

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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ARTIST'S CHOICE: BURTON ON BRANCUSI

April 7 - June 28, 1989

In the first of the ARTIST'S CHOICE exhibitions, opening at The Museum of Modern Art on April 7, 1989, works by Constantin Brancusi have been selected from the Museum's holdings and presented in an installation conceived and supervised by sculptor Scott Burton. In BURTON ON BRANCUSI, Burton reconsiders the significance of Brancusi's work in relation to contemporary art and especially to his own concerns as an artist. The exhibition includes a few key works by Brancusi from other museums.

BURTON ON BRANCUSI has been organized in collaboration with Kirk Varnedoe, director, Department of Painting and Sculpture, and has been made possible by grants from Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art. Continuing through June 28, the exhibition is on view at the entrance to the Museum's third-floor Painting and Sculpture Galleries. A concurrent installation of Burton's sculptures has been installed in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden.

Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) has long been recognized as one of the pioneers of modern sculpture. He was born in Rumania and in 1904 moved to Paris where he maintained a studio for the rest of his career. His work marks a decisive break with the long tradition of sculpture in which the idealized human form was the primary bearer of meaning. Brancusi developed a vocabulary of geometric or quasi-geometric shapes to connote human and animal forms in ways that redefined the concept of sculptural representation.

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Different aspects of Brancusi's achievement have inspired successive generations of artists. Earlier regarded as a kind of folk visionary, Brancusi was embraced in the 1960s by Minimalist artists who recognized in his work a precedent for their systematic use of modular shapes and reduction of forms to essential geometric components.

Scott Burton (born 1939) employs a Minimalist formal vocabulary but nevertheless attempts to place sculpture within a larger social and cultural context. He first gained recognition as a performance artist in the early 1970s. During that time, he began to make sculptural objects that could function as furniture, and in the 1980s he has undertaken a number of commissions for the design of public spaces.

Burton has referred to certain of Brancusi's works as "sculpture-approaching-furniture." In this exhibition, Burton wants to demonstrate "that Brancusi radically rejected the distinction between the sculptures and his other created objects," such as seats, tables, bases, and architectural elements. Burton also draws attention to Brancusi's "invention for our century of sculpture as place," in the artist's studio, now recognized as an environmental work of art in its own right, and in the monumental sculptural ensemble created by Brancusi at Tirgu Jiu, Rumania, in 1937-38.

Burton considers that Brancusi's tables and seats are not only functional objects, "but also representations of functional objects. This is of course clearest in Table of Silence (a monumental work in the Tirgu Jiu park) but it is also true of the simplest base. As well as being a specialized form of table, a Brancusi base is a sculpture of a table."

"This complex thinker," Burton continues, "did not give any less of his powerful imagination to his furniture works than he did to his animals and heads. In today's artistic climate Brancusi's embrace of functional objects

seems absolutely contemporary. The American art public is hardly aware of this major facet of the artist."

For the ARTIST'S CHOICE series, contemporary artists are invited to select, juxtapose, and comment on works from the Museum's painting and sculpture collection. The establishment of the series points to the role of the collection of the Museum as a rich resource for creators of contemporary art. "We have to recognize," Kirk Varnedoe states, "that a crucial part of the modern tradition is the creative response of artists to the works of their peers and predecessors. This installation helps us understand more clearly not only the roots of Burton's own work, but an aspect of the larger dialogue between tradition and innovation with contemporary art."

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