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How Brancusi Influenced Frank Gehry's Design for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

By Ian Jeffrey

The relