

## BRANCUSI

The trip that Margie and I made to Romania in 1996 came about because of a mathematics teacher named Radu Tunaru at the University of Craiova. He had come across an article written by Ronnie Brown that included some photographs of my Symbolic Sculptures. Radu wrote to me asking if any posters were available to hang in his classroom.

The next time I heard from Radu was when he wrote and told me that he had won a scholarship to the University of London and asked if he could come and see me in Somerset. He arrived by train and was a great help as I was making a maquette of *Immortality* at the time and needed someone to hold the matchboxes together while I built up a covering surface with plaster of Paris.

During the years Radu studied in London we got to know him quite well and heard all about his girlfriend, Diana, who had been a pupil in his class. He returned to Romania, married her and settled in Craiova.

I have always admired the work of Brancusi and I had discussed the sculptures with Radu. He told me that his home was not very far from where Brancusi had been born in the village of Hobita near Turgu-Jiu, the town where the famous *Endless Column* is to be found.



*'Endless Column', by Brancusi*

Damon is a fan of Brancusi and asked me to arrange a trip to Turgu-Jiu. Radu had often suggested to me that Margie and I should visit Romania, so I didn't think he would mind if I asked him to hire a small bus, plan a tour and suggest which hotels we should stay in.

Radu was delighted and as Diana's father was a serving officer he was able to book us into an army hotel in Craiova for our first night. To help matters Radu's cousin owned a bus and Diana's uncle was head of the State Administration for the area, so with contacts like that anything was possible!

We arrived in Bucharest on a very hot day in May. Radu and Diana met us at the airport with the cousin who drove the minibus and we set off for Craiova passing several medieval scenes along the way, including flocks of sheep on the highway and a multitude of wooden carts drawn by very thin horses. On arrival we found that Diana's father had ordered a special dinner at the army hotel, but as he didn't speak a word of English it was hard to thank him properly! After dinner we walked around the deserted town and admired the architecture of the old city.

In the morning we drove to Turgu-Jiu and booked into the hotel which very conveniently for us was next to the *Avenue of the Heroes*. However, before we looked at Brancusi's sculptures we decided to visit the village of Hobita where he had been born in 1877.

The journey took us through beautiful cherry orchards and past turreted churches hiding behind rows of poplars, their silvery zinc roofs glinting in the sunlight. Brancusi's two-room cottage has been restored so undoubtedly was in better condition than when he lived there as a boy! The kitchen has an enormous bread oven on top of which the whole family slept in the bitter winters when the temperature can drop to below 40 degrees.



