

Abstract. *The paper aims to shortly retrace the history of the Écorché made by Constantin Brâncuși as a school project in 1901, while he was still a student at the art school in Bucharest.¹ Brâncuși completed it in two years with the support and guidance of his anatomy professor, Dimitrie Gerota, with whom the artist actually shared the authorship of the artwork. It was the first such project ever made in Romania, so it was important for both, student and teacher, that it would be well received by the Academia and the art scene. Created at the beginning of the last century, the Écorché was a very modern and advanced idea, its making requiring high-level skills, unusual and unprecedented, not only for an art school graduate, but even for the entire scene of Romanian sculpture. The work was regarded as a masterpiece, and appreciated as an essential stage in the ensemble of Brâncuși's oeuvre. The paper presents a summary of the analysis of the Écorché and the copies made by Brâncuși at the time.*

Keywords: *Brâncuși, Gerota, sculpture, anatomy, model, original, copy.*

The creation of the *Écorché* was related to the European phenomenon of studying and understanding the human body and nature, a process started in the 16th and 17th centuries, and embraced later by both the artistic and medical milieus.

The simple study of a live model, articulated model or skeleton was not considered sufficient anymore for the proper understanding of the complex structure and mechanisms of the human anatomy and motion. Beginning with complex personalities such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Vasari, Dürer, Andrea Vesalius and J. A. Houdon, the artists constantly strived to create increasingly accurate and anatomically precise models and representations of the human body.

The study of the human body and its complex mechanisms, performed by the

THE ÉCORCHÉ BY BRÂNCUȘI AND GEROTA. ARTISTIC CREATION AND ANATOMICAL SCIENCE

Elena Dumitrescu

artists of various ages, and later systematized in the early Belle Arte Schools from Europe, has often raised the issue of the ways, the methods and the subject best suited for learning.

The relation between artist and anatomist is crucial for the making of anatomical models destined to artistic studies, and from this point of view the *Écorché* of Dr. Gerota and Brâncuși, even if it was the first of its kind in Romania, is not an isolated phenomenon in the field, and it was born from the need to bring the local level of the anatomical studies to a European standard.

The School of Fine Arts from Bucharest founded in 1864 followed the – already traditional – French model, and included in the first curricula, for the first years, “studies of the ancient statues”, bust and full figure, “anatomical studies” from the second year, and “studies of live models” – busts and full figures, starting with the third year.

The context in which Brâncuși and his anatomy professor Dimitrie Gerota M. D. made the *Écorché* was not favorable. The art school in Bucharest was, at the time, functioning on a rather small budget and without its own venue², the classes were hosted by various other institutions, such as the Romanian Athenaeum or the

University, and most of the professors were either foreign artists – several of them became Romanian citizens – or had been at least schooled abroad, until to the formation of a new generations of Romanian sculptors. As for the art scene, those were according to V.G. Paleolog³, the so-called ‘dry’ years of Romanian sculpture.

The school offered theoretical classes, such as art history, aesthetics, geometry and artistic anatomy, and for the practical studies, the models consisted mainly of plaster casts of antique sculptures ordered from Paris by Theodor Aman – a famous painter himself, the school founder and its first director. One of these moulds, a reduced replica of Houdon’s “*Écorché* with extended arm”, one of the most common anatomical models in the European arts schools, is the one Brancuși also uses as one of his models.

From the point of view of a sculptor, such a work does not imply only the thorough knowledge of the human anatomy, but also the understanding of the mechanisms which determined the particular shapes and volumes related to the movement and stance. The young student thus created a flawless human architecture, with a perfect balance between the stance and the represented volumes, both anatomically precise and harmonious from a sculptural, artistic point of view. The fact that the young student had to adapt the size of the didactic material – approximately 177 cm tall – to a scale noticeably larger than life size, made the challenge of this work even greater, and defintory for his mastering of his chosen profession.

