MONUMENTS IN MINIMALISM: SAFELY UNIVERSAL

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I. Introduction

Let me begin with an image. A week after the events of September 11th, the New York arts community, just as the rest of the nation, gradually began the tremendous task of simply returning to everyday work. Theaters on Broadway reopened, the New York City Opera performed, the Met resumed its season. Each venue marked the return to work in its own ways—say, by offering free performances or with the singing of “God Bless America”—but almost universally present at these performances, as it was at thousands of high school football games, school plays, even the World Series, was a single gesture: a moment of silence.

Elegant, restrained and austere, a simple moment of silence can be a profound and powerful act that frames emotions often too deep and complex to be handled appropriately with words. Authors as diverse as Shakespeare and Wittgenstein have suggested that silence is all we have when dealing with the deepest mysteries in life. Composer John Cage’s most famous musical work is structured of three movements totaling four minutes and thirty-three seconds—of silence. Cage claimed that his intent was to provide a frame of time for individuals to focus on the natural sounds of life; thus, the normally intrusive ringing of a cellular phone in a concert hall would be just as much part of the performance of 4’33” as the gentle whir of an air conditioning system. Attending a performance of this composition reminds observers in a dramatic way that silence is never really so silent—it is full of aural content. In the same way, a moment of silence observed at Yankee Stadium is not as nearly as simple and benign as it may initially appear.

The moment of silence has unquestionably become our contemporary standard for a public remembrance of tragedy or death. It is tasteful, unobjectionable, simple (it certainly does not take much involved preparation), and appropriate at most any event. It has replaced public oration, eulogy and prayer in our offering of a small memorial of remembrance for the dead, and in many ways it is a perfect statement for our politically correct times. But the moment of silence is part of a more pervasive trend for our public memorials to employ an aesthetic of Minimalism in their design.

This paper seeks to determine the reasons why an aesthetic of Minimalism has become so dominant in shaping public acts of remembrance over the last generation. After examining some basic principles of Minimalist design, and why such features work so well in public art and memorials, I hope to offer a critique of the explicit and implicit political and social motivations that often drive these large projects. However, in the end it will be shown that Minimalism has an amazing ability to preserve its aesthetic integrity as a form of public art, and it may still offer us the best solution when faced with our current daunting task of constructing an appropriate memorial to remember the dead from the 9/11 tragedies.

II. MINIMALIST BACKGROUND
The Columbia philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, writing in an article for the Nation magazine on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, makes a useful distinction between a public monument and a public memorial. He states that a monument celebrates a victory, whereas a memorial mourns the dead. Thus, we have the Washington Monument confidently thrusting into the sky counterbalanced by the Lincoln memorial, a low-lying Greek temple of hushed reflection.\(^1\)

The act of remembering a tragedy publicly has become a necessary component of contemporary life. From the Holocaust, to the Vietnam War, to the bombing at Oklahoma City, we have become aware not only of the need to recognize the emotional impact of our tragedies, but we have also been more quick to identify these tragedies as historically important. We are moved forward to ever quickening memorial construction by both the charge never to forget our dead, as well as to reinforce our own pragmatic identity as resilient survivors. (Consider for example that the Lincoln Memorial was not authorized until 1911, and not completed until 1922.) We have also become, especially in the United States, much more aware of ourselves as a culturally mixed nation where the necessary and democratic claims of respecting diversity have filtered into all aspects of contemporary life. Thus, when faced with the task of creating a public memorial, designers and politicians must face the competing demands of the general public, the families of the deceased, as well as art experts—all of whom have legitimate claims to feeling a deep sense of ownership in the memorial. So the urgent question becomes: What type of memorial design will best fulfill our needs?

Writing for the New York Times this past January, Michael Kimmelman provides an excellent brief history of the use of Minimalism in recent memorial design. He rightfully states that “The purpose of a memorial is to get people talking, so that the memories being honored are kept alive after the events memorialized pass into history.”\(^2\) In the most easily recognized case of a successful contemporary memorial, Maya Lin’s 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., this purpose has been achieved in particularly dramatic fashion. Situated between Washington’s obelisk and Lincoln’s temple, Lin’s memorial is a refined exercise in restraint and provides us with a useful primer on the basic elements of Minimalist design.

Lin’s famous memorial design grows out of the artistic and theoretical work of first-generation Minimalist artists in the 1960’s such Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre, along with the earlier antecedent work of painters such as Barnett Newman and Frank Stella. Minimalism focused on creating a kind of middle ground between that of painting and sculpture, creating three-dimensional objects which were often projected out from walls or brought directly into the viewer’s space—namely sculpture which was brought down off the pedestal. The pieces tended to have tight geometric structures, and usually possessed either a monochrome or highly reductive color scheme. Additionally, the use of repetition became a hallmark of Minimalist design—grids, stacks, and linear patterns were used to full artistic effect.

A quick glance at the Vietnam memorial reveals the implementation of these basic Minimalist principles. The structure is composed of two highly polished mirror-like black granite walls which ascend, and descend, from single points to meet at a gently-angled central hinge over ten feet high. The only adornment on the walls is, of course, the names of all the U.S. soldiers who either died in the Vietnam War, or were still listed as missing in action at the time of the memorial’s construction. Ordered by year of death, the names are presented all in identical
font, in tight grid-like formation, which intensifies the sense of stillness already brought by the
black background.

By combining elements of repetition, reduction, and geometry with the natural intensity and
specificity of a list of names, Lin has created the most visited, and perhaps most beloved,
memorial on the Washington Mall. However, the idea of listing the dead has antecedents
stretching back much further than the 1960’s. In many small towns and big cities throughout
the U.S., monuments and memorials to the Civil War stand with the names of local soldiers
who died in battle. Even Herodotus tells of an ancient battle in which an entire battalion of
three hundred Spartans were killed fighting with a unified Greek army against King Xerxes at
Thermopylae. Their heroism was so revered that soon after the battle, stone pillars were
erected on which all three hundred names were inscribed.

Similarly, the beauty and effectiveness of the actual design principles espoused by the
contemporary Minimalists were fully recognized by the Greeks as well. Xenophon, the other
major chronicler of the life of Socrates, has one of his interlocutors in the Oeconomicus wax
poetically about simple good housekeeping.

> How beautiful it looks when shoes are arranged in rows, each in its proper
place, how beautiful to see all kinds of clothing properly sorted out, each kind
in its own proper place, how beautiful bed-linens, bronze pots, table ware…
even pots appear graceful when they are arranged in a discriminating manner.
> It follows from this that all other things somehow appear more beautiful when
they are in regular arrangement.

It is clear from the statement above that the essential ideology of Minimalism has long been
recognized to be a basis for beauty which provides a context of austerity, derived from its
elemental form and abstract nature, that appeals not only to human rationalism, but also incites
great emotional intensity.

III. CRITIQUE

Even though it is clear that a Minimalist aesthetic can be used to great effect in the design of
public memorials, the ascendancy of this artistic vision over the past twenty years raises deeper
questions regarding the reasons why Minimalism has become so dominant in the public realm.
A simple overview of corporate art collections, for example, reveals an overwhelming
preponderance of Minimalist works. They have become the blue-chip standard of corporate
collecting—they are guaranteed to increase in value, they are easily accessible and appreciable
even to a public not grounded in art history, their often large scale is metaphorically in synch
with the expression of power, and because of their purposeful lack of narrative content, they
offend practically no one. The only major offense that Minimalist works usually provoke from
skeptical onlookers is aesthetic in nature—simply that they are too easily constructed. (Why
didn’t I think to paint a white stripe on a red canvas and laugh all the way to the bank à la
Barnett Newman?)

For the most part, though, Minimalist artists are not provocateurs. They are not in the game of
crafting a breast for the Virgin Mary out of elephant dung, or constructing a Nazi death camp
out of Legos (to recall two recent New York controversies). Rather, Minimalist works such as
the jewel-like stacked boxes of Donald Judd, or the florescent light constructions of Dan Flavin, have no narrative content whatsoever. Depending upon one’s interpretation, these works may have either purely visual content (based say on geometric relations or the play of light and shadow), or they provide a context for deeper feelings of meditation and reflection (though the actual content of these feelings is certainly vague and inherently personal).

In spite of the fact that Minimalist artists may have the intent of leaving out traditionally objectionable material from their work, this is not to say that the tradition of Minimalism has been completely free of controversy. At his first major exhibition in England, American artist Carl Andre—whose seminal work often consisted of floor-bound rectilinear arrangements of construction bricks and metal squares—was lambasted by the British tabloid press as an artistic con man, much the way that the sometime Minimalist British artist Damien Hirst was mocked earlier this year by the American newspaper columnist Dave Barry. In his weekly syndicated column, Barry curmudgeonly identified Hirst’s groupings of piles of garbage at a recent gallery show as the absolute worst kind of artistic charlatanism. Additionally, we only have to remember back to the mid-1980s for another chilly public reception to a major Minimalist work—Richard Serra’s “Tilted Arc.” The piece was composed of a single enormous gently-arcing sheet of rusted Corten steel, and was installed in the plaza of a federal office building in downtown Manhattan. Many of the office workers in the building absolutely hated the work, claiming that it ruined the plaza to morbid effect and created additional hassle by blocking natural pathways to the building. Even some brave art critics such as Danto maintained that its removal would, in fact, be for the best. He claimed that while the work may possess artistic merit, and even beauty in itself, it is simply too antagonistic to work as public art. After a lengthy and vicious court battle, the work was removed in 1989.

But, perhaps the most relevant controversy for our present concern is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Today the memorial is beloved largely because of the uniquely personal experience which individuals have there, and this personal vision is a direct result of having to read so much into the work; that is, there is no explicit political, religious, or nationalistic narrative to direct our experience. However, when it was unveiled in 1982, many right-wing politicians derided the work as a subverted liberal ideology. It was said that the black granite walls represented shame, failure, and humiliation, and the experience of descending its ramps was metaphorically too close to a descent into hell. Moreover, these critics, along with several prominent conservative veterans groups, maintained that a simple list of names was not properly heroic, and that only traditionally representational art could do our soldiers justice. As a political consolation, a grouping of three realistic looking (and ethnically diversified) U.S. soldiers, designed by the Washington D.C. sculptor Frederick Hart, was installed near the main wall two years later. Ironically, even though Hart was commissioned largely through the efforts of conservative political interests, he himself was very active in the anti-war effort during the Vietnam conflict. Additionally, in 1993, a third piece was added to the memorial puzzle, when a realistic bronze grouping of three uniformed women holding a wounded male soldier was installed near the other sculptures. The addition of realistic figures to the Vietnam memorial does not necessarily constitute a perversion of an originally pure artistic vision; rather, it is simply illustrative of the complexities faced by a memorial designer, and it is also indicative of the possible aesthetic and emotional limitations which a Minimalist framework inherently possesses when brought to the public arena.