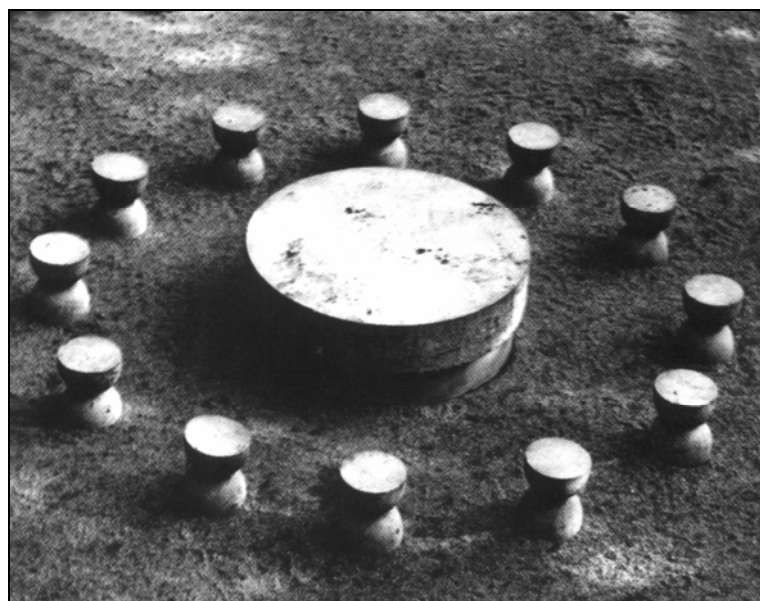
*Brancusi's bedroom*



*The summer house in Brancusi's garden*

The cottage had a beautiful garden full of fruit trees and a summer house to cope with the hot months when temperatures can top 40 degrees! Brancusi was so driven by the urge to sculpt that he walked all the way to Paris to work as an apprentice to Rodin. When he left Rodin to develop his own art form he said, *If we limit ourselves to exact reproduction, we halt the evolution of the spirit.* He worked in Paris all his life, until he was commissioned to build the *Avenue of Heroes* in Turgu-Jiu, which we now drove back to explore.

At the entrance to the park is the famous *Gate of the Kiss*, but as this is right in the middle of the memorial we walked past it down the avenue to the river. If you stand on the bank of the Jiu River and look left you can see the bridge that was defended by the virtually unarmed citizens of the town against the invading German Army in October 1916. Brancusi's sculptures are the memorial to the heroic men, women and children who died defending the bridge during the three days it took for the Romanian army to arrive.

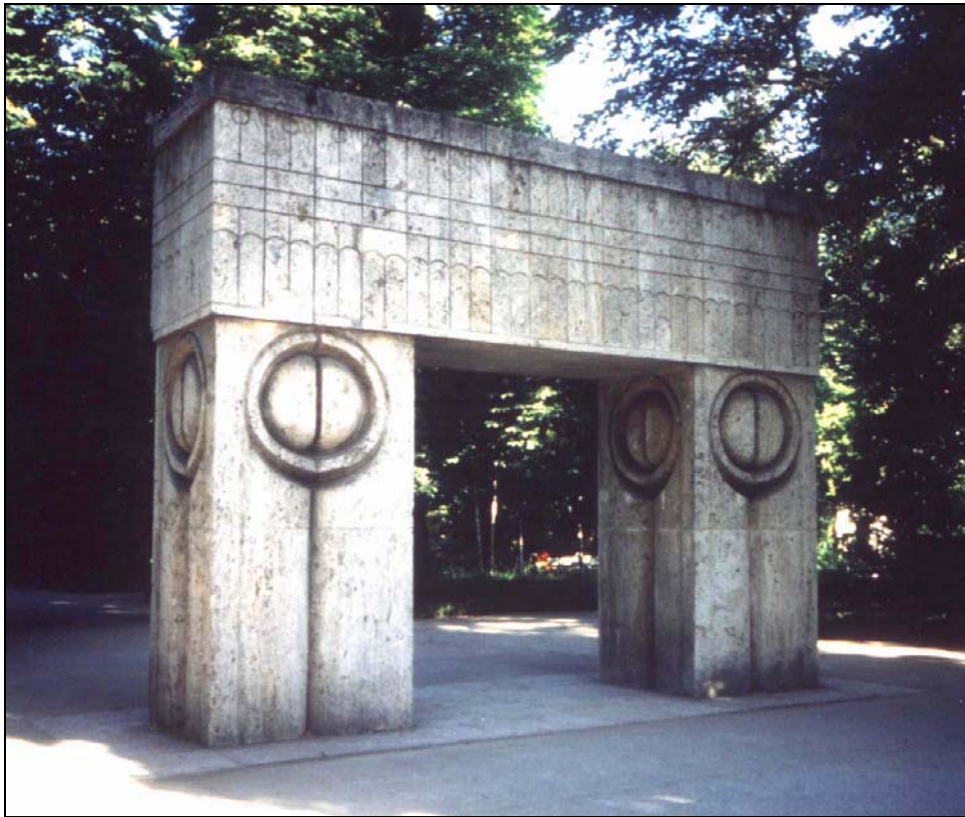


*Table of Silence*

The *Avenue* starts at the riverbank with the *Table of Silence*. The table is surrounded by 12 stools and is 12 foot across. At a Romanian baptismal celebration the child is placed on the kitchen table and the family sit around it and drink a toast wishing the child long life and happiness.

