

ABSTRACT

This monograph provides a synthetic approach to the complex personality of engineer Ștefan Georgescu-Gorjan, who authored the technical conception of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, wrote widely acclaimed technical handbooks and as a proficient publisher, printed a great range of volumes dealing not only with technology but also with literature and the arts.

Ștefan Georgescu-Gorjan was born in Craiova, the chief town of the province of Oltenia, on 29 August 1905 (11 September, according to the Gregorian calendar), to the family of Ion and Stanca Georgescu-Gorjan. His father – orphaned at ten years of age – had left his native village of Godinești (Gorj county) and had worked hard to become a respected draper. When he came of age he chose to change his name from Ciobanu (Shepherd) into the patronymic Georgescu-Gorjan (the son of Gheorghe from Gorj). Ion Georgescu-Gorjan greatly prized education, though he was a self-taught man, and he helped his younger brother, Gheorghe Ciobanu, study to become an engineer. He also befriended a younger lad from Gorj, who worked in a neighbouring pub and grocery – Constantin Brancusi. The future sculptor was accommodated in Gorjan's lodging, both in 1893 (before entering the Craiova School of Arts and Crafts) and in 1902 (as a graduate from the Bucharest National School of Fine Arts, serving in the army). Brancusi was grateful for Ion's support and good advice, he called him "godfather" and made a fine plaster portrait of his friend, as a token of his affection.

Ștefan was born in the very house where Brancusi had been a guest. The first work of art he admired was a genuine Brancusi - the Portrait of Ion Georgescu-Gorjan. His father told him a lot about the

wonderful Costache and he looked forward to seeing him. He actually met the artist in 1914 and 1922 in his parents' house and was greatly impressed by his personality. Desirous to follow his example, he strove to attain excellence.

In 1923 Ștefan graduated with honours from the "Carol I" High School of Craiova and in 1928 he took his engineer's diploma from the Polytechnical School of Bucharest. During his first grades he also attended courses in philosophy, history, literature and the arts and was a constant visitor of art galleries and museums.

After a 6-month training period in the Siemens-Schuckert Works in Vienna, he started working at the Central Workshops of the "Petrosani" Society, in the mining district of the Jiu Valley. His professional proficiency and impressive command of foreign languages recommended him for various assignments abroad. He travelled to Austria, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Egypt, Syria and Algeria, increasing his professional skill and enhancing his knowledge of art and culture.

On the occasion of his first assignment to Paris, in December 1934, he visited Brancusi's studio at 11, Impasse Ronsin and was awed by the strange universe of shapes carved by the artist. On a postcard sent to his parents he wrote: *I've seen Brancusi and we've talked a lot. He is a true artist, a genius.*

On January 7, 1935 the friend of his father invited him again to the studio and he spent there unforgettable hours. He especially admired the wooden *Endless Columns*, altogether different from the classical ones, as they had neither base nor capital, neither beginning nor end. Brancusi's columns consist of endless successions of identical modules (truncated pyramids, joined by their large square bases) with half modules at either end, sometimes slightly elongated at the base. Throughout his life time, the sculptor had carved columns of oak or poplar, with two, three, five, six and nine full modules, ranging in height from 1.30 to 7.17 meters.

In 1934 Brancusi had been invited by Aretia Tătărescu, the wife of the then premier, to erect at Târgu-Jiu a memorial to the Gorj heroes, killed in action during the First World War. He thought of a monumental *Endless Column* and asked the young engineer whether a large-scale metal one was feasible. Ștefan suggested the technical solution:

To fix the base of a solid steel pillar in a massive concrete foundation and to thread onto it giant hollow beads - the repeated iden-

tical modules of the column. The perfect superposition of the modules would provide the impression of continuity and the column would spring stem-like towards infinity.

The artist approved of the solution and invited the young engineer to assist him with the project. They met again in Paris in December 1936 and May 1937, deciding that the modules were to be made of brass-coated cast iron.

Engineer Gorjan was chief engineer and assistant director at the Petroșani-based Central Workshops. He headed the designing office, foundry and laboratories and was well acquainted with the highly skilled working force. Engineer Ioan Bujoiu, the director-general of the Petroșani Society, who was also a prominent member in premier Tătărescu's liberal cabinet, agreed that the company would cover the cost and execution of the monument, giving free scope to engineer Gorjan to supervise the whole operation.

In contradistinction to previous commissions which failed because of lack of understanding, the Târgu-Jiu memorial benefitted from Aretia Tătărescu's capacity to grasp its symbolic meaning. She helped Brancusi get the necessary financial means and provided unconditional moral support. In June 1937 she assisted the artist in selecting the sites for the component parts of the memorial – *The Table of Silence* (close to the Jiu bridge, where a battle had been waged in 1916 by the townspeople), *The Gate of the Kiss* (near the entrance to the town park), and *The Endless Column*, on a height, east of the town with the mountains looming in the background. The elements of the ensemble are prefigured in a photographic self-portrait of the artist, surrounded by a round table, a gate-like fireplace and a group of columns.