IV. MONUMENTS TO MINIMALISM
At the height of the Minimalist movement in the late 1960’s, the critic Michael Fried leveled an influential attack against what he referred to as “literalist” art in his essay “Art and Objecthood.” In the essay, Fried argues that the movement is appropriately literalist because nothing is being represented, or put into a series of special relationships, as are colors and lines in the pictorial space of a painting—even the most abstract painting. Instead, Minimalist artists seek to emphasize the literal shape of a three dimensional object by putting the observer into its immediate physical space—for example, walking around a six-foot steel cube by Tony Smith. Fried insists that this “espousal of objecthood” amounts to a justification of a new kind of degenerate theatricality; and this sense of the theatrical, or even of staging—that is, placing the viewer into direct confrontation with the work—reduces the rarefied and disinterested aesthetic experience accompanying the best painting and sculpture of the past to a kind of cheap and mundane literal experience of present works.

What Fried could scarcely notice though in 1967 is that perhaps this very feature of theatricality may account for the already acknowledged deep emotional effectiveness of minimalist works, and likewise may explain just why Minimalist design has been so successful for public memorials. For, in a memorial which remembers the dead, dramatic emotional significance is precisely what makes a work relevant and successful. (For example, aesthetic experience can hardly account for the fact that the National Park Service maintains an enormous warehouse which holds the entire collection of mementos left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—from baby pictures and unsent love letters to a full sized Harley Davidson motorcycle. The Louvre has hardly brought in such a personalized bounty from its treasures.) Moreover, Fried’s critique of Minimalism smacks of the kind of narrow-minded Modernist elitism that eventually made critic Clement Greenberg simply irrelevant to the dynamically evolving artworld around him.

This philosophical game of determining the proper limits of art—and thus proposing some kind of definition accounting for the entire extension of the term—continually wrought with trouble. Firstly, the world of art is in constant flux from the application of new techniques and technologies, and from the constant pressure of curators, magazine editors, gallery owners, as well as artists themselves to find the next big thing. And secondly, artists are inherently resistive to the aesthetic prescriptions of ivory tower critics.

Even though a fair critique can be leveled against the motives for creating our important public memorials in a Minimalist framework, it nevertheless must be noted that an unintended outcome of this tendency is the fact that these memorials now have an interesting double meaning. That is, on the one hand they shape a space and create an environment for remembering and mourning the dead, but on the other hand, memorials like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Oklahoma City Memorial have in fact become monuments—monuments to the art historical victory of Minimalism as a movement of public art.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has set a deadline date of September 11, 2003 for determining the design of the eventual 9/11 memorial in lower Manhattan. But, already in both the discourse surrounding this decision and the actual construction of the most significant and successful 9/11 memorial to date—the Twin Towers of Light—one can easily see that the
vocabulary of Minimalism is highly prevalent. The Twin Towers of Light itself is a paradigm of Minimalist aesthetics. Dedicated on March 11, 2002—the six-month anniversary of the attack—the memorial was composed simply of two 50 square-foot banks of blue searchlights, each holding 44 high powered bulbs. The banks produced parallel columns of light that stretched much higher into the sky than the original Trade Center towers and remained in place for a month’s time. Initially conceived by its design team to project one column of red and one of blue, the colors were in time simplified to a monochrome palate in recognition of the many international victims of the tragedy. From a critical perspective, the decision to project two identically colored columns is a testament to the reductive power of Minimalism: not only did it produce a work of art aesthetically more austere, powerful and unified than parallel columns of differing hues, but this decision was a prime example of how Minimalism can provide a political solution to a sensitive work of public remembrance. Additionally, further symbolism in the Twin Towers of Light, also arising from its Minimalist framework, was readily apparent both to critics and the general public; that is, being immaterial, these towers of light were in fact much more resistant to attack than the original glass and steel towers—a plane could fly right through them.

Architects, designers and artists from around the world are now in the process of submitting proposals for the rebuilding of the ground zero sight and the specific task of constructing a permanent 9/11 memorial. Through this process, the public has been introduced to a new term: the footprints of the Twin Towers. These footprints consist of the actual ground space once occupied by the two buildings. As more designs come forward, as in the recently published book A New World Trade Center as well as in the bold edition of the New York Times Magazine from September 8th of this year (which invited some of the world’s most esteemed architects to rethink entire lower Manhattan), considerations of these footprints have ever greater relevance. Many designs for rebuilding the ground zero area leave the footprints untouched—creating a specifically demarcated zone of sacred ground. In fact, the ground zero sight is already a kind a secularized sacred space, and literal pilgrimage site, for individuals from all over the country and world. And this call for an aesthetics-of-absence in the treatment of these footprints once again betrays the appropriateness and effectiveness of Minimalism in memorial design. Maya Lin’s proposal for the Times Magazine, for example, suggests the construction of two unadorned square reflecting pools covering the footprint areas. Likewise, but in a more whimsical fashion, architect Nathan McRae’s design contribution to the New World Trade Center book is entitled Preservation of Loss. He proposes the construction of a rectangular shaped skyscraper directly over the site of the footprints, but instead of destroying access to the footprints, they would be untouched, creating two massive square columns within the building itself.

Perhaps the most poignant memorial though to the 9/11 tragedy has already been created by a person who is neither an artist nor politician. David Cohen is the owner of the Chelsea Jeans store, a clothing store located only a block from the former World Trade Center. As reported by Michael Kimmelman in a separate article for the New York Times, the front windows of Cohen’s store were smashed on the day of the attack and the gray dust from the two falling towers filled the store, covering all his merchandise. Most of the clothing was ruined, but Cohen decided to enclose the front corner of his store in glass, and preserve the neatly folded piles of blue jeans, sweaters, and t-shirts as they were left after the attacks. The memorial recalls the quiet and orderly beauty that Xenophon spoke of almost 2500 years ago—yet, in a
horribly immediate manner. There is no political message, no moral lesson, no religious comfort—there is only dramatic perfection beneath a gentle layer of dust.

