demonstrates how Brâncuși redefined his conception of modern art through its relationship with public space and public art. Whereas traditional public monuments were inserted into the urban fabric as autonomous objects representing a particular event or individual, Brâncuși proposed the opposite, marking a turning point in the history of monumental sculpture and public art. As emphasized in UNESCO's 2024 World Heritage decision, the Târgu Jiu Ensemble is Brâncuși's only monumental work realized on a large public scale. The decision further states that, rather than placing the monument within the city, Brâncuși conceived the city itself as a functional component of the monument, as expressed in the following statement: "It is the seminal creation and the sole largescale public work by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși who, instead of placing the monument in the city, placed the city as a functional element in the centre of the monument" (UNESCO, 2024: 57). This statement also reveals the fundamental basis of Brâncuși's conception of public art. Here, the city is not a neutral setting that merely serves as the background for the sculptures, but an integral component of the work and an active part of the aesthetic experience. For Brâncuși, public space embodies a conception of place that completes the meaning of art. Indeed, UNESCO explicitly states in its decision that the Târgu Jiu Ensemble represents a turning point in the history of Twentieth-Century monumental sculpture and public art and played a decisive role in the development of both. Furthermore, public space is transformed into a ritual experience through which collective memory is reactivated. Brâncuși's conception of public art lies in his integration of the landscape, the walking route, the visual axes, and the everyday life of the city as inseparable components of the overall composition. For this reason, Târgu Jiu may be interpreted as a holistic environmental design proposal in which the city as a whole is transformed into part of the artistic experience. The idea of dissolving the boundaries between art and everyday life, which today constitutes one of the fundamental aims of public art, found a remarkably early embodiment in Brâncuși's project.

This approach is also directly related to one of the fundamental ideals of the avant-garde: the dissolution of the boundary between art and life. Rather than regarding art as an exclusive field of production confined to museums and galleries, the avant-garde sought to make it an active component of everyday life. Brâncuși's conception of public space in Târgu Jiu may likewise be understood as one of the spatial manifestations of this idea. Here, art is not a monumental object kept at a distance from the viewer. Instead, it becomes a lived environment - one that is walked through, experienced, and encountered repeatedly in the course of everyday life. In this way, public space is transformed into a cultural memory in which art is continuously re-experienced as part of everyday life. As

Halbwachs (2023:164-165) states, “To better understand the influence that different parts of a city gradually exert on the groups that adapt themselves to them, one must observe, in a modern city, especially its old districts, or those relatively distant neighborhoods that resemble small enclosed worlds whose inhabitants leave only to go to work, as well as the newer parts of the city, particularly the streets and boulevards inhabited by workers. For there is a continual exchange between the street and the place of dwelling.” In this context, the Târgu Jiu Ensemble provides a continuous space of cultural exchange among the city’s inhabitants, historical and cultural narratives, national heroes, and the nation’s cultural heritage.

Figure 5. Constantin Brâncuși, Table of Silence and the Avenue of Heroes, 1938. The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu, Târgu Jiu, Romania. UNESCO (2026), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1473/gallery/>



The Târgu Jiu Ensemble anticipated many later developments in public art while sharing significant common ground with subsequent public art practices. In this context, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville’s public installation “Take a Break... Out to Lunch... Back to Work...” (1995, Cranston, Rhode Island, USA) is a remarkable example (Figure 6). The artwork likewise invites users to pause, reflect, and establish new relationships with their surroundings within the ordinary flow of everyday life. de Bretteville’s installation is comprised of eight engraved concrete chair-like structures and one star shaped engraved concrete table-like piece with movable parts” (Van Assen, 2026). Both artists conceive public space not merely as a physical environment but as a cultural arena in which social interaction and shared experience are produced. While Brâncuși’s approach is grounded in monumental and ritual forms of memory, de Bretteville’s work redefines public experience through the practices of everyday life and democratic social participation, positioning public space as a social platform that fosters encounter, democratic participation, and public dialogue. The table and chair forms are particularly striking in

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both works. From a conceptual and semiotic perspective, however, these elements are far more than functional industrial objects associated with everyday life.

