

MĂIASTRA:

A History of Romanian Sculpture in Twenty-Four Parts

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PART V: MEDUSA

Even as a young woman, Milița was not what you would call beautiful. She had large, fleshy jowls that obscured her neck like a dewlap, and made her already squat, hunched figure—different from those of her elegantly proportioned, delicately connected contemporaries Irina Codreanu and Zoe Baicoianu—appear as a solid lump of clay. She had buggy eyes with heavy lids and a long, sharp nose that cast a shadow over her carnivorous mouth. This is my portrait of Milița Petrascu, one of the most talented sculptors in Romanian history, and a personal favorite of mine.

Petrascu was born on New Year's Eve in 1892, in what is now Moldova, then Bessarabia. When she was sixteen, she moved to Moscow, where she would begin her formal sculpture education. She studied at the Stroganov School of Fine Arts under the great Soviet sculptor Sergei Kononov, the solemnity of whose cracked stone crag of a nose was made playful by his wispy white hair and beard. Kononov's representational work was mythic in both scale and sensibility and by the time Milița got to him, Kononov had sculpted almost every significant figure in Russian history. His chisel's monumental ambition served as solid foundation for Milița's education.

After Moscow, Milița moved to Munich, where she studied with Vasily Kandinsky and Alexei von Jawlensky, one half of the German artist group Die Blaue Vier (the Blue Four). Painting at the time was further afield into modernism than sculpture was, and the heroes of Abstract Expressionist painting significantly influenced young painters and sculptors alike. Milița next moved to Paris, where she sought out and studied under Antoine Bourdelle, "a great sculptor, but as a teacher . . . by far better at giving Sunday sermons to old Protestant English ladies,"¹ and Henri Matisse, "a man with rosy cheeks, framed by rust-colored hair and beard, jutting out eyes, lacking expression, wearing eye glasses."²

Like Pablo Picasso, Matisse used sculpture as a way of solving problems of light and perspective in three dimensions before reducing them to the canvas. And while the undoubtedly important sculptural works of these two men succeeded in sending formal statuary free falling into abstraction, the two remained, fundamentally, painters. This is where Petrașcu diverged from her teacher. The difference between painter and sculptor is the difference between parishioner and priest, pew and pulpit. While painters render with the fullness of their sensibility the beauty of God's creations in order to be judged favorably in his eyes, sculptors aim to emulate his power, even to supersede it, creating new beings, a new nature. This is not a critique of painters; on the contrary, the Icarus-like striving of sculptors is what renders most sculpture absurd, even tyrannical. But it is exactly this quixotic ambition that opens, on occasion, a distant, glowing door to the sublime through which sculpture alone may walk. And though Petrașcu was never entirely comfortable in Constantin Brancusi's primitive abstraction, and shied away from the allegorical masculinity of Auguste Rodin, whose nose could have achieved government rank, her sculptural portraiture had in it, somewhere in the brow, the mouth, the jowls, that green-glowing hint of sublimity.

Her time in France was fruitful, and in 1919 she displayed a bust in the prestigious Salon des Artistes Indépendants, which only a year later would play host to that famous prizefight between the Cubists and the Dadaists. There was where she met countryman Brancusi, who by this time was already at the forefront of the Parisian modern art scene. On visiting her studio for the first time, Brancusi told the young sculptor she was "better than Rodin!" The two became fast friends, and she turned her sculptural gaze toward him: "Two strong traces from the nose to the mouth gave him sometimes the expression of a disappointed

1 Petru Vintila, *Milița* (Heliopolis Editura, 1971), 46.

2 Ibid.

child, in contrast with a sparkling energy of the eyes.”³

Petrașcu’s work in the late twenties and early thirties emulated Brancusi’s in both form and content. She stripped down her sculptures to the elemental. She worked in wood and rough clay. She began to incorporate stone plinths to support her primitive shapes, most notably *Idol*, *Angel*, and *Mask*, all on display at the National Museum in Bucharest. The museum, by selecting these particular works to present, would have you believe that Petrașcu’s most important sculptures were those directly inspired by her mentor’s. But while they are remarkable, these works are not her most important. That honor belongs to her figurative work: “Fragile and delicate or full of grandness and force, in all its living states nature has such an overwhelming personality that you can find it wholly only in the perpetual movement of the portraits.”⁴

Whatever the comparative merits of her elemental sculptures or modernist portraits, the division of artists into rival gangs seemed to have had little appeal to Milița, who moved back to Romania in 1925 with her new husband Emil, a brilliant young radio engineer. [Note: By the 1970s, Milița and Emil were reportedly under surveillance by the Communist State for suspicion of leaking information to the Turkish government. They were by no means the only Romanian intellectuals under such scrutiny.] She made her most important work in the 1930s, during the final act of Romania’s interbelic “golden age.” And though she sculpted men, notably Brancusi, George Enescu, I. L. Caragiale, and Oscar Cisek, the heart of her work is found in her portraits of the noteworthy women of her time.

Her busts of the Romanian pianists Clara Haskil and Cella Delavrancea are two of her most complex and stunning works. It is not hard to imagine Petrașcu enamored with the faces of classical musicians, the balance between their exterior composure—the closed eyes, the pursed lips—and the fiery combustion those faces masked. She was later commissioned to sculpt a marble bust of Marie Victoria, Queen of Romania, a softened and kindly effigy of the British royal, whose pinched nose would have undoubtedly agreed with Marcel



TOP TO BOTTOM The actress Agepsina Macri, marble, 1930–35. Regina Maria, bronze. Milița Petrașcu with Queen Maria

Proust’s Mme. Cottard that a portrait “should be like.” Petrașcu found inspiration in women of all shapes and standings, however, and one of her favorite muses was the Romanian film actress Agepsina Macri, a smoky, shape-shifting beauty whose arrow-like nose was softened by the painted Eastern orbs hovering above it. Petrașcu sculpted a number of busts and statuettes of Macri, each one capturing the actress in different emotional “roles.” One of these statues represents Agepsina as a grieving Antigone and tops the actress’ grave in Bellu cemetery in Bucharest.

Petrașcu continued her work in funerary memorial in 1935 when she sculpted the crypt of legendary WWI heroine Ecaterina Teodoroiu, which stands in the center of the Romanian city of Targu Jiu. [Note: It was Petrașcu who convinced Brancusi, on behalf of the National League of Gorj Women, to build his famous sculptural ensemble along the axis of this same city.]

As a student and later as a young professor, I met Milița Petrașcu a number of times. Despite the assuredly little impression these encounters would have had on her, I do often wonder what features of mine would have struck her, if any. Perhaps my nose: a thin scrim of flesh stretched tightly over a sharply arcing armature, fixed delicately on my face like a kite stuck in a tree.

The eventual jilting of representation for abstraction in sculpture was inevitable. The New Sculptors had so mastered the craft of sculpting that their flawless representations bordered on grotesque. The welcome return of sculpture to the elemental, and the consequent drift into abstraction gave the medium room to grow. The reason Petrașcu’s name is so often omitted from conversations about the great European sculptors of the twentieth century is not simply because she was a woman—though this plays a role—

but because her particular talent, specifically the fixing of human faces in stone, had become passé. But I do miss the days when the entire history of art could be found hiding in a single plastic gesture, one broken nose, a slight deviation from a familiar path. **MR**

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3 Ibid., 37.

4 Ibid., 28.