This work has been regarded as a true masterpiece, and at the same time, completed a very important stage in his formation. Brancuși himself regarded it more as a work of art rather than a school project, and often referred to it in his autobiographies⁴. The work had a great impact on the art scene and Academia of the time, and it marked the moment when Brancuși gained admiration and respect from everybody, but most importantly he proved to himself that he had reached a remarkable level for a 25-year-old student, a skill level which he assimilated and

integrated in his further studies and later synthesized in his work.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the show organized at the Brummer Gallery in New York in 1933, Brancuși insisted to exhibit the photo of the *Écorché*. He did so to prove to all those who criticized his art that the evolutions of his volumes had been a natural process, and that his capacity of synthesis was grounded in a profound and thorough understanding of human anatomy. He wrote, in one of his aphorisms on this very vision of form, that “in art, simplicity is not a goal in itself, but something that we come nearer to, as we come nearer to the real meaning of things, as simplicity is just revealed complexity, and in order to understand it, we have to connect to its essence, and let it nurture us...”⁵

Brancuși’s anatomy professor, Dimitrie Gerota M.D., played a key part in the making of this artwork. Brancuși had the important support of Dr. Gerota, in the entire process of conceiving, multiplying and selling the *Écorché* to various Romanian institutions.

Dimitrie Gerota, a physician and founder of an important hospital in Bucharest (1909)⁶, studied at the end of the 19th century in Paris and Berlin – where he worked as the assistant of the great anatomist Gottfried von Waldeyer Hartz in 1895, at the anatomical institute the latter he was running. His experience there motivated him upon his return to his native country to develop his own method of preparing anatomical specimens by means of wax injections. At the National Scientific Exhibition from București in 1903, he received the golden medal, for his museum of anatomical-surgical specimens, made entirely by himself. The professional experience brings him near several anatomical specimens, so the idea of an *Écorché* figure, made for the students of both medical and artistic studies – schools where he taught – was born probably during his studies in France and Germany. The making of an *Écorché* figure for the schools of art and medical studies was an early idea of his and this was possible due to the talent and skill of his young student and friend, Constantin Brancuși.

The *Écorché* approached the human body from a double perspective, both artistic and anatomical, and its realization and further duplication had clearly targeted both the artistic and medical areas of education, in which professor Gerota was equally – and famously – active at the time.

What we know from his biographies⁷ is that Brăncuși attended dissections at the medical faculty and made several plaster casts. This is mentioned in a letter addressed in 1903 to the Director of the Fine Arts School of Bucharest by its students, in which they asked for the acquisition of the *Écorché* for their

anatomy lessons: “One of our colleagues, who recently graduated from the Sculpture Department, Mr. C. Brăncuși, has made an anatomical study inspired by the ancient statue of *Antinous*, a study which deserves our full attention since it was perfected under the supervision of professor Dr. Gerota and was based on in-depth studies of the bodies available for dissection at the Faculty of Medical Studies. If we had it in front of us, to accompany the explanations of our Professor, it would help us very much in understanding the artistic forms of the human body, from an anatomical point of view.”⁸



Fig. 1 – Brăncuși in Romania visiting his lifelong friend Dr. Dimitrie Gerota, 1938 / the personal Archive of Dr. Ion Gerota.



Fig. 2 – The copy at the Art Museum in Craiova, detail / Photo Elena Dumitrescu, 2010.

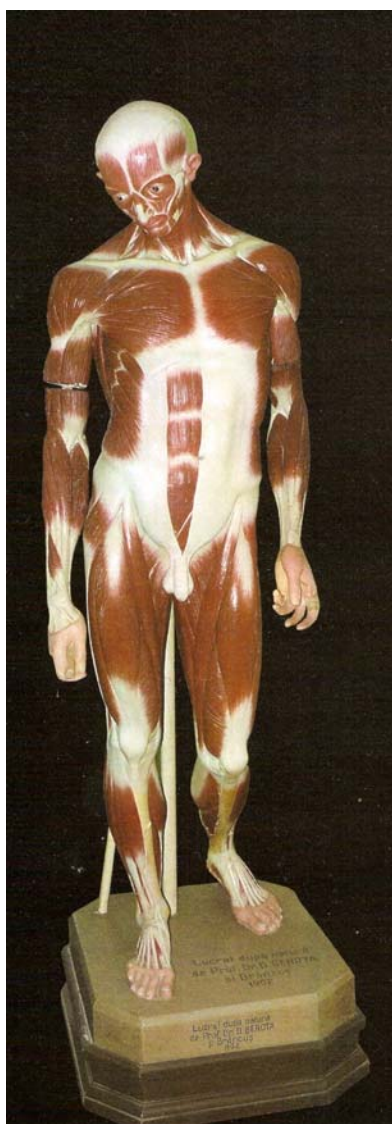


Fig. 3 – “Worked after nature by Prof. Dr. D. Gerota and Brâncuș 1902”.