So perhaps we should gather together at this conference and hold a moment of silence for the ornate, the rococo, and all the moral lessons that the art of the past has tried to teach. Maybe the best we can do is simply to provide a framework for remembrance rather than offer an interpretation of our tragedies. Obviously, there is no perfect design solution for our memorials, but an aesthetic of Minimalism can provide an openness of personal and aesthetic experience that can certainly be a foundation of broad democratic values.

NOTES

1. This article, along with other writings of art criticism from the Nation, are collected in Danto’s book State of the Art (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987).
6. See Kimmelman’s “Art is Ashes, Drama in Dust: Saving Serendipity’s Memorial,” in The New York Times, 8/19/02
The Endless Column by Constantin Brâncuși is perhaps the best-known feature of a war memorial complex the sculptor designed in 1935-1938 for the town of Tirgu Jiu high in the Carpathian mountains of western Romania. The column has recently been restored. It does not, however, stand alone. The Endless Column is part of a monumental architectonic program with richly mythic features.

On October 14, 1916, at the height of the Great War, the town was successfully defended by a rag-tag lot of “old people, women, boy scouts, and children,” as a memorial plaque on the bridge crossing the river Jiu declares. The defenders had fought from that bridge and held it. Casualties were high, more than a thousand died, but the town had been saved. In 1934, the county’s chapter of the National League of Women asked Milla Petrașcu, a well-known Romanian artist, if she would accept a commission to design a sculpture, a column, to memorialize such unlikely heroes. Petrașcu suggested, instead, another artist be approached—Constantin Brâncuși. He was the hometown boy. Brâncuși accepted.

The architectonic program Brâncuși designed for the column’s siting encompasses the entire town. The program is laid out along an axis running W to E, beginning at the river Jiu in the West, stopping at the Table of Silence, continuing along the Alley of Seats, through the Gate of the Kiss, down the Avenue of the Heroes, by way of the Church of the Holy Apostles SS. Peter and Paul, before reaching its terminus: the eastern hilltop on the far side of town. There the Endless Column rises to the sky.

THE LAND OF THE DEAD

The ancient story visualized in the sculptural ensemble is this: the heroic dead cross a river into the land of the dead. Mourners sit in silence—they await the celestial marriage and rebirth of the hero’s eternal soul. The earth claims its own, as she must. The corporeal body returns to the mother, cells divide; from the rot of the flesh new life springs. The soul, blessed by ritual offerings at the sacrificial altar (i.e, the Romanian Orthodox funeral Mass), journeys onward through the land of the dead.

The soul is female: anima traveling in the persona of beautiful M_iarna, the great bird, the soul bird. The soul bird flies to the sun, her solar direction set for her by the grave post. It is an axis mundi holding up the sky—a tri-level terrestrial connection of underworld grave to solar rebirth.

Brâncuși’s scale at Tirgu Jiu—a sweep from one side of town to the other—is grand. His motifs, however, are local and familiar. They are the traditional Romanian beliefs of rebirth and regeneration. In these beliefs woman is the life giver—as mother, as grandmother, and, in death—woman is the soul bird, the M_iastr_ lured to the grave post with grandmother’s funerary
Only when the beautiful soul bird is released from the body’s grave, can she begin her solar journey. M_iastr_flies to the sun, and is reborn.

Romanian folkloric practice celebrates death with song, dance, and food. The foods served at the graveyard feast will be ones associated with fertility and sacrifice—preeminently eggs and bread because the ancient meaning of a Romanian death is the same as that ascribed to weddings. Death, like weddings, is an occasion to celebrate fertility and regeneration. And, when heroes die, death arrives as a beautiful woman, a princess, the “world’s bride.” But for all, the graveyard is a place of continuing sociable contact—between then and now, between the living and the dead—throughout the calendar year.

THE AVENUE OF HEROES

There is a park near the bridge that the townspeople had so successfully defended. What better site could there be for the memorial column? And, if the artist would also agree to design a new gateway into the park—perhaps, a “stone portal”? The artist agreed to design that, too.

Brâncuși was not far into the design detail of both the column and gateway when he conceived a new schema, radically inventive: locate the column outside the park. Erect it on a hilltop clear to the east side of town. To align the eastside hill to westside river visually, the artist drew a W-E promenade. At a point halfway along the axis, the plan for the promenade intersected with a site already under construction. A little church was being built there. The church, felicitously, had also been commissioned by the women’s committee. It, too, was being built to honour the WWI dead of Tîrgu Jiu.

Brâncuși’s new plan also meant the column on the eastern hilltop would become visible at a point on the axis right after leaving the church. The artist and the committee liked this feature. The revised plan was accepted. In 1937, the church was consecrated, Brâncuși attended the ceremonies. The church is familiarly known as the “Church of the Heroes,” and the promenade is called today the Avenue of Heroes.

THE TABLE OF SILENCE

In the park by the river, Brâncuși added a third element to the program—the Table of Silence. The Table is comprised of one large cut stone circle set atop another only somewhat smaller. Around the table the artist placed twelve stools, each at a remove from the table and from one another. This is not a circle begetting intimacy. The table is larger than one would find in a Romanian home. Brâncuși intends another possibility.

