



Impasse Ronsin, in the 1950's

A Memoir of Brancusi

It was by the purest chance that I first met Brancusi. One Sunday afternoon in early autumn, 1948, my wife and I were strolling in Paris. We had been there only a very short time, and I was looking for a studio. On the corner of the rue de Vaugirard and the impasse Ronsin I noticed what seemed to be a three-story factory building, with big sheets of translucent glass forming its walls. Upon inquiry the concierge told me she knew of nothing available but that farther down the block lived a "*très gentil*" sculptor who, she thought, would be sure to help. On a scrap of paper she wrote the name "Brankusi", and, a little stunned, I made my way down the hill to his atelier.

I found Brancusi standing in the garden talking to a friend. Stocky, with a long white beard, he had the most alert and mischievous eyes I have ever seen. He was wearing a beautiful English tweed suit which, curiously enough, I never saw again; in our subsequent encounters he invariably wore the sculptor's blouse and trousers. Shaking his hand was like grasping a piece of stone. His manner appeared simultaneously friendly and withdrawn as he told me he knew of no vacant studios but suggested I speak to his concierge. She turned out to be a kind and gentle person to whom I thereafter paid fortnightly visits because she could not bring herself to tell me there was no hope of having an atelier. A year later she gave me the names and addresses which led to my obtaining a studio.

Brancusi had lived on the Impasse Ronsin

since the 1920's. The entire length of this dead-end passage is less than one hundred yards, and, as a "*cit  d'artistes*", it is characteristic of artists' living quarters in Paris. There are fewer and fewer of these, and it is a pity, because they were a kind of citadel where the artist could live cheaply and according to his individual inclination, stimulated by contact with his fellows; at the same time they allowed him considerable social freedom insofar as his status was automatically recognized, if not always accepted.

Brancusi's five ateliers were similar to all the others of the impasse. Built directly on the ground with no second story, they consisted of four windowless walls, perhaps four yards high, and their dimensions were about six yards by five. The roof was made up of two slanting spans, one of red tile, the other of glass, which started from the top of two opposite walls and met at a height of some eight yards. The span facing north was a glass and let in an unbelievably beautiful light. Brancusi had arranged three of his ateliers to serve as working quarters and installed two for living.

In 1949 few Parisians suspected the bucolic life which reigned in the heart of the metropolis only a few steps from one of its biggest and busiest arteries. Among the abundant foliage, much of which Brancusi tended himself, cats, dogs, chickens, rabbits, and even a majestic goose ran about as they do on any farm. And although one might hear an occasional auto horn, there was a farm like sense of peace.

After my first brief meeting with Brancusi I didn't see him again until I moved to the impasse over a year later. My atelier, uninhabited for some fifteen years, was falling in ruins. It presented

special repair problems, particularly since I was alone at the job and without funds. Brancusi, whose philosophy was that one *should* be alone at a job, without funds, and have to solve special problems in special ways, was almost enthusiastic about my plight. Eventually he would come around of himself to see how the work was progressing. If he found me up against an insoluble problem—which was generally the case—he would rally all the young available artists in the neighborhood and, with tremendous gusto and a look of childlike amusement, lead the work.

It was a cold and rainy autumn, and it soon became impossible to continue without a fire. The installation of the stove was mainly a question of throwing up eight yards of stovepipe. We had a four-yard ladder. A friend and I assembled the sections of stovepipe in the garden and marched the whole eight yards of it into the atelier to Brancusi's gleeful cries of "Avanti, aVANTi !" The problem was clear, and difficult enough. Successively, the two of us climbed to the top of the ladder, hoisted up the stovepipe, and tried to hold it sufficiently steady to fit into the chimney—a hole about six inches in diameter, four yards away. We swayed obstinately and futilely back and forth until, exhausted, we had to look about for another means of surmounting the difficulty. We were mentally manipulating ropes, levers and pulleys when Brancusi with a grunt of disgust seized the pipe and, in spite of his seventy-three years, scrambled up the ladder with it before we could stop him. We stood there transfixed with horror as he swung up and back over our heads until, after a few misses, he actually succeeded in pushing the pipe home. The next day when I came to work I found, hanging from the doorknob, a beautiful

poker which he had forged himself.

One rainy day shortly thereafter I arrived at my studio to find Brancusi on his roof repairing the tiles. I called out to ask if there was something I could do. He said he was finished and started slowly descending the ladder. The rain was coming down hard, and fearing that his wooden shoes might slip, I put out my hand to help. He brusquely pulled back his arm and barked that he needed no assistance whatever.

The independence and self-sufficiency of the man were extraordinary. One summer during his middle years, feeling the need to be alone and work, he borrowed the house of a friend which stood by itself in the middle of a deep woods, and went there with his dog. During his stay he slipped off a high balcony and broke his leg. He hauled himself up a flight of steps to his bed, set the leg as well as he could, and took care of himself for four days until the arrival of his friend. He suffered the rest of his life from rheumatism due to incorrect healing.

Shortly after our installation in the new studio, Brancusi told me he was expecting some people to visit him the following Sunday and asked me to come with my wife. We accordingly crossed the garden path three days later and pulled the wire ring which set off the gong at Brancusi's studio door. This gong, deep and sonorous, always rang a solemn prelude; it could cast a momentous shadow over even the simplest neighborly gossip. We had brought with us, American-fashion, a bottle of wine which we proffered warmly to our host — who, just a warmly or even hotly, refused it. He told us he never drank, had no use for wine, and he snapped his eyes at us furiously.

Nonplussed and unable to think of anything to say, we all confronted each other a moment in perfect silence, and then he turned to his other guests, a well-dressed, handsome young woman and her escort who was built like a football player; we withdrew crestfallen to a corner where we remained for the rest of the afternoon.

The studio was stupefying—I had not seen it before. It was like a cathedral built for a carpenter. Of the walls that had stood between the three studios, one had been removed entirely, leaving a very large room, about fifteen yards by seven, and the other wall had a generous opening about three yards square. The sculptures, most of them covered with cloth, seemed to be quite carefully arranged. In the far corner a round slab of cement, six feet in diameter and eighteen inches thick, superimposed on a smaller cylinder, served as a worktable. Lying across it was a gigantic piece of plaster—the work in progress—*Le Coq*, which he told us was commissioned by U. S. Steel (this work was unfortunately never cast in steel because Brancusi wanted it done in one piece, and U. S. Steel, considering the expense, opted for several pieces.) One wall had a huge red drape, another an ultramarine of the same size, and the couch was yellow.

Brancusi seemed a very different person from the one I had known for the past six months. He appeared to find the situation wearisome, spoke in a monologue which gave the impression of having often been repeated, and as the afternoon wore on, his mood worsening, he gave full vent to a black pessimism which depressed us all.

A dense silence followed Brancusi's statement that the world had become a horrible place, peopled with shopkeepers, where the

streets are full of hatred and even the children are poisoned, and which no longer has any room left for an artist. The silence was broken by the young man, a sculptor it transpired; changing the subject clumsily, he conveyed to Brancusi the best regards of a friend they had in common, an internationally known artist. "*Never heard of him*", said Brancusi, frowning.

The young woman spoke up at this point and told Brancusi that they had brought along photographs of the young sculptor's work (she was taking them out of a manila envelope as she talked), and that they would both be honored if he would look at them and give his opinion. Brancusi pushed the envelope away gently saying, "*My dear lady, if this young man and I were rival shoemakers, would you think of coming to one of us to ask for an honest opinion of the work done by the other ?*"

Night was beginning to fall and so, shortly thereafter, we stood up to take our leave. As we came toward Brancusi he looked up sharply and moved to meet us. "*Stay a little*", he said softly, "*wait till the others leave*". Fifteen minutes later the door closed behind the departing visitors. Brancusi walked immediately to the corner where I had left my coat and the offending Vin d'Alsace, picked up the bottle, brought out a corkscrew and filled the glasses. No one spoke. Then, with a sign, he said, "*All right, I've finished playing the clown now*".

That summer, at the end of the day's work, we would frequently meet without prearranged plan and talk until one or two in the morning. Sometimes we would sit down to a late meal in Brancusi's kitchen, he would pull out a chicken,

broiled in his forging oven, which we would wash down with Asti Spumante, or it might be a roast leg of lamb. Brancusi was a fantastic cook. Everything he made was full of flavor, wholesome and thoroughly uncomplicated. One's appetite in his house could be aroused simply by the vitality of his attitude toward food.

He had built his living quarters around him. His chairs were mushroom-like stools, sculptured from single blocks of wood. The table was an enormous slab of stone; he had even carved a stone loud-speaker. The bed was on a balcony which had no staircase; Brancusi climbed up and down by means of a rope.

Occasionally in the evening he would play the violin and sing Rumanian folk songs as great tears welled up in his eyes. There was nothing sad in these tears; they were natural, simple and overflowing. Sometimes we would listen to records. His collection was eclectic : he would go from New Orleans jazz to Hindu music, from African ritual dances to Chaliapin.

