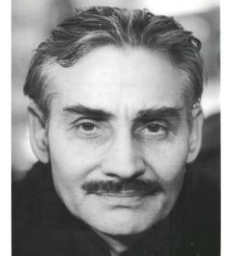


Constantin Antonovici (1911-2002) – A Great Brâncuși's Disciple **A Brief Biography**

by Stephan J. Benedict, Executor of the Estate of Constantin Antonovici

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The sculptor Constantin Antonovici is one of Constantin Brâncuși's main disciples. This text outlines Antonovici's position as a follower of the avant-garde movement initiated by Brâncuși, who reduced the sculpture to its essence, as well as his contribution towards the consolidation of Brâncuși's new aesthetics.



The biographies of Brâncuși and Antonovici have some elements in common even though both had left Romania at different times. They lived abroad for over half a century and died away from their homeland. The majority of their works exists outside Romania. Like Brâncuși, Antonovici has never denied belonging to the Romanian people and culture, and remained faithful to his roots till the end of his career and his life. The presence of the former totalitarian regime in Romania prevented the artist from maintaining a normal contact with his native country. By the time the Romanian culture eventually opened up to the world, Antonovici was towards the end of his life. His mental state and lack of lucidity prevented him from making the correct decisions. He was full of un-trust, suspicion and doubt, and could not manage to become free of the past and renew the contact with his homeland.

Antonovici had never abandoned Romanian culture despite a self-imposed exile. He remained faithful to his homeland throughout the various travels in Europe during and immediately after WWII, while living for six months in Zagreb, six years in Austria, four years in Paris working in Brâncuși's atelier, two years in Montreal, before finally settling in New York City in 1953. Antonovici participated in many anti-communist rallies organized by various Romanian societies and groups in Washington, DC, during the '70s. He confronted the wrongs of the former communist regime with the Romanian flag in his hands on the steps of the Capitol Hill.

Tutzi Marton, the co-Executor of the Constantin Antonovici Estate, has eye-witnessed contacts between Antonovici and many personalities who knew the sculptor directly. Included were members of the Romanian Academy such as the lates Dan Grigorescu and Virgil Candea, who were the cultural attaché and respectively an official to the Romanian Mission in New York and who both visited the sculptor at his home as well as at his atelier. Antonovici also met and corresponded with the late Barbu Brezianu, considered the dean of the Romanian art critics, and met the critics and researchers Doina Lemny of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Mircea Deac, Radu Varia, Edith Balas, Victor Craciun, Paul Rezeanu, Ion Pogorilovschi, The Romanian Patriarch Teoctist, Ioan de Hondol, and the writer Toma George Maiorescu. One Antonovici Archive photo (see below) depicts the sculptor in the company of Salvador Dali and the General Secretary Kurt Waldheim at the United Nations, in the early '70s.



Antonovici was also known to important art critics, some of whom mentioned him in their writings, such as Sidney Geist, who for a while lived in the same building with the Romanian sculptor. Among personalities that had contact with Antonovici were Alain Bosquet, V.G. Paleolog, Petru Comarnescu, Petre Pandrea, Ion Miclea, and the artists Eugen Ciuca, Vlaicu Ionescu, and Eustatiu Stoenescu. Many sculptors from Romania nurtured a relationship with Antonovici: Vida Geza and his son Gheorghe Geza, as Secretary of the Ministry of Culture of Romania, Ion Irimescu, Marcel Guguianu, and most actively the sculptor Ion Vlasiu, whose correspondence is preserved in the Antonovici Archive.

Of special interest is the relationship between Antonovici and the master stone-cutter Ion Alexandrescu, who had been selected by Brâncuși to carve the majority of the stone works in the Targu-Jiu architectural Ensemble. Alexandrescu had drawn a plan of the Targu-Jiu Ensemble on tracing paper in 1939. After Brâncuși's death he sent the drawing to Antonovici. The drawing is significant because it documents Brâncuși's recommendation that twelve chairs ought to be placed around the Column of Infinity upon his eventual return to Romania. This project was abandoned due to the approaching WWII.

Constantin Antonovici was mentioned recently several times in Professor Dr. Victor Craciun's books published in Romania. The mentions are based on Craciun's personal knowledge of Antonovici, an interview of 1976, and archival information provided by his Estate. A documentary and critical effort on Antonovici is intended to place this artist in the proper perspective as one of Brâncuși's authentic disciples.

