

The following is an example of a research essay that does a good job touching on all of the assignment's required content. I have labeled such content throughout this essay with a heading in red so you can identify what each of these items might contain. Note how well specific examples are engaged to help make points. Also note how well the essay is organized with single topic paragraphs not simply written as strung together reading notes.

- An overview of the artist's biography (i.e., their career including when and where they lived and worked. To not exceed more than ¾ of a page. The more this addresses their work as a sculptor the better.
- A characterization of the type of sculpture they have made (maybe some comments as to how their work has varied over time if relevant).
- A characterization of the artist's expressive concerns and intentions.
- The context in which they have created their art (patronage, social conditions etc.) and how that context has possibly effected their art making.
- A characterization of the school(s) of artistic thought that the artist has participated in (including a description of these ideologies and commentary as to how this artist fits into or has varied from these ideologies.)
- A characterization of how the artist defines and deals with the issue of "representation" including attitudes towards materiality vs. illusion, realist depiction vs. expressive content, objective observation vs. artistic subjectivity. (see lecture PDF to jog your understanding of this)

Example Artist Research Essay by Julia Rasnake, Fall 2010

Brancusi: The Essence of Modern Sculpting

(Artist's biography ...) Constantin Brancusi was born in February of 1876 to a peasant family in the Carpathian Mountains of Rumania, but left home when he was eleven years old. He had no formal schooling and was not literate until the age of eighteen. He slaved over menial jobs in Rumania, finally entering the School of Arts and Crafts at age nineteen (Bowness, 50). He graduated with honors in 1898, at age twenty-two. From there, he traveled to Bucharest to enroll in the School of Fine Arts, with financial help from a locally administered grant. He excelled there, specializing in sculpture, and developing a talent for portraiture. After graduating from the School of Fine Arts, he traveled across Europe on foot to reach the bustling city of Paris, the epicenter of the art world at that time (Geist, 3). There, he supported himself with many portrait commissions, but was unsatisfied with portraiture alone. Though his talent achieved him a place as an artist in Rodin's studio, Brancusi was still unsatisfied: he struck out on his own, knowing that he would never become known if he remained under the

pupilage of Rodin (Hulten, 66).

(Context in which he created his art ...) Soon after this, Brancusi began to garner fame and appreciation for pieces of art in his already distinctive personal style. His first participations in exhibitions were successful; he had already shown his sculptures in Paris, London, New York, and his home country of Rumania by 1913 (Geist, 5). Brancusi remained in Paris for much of his life, thriving in a society of artists constantly breaking down the boundaries of classical art through fauvism and cubism (Hulten, 10). He also spent time in America, and as he got older often traveled. He visited India, Egypt, Holland, and often returned to Rumania. He received much recognition in all of these communities, and the differences in climate and culture were inspirational for him (Bach, 42). He continued to work into old age, utilizing and recreating the same motifs in monumental proportions. He became a French citizen a year before his death, which occurred on March 16, 1957 (Geist, 9).

(Schools of artistic thought that the artist has participated in ...) As a developing artist in Paris, Brancusi was surrounded by daring artists, many of which were fauvists and cubists. Scholar Sydney Geist lists that "Brancusi was a friend of Rousseau, Modigliani, Matisse, Leger, Apollinaire, Jacob, Picasso, Gonzalez, Cocteau, Cendrars, Lipchitz, Pach, and many other artists and writers," (Geist, 3). As Picasso and other cubists broke down the boundaries of classical art in terms of perspective and shape, and fauvists such as Matisse questioned the objectivity of color, Brancusi worked alongside them. Though he was influenced by both groups, he did not subscribe to either: he abstracted and simplified in his own unique style (Rowell, 48). For Brancusi, the most influential aspect of this artistic environment was the questioning that powered both movements. Brancusi was forever seeking the essential reality of a form so that he could represent it in the most intimate truthfulness. Hulten states that "early in his career, especially when he lived in Bucharest, Brancusi's quest was rather a solitary one, but in Paris he met an entire generation of artists absorbed by the same issues," (Hulten, 8). Just as the cubists questioned the reality of one-point perspective, and fauvists questioned the observation and replication

of color into classical realism painting, (Attitudes/approach toward representation...) Brancusi questioned representation itself. He came to believe that the role of the artist is not to recreate what one sees, but create forms that reflect the greatest degree of essential truth about the subject. This age of questioning in Paris undoubtedly allowed Brancusi to fully grasp his potential to seek these essential truths: his artwork was received at a time when the public delighted in such searching for answers (Bowness, 52).