Throughout the history of art, the table and chair have functioned as powerful spatial signifiers representing communication, togetherness, shared experience, encounter, dialogue, and the construction of collective memory. The table both brings people together and separates them from one another. As Arendt states: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (1998:52). These objects not only organize the relationship between the human body and space but also define threshold spaces in which social relationships become visible. Accordingly, both artists transform the table and chair from purely functional objects into powerful visual metaphors that make social interaction, collective experience, dialogue, and cultural memory visible within public space. Despite their shared formal vocabulary, however, the meanings the two artists attribute to public space and the aesthetic approaches they develop differ significantly. Brâncuși’s approach is grounded primarily in history, memory, ritual, and timelessness, whereas de Bretteville’s interpretation focuses on everyday life, participation, dialogue, and participatory democracy. Despite the approximately sixty-year interval separating their works, both approaches share a common objective: they transform public space by making the user an active component of the artwork. In this respect, Brâncuși’s Târgu Jiu Ensemble stands as one of the important precursors to many of the approaches later developed in contemporary public art.

Figure 6. Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, *Take A Break... Out To Lunch... Back To Work*, 1995. Rhode Island Dept. of Labor and Training Center Cranston, Rhode Island, USA.

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The significance of Târgu Jiu in terms of cultural memory emerges precisely at this point. Much like Pierre Nora's concept of "*lieux de mémoire*" (sites of memory), the ensemble is not merely a monument representing the past but a living public environment in which memory is continuously reproduced. Here, people do not simply observe the artworks; they walk through the site, hold ceremonies, participate in commemorative events, and carry out their everyday lives. In this way, Brâncuși's conception of public art becomes a cultural practice through which collective memory is continually produced.

The international recognition of Brâncuși's Târgu Jiu Ensemble as cultural heritage was achieved through a historical process spanning nearly ninety years. Romania submitted the first nomination dossier to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2015; however, following ICOMOS's evaluation, the dossier was referred for further revision and development. After more comprehensive processes of conservation, management, and scholarly assessment, the revised nomination dossier was approved at the 46th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, held in New Delhi, India, in 2024, and the Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu was inscribed on the World Heritage List under cultural criteria (i) and (ii) (UNESCO, 2024).

In UNESCO's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value, the Târgu Jiu Ensemble is identified as a transformative turning point in the development of Twentieth-Century art. The decision states that "The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu represents a turning point in the evolution of the 20th century history of monumental art and commemorative architecture" (UNESCO, 2024: 57), emphasizing in particular that the integration of abstract monumental sculpture, landscape design, engineering, and urban space within a single composition exerted a decisive influence on the development of the modern conception of public art. According to UNESCO (2024: 57), "the Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu is a creative masterpiece of the 20th-century monumental art which played a key role in the dissemination of site-specific art, installation, landscape and public art."

The following statement in UNESCO's decision is particularly significant for understanding Brâncuși's artistic approach: "For Constantin Brâncuși, sculpture is the language of content rather than the language of forms, and the Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu is the synthesis of his entire oeuvre" (UNESCO, 2024: 57-58).

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Figure 7. Constantin Brâncuși, Endless Column, 1938. The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu, Târgu Jiu, Romania. UNESCO (2026), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1473/gallery/>



The contemporary significance of Târgu Jiu has also evolved alongside Romania's political transformations. The Târgu Jiu Ensemble is no longer merely a national monument; it has become a symbolic heritage site representing Romania's modern cultural identity on an international scale. Its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List stands as the most visible and significant outcome of this transformation. Thus, while the same public space has been subject to different ideological interpretations across successive political periods, it has today become one of the representative spaces of democratic public culture, cultural pluralism, and the shared heritage of humanity.

Epilogue

Brâncuși's artistic legacy constitutes a dynamic field that is continually produced and reinterpreted at the intersection of modernist aesthetics and cultural heritage politics. In the Post-Communist period, his art has been reappropriated as a central component of Romania's cultural heritage policies, becoming both a national symbol and a strategic reference point for global modernist art.

Brâncuși's contemporary significance within the field of cultural heritage stems from his position as an Eastern European artist at the core of Western modernism and from his symbolic role in the international redefinition of Romania's national cultural heritage. In this context, Brâncuși emerges as a critical figure through whom national identity is articulated within international discourses on cultural value and heritage.

The Brâncuși Monumental Ensemble of Târgu Jiu represents a compelling example of this dynamic, transforming public space into a structured site of memory. The ensemble functions not only as a modernist artwork but also as a cultural space where

collective memory, national commemoration, and homage converge. Over time, it ceases to be merely an aesthetic object and becomes a memory infrastructure embedded within the urban fabric and symbolic landscape of Romanian cultural heritage.

Ultimately, Brâncuși stands at the ideological intersection of modernist abstraction, cultural memory, and heritage politics, continuously re-signified within both national and transnational narratives.

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