Fig. 4 – Inscription on the base of the copy from the Carol I College in Craiova “The Posture of Classical “Antinous” The Anatomy of the Superficial Muscles worked after nature by: Prof. Dr. D. Gerotă and Brâncuș 1902”.

In a photograph of the clay modeled *Écorché*, now in the property of the MNAM Archives in Paris, one can notice a fragment of an anatomical mould of a flayed leg in the background, and a fragment of another plaster cast, also flayed, a bust with arm, alongside a human skeleton and a small-scale replica of the *Écorché* made in 1767 by Jean Antoine Houdon – a piece acquired for the school by Theodor Aman. Next to the clay *Écorché* are the replica of *Antinous* and few drawings, all serving as study material for

Brancuși. Although various biographies⁹ of Brancuși take into consideration different sources of inspiration for the *Écorché*, this photograph shows the most relevant image of the work process and research material employed. The photograph captures the modeling process in a very well defined stage in the summer of 1901. We believe, however, that beyond all other reasons for choosing the subject for their project, Brancuși and Gerota had to use what the school had to offer in terms of study material. Choosing the subject was of vital

importance for the size, movement and most importantly, the proportions of the work. Probably, from all the gypsum replicas the school owned at the time, *Antinous* was the most suitable.

Brancuși chose, just like most of the European artists¹⁰, the ancient model, and he sculpted, as perfectly balanced as the figure created by Houdon, his predecessor, a work of art which goes beyond its didactic purpose. The harmony of the structure and the relief of the sculpted surface render a more artistic value than anatomical to the uncolored *Écorché* replica.

While materials, documenting the creation of the *Écorché* have been published to a great extent¹¹, an analysis and tracking of all the copies made by Brancuși himself at the time has not been completed until now. In this quest, we took as a starting point the aforementioned photograph in which the clay *Écorché*, not yet completed, carries an inscription with the school award which Brancuși won in June 1901. A letter written by the director of the School, G.D. Mirea, on August 28, 1901, addressed to the Madonna Dudu Church in Craiova, which was granting a scholarship for Brancuși, confirms that the sculptor continued to work in the school during and even after the holidays. So we can conclude that Brancuși completed the *Écorché* in the summer of 1901 and cast the plaster negative most probably before the end of the same year. He then probably stored it somewhere else, and started multiplying it at the beginning of 1902.

During the ample analysis started over four years ago, we have discovered – even if the documentation available suggests more copies – that we can be certain of the existence of five copies made by Brancuși, one of which is visibly restored. All the five copies have been studied on site, photographed and evaluated.

The initial copies have several elements that distinguish them from the later replicas. The dimensions of the *Écorché* are 177/52/32 cm, and all copies have the same dimensions, minus insignificant variations due to measurements or replications. Their surface is very well finished, very detailed, with all muscle fibers carefully defined and

with color (for the colored copies) rigorously tracing the anatomical elements. The figure, cast in one piece except for the arms, which are connected under the deltoid muscles, at half the distance between shoulder and elbow, is set on a square base with the corners cut off. The wooden box, buried two centimeters into the plaster base, is provided with small wheels. The back support is a round pipe upturned L, inserted in the lumbar region, with a thinner, also round counterfort, bolted, and not welded to the main pipe. Last but not least, is the inscription on both the horizontal plane and on the vertical front of the base: *Worked after nature by Prof. Dr. D. Gerota and Brâncuș 1902*. We know that the painting of the colored copies was not made by Brancuși himself but, with his approval, by an assistant of Gerota from the Faculty of Medical Studies.

Among the copies of the work, the one found today at the Art Museum in Craiova (city where Brancuși studied at the Arts and Crafts High School) is very well maintained and preserved, and has all these four characteristics, identifying it as an original piece.

A second copy, also in Craiova, is at Carol I College, founded in 1826 and one of the oldest schools in Romania, the school where Dr. Gerota studied. The college owns a very valuable collection of books and study material for chemistry, anatomy and biology, and their *Écorché* was rediscovered in one of their storage rooms as late as 1966. This copy presents minor repairs to the arms, but has all the identification elements, with just two exceptions: the color of the base and the inscription. However, there is no doubt about the time of its making, but it was probably colored and inscribed at a different time than the other copies. The base is ochre and the inscription is on a metal plate which is attached to the base, and is slightly different: *The Posture of Classical Antinous. The Anatomy of the Superficial Muscles Studied After Nature by: Prof. Dr. Gerotă and Brâncuș 1902*. These small differences make the copy from Carol I College unique among the other colored copies made by Brancuși.



