

Thoughts on Brancusi and Form

About the relationship between form and surface quality in sculpture, Constantin Brancusi wrote “A high degree of polishing is required of certain materials in the case of more or less absolute forms.” (*This quarter* (Paris), Spring 1925, as cited in Varia, R. 1986. Brancusi. Rizzoli.) That is a powerful statement of Brancusi’s notion of the power of sculptures to evoke a sense of light in viewers. In this view, Brancusi reminds us that the reflectivity of a polished surface converts it, in the nuts and bolts of perception, into a reflection of the environment. More and more as surface smoothness increases, the reflected image approaches a true mathematical projection of the environment, transformed by the shape, or form, of the sculpture.

In that sense, and to the extent that it has proceeded, the only thing to see in a polished surface, aside from its profile and whatever variation in greyscale values is available through directional lighting, is the environment. Consider a boulder of fine-grained, homogeneous black Belgian marble fresh from the field, for example. In perception, this stone is a stone, and although information about the environment such as the intensity and direction of lighting aids perception of the stone, it is perceived as a stone.

To a geologist, perhaps, the multiple-scaled roughness of the stone, when understood as the end result of a process, reveals the roughness of the environment, just as the organized smoothness of some stone streambeds reveals the smooth flow of water and the abrasives that it carries. But although that revelation begins with perception, the image of the environment is conceptual, not perceptual. It is not primary experience, but the result of a logical analysis of primary experience, and so it is a very different thing than what we are considering here.

To a viewer, the rock is itself, and if the boulder becomes a block through the action of a saw, it is a block. To follow Brancusi’s logic to its conclusion in a high polish, the sculpture is defined and determined perceptually more and more by the structure of its environment as it comes more and more to reflect light from its surface. This vision opens space for a whole series of questions about how surface texture functions in perception of form.

Depending on what forms Brancusi considered to be “absolute”, his claim that they *require* high polish leads me to ask whether the reverse may also be true. In my experience of surfacing sculptures, only those that are absolute in some sense can *tolerate* polish, and for the same set of reasons having to do with the coherence of reflected images. A perfect mirror, whether it is planar, spherical, cylindrical, ovoid, or any other absolute form, produces a perfect, one-to-one correspondence between every aspect of the environment that is visible from the mirror and its reflection. Aside from their being flipped right to left for two-eyed viewers, reflections from perfect surfaces are faithful in every way to their originals, again without regard to the actual form of the mirror. It is the smoothness of the surface on every scale, and not its form, that determines the faithfulness of the reflection.

True, it takes a different way of seeing to decode images reflected in spheres than in planes (as M.C. Escher explored in his drawings), and different ways again to appreciate one's own image at the funhouse, or at the edge of the pond. But this is the point, and I think it is the point of Brancusi's declaration about polish. To the extent that a mirror exhibits its own integrity of form, so will its reflection. And for viewers navigating in an environment with known structure, the transformed image of the environment provides the information they require to construct the form of the mirror. In Brancusi's case, the better the mirror, the better its reflection reveals its form. To the extent that a form is, as Brancusi imagined, "absolute", in the sense that it exhibits a simple, smooth, geometric structure with no surprises at any scale, then polish reveals that perfection. It also follows that to the extent that a form lacks this geometric integrity, then polish will reveal its imperfection.