Brancusi designed the *Avenue of Heroes* so that from the *Table of Silence* you can see the bridge as well as the *Endless Column* half a mile away through the *Gate of the Kiss*. Unfortunately this is no longer possible as the town planners have built houses that block the view!

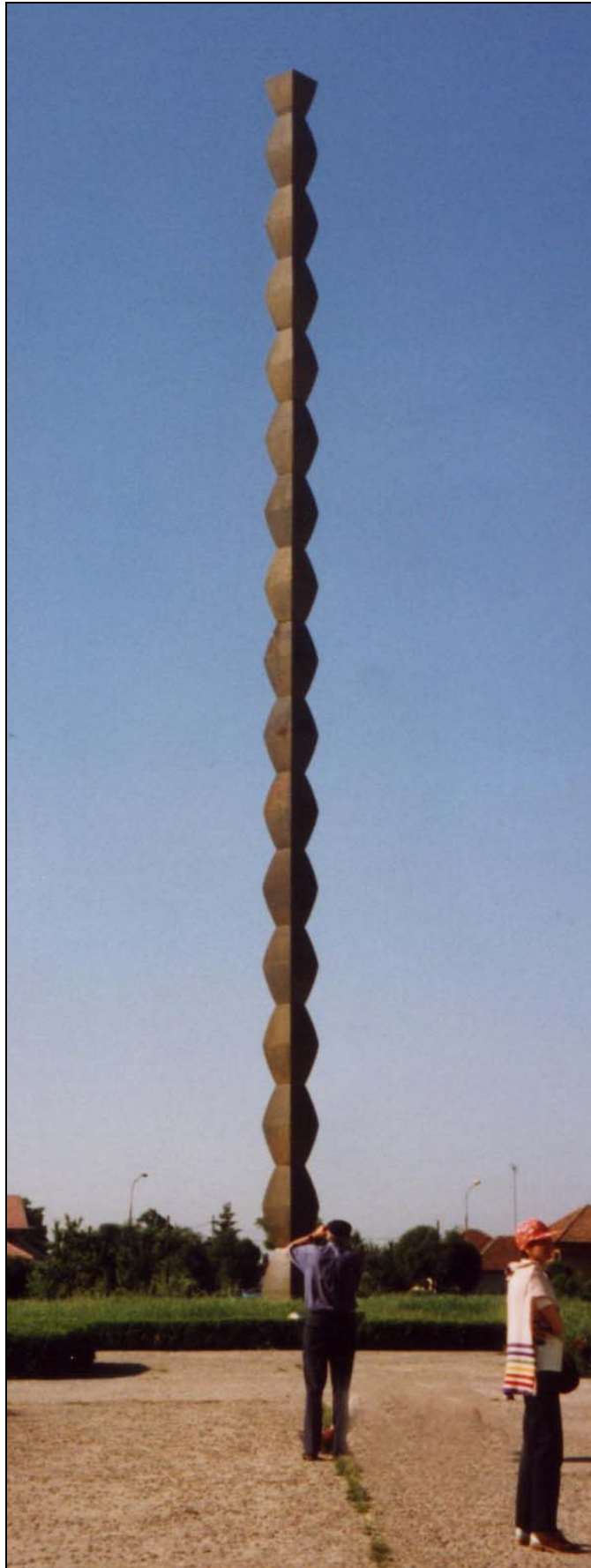
You leave the *Table of Silence* and walk up the avenue of mature trees to the *Gate of the Kiss*. We tried to toss coins onto the top with our backs turned to the *Gate* as it is meant to bring good luck. Actually this is a lot harder than it sounds, but we persevered until we had succeeded. The *Gate* symbolises the 'act of falling in love'.