In late July 1937, in Târgu-Jiu the artist and the engineer visited the site selected for the Column. On a snapshot taken by the engineer, Brancusi sketched the outline of a screw-like twelve-module monument, surrounded by a circular lawn and path, with radial alleys and some poplars. Throughout August 1937 Brancusi stayed in Petroșani, in Gorjan's house. For a fortnight they tried hard to establish the best dimensions of the monument, by reconciling the sculptor's artistic vision to the range of technical possibilities and to the financial limitations (some two million lei). Brancusi requested that the module should observe a law of plastic harmony: its total height should be four times the side of the narrow base and twice that of the central width, i.e. (1):

(2): (4). The dimensions eventually selected were (45 cm):(90 cm):(180 cm). The column was to have 15 full modules and two half-modules, that is a slenderness formula expressed as $1/2+15+1/2$. The total height of the column was to be 29,35 meters.

In mid-August, Brancusi started carving a rough softwood model with bulging faces. For almost two weeks he patiently carved one side, until he obtained an almost imperceptible curvature of the surface. He had to leave Romania in early September and the whole responsibility of the operations devolved on engineer Gorjan.

The team of carefully selected specialists of the Central Workshops did a wonderful job, under engineer Gorjan's supervision. His most trustworthy assistants were: engineer Nicolae Hasnaș and draftsman Gavrilă Șomlo in the designing office, model carpenter Carol Flisek (who actually completed the foundry model), foundry foremen Szabo Emeric and Gheorghe Atanasiu, foreman Ion Romoșan of the Metal Structures Department, assembling fitter Francisc Hering, master welder Victor Borodi and foundation and scaffolding foremen Victor and August Perini.

The steel spine of the monument was designed in three sections (to permit transportation on the winding Jiu defile between Petroșani and Târgu-Jiu). The structure of the upper section is simpler than that of the lower ones. Inside the lower section concrete was poured. At Târgu-Jiu, the spine sections were electrically welded on site. The foundation was shaped like a truncated pyramid, five meters below grade, with a base 5 meter square. Seventy-five cubic meters of concrete weighing 165 tons were poured inside. A special structure – a three-meter long "cross-trestle" – was anchor-bolted to the bottom of the concrete block by two-meter rag-bolts. The cast iron modules were threaded down onto the spine and fastened onto it with thin metallic wedges.

Engineer Gorjan took photos of the main stages of the operations. He also recorded all details in letters sent to the sculptor in Paris. Unfortunately these documents are not yet available.

The sculptor came back to Târgu-Jiu in early November, watched the threading down of the first modules and left again for France. By mid-November the elevation of the column was completed. Only three months had lapsed since mid-August!

In December Brancusi sailed to India, where he stayed throughout January 1938. He intended to discuss a project of a temple with the Maharajah of Indore. He had asked engineer Gorjan to accom-

pany him and imparted him his conception of the mausoleum – a huge egg-like structure placed on the lawn of the Manik Bagh Palace. Unfortunately the engineer could not go and Brancusi could not meet the maharajah, so that the project did not come to fruition.

Engineer Gorjan got married in February 1938. In June-July, Brancusi supervised the brass-coating of the Column and completed the other components of the ensemble. The memorial was dedicated on 27 October 1938. The engineer of the column did not attend the ceremony as he was abroad. Brancusi's presence is still a matter of controversy.

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The monograph also deals with other aspects of engineer Gorjan's many-sided activity.

He stayed in the Jiu Valley between 1929 and 1941. He was also a professor at the School for Mechanical and Mining Foremen and as early as 1931 started writing technical handbooks, adapted from the specialty literature of France, Germany and the USA. All his books enjoyed great success.

As a member of the recently founded Touring Club, he became a great mountain lover. He would climb heights till late in life.

In 1936 he initiated an "aeroclub", mainly meant for the miners' children, who could learn how to construct plane models and how to use gliders.

After the birth of two daughters in 1939 and 1940, Gorjan's family moved to Bucharest. There he set up a small publishing house, specialized in technical books. He initiated a Technical Collection, a Practical Collection, a collection for handicraftsmen. He endeavoured to find the most appropriate Romanian words for specialty texts adapted from foreign languages. His publishing house also promoted young Romanian writers, fine literary translations, art albums, books for children. He even wrote a manual of bridge.

In 1948 all private publishing houses were done away with. Between 1949 and 1953, engineer Gorjan became acquainted with the communist prisons of Aiud, Mărgineni and Poarta Albă, following a mock trial. His wife, daughters and brother also bore the brunt of life as relatives of a prisoner.

Back home, he worked in construction institutes till his retirement in 1967.

Starting from 1964, when Brancusi ceased being considered a "persona non grata", engineer Gorjan devoted most of his energy to

record all available information on his cooperation with the artist in erecting the Column. In order to ensure the preservation of the monument, he worked out restoration-remetallization projects in 1965-1966 and 1975-1976. He also assisted the Institute of Research in Constructions in its investigations for a major revision.

His archives treasured letters from Brancusi, a rich correspondence with Brancusi specialists all over the world, photos of the elevation process, important books and magazines. He delivered lectures, answered interviewers, wrote papers, proving his deep-going concern for the preservation of Brancusi's masterpiece.

Engineer Gorjan was also a devoted son and brother, a loving husband, a wonderful father and a doating grandfather.

He died on March 5, 1985. The manuscript synthesizing his unique experience of working with Brancusi was published posthumously in two volumes – *Recollections on Brancusi* (1988) and *The Temple of Indore* (1996) – by his elder daughter, the author of the present monograph.