(Type of sculpture ...) Though influenced heavily by the art society of Paris, Brancusi's sculptures are still easily recognizable and differ greatly from the works of artists with which he surrounded himself. Perhaps his background as a shepherd boy in the rural mountains of Rumania gave him the deep appreciation for the smooth shapes he sculpted—and always in the most permanent and lasting materials, like marble and stone (Hulten, 20). Though his work is most often characterized by these simplified, rounded forms, his art shows a marked development as he grows older and gains the freedom to experiment with style and quest for the essence of his subjects. His early sculptural portraits are detailed, naturalistic, and achieve a degree of realism and personality that made them desired as commissions. However, as years pass, he takes this style of portraiture and makes many versions of each piece, each more smooth and featureless than the last: "in his search for the essential, Brancusi simplified until he reached a pure and perfect form" (Bowness, 51).

(Attitude/approach toward representation in the context of a specific example...) This shift is evident when one compares his work *Sleeping Child*¹ in 1907, and *The Newborn*² in 1915. *Sleeping Child* is a piece loosely based on the classical concept of realism: the sculpture is a head that has the chubby cheeks, the smooth chin, button nose and soft features of a human baby but "is...striving to be an independent object: an ambition at odds with its naturalism," (Geist, 32). In a manner that mirrors the

¹ See Appendix A, Fig. 1

² See Appendix A, Fig. 2

style of Rodin, Brancusi does not attempt to make the marble appear as the flawless skin of a baby. By letting the marble appear to a certain degree as stone instead of making it mimic skin, Brancusi experiments with letting the medium behave in its natural way (Rowell, 39). This is an attempt to step away from art as illusory, and towards art as a created object with representative qualities. This period of time is marked with pieces in this style, such as *Torment II*, and *Bust of a Boy*³ (Rowell, 43).

(Attitudes/approach toward representation...) Over the next decade, Brancusi leaves this style behind in favor of a greater simplification of his forms. He does not worry himself with representing the personal features of his subjects, but instead smoothes them and rounds them into more generalized forms. However, he does not let this tendency affect his ability to portray the character, nature, and emotive qualities of the subject. This development is evident in *Newborn* (1915), which has subject very similar to *Sleeping Child*, but differs greatly in the style of depiction. *Newborn* (as seen in appendix A) is also the head of a child, but it is simplified and abstracted. It is a rounded, smooth oblong shape, with decisive and smooth slices removed to suggest the full cheeks of a child and the vague shadowing of a small nose. This sculpture is evocative of a sleeping infant without portraying any facial features in a naturalistic way. (Context in which he created his art ...) This shows a clear development away from the influence of Rodin: Brancusi's manner of representation still emphasizes sculpture as a created object, but rather than calling attention to the medium he works in as Rodin did, he sloughed away the outer layers of the subject and recreated only what he felt to be the absolutely essential shapes (Bach, 24-5). (Artist's expressive concerns and intentions ...) He continues to sculpt in this highly abstracted style throughout much of his life; his *Sleeping Muse* motif, *Danaide* pieces, *Prometheus*, and *Beginning of the World*⁴ all utilize these smooth-featured oblong shapes to evoke the unfathomable essence of the heads and minds that are his subjects. They become "decontextualized...timeless," (Rowell, 43). *Beginning of*

³ See Appendix B, Fig. 1 and 2 respectively.

⁴ See Appendix C, Fig.1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively.

the World in particular embodies this style: a slightly irregular egg shape, marble white, sits by itself on a pedestal. This piece has been interpreted to be an egg, “a symbol of life of immeasurable antiquity and universal validity,” (Bowness, 53), and a head which holds “the brain... the life force itself,” (Hulton, 9). In both cases, the sculpture is interpreted as filled with the spark of new creation and thought.

Brancusi used photography to create distance between himself and his sculptures, using it as “an instrument of documentation and verification,” (Bach, 312). He constantly photographed his sculptures and his studio, which he saw as a whole: a constantly morphing work of art created through the combination of sculptures. The pedestal and the surrounding space were just as essential to the sculpture as the marble itself (Bach 317). With this in mind, he often submitted his sculptures as a *group mobile*⁵, a specially arranged group of sculptures constituting, he felt, the recognition of a whole new work (Hulten, 18).

Editorial comment: Julia, interesting and important info but you’ve not managed to contextualize it in terms of your essay as a whole. Might you find a connection between this impulse to consider his sculptures as part of an ‘always morphing totality’ with your earlier comments about his way of searching for a simplified truth?