Dan Grigorescu links the round table and its seats to a similar arrangement found in a nearby Dacian sanctuary. It is unknown if Brâncuși was aware of this ancient archaeological site, however. Others have posited an allusion to the solar cross of the pre-Christian Dacian culture. The problem with this interpretation is the lack of a cross and circle arrangement—the tabletop is a plain circle, nothing inscribed upon it, and it sits on another circle just as unadorned.
Thirty stone seats were designed by Brâncuși to flank the walkway from the Table to the gate. Finding some leftover slabs of stone, the artist had benches built. These were placed on either side of the Gate.\textsuperscript{21}

The table, the seating, and the gateway all combine to provide the little park with the appurtenances of the sociable Romanian graveyard. It is that architecture which is as familiar today as it was in Brâncuși’s youth. Indeed, the Table of Silence is constructed in the same manner as the very table Brâncuși made and used in his Paris studio. At this table the artist, who was renowned for his hospitality, served meals to his guests.\textsuperscript{22}

**THE GATE OF THE KISS**

Romanians erect gates at the entries to their homes, to their churches, to their graveyards. On these gates are incised protective devices. Each gateway marks a passage from an impure place to a better place—be it the home, the church, or the afterlife. Brâncuși’s design for the Gate of the Kiss is marked by an iconic image he returned to many times in his work—the kiss.

The Gate of the Kiss is a simple post and lintel stone arrangement cut from honeyed travertine locally quarried. On the lintel 40 paired figures are incised. They kiss. The lintel is stylistically related to the Montparnasse sculpture Brâncuși had placed years before—at the request of friends—on a young unmarried woman’s grave in Paris.\textsuperscript{23} The lintel itself is as simple and sturdy as a bride’s dowry chest.\textsuperscript{24}

Our eyes go first, however, to the gateway’s supporting posts. The two posts are emblazoned on each of their four sides with a bifurcated circular swelling. It suggests the dividing cell, the egg, the eyes of the soul (Brâncuși said as much, too).\textsuperscript{25}

Eric Shanes describes a composite reading of the splitting cell and egg as “. . . the filling of the dilated female aperture with the twinned male genitalia.”\textsuperscript{26} In other words, sex. One can thicken the description further with two more readings—the tree of life and, maybe, the bride’s spindle.

The tree of life, in Romania, is a fir tree. It is depicted in many ways—sometimes with a bird on top, sometimes springing from a so-called “flowerpot.” On a Maramures gate, for example, the tree of life is presented as a bisected circle with a branching bar. It is, nonetheless, a tree, its roots triangulated into the earth, its branches spreading to the heavens.\textsuperscript{28} The tree pulls the sun down to the earth mother. The device Brâncuși cut into each side of the squared posts of the Gate of the Kiss similarly pulls our gaze down to the earth below.

Is the bride’s spindle symbolically related to Brâncuși’s gateposts? Perhaps—if inverted. The spindle is certainly suggestive of the Endless Column. The shaft of each bride’s spindle is uniquely designed. The weight, however, is always constructed the same way. It is a puzzle. As the bride turns the spindle back and forth in her fingers, she hears the gentle clatter of a seed tucked within the puzzle weight. The bride is being reminded of the children her marriage will bring.\textsuperscript{29} Her husband carved the spindle as a pledge of his intentions to marry her and “to plant those seeds in her.”\textsuperscript{30} Her husband has also carved the gateposts that mark the way into their home with similar suggestions.
Brâncuși, too, preferred to carve wood with his axe.\textsuperscript{31}

The committee commissioning Brâncuși may have wanted a triumphal arch—something like that in Bucharest perhaps, an arch modeled on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. What they got was a triumph, the perfect synthesis of the sculptor’s life-long focus on love—in a wistful, yet erotic, post-and-lintel presentation.

**GRAVE POSTS**

When a child is born in a Romanian village, it is customary to present the baby to a fir tree. The tree is asked to watch over the child throughout the individual’s entire life. Then, at the time of death, the natal fir tree will be cut down and carved into a post for the grave.\textsuperscript{32} If that tree no longer exists, another tree\textsuperscript{33} can be used. But there must be a grave post. This is why.

\textit{Miastra}, the soul bird, is deep within the grave; she has the incorporeal soul of the dead within her, but she is still attached to the rotting body. \textit{Miastra} must be lured from the grave. Grandmother puts a sweet funerary bread on top of the grave post. It works. \textit{Miastra} emerges from the grave. She sits with folded wings on top of the post. From there to the sun is not far. The soul can, and will be, born again.

In Brâncuși’s 1910-1912 \textit{Miastra}, assemblage, the soul bird is positioned in just that manner—with folded wings. \textit{Miastra} is serene, poised. Soon she begins her solar flight. Below are the mouldering bodies of the dead—vividly realized in the artist’s \textit{Double Caryatid} (c.1908).

**THE ENDLESS COLUMN**

In a 1933 catalogue statement, Brâncuși wrote of his desire to build a column one day that would “support the arch of the firmament.”\textsuperscript{36} At Tirgu Jiu, during the construction of the \textit{Endless Column}, the artist spoke of it in the same terms—it was to be a column to hold up the sky.\textsuperscript{37} This is a traditional expression Romanians use when speaking of grave posts. They are the “columns that hold up the sky.”\textsuperscript{38}

Indubitably, the \textit{Endless Column} is a grave post—but, what a grave post...! It has been designed\textsuperscript{39} with an elegant regard for the music of the heavens.

Constantin Brâncuși was an educated man. Using the Golden Section of Pythagoras, Brâncuși devised a set of uniform specifications for the column. The individual modules are built upon Golden Section ratios to achieve an average height of 1.8m\textsuperscript{40} per module—a very human scale. The modules are each perhaps six feet tall.\textsuperscript{41}

Brâncuși transformed the village folkloric grave post into a universalizing aspiration. At dawn the column is transfigured becoming a shaft of infinite light. Endless, \textit{Miastra} flies straight and true from its zenith. I imagine Pythagoras and Zalmoxis are cheering from the heavens.

