

'Brancusi: Masterpieces From Romanian Museums'

Gagosian Gallery

980 Madison Avenue (at 76th Street)

Through Dec. 15

There's one masterpiece in this so-called masterpieces show, although the artist would have been the last to have made such an inflated claim for this intentionally humble work: the first version, from 1907, of "The Kiss," a subject to which Constantin Brancusi would return many times in his career. There's also "The Prayer," that tough, pathetic image of a kneeling woman, from the same year, which signaled the artist's turn toward abstraction.

The four other sculptures, dating from the years 1905 through 1909, serve mostly to round out a picture of the artist's early development. "Pride" from 1905 typifies the studies in facial expression that were standard components of every sculptor's academic training at the time. "Head of Boy" (1906) brings to mind the meltingly impressionistic sculptures of Medardo Rosso while still remaining squarely in a traditional mode.

Against the backdrop of these two works, "The Kiss" and "The Prayer" seem all the more daring. With the former, Brancusi took an enormous creative leap. It is not simply the abstracted, glyphic way in which he reduces two embracing figures, faces pressed together, to a few simple marks carved in a block of stone. It's also the subtle variety of those marks — the gentle swelling of the woman's breast; the flattened, elongated shape of her hands; the suggestion, through a few incised marks, of hair flowing down her back. As with Cycladic or Egyptian sculpture, what looks at first formulaic reveals itself to be richly detailed.

With "The Prayer," Brancusi was commissioned to render a female figure not sexually but as a symbol of mourning. He achieves this by a combination of gestures, none more startling than the clublike hand that curls tightly against her chest or the arm cut off abruptly above the elbow. The slightly swelled belly, the sharp cuts around the pelvis, the hulking legs and deep gouge in the back contrive to spell pain.

The considerably less inspired "Sleep," from 1908, dates from around the period, long denied by Brancusi, when he apprenticed in Rodin's studio. According to the art historian Anna Chave, who is completing a book about Brancusi, the work announces its Symbolist ties. But it looks as interesting for its connection to the artist's later sculpture, "The Sleeping Muse."

"Brancusi: Masterpieces From Romanian Museums" is a modest, academic display that nonetheless suggests a good amount about the evolution of this foremost modernist.

(The show travels to the Detroit Institute of Arts in January and the Baltimore Museum of Art in February.)