(Artist’s expressive concerns and intentions in terms of specific artworks...) Of these sculptures, much photographed and constantly reborn through spacial comparisons with other works, his bird sculptures are perhaps most well-known. The graceful, arching figures capture the streamlined movement of birds in flight, yet they possess no wings, no eyes, no beaks, faces or feet. There is not a feather to be seen, yet Brancusi has immortalized the beauty of flight in these sculptural forms.⁶ They are simple, yet imbued with liveliness of movement. This is a triumph of Brancusi’s search for truth in a world of illusory art: he strips away the surface complexity of birds and portrays only what he sees as most essential to their form. He justifies this saying, “simplicity is complexity resolved,” (Bach, 23).

⁵ Appendix A, Fig. 3: Example of *Sleeping Child* and *Newborn* as a *group mobile*.

⁶ See Appendix D, figure 1

Rather than recreating the appearance of a bird in a realistic sense, Brancusi instead sculpted an abstract, simplified shape which he felt represented the essential nature of a bird in flight. Thus, he asserted that the purpose of artistic representation is not to make an exact replica of the subject, but to resolve its complexity until one can uncover and pinpoint its vitality and essence.

(Attitudes/approach toward representation...) Because of this, representation in its most literal sense was not Brancusi's aim. He forgoes the "mimesis of living form" for "representations [of] the ideas which 'lie behind' natural objects," (Bach, 22-3). He did not desire to create art that created the illusion of being lifelike: he felt art should be recognized as a created object and share not the appearance, but the nature of the subject. Hulten asserts that "Brancusi defined sculpture as an object, then he concerned himself specifically with aspects other than representation," (Hulten, 8). These aspects were his constant search for the essence of the subject matter. This, rather than representation, was Brancusi's greatest concern.

Brancusi has been described as an artist constantly in search of truth. The questioning of artistic expression that took place in Paris in the early 1900s and thus in Brancusi's studio can be summarized by Hulten, who writes:

How...could a work of art have anything to do with truth when it is basically an illusion, a depiction of something from the real world—a man, a landscape, a still life—in the form of another piece of reality made of canvas and pigments?

Brancusi's art, made of marble and bronze and oak wood, never escaped that constant questioning about how to create something truthful through a system build on creating illusion. Brancusi's answer, as recorded by Alan Bowness, is that "it is not the outward form that is real, but the essence of things...it is impossible to express anything real by imitating the outer surface of things" (Bowness, 51). To get to the secret heart of the nature of his subject, Brancusi sloughed away the exterior to come in contact with the hard, truthful self hidden beneath.

Appendix A

Fig. 1



<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/brancusi/room2.htm>

Fig. 2



http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81655

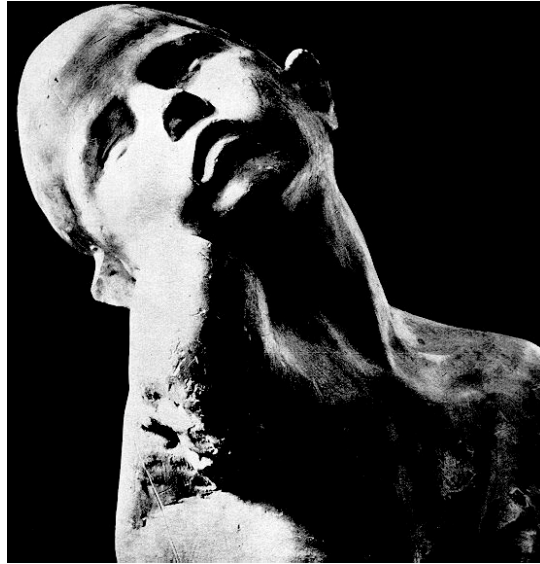
Fig. 3



<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/originalcopy/images/section04/opener.jpg>

Appendix B

Fig. 1: Torment II



<http://robinrile.com/blog/?tag=auguste-rodin>

Fig. 2: Bust of a boy



<http://www.zuzafun.com/uggenhe-art>

Appendix C

Fig. 2: Danaïde (ca. 1918, Bronze)

Figure 1: Sleeping Muse (1909, marble)



<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/brancusi/>



<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=1430&searchid=9966&tabview=image>



Figure 3: Prometheus (1911, marble)

<http://awp.diaart.org/kos/images/branprom.html>

Appendix C Continued

Fig. 4: Beginning of the World (1920, Marble)



<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/uggenhe/room3.htm>

Appendix D

Fig. 1: Bird In Space (ca. 1932)



<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/piece/?search=Bird%20in%20Space&page=&f=Title&object=76.2553.51>

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