***Gate of the Kiss***

We left the Park and drove up the main street past the church, which Brancusi intended as an integral part of the Memorial, as it symbolises marriage, and arrived at the spacious grassed park on the hilltop where the *Endless Column* stands all by itself, 100 foot high, surrounded by several formal beds of red roses.

It wasn't until I saw a Romanian cemetery that I came to understand the meaning of the 'column'. Romania's culture depended totally on wood which has always been abundant in the forest, whereas iron was in short supply. Everything is built of wood! The churches are all built of wood, as are the grave markers, which are usually six to eight foot high, and carved in a similar fashion to the *Endless Column*. The column is a giant grave marker for the heroes who gave their lives defending the bridge against the Germans in 1916.



*Endless Column*

We walked around the gardens trying to take a good photograph, but soon realised that in fact it is almost impossible to do so, even when we lay down under it or walked miles away. It is the overpowering presence of the *Endless Column* that fills the mind that makes it unbelievably awe-inspiring.

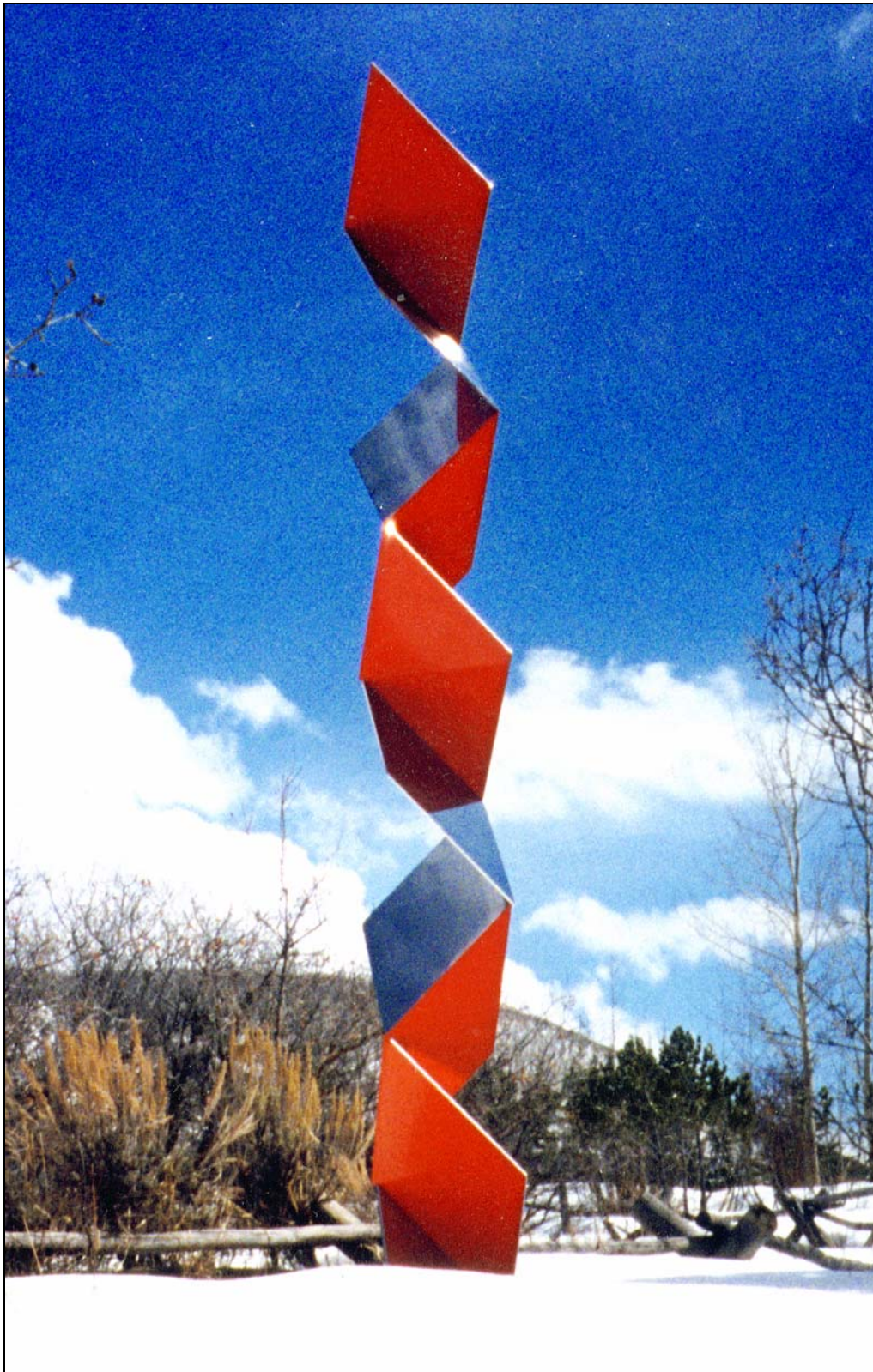
I walked back towards the bus and on reaching it turned once more to look at this amazingly majestic sculpture. By chance the sun was directly behind the top, crowning the column with a halo of light. It was an exceptionally moving sight.