The \textit{Endless Column} was erected in three months’ time, permitting the dedication of the war memorial complex on October 27, 1938. The artist journeyed from his home in Paris to attend the ceremonies.
Constantin Brâncuși would not see Romania again. Three weeks earlier, Oct. 3, 1938, the Germans had invaded Czechoslovakia. The second Great War had begun. Some ten years before the artist was quoted as saying:

Once rid of the religions and the philosophies, art is the one thing that can save the world. Art is the plank after the shipwreck, [the plank] that save someone...

VILLAGE LIFE TODAY

Nearly a hundred years later, it is still possible to see something of the kind of world from which Constantin Brâncuși set out in 1904 when he left Romania at the age of 28, and headed on foot for Paris.

In the villages, at the end of day, people take their ease on benches beside the gates to their homes. There one will sometimes find seated, not on a bench, but directly on the ground, her feet planted firmly to the earth, an old woman dressed in black. She is a grandmother, the much-honoured bunica suggested years before by the artist in Brâncuși’s Ancient Figure (1906–1908) and the Wisdom of the Earth (1908).

In every village today there is an old woman, who can tell you what the new baby’s name is and what the future will be for the child. That grandmother—some might call her a “sorceress” (The Sorceress, 1916-24)—must be implored, beseeched with a red-coloured bread, to come see the new-born baby, to give the baby a blessing. In such honours paid the village’s ancestral seer, linger old beliefs in the transmigration of the soul. The old pre-Christian transmigration beliefs underline, too, the ritual washing of a new-born baby in the wooden tub in which grandmother kneads her bread.

Traditionally, it is grandmother who makes the sacramental bread for births, baptisms, marriages, and funerals because she is “pure.” Each grandmother has her own bread stamps. When grandmother dies, her stamps are kept within the family, but not used again. Brâncuși used similar shapes in his sculptural assemblages. The Beginning of the World (1920), for example, illustrates the way some of Brâncuși’s sculpture begins in a primal, physical contact of the work with the earth. The assemblage consists of a stone cruciform base, surmounted by a marble egg on a metal disc. It is a sculpture for Easter.

At Easter red-coloured, hard-boiled eggs are served at table. Red eggs symbolise, of course, germination, the fertile egg, rebirth, the joy of life. Eggs are not eaten during the Lenten fasting period. The Beginning of the World, on a mythic level, celebrates the resurrection or rebirth of the sacrificed god. Romanian folk tradition says the colour red was first obtained when Mary the mother (or was it Mary Magdalen? versions differ), placed a basket of eggs at the foot of the cross where Jesus hung to die. His blood flowed over the eggs and they became red. Even today, the village bride wears white, but dresses her attendants in red.

For Brâncuși the egg shape was quickly subsumed into sculpture, the Newborn (1915), the First Cry (1917), Sculpture for the Blind (1916) (first exhibited wrapped) and the various heads, such as Head of a Woman, (1910–c.1925), The White Negress (1923), and divers Mlle Pogany
(1912, 1913, 1920, 1931), among others. In the Gate of the Kiss (1936-37), the eggs are fertile, cells dividing.

Near Brâncuși’s home village is a famous church with frescoed imagery of severed martyrs’ heads rolling along the avenue. The frescoes are preserved today in a small museum on the monastery grounds. Once, however, they were on the walls of the church. I can imagine a boy looking at them closely with fascination and thoughtfulness.

BRÂNCUSI IN EXILE

The year before Brâncuși died, he drew up a will. In it, the artist left his studio and its Contents—lock, stock, and barrel—to the French government. As Romanian historian Barbu Brezianu painfully concludes, there was only one reason for the artist’s dramatic back-of-the-hand gesture. Brâncuși had been insulted beyond measure by the then Romanian Communist government and the enthusiastically Communist-dominated Academy of the Popular Republic of Romania. The Academy had rejected the artist’s offer to donate work from his Paris studio to the people of Romania. Moreover, in Tirgu Jiu, the Communist mayor of the town had himself commandeered a bulldozer in a futile effort to topple the Endless Column. The mayor had other uses for its metal, but the column did not fall.

There was a last-minute effort by the Romanian government to make peace with the artist. It failed: “With the traitors in Bucharest, I have nothing to discuss. They have sold the Romanian people to the Russians. I prefer to stay and die in France,” said the artist.

Since the 1960s, however, Romanian scholars, well beset with anguished thought about the Academy’s summary rejection of Brâncuși and his work, have published studies which embrace Brâncuși as the echt-Romanian. Brâncuși, the Romanian sculptor is the consistent theme of their scholarship: they argue the Romanian context of Brâncuși’s work is foundational in the artist’s work.

I agree. The Romaneste context is a world view steeped in folklore, potent as tzuica; redolent with Orthodox church belief and practice, a world view worked through as patiently as the mamaliga, warming on the back of the stove. Knowing any of the Romaneste context deepens our understanding of Brâncuși’s trans-national and specific genius. Nonetheless, Constantin Brâncuși should have the last word here. The artist directs the viewer to the work itself, saying:

Don’t look for obscure formulas or mysteries. Because what I will give you is pure joy. Contemplate my work until you see them. Those close to God have seen them.

Constantin Brâncuși was born in 1874 in the little village of Hobișa, near Tirgu Jiu. He died in 1957 in Paris where he had lived since 1904. The artist is buried in Montparnasse cemetery in a grave with two other Romanian artists. They were his heirs (Brâncuși had no children) and, like him, they were artists-in-exile from their homeland. There is no grave post at their grave.