Constantin Antonovici officially visited Romania three times after his departure in 1941: on the occasion of a Brâncuși's conference in 1967, and again during 1971-1972, when he intended to install in Oradea the tombstone of his last life companion Ileana (Elena Chirvai). Antonovici lived in New York with Ileana for approximate 11 years, after the loss of his wife, a French woman called Jeannine, who had married him during his stay in Paris in the early '50s. The sculptor held a few lectures in Romania in 1971, most notably one at the Art Museum of Craiova regarding his personal recollections of Brâncuși. He visited Romania for the Centennial celebration of Brâncuși's birth in 1976 and participated in the related cultural events. The only known works of the artist in Romania are the tombstones for Ileana and the Antonovici family in a Yassy's cemetery. He also executed wood carvings in the Jimbolia Cathedral and the St. Ilie Church in Yassy, and a few other churches.

Constantin Antonovici was born Bucataru of an unknown father. He was adopted at the age of 17 by Jacob Antonovici's family and he thus took on his last name. The facts are documented by both his birth certificate as well as the tomb stone inscription of his family in Yassy. The sculptor was not a

Bucovinean by birth, as it was believed, but he was educated there. Antonovici was actually born in the village of Carligi, Neamtz County.

Like Brâncuși, Constantin Antonovici had a difficult life particularly during his formative years, as it was the case with many artists of the 20th century who had to confront the two world wars and the rise of Nazism and Communism. In spite of living for more than half a century in the free land of America, he had continued to endure the hardships of an artist's life similarly to Brâncuși's in Paris.

Celebrated and revered artists such as Isamu Noguchi, Jean (Hans) Arp, Henri Matisse, Fernand Leger, Alexander Archipenko, Jaques Lipchitz, Amedeo Modigliani, Henry Moore, Maurice Utrillo, Eric Satie, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, as well as the Romanians Militza Petrascu, Margareta Cosaceanu, Victor Brauner, Sanda Kessel, Marcel Janco, Irina Codreanu, Tristan Tzara, Oscar Han, Jacques Herold, Fritz Storck, Gheorghe Anghel, Mircea Basarab, Natalia Dumitresco, Alexandru Istrati, etc., had visited with or worked in the Brâncuși's studio for various periods of time. Constantin Antonovici is the only one to whom Brâncuși issued a certificate attesting as to his talent.

While still living in Romania and barely after graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts in Yassy in 1939, the young Antonovici had the chance to meet the famous Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrovič, a successor of August Rodin. Meštrovič had been invited by the Romanian Government to complete several monuments in Bucharest between the two world wars. Eager to succeed and establish himself as a sculptor, Antonovici accepted Meštrovič's invitation to come to Zagreb and work under him in 1940. He remained there for half a year. When Antonovici returned to Zagreb after a brief visit to Romania, which he had to leave in 1941 clandestinely in order to avoid being drafted into the army, the artist learned belatedly that Meštrovič had been arrested by the Italian fascists. Antonovici was arrested as well and deported to Germany and blackmailed to accept to fight in the front line along with the Nazi Germany against the Russians. Antonovici refused and was incarcerated by the Nazis. Only a miracle saved his life by secretly addressing a letter to the Romanian government, at that time acting on Hitler's side.

Constantin Antonovici remained in Austria until the end of WWII under the strict supervision of the Gestapo. He was allowed to study in the Sculpture Department of the Akademie der Bildenden Künste between 1942 and 1945 and under the guidance of Fritz Behn, one of Meštrovič's ex-colleagues at the school. Later on, Antonovici worked for a while as Fritz Behn's assistant. He learned sculpting in marble and stone from Behn. He studied wood carving in the Tirol's region of Austria, between 1945 and 1947. He had visited Italy during this period and became familiar with the art treasures of Rome. The sculptor was offered a scholarship to work in Rome but he refused it due to his obsessive desire to settle in Paris and to meet the great Brâncuși. In the interim, he had won a competition and was given the commission to execute the sculpture of St. John the Baptist for the Jesuit Cathedral of the Am Hof Square in Vienna, and sculpted the bust of Beethoven, a Madonna, and other works in Innsbruck.

After settling in the US in 1953, Antonovici won a competition for the bas-relief sculpture of Bishop William Manning tomb's cover at St. John's the Divine Cathedral. This work, made out of a three tons block of Carrara marble, is considered Antonovici's New York masterpiece. The work was inaugurated at the end of 1954. The sculpture was so successful that it earned the artist the right to use a room in the basement of the Cathedral as his art studio, free of rent and for the rest of his life.