*A sun halo topped the magnificent memorial*

That evening Margie and I went for a walk in the park woods. We had just been treated to another sumptuous dinner and needed the exercise before turning in. We walked up the road to the *Gate of the Kiss* and found a couple of heavily armed soldiers guarding the entrance, and asked if it would be all right to walk down the *Avenue*. They obviously thought we were quite mad but nodded, so we set off into the gloom. We were rewarded for our bravery by discovering thousands of nightingales all singing their hearts out. We had never heard such a chorus of bird song. It was utter magic and a brilliant way to end a fantastic day. As we left the woods who should we walk into but Damon and Sam enjoying the same experience. We stopped and listened together and then said goodnight. Sharing moments like that with friends must be one of the best things anyone can do in life.

Some years later I built my own *Endless Column* and named it *Evolution*. I think of the sculpture as my tribute to a great artist. Constantin Brancusi said, *Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, in approaching the real sense of things.*



*Evolution*

We spent the rest of our trip being tourists. We drove through Transylvania, the home of Dracula, saw a fairy-tale medieval castle, a walled town, old villages, and climbed some wooden-roofed stairs that were built in 1640, or so we were told. At Peles we visited the rather ornate summer residence of King Carol the First, and a beautiful small art-nouveau chateau in the palace grounds built by his successor, Ferdinand, with a lot more taste. We were taken to see an ethnographical park where all the old wooden buildings of Romania have been collected and arranged as a village. The wooden church was next to a wooden mill that drove wooden crushers. On arriving back in Bucharest we drove round Ceaucescu's 'House of the People' that he built as his personal residence. Fortunately it was closed as it has 1,000 rooms!

On our last evening after dinner Damon and I took a stroll around the city's Central Square and quite by accident ended up outside the Opera House. Through the glass door we could see that all the lights were on in the 19th century grand baroque foyer and we could hear organ music. Damon tried the door and found it was open so we stepped inside to investigate. As we did so a man arrived carrying a bucket and mop and told us that the place was closed. We didn't actually understand a word of what he was saying, but his gestures were emphatically saying, "No". Pointing to our eyes didn't gain us entry, but a naughty \$5 bill did!

We walked through the foyer into the vast auditorium to find a girl practising on a gigantic organ at the back of the stage. She was playing beautifully so we sat down on the red velvet seats in the Grand Circle boxes to watch and listen. It was a very plush Opera House, red, gold and vast crystal chandeliers, nearly the equal of Covent Garden in London.

Suddenly Damon leapt up, walked down the aisle, climbed up on the stage and perched himself in the conductor's chair. *Whoops*, I thought, *it was definitely time we headed back to England or we might find ourselves doing time in a Romanian prison*. Fortunately the girl stopped playing and Mr Bucket and Mop turned out the lights before the police arrived!