Little by little we learned about Brancusi's past. He told us he had been brought up on a farm by his mother and aunt whom he adored and a father who terrified him. One of his earliest memories was of how he had been lowered into the wine barrels to clean out the bottoms, the only person on the farm small enough to fit in and do the job. His sense of pride at this, he said, kept him from misbehaving until the age of five, when he took advantage of the situation to get drunk, and was soundly slapped.

He spent his childhood carving and whittling when he could and even managed to make some very decent violins. His parents enrolled him at the School of Applied Arts in Bucharest, where

he was suddenly seized with wanderlust and the desire to sculpt. One day he set out on foot, without baggage or money, and walked by way of Vienna, Germany and Strasbourg to Paris.

Paris was incredible then, he said—impossible to imagine now, the atmosphere of love and warmly fraternal human relations which prevailed at that period. He took a job as waiter in a restaurant where he did the dishes part of the day; he studied and worked the rest of the time, and slept not at all. He was again enrolled at the School of Applied Arts, in Paris this time; but he had seen the work of Rodin and was beginning to know what he wanted. He changed to Beaux-Arts, where he studied with Antonin Mercié, and then some ladies of the Rumanian court became interested in him and began to help him.

Meanwhile the official Salon accepted three heads, influenced by Rodin, which Brancusi had sent in. This was a considerable feat for a young sculptor, especially an unknown and foreign one. He went to the *vernissage*, a man of twenty-five in top hat and tails, where he was presented to Rodin, also officially dressed. With a certain trepidation he asked Rodin for a criticism of his work and was dismissed with an equivocal "*Pas mal*". "*But, Maître*", Brancusi brought out, "*anyone would tell me that. From you I expected something more*". Rodin scrutinized him and said, "*Eh bien, ce n'est pas mauvais, but you went too fast*". I must have looked startled, for Brancusi, showing me photographs of the heads, smiled and said, "*Well, don't be upset, it was perfectly true! I'd turned out all three in one afternoon*".

This brief interchange with Rodin stimulated Brancusi into a good period of work. One day he was invited to Rodin's house for a lunch which had

been arranged by the Rumanian ladies, who knew of his passionate admiration for the older sculptor. In the middle of the luncheon the surprise was sprung. Everything had been arranged: the ladies would pay, and Brancusi would study with Rodin. Brancusi said he stopped eating and felt hot and cold all over. He reflected for a moment and then, almost to his own amazement, said, "*No, I can't, I won't do it. Under big oaks nothing ever grows*". Brancusi paused a moment in his narration and said, "*Imagine how terrible it was, flouting everyone like that, my patrons, Rodin, everyone !*" Rodin left the table and went to an adjoining room where one of the ladies sought him out, begging him to forgive the young Brancusi, who certainly didn't know what he was saying. "*No*", said Rodin, "*after all, he's quite right*".

A bit later, the first major change occurred in his work. It came over him that he had had enough of the preoccupation with flesh and muscles, enough of "beefsteak", to quote him exactly, and that his work must take another form. He received a commission for a statue of a woman which he almost completed in his earlier style, and then suddenly destroyed, irritated with his own lack of audacity. He redid it entirely, and it was evident from the photo he showed me that, with its elongated limbs, the statue marked a strong step in an entirely new direction; this was the beginning of a road which led, many years later, through profound evolutions, to Brancusi's work as we know it.

In the early 1920's, Brancusi submitted *Mademoiselle Pogany* to the Salon des indépendants. He told me that Paul Signac,

president of the Salon, condemned the statue as phallic and indecent, and insisted that it be removed. This decree caused a commotion among the artists, who determined to make a fuss. Brancusi was urged by many to go down to the Préfecture de Police and protest. As he and Fernand Léger, setting off on foot to do so, descended the monumental stairs of the Grand Palais, feeling ran so high that they received three cheers from the artists massed below. But now Brancusi and Léger came out into the open air and made for the *quais*. It was a magnificent day and, more or less exalted, they began to sing. After five blocks they felt almost peaceable; after ten they realized that life was too good, the day too wonderful, and their frame of mind too non-belligerent to waste time at the Préfecture. So they turned off and went home to Montparnasse.