NOTES:
2. Tirgu Jiu is also spelled Targu Jiu by translators. No particular spelling predominates.
5. Brâncuși's axis bifurcates the Church of the Holy Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. The axis runs directly through the high altar behind the iconostasis. Some scholars have argued that the church should be moved off the axis; however, this changes the iconographic program. According to Richard Newton of Olin Partnership, Philadelphia (e-mail Newton to Korp, October 8, 2002), the church is to remain precisely where it is on the axis: “What you interpret from the layout drawing of the Ensemble in the area of the Church on our web site is not a roundabout. The Church remains in its present location on the axis. Our proposals for this axis are to control vehicular access to the street, repave it and the sidewalks with a local stone and to plant trees either side of the street throughout the length of the axis. In the vicinity of the church the road widens and splits into two. What appears as a “roundabout” will in fact be a stone paved space for pedestrians framed by tall trees, all providing a sympathetic context for this wonderful little church, a place to pause on the mile-long walk between the two parks and just before the column comes fully into view.”
6. Nationalist fervour regarding the Tirgu-jiu complex has also resulted in argument concerning the names Brâncuși gave to parts of the whole. Other names put forward as authoritative include the “Column of Infinite Sacrifice,” “Unity of the Nation,” “Table of the Apostles of the World,” and “Church of the Heroes.” This claim is made by Dan Popp in an article published July 31, 2001, in Romania Libera. Popp knew the grandson, Grigore Stoicoiu, of Matthew Stoicoiu. Matthew Stoicoiu knew Brâncuși. The path and roadway linking the table to the column is, in fact, today called “Avenue of the Heroes,” but, Calea Eroilor (Avenue of the Heroes) is one of the most common street names one can find throughout Romania. Similarly, the Church of the Holy Apostles SS. Peter and Paul is known locally as the “church of the heroes.” And, the Endless Column was initially commissioned as a column of “infinite gratitude.” Lastly, the Gate of the Kiss was proposed by the women's committee as merely a “stone portal,” according to Brezianu, Ibid, pp. 42-45.
7. Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade wrote often of the ability of artists to understand and work from within the primal myths of human history. See, for example, Eliade's essay “Brâncuși and Mythology” in Mircea Eliade, Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts, ed. By Diane Apostolos-Cappadone (New York: crossroad, 1986), pp. 93-101: “It is significant that, in the Colonne sans fin, Brâncuși should have rediscovered a Romanian folklore motif, the “pillar of the sky” (columna cerului), which is an extension of a mythological theme already shown to exist in prehistory, as well as being fairly widespread throughout the world. The “pillar of the sky” supports the heavenly vault. It other words it is an axis mundi . . . the axis supports the sky and is also the means of communication between the heaven and earth.”
8. Casandra Culcer, University of Bucharest, 3-mail, November 20, 1998.
10. On Easter Monday, for example, the dead are served an Easter meal in the graveyard. It is their Easter, too and they are joyful that day, as reported in “Customs and meaning of Easter,” *Ziua*, May 4, 2002 (tr. G. Tillman).

11. Casandra Culcer, University of Bucharest, e-mail, November 20, 1998: . . . The round table might symbolize the sun (the Celtic wheel of the sun), but for sure it is a wedding party table, as in the popular tradition death itself is seen as a wedding. So the heroes die—take on their way to the other world, assisted by their ancestors, kiss good-bye the living world, then comes the gap, the chaos of the city, before they reach the column, the launching point to the highness.”


13. Some say the dead actually return for the summer solstice: see “Traditions and customs of ‘Sanzienee,’” *Romania Libera*, June 24, 2002 (tr. G. Tillman)

14. Brezianu, *ibid.*, p. 156: “Originally Mrs. Arethie T_trescu (head of the Gorj chapter of the National League of Women, and the wife of the prime minister of Romania) commissioned two works: “The Column of Infinite Gratitude, dedicated to the heroes fallen in 1916 in the battles along the Jiu River and the Stone Portal, that was meant to be the main gate to the public gardens of Tirgu-Jiu.” Brezianu, in a note (ibid.) writes further: “All the correspondence between Brâncu_i and the patron who commissioned the monuments in Tirgu Jiu concerning the project itself has been destroyed by the Securitate . . .”


16. The riverbank is higher today because it forms part of a flood wall needed after the river Jiu was dammed, according to Donald G. McNeil, Jr. (“A Sculptor’s Gift to his Native Romania is Gilded in Squabbles,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2001.

17. The number of stools arranged about the table is twelve—a number with several Christian liturgical (E. G. 12 apostles), calendric (e.g., 12 months, 12 hours), and pre-Christian mythic layers of significance. For example, on the Thursday before Easter, not only are Easter eggs colored, but the “12 Gospels” are read. Those listening to the reading tie knots in string for each gospel as it is read. This action helps protects against misfortune, according to a recent Romanian newspaper article: “On Flower Sunday there is a dispensation for fish,” *Ziua*, May 1, 2002 (tr. G. Tillman)


20. Casandra Culcer, University of Bucharest, e-mail, November 20, 1998.


23. Brâncu_i sculpted the Montparnasse *Kiss* in 1909, not long afterwards a friend of the artist asked if the sculpture could be erected as a tombstone for the grave of a young woman who had committed suicide. Brâncu_i agreed and cut the tomb’s inscription himself according to Brezianu, *ibid.*, p. 25.


25. Eric Shanes quotes both Petre Comarnescu’s and Malvina Hoffman’s Recollections of conversations with Brâncu_i in support of both of these ideas (Shanes, *ibid.*, pp. 90-93.)


James Brown, personal communication, Baia Mare, May 1998.

Brown, *ibid.*


Casandra Culcer, University of Bucharest, e-mail, November 20, 1998; “... the column (simple without ornaments for men, or adorned for women, or sometimes having the soulbird on top... the funerary bird would appear... with closed wings standing quiet, as a receptacle for the ready-to-leave soul, or with open wings, a celestial image of the soul-bird flying.”