Constantin Antonovici participated in exhibits outside the United States in Canada, Austria, France, Poland and Romania. His works are in 30 private collections in these countries as well as Holland. He was a member of National Society of Literature and the Arts and the National Sculpture Society and was

awarded by the Academy of Brazil. Among the art critics who gave Antonovici rave reviews were Alain Bosquet, George Boudaille, Michelle Seurier, Fritz Spitzer, Donelson F. Hoops, Ralph Fabri and many others that included the critics in Romania like Barbu Brezianu, Petru Comarnescu, V.G. Paleolog, Petre Pandrea, Dan Grigorescu, etc.

After the peak years of his career between the '50s and through '70s, Antonovici never attempted to benefit from the success of his works, take part in art exhibits, or employ a good agent to promote his art and consolidate his reputation. He became a recluse and vanished completely from the New York art world after his last public exhibition in 1981. During the next twenty years of his life he treated his works as "children" that he could not part with at any price.

He lost precious social and art contacts and excluded himself from the art market. He died destitute but under proper medical care at Jacobi Medical Center in New York, on February 5, 2002. He left behind an extremely important and valuable body of art work that did not see the light of day in the last 27 years.

Constantin Antonovici never hid his affinity and affiliation for Brâncuși. On the contrary, he spoke passionately and proudly about it. To everyone who knew him, worked with him, and learned from him, it was clear that for him, the figure of Brâncuși was a supreme obsession. He was totally committed on this point. Antonovici was proud and satisfied to have been able to know the father of modern sculpture and that he was able to reflect in his own art the knowledge acquired through direct contact with Brâncuși.

It was only by chance that Antonovici did not get to meet Brâncuși earlier and before WWII. During the war years Antonovici was a student in Austria, and had acquired and mastered the technique of carving marble and wood. When he finally met Brâncuși in 1947, he was already a fully formed and versatile sculptor. Perhaps the entire relationship between the two sculptors could have turned into a different direction had they met before the war.

Antonovici did not copy Brâncuși's works but used impeccably the master's new aesthetics and artistic credo. By the time Brâncuși met him, the master was already 71 years old and could not lift with ease anymore the rhomboidal shapes of the "infinity column" type, carved from the old wood beams. These pieces were actually carved by Antonovici. The young artist succeeded in gaining Brâncuși's confidence because he exhibited versatility, expertise, and technical skills demonstrated through perfect cuts and high-quality work. These facts convinced Brâncuși to keep Antonovici on in the studio.

Why did Constantin Antonovici pass the test of endurance and remained for the entirety of his long stay in Paris to work in Brâncuși's art studio, when compared to other art celebrities? The reason is simply because Antonovici was in a way Brâncuși's alter-ego as far as talent is concerned, his carving skill abilities of various materials and his work ethics. The artists shared the same peasant background, full of characteristic modesty and perseverance. Brâncuși valued enormously such essential ingredients. Many of Antonovici's own pedestals are of Brâncuși's inspiration, particularly those executed while he worked with the master. Further research needs to still establish what did Antonovici actually work on in Brâncuși's atelier. Antonovici's sculptures speak with their own voice despite obvious Brâncuși's influences which he never denied but, on the contrary, was very proud of.

Many of Antonovici's recollections about Brâncuși were published in the Romanian volume *Brâncuși Maestrul* by Victor Craciun (2002), and are based on the manuscripts made available by our Archive. There are many witty fragments in this volume in which Antonovici, based on the notes he secretly kept

about Brâncuși while working with him and which were made available only after Antonovici's death in 2002. For instance, there was a fascinating and emotional meeting in New York between Antonovici and a former friend of Brâncuși by the name Romany Marie, the owner of several Greenwich Village restaurants, where local and foreign artists gathered and which earned her the nickname of "Queen of Greenwich Village." Romany Marie was a Romanian who met Brâncuși at a party in Paris sponsored by Fernand Leger and Henri Matisse. She befriended Brancusi for few months. Many years later, in the early 60th, she introduced Antonovici to another of Brâncuși's friend, a wealthy New Yorker by the name Agnes Meyer, who met Brancusi in Paris while in her 20th and whose daughter Florence also met Brâncuși in Paris and performed for him as an aspiring young musician. Her other daughter, Kathrine Graham became the famous publisher of *The Washington Post* for over 30 years.