He always had a good deal of difficulty with dealers, who wouldn't buy his work, with critics, who didn't understand it, and with salon jurors, who rejected it. At the end of his life, when I knew him, he hated all three clans and wouldn't allow them in his studio. There were some notable individual exceptions, however. He said to me one day, when I showed him an article about his work by a young *avant-garde* critic, "*God, what is there on earth more idiotic than a critic, unless it be a young critic ?*"

Once he told a story brought to his mind by some rather high-flown statements on art by a well-known painter. "*I used to know an explorer*", he said, "*who often went to the East in the course of his work. His mother, a very pious person, had asked him several times to bring her back a relic, and although he always meant to do so he invariably returned without it. Finally, on the eve*

of a new departure, he said to her, Don't worry, this time you'll have your relic, I won't forget. Nonetheless, at the end of the trip, he was much disturbed to find himself starting home once again empty-handed. He happened to look down at the side of the road where, by some lucky chance, there lay a dog's skeleton. He picked up a thigh bone and put it in his knapsack. Upon his arrival home, he took out the relic and gave it to his mother. Joyously she put it on the mantelpiece. And so it is that peace and happiness reigned in the protected household ever after".

It was with rather a puzzled air that he told of his relations with James Joyce, who had come to the studio to have a black-and-white portrait done for a special edition of *Work in Progress*. Since Brancusi didn't read English, he had known of Joyce until then only by reputation. "Joyce told me he'd asked his editor for an avant-garde artist and that the man had suggested me as one of the best. He came regularly with his wife to sit for me. I was happy about it and worked hard on the sketch until I thought it was just right, at which point I showed it to Joyce. He was astounded.

– But I thought you were a modern artist, he exclaimed.

– But it is modern, I said.

– But it looks like me.

– I had hopped so.

– But I thought you would do an abstract portrait.

– But I'm not an abstract artist!

I realized at this point that he wanted something totally different from what I had had in mind, and so I made a few geometric scrawls on a paper, called it *Portrait of James Joyce*, and off he went, content".

Once on twice in our conversations Brancusi alluded to problems of getting down to work. He said, "An artist generally has the attitude that he must stop everything and get work, that work itself is something special, sacred, apart from life. On the contrary, a man should work as he breathes, as he sweeps the floor, easily and naturally, without thinking too much about it. In fact, I can think of no better way of getting to work than drifting into it after sweeping the floor and cleaning up. An artist should always do his own chores".

Brancusi considered the intelligence an impediment to creativity. He often said that finding a means to make it recede into the background was the most important step in getting to work. "Je fais pipi sur l'intelligence", he said angrily. He told how one day he had arrived at a sort of trance while in the middle of work, "J'ai senti que j'ai touché là au néant". He found his thumb split open, the floor bespattered with blood, and he had no idea of how or when he had hurt himself. The statue he was working at had evolved, he discovered, to an entirely new and particularly successful stage; he could not have said how. He told me he believed he had been working two or three hours in the complete absence of the faculties of intelligence and consciousness.

He had a deep hatred for those who were bitten by the desire for fame. According to Brancusi the world was divided into two tribes. One he likened to the dwellers of a pyramid-city, up the sides of which people kicked, bit and struggled their way to the top, where at best there was room for only three or four. While those on top fought to maintain themselves, those below grabbed at their feet in a desperate effort to displace them. Here all was anguish and unhappiness. The other tribe

was made up of anonymous people in the fields—working in solitude, unconcerned with fame—who lived a historic lives and were happy. One's salvation is decided within oneself, he insisted. Those who permit themselves to be drawn into competition are thereby allowing a degeneration of their creative forces.

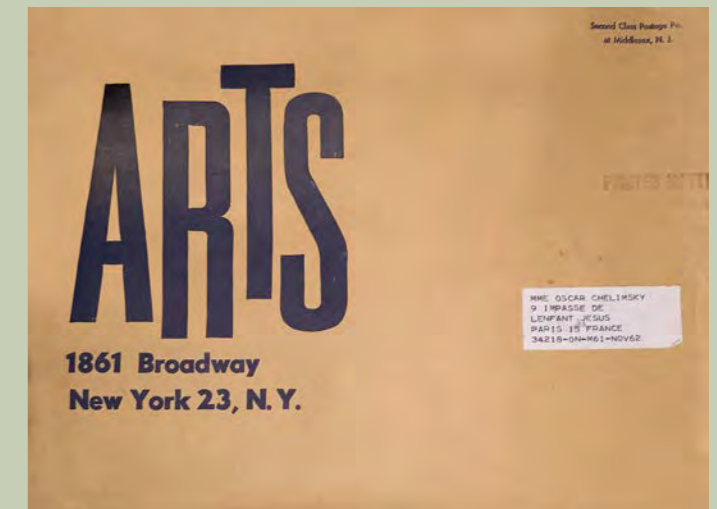
Uppermost in Brancusi's nature, it seems to me, was a love of the natural, the humble, the useful.

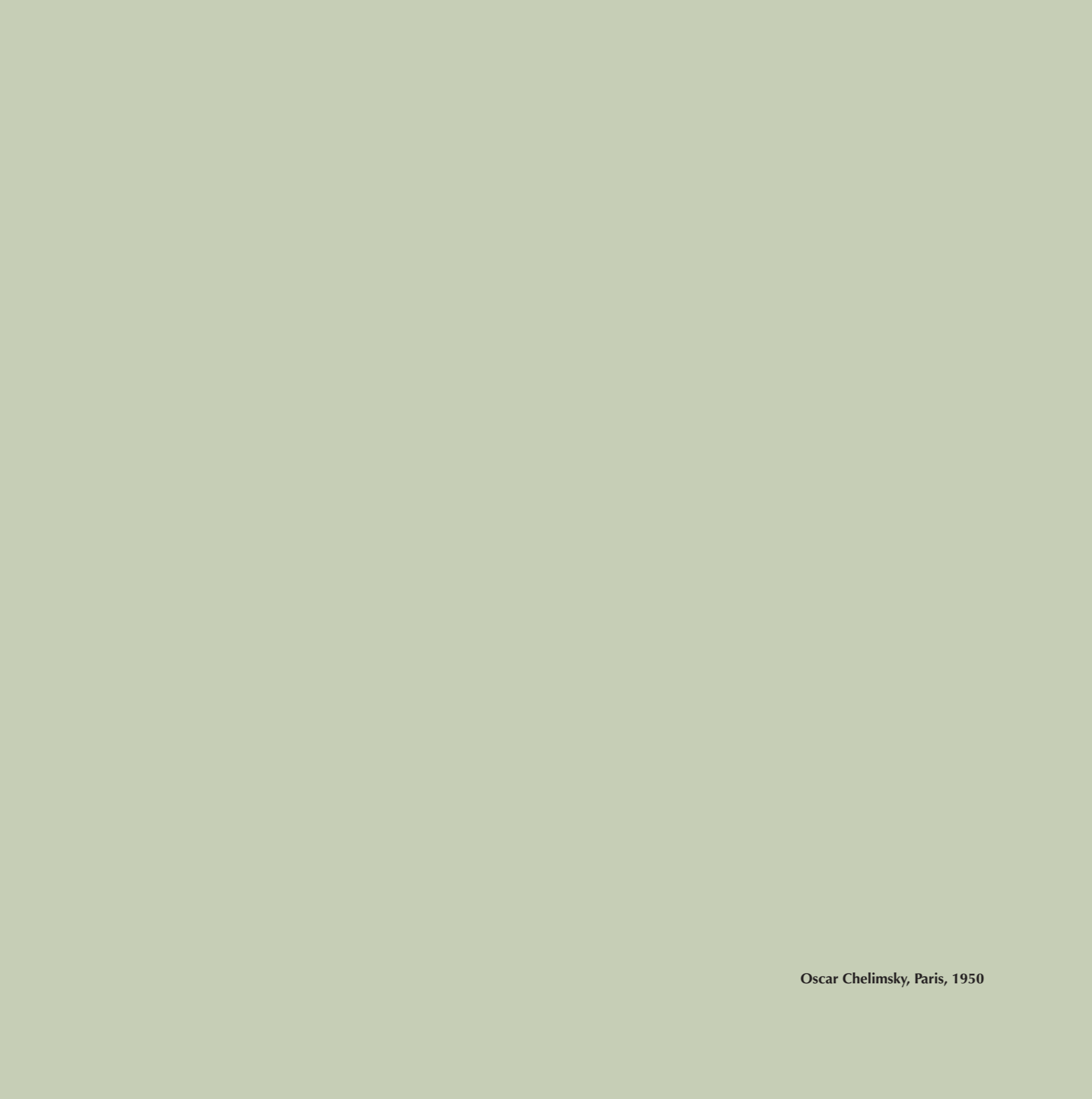
"Michelangelo", he said, "is too strong. His moi overshadows everything. Who could imagine having a Michelangelo in bedroom, having to get undressed in front of it?"

He was determined to keep "cabotinage", or "hamming", out of his own life, and it was for this reason that he eluded the camera. But prophetically he used to say, "Just wait till I'm dead. You'll see. The vultures will all be there".

Not twelve hours after his death a reporter somehow gained access to his studio, and a few days later a sensational article appeared in *Paris-Match* with an enormous photograph of Brancusi on his deathbed.

Oscar Chelimsky
Arts, June 1958





Oscar Chelimsky, Paris, 1950