Fig. 5 – The Écorché, The National University of Arts in Bucharest /courtesy of the UNARTE Museum Archive.

A third copy can be found in the Anatomical Museum of the University of Pharmacy and Medical Studies in Iași, among several other anatomical exhibits. It is also well maintained, except for some conservation work on the hands, and is the copy that preserves the best the initial patina. It also fulfills all identification criteria and has a double inscription on the base, similar to the copy from the Art Museum in Craiova. It was restored at the end of 2012, when the left arm was reattached.¹² On the same occasion, it was cleaned and encased in a new display cabinet.

A fourth original can be seen in Cluj, also in the Anatomy Lab of the Medical University. Several historians did not

consider it as part of the initial series cast by Brancuși. This copy arrived in Cluj around 1934, as a private donation of Dr. Gerota to his friend Dr. Papilian¹³, the Head of Anatomy Department of the University there. In the complicated years before World War II, Dr. Gerota was very openly against the blameful decisions of the authorities, and he suffered the consequences, being arrested and even imprisoned. He had sent his friend the *Écorché* with the covered inscription, in order to hide the authorship. Only much later, in the early 1970's, Gheorghe Ghițescu, professor of artistic anatomy at the art school in Bucharest, identified it as an original, and cleaned part of the paint to reveal the original inscription. In 1978 and

1979 the work was restored, and received a second counterfort welded to the first one. A negative was molded after it, and several replicas were cast for schools all over Romania.

And finally, as concerns the long discussed issue of the copies from Bucharest, the sources indicate two copies, one at the art school, and another at the medicine school, both institutions where Dr. Gerota taught for a long time. The copy from the Faculty of Medical Studies is a colored one. It is mentioned in the memoirs of Dr. Rainer¹⁴, the founder of the first Anthropological Institute in Romania. Ion Bercuș argues that “This damaged copy which we have also seen in the Anatomy department of the Faculty of Medical Studies [...] has served as study material for at least 40 classes of medical students, and it has been filmed before the transfer.”¹⁵ On the other side, Barbu Brezianu writes in his latest monograph on Brancuși that the copy from the anatomy museum of Dr. Gerota went to the faculty of Medical Studies “where it became an attraction for all visitors, but in the last decades it has increasingly deteriorated. Brancuși, who was very proud of his youth masterpiece, expressed, shortly before his death, the desire to see it again. It was shipped to Paris for this purpose, but due to the improper packaging, it arrived almost destroyed at its destination.”¹⁶ We have not found any document concerning this trip, but it is not surprising, considering the political climate of those years. One thing is certain, that this much-damaged copy from the medical school, regrettably no longer exists.

The fifth copy is the one from the art school in Bucharest, and it also has a very complicated history. The art school, initially named the School of Fine Arts, has changed its name several times in its 150 years of existence, finally becoming the National University of Art in Bucharest, but has kept the venue and collection, which includes an old copy of the *Écorché*. We have discovered that the *Écorché* is often

mentioned in documents concerning its repairs or displays. In the book by George Oprescu, we have come across a reference to this piece: “kept by the school for the instruction of the future generations of students, it suffered later deteriorations, but the statue exists to this day, in addition to the copy dismantled into three parts for further gypsum replication.”¹⁷ Barbu Brezianu also describes in his book¹⁸ how the *Écorché* from the art school in Bucharest lost its inscription: “The initial signature was erased (as professors Gheorghe Ghițescu and Lucian Murnu recalls, on July 27, 1970)”.

Even if the information available about this last copy is insufficient and sometimes contradictory, we can conclude that one original piece of the *Écorché* is at the art school in Bucharest. Either the Ministry of Education bought it, or, much more likely, Dr. Gerota donated it to the school, and used it in his artistic anatomy classes, which he taught until 1914. This copy was multiplied into several replicas, and the original is reconstructed without the original bust. The copy, as it is today, includes original elements, but has been dismantled for multiplication. Furthermore, it has been repeatedly restored and it received a new base and a new counterfort inserted in the dorsal region in 2000.