Antonovici recounts that Brancusi was hosted in New York for one month by Romany Marie, whose mother was Romanian and father was Jewish. Brâncuși introduced his famous culinary recipes in Romany's restaurant. These establishments were frequented by Joseph Brummer, the owner of an art gallery, of Hungarian origin, whom Brâncuși first met in Paris and who organized in his gallery, the artist's 1926 solo exhibit in America, when he was designated as art dealer to resale the collection of John Quinn who previously bought 26 pieces of Brancusi, but unfortunately passed away very young due to cancer in 1924. Brancusi made on that occasion, the trip to USA in 1926 for the second time. Romanie Marie had a golden heart. Late in life, she slept in various locations in unsafe conditions. She died in poverty in New York at the age of 76, abandoned by all her former "friends" as well as her own millionaire brother. Antonovici refused to shake hands with him, at Romany's funeral. Later on, her nephew Robert Schulman wrote a book on her life: *Romany Marie, the Queen of Greenwich Village*, published by Butler Books in 2006.

It is interesting to understand Brâncuși's vision concerning the Targu-Jiu Ensemble through Antonovici's notes. Brâncuși seems to have had a much more religious and spiritual outlook on art than what has been thought previously. According to Antonovici, Brâncuși considered the *Table of Silence* as the *Table of Apostles*, or the *Sacred Supper*, whereby the Table represented Jesus Christ and the 12 stools around it stood for the Apostles.

Christ initiates the sacrament of the Holy Communion during the Last Supper. The departure of the soldiers is symbolized by leaving this table. The *Gate of Kiss* was considered the gate of the departure of the soldiers from the beloved ones while going to war and the *Column of Infinity* was the *locus* where the souls of the deceased pass from earth to the heavens. Brâncuși had drafted a sketch which he showed to several friends that included Antonovici, and anticipated how the public procession on "Heroes Day" was supposed to unfold. The conscious inclusion of placement of the church on the main axis of the Ensemble acquires a clear meaning in this context. This interpretation was also acknowledged by Friedrich Teja Bach in his 1988 monograph CONSTANTIN BRANCUSI edited by Dumont (page 379). Also, the shape of the stools at the table were given by two half oranges joint together back to back, representing the fruits of Jesus in Palestine.

Important critiques and articles about Antonovici's work have appeared in magazines and newspapers in New York, Paris, Rome, Montreal, London, Washington and other American and Romanian cities. Some of the major articles about Antonovici appeared in the following publications: *La Revue Moderne*, Paris, by R. Clermont, 1950; *La Nation*, Paris, by Emanoel (1950); *Arts*, Paris, by G. Boudaille, 1951; *Opera*, Paris, by Michelle Seuriere; *La Presse*, Montreal, by De Repentigny, 1953; *Living Church*, New York, by Canon E. West, 1954; *Picture on Exhibit*, New York, by G. S., 1959; *Toledo Blade*, Toledo, Ohio, by Fritz Spitzer, 1959; *Fiinta Romaneasca*, London, by Mihai Niculescu, 1962; *Sunday Star*, Washington, by Frank Getlein, 1964; *America*, Detroit, by M. Farcasanu, 1964; *The Corcoran Gallery*

of Art, Washington, by Donelson F. Hoopes, Curator, 1964; *Combat*, Paris, by Alain Bosquet, 1967; *Cronica*, Yassy, Romania, by M. Costache, 1971; *Arges*, Brasov, Romania, by G. Alexe, 1967; *Today's Art*, New York, by Ralph Fabri, 1970.

Some of the exhibitions that Constantin Antonovici took part throughout his life include: Yassi, Romania (1939); Bucharest, Romania (1941); group exhibit in Vienna, Austria (1944); personal exhibit, Jean de Beauvais Gallery, Paris, France (1949); Societe des Artistes Independants and Association Federative L'Art Libre, Paris, France (1950 and 1951); group exhibit in Montreal, Canada (1953); Mond'Art Galleries, New York City, USA (1959); Madison Gallery group show (1961); group exhibit, Philadelphia, USA (1962); Washington DC, Corcoran Gallery of Art, and the home of Mrs. Franklyn Matt Gunther Jersey City, New Jersey, USA (1964); group exhibit Jeanne Taylor Gallery (1964); group exhibit in New York City, USA, and group exhibits organized by National Sculpture Society, Washington DC, (between 1967 and 1974); the Kreeger Collection (1977); Group Exhibit, New York City, USA (1981).

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