James Brown, personal communication, Bucharest, Spring 1996.


Claudia Poloscu, “Interview with Sorana Georgescu Gorjan,” *Adevarul Literar si Artistic*, nr. 560, March 20, 2001 (tr. G. Tillman)

Culcer, *ibid.*

In 1935 Brâncuși met in Paris with a Romanian engineer, Stefan Georgescu Gorjan, to discuss how the column could be built. Gorjan inventively, and pragmatically, suggested individual units of the column be strung like beads upon a supporting inner shaft. He became the supervising contractor onsite, working closely with Brâncuși throughout as reported in an interview by Claudia Poloscu with the daughter of Gorjan. See: Claudia Poloscu, “The Endless Column is set up on the site of an old cattle market—interview with Mrs. Sorana Georgescu Gorjan, the daughter of the Column engineer,” *Adevarul*, March 10, 2001 (tr. G. Tillman)

Ibid.

Sixteen modules were cast of iron, and arranged with two half modules top and bottom and in between 15 complete modules for a total projected height of 28.8m (but, by some calculations, actually a bit more, 29.33m). Grigorescu, *ibid.*, p. 89. “... 16.2 which is the value of the golden number multiplied by ten.”


August 15-November 15, 2937, as cited in “The Endless Column to be Rebuilt,” *Ziua*, September 14, 2000 (tr. G. Tillman). Its restoration, however, in the post-Ceaușescu period took years and was not completed until 2001; the restoration of the rest of the architectonic program and its elements—including the park and its sculpture, the Avenue of Heroes, the Church of the Heroes—is ongoing.


Balas, *ibid.*, p. 40: “The Forces of nature were placated and governed by the interpretation of omens and carefully prescribed ritual. The presiding figure at such rites was generally an old woman, who was as significant a personage in a given village as the local priest and probably more so.”

47. Women who are menstruating or in afterbirth cannot make bread. Until recent times they could not enter a church.
48. Tiberiu Alexa, personal communication, Baia Mare, April 1996.
49. Balas, *ibid.*, p. 36.
51. Shanes, *ibid.*, pp. 74-76.
52. Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of this Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 86: “As early as 1912 the critic Jacques Doucet realized that the subtlety of these near egg forms by Brâncuși was accentuated by slight impressions and textures that interrupted otherwise symmetrical surfaces. If the ovoid form, polished and gleaming, is the perfect collector of light, then any imperfection on its surface would act as a premonition, a visual hint of the forces of internal organization harbored within.”
53. Tismana monastery, founded in 1375, the oldest monastery in Romania, is located very near Brâncuși home village of Hobia (Dan Richardson and Tim Burford, *Romania: The Rough Guide*, 1995, p. 101). The frescoes, extant in Brâncuși’s childhood on the walls of the church, have been removed and are now part of a little museum display in a separate building on the grounds of the monastery.
54. Brâncuși applied for French citizenship, giving up his Romanian passport, a few months after the Academy of the Popular Republic of Romania rejected the artist’s offer to donate to the “. . . Art Museum of the Republic of the works by the sculptor Brâncuși, around whom are gathered all the anti-democrats in the field of arts” (Brezianu, *ibid.*, pp. 12).
55. c. 1948, according to, Brezianu, *ibid.*, pp. 12: “Ten years after making this present to his country—the communist regime, through its handymen, offended him repeatedly, beginning with the unsuccessful attempt of the major of Tirgu Jiu to pull down the Column, in order to be melted . . . . “ In a lengthy interview with Claudia Ploscu (published in *Adevarul Literar si Artistic*, nr. 570, June 6, 2001), Plscu collects more horror stories about Brâncuși scholarship in Romania, quoting Bogdan: “Our Traditionalists and nationalists of all stripes, and laster on Communist dogmatists rejected Brâncuși, counting him a foreign body, an eccentric Western product, a status that, in general, discontinued at the threshold of the sculptor’s final years.”
58. Please note: the Romanian studies are often translated and simultaneously published in English and French by Romanian publishers. See, for example: Paul Rezeanu, *Brâncuși la Craiova* (Bucharest: Editura Arc 2000, 2001). The text is in Romanian, French, and English. A number of Western studies also acknowledge the Romanian folkloric context of Brâncuși’s work, including, for example: Eric Shanes, *Brâncuși* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989). One of the better studies is: Edith Balas, *Brâncuși and Romanian Folk Traditions* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1987). None, however, are exhaustive.
59. “The Brancusian Universe in an exceptional exhibition at the Sibiu Village Museum,” *Romania Libera*, July 20, 2001 (tr. G. Tillman): “The organizers at Sibiu present objects of great heritage value . . . the whole constituting an essay on the relationship of Brâncuși creations to Romanian folklore traditions, a relationship whose authenticity is found as
much in the artist’ lifestyle, temperament, and thinking, as in the entire Brancusian oeuvre.”

60. “The Eye of the Artist: Constantin Brâncuși photographed his own works,” Romania Libera, August 8, 2001 (tr. G. Tillman).

61. Alexandru Istrati and Natalia Dumitrescu, identified in Brezianu, ibid., p. 55: “At the suggestion of Sonia Delaunay, and of Jean Cassou, Brâncuși bequeaths in his will to the Musée National d’Art Moderne all the works and objects in the studios from Impasse Ronsin, on condition that the studios will be reconstructed. The painters Alexandru Istrati and Natalia Dumitrescu are nominated universal heirs and Professor Dr. Pascu Atanasiu as testamentary executor.”