The reality was that, in the context of a less fertile productive field of cultural traditions, that was at that time the foundation of modern period of Romania, many important cultural, artistic, or scientific events were often ignored, too little acknowledged or improperly appreciated.

Even the *Écorché* itself, although it equals in importance and value most of the European similar works in artistic anatomy field, is to this day fairly unknown or less advertised outside Romania.

Usually only briefly mentioned in Brancuși monographs as well as in various studies on his work, it is a very important artwork since its very subject opens an innovative field of research into the

Romanian visual art and art education. The *Écorché* is undoubtedly an important example of its genre, considered by Brâncuși himself to be an important heritage he left for the school in Bucharest. It is a sculpture that implied a thorough knowledge of anatomy revealing the artist's way of finding, beyond the nature of the subject, the harmony and perfection of

ancient sculptures. One can regard the *Écorché* as a landmark in his formation and his career, a work that meant a first major accomplishment for the young student in Bucharest. Brâncuși left us this work which marks, alongside the Ensemble in Târgu-Jiu, two core moments in his creation and his entire work: the beginning and the completion – the quest and the perfection.

Notes

¹ The detailed results of my research on this early work of Brâncuși are to be found in my recent book: *Ecorșeul Brâncuși – Gerota. Istoria unei lucrări realizate la Școala de Belle Arte din București*, UNARTE Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013. A version of this paper was presented at the conference: *The Sculpture of the Écorché*, at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2014.

² Ionescu Adrian-Silvan, *Învățământul artistic românesc 1830-1892*, Bucharest, 1999.

³ Vasile Georgescu Paleolog, *Tinerețea lui Brâncuși*, Bucharest, 1967, p. 101.

⁴ See Doina Lemny, Cristian-Robert Velescu, *Brâncuși inedit – Însemnări și corespondență românească*, Bucharest, 2004.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁶ Ion Atanasiu, *Activitatea științifică și socială a lui Dimitrie Gerota*, apud. Gh. Brătescu, *Trecut și viitor în medicină*, p. 419.

⁷ Barbu Brezianu, *Brâncuși în România*, Academia RSR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1976; Vasile Georgescu Paleolog, *Tinerețea lui Brâncuși*, Bucharest, 1967.

⁸ Letter from the Fine Arts students addressed to the Director of the School, See Central Office of National Historical Archives [ANIC], records of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction [MCIP], file 259/1903, p. 33, 48.

⁹ As the information regards different sources of inspiration see: Brezianu Barbu, *Brâncuși în România*, Academia RSR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1976; Vasile Georgescu Paleolog, *Tinerețea lui Brâncuși*, Bucharest, 1967; Petre Comarnescu, *Brâncuși mit și*

metamorfoză în sculptura contemporană, Bucharest, 1972; Han Oscar, *Dălți și pensule*, Bucharest, 1970.

¹⁰ We note the *écorché* of Jean-Galbert Salvage made after *The Borghese Gladiator* and *Apollo* buste; the drawings made by Charles Errard, Bernardino Genga and Giovanni-Maria Lancisi after *Farnese Hercules*, *Laocoon*, and *The Borghese Gladiator*; the drawings made by Antoine-Louis-Julien Fau after *Laocoon*; the *écorché* of Agostino Carlini and William Hunter, named *Smugglerius* after *Dying Gaul*.

¹¹ See also Velescu Robert Cristian, *Brâncuși, două lucrări de tinerețe: Laocoon și Ecorșeul*, in *150 de ani de învățământ artistic național*, Institutul de Istoria Artei "G. Oprescu", Bucharest, 2014.

¹² There is no official report about the restoration, but we have the information and the photos provided by the works coordinator.

¹³ This fact was confirmed by Dr. Ion Albu, collaborator of Prof. Papilian, quoted by Barbu Brezianu in *Brâncuși în România*, 1998, p. 98.

¹⁴ Tudor Vianu, *Works, Book I*, Minerva, 1978, p. 261.

¹⁵ Ion Bercuș, *Legăturile lui Brâncuși cu medicina și medicina*, from Gheorghe Brătescu, *Trecut și viitor în medicină – studii și note*, Bucharest, 1981, p. 429.

¹⁶ Barbu Brezianu, *Brâncuși în România*, Bucharest, 2005, p. 96.

¹⁷ George Oprescu, *Scrieri despre artă*, Bucharest, 1966, p. 124.

¹⁸ Barbu Brezianu, *Brâncuși în România*, 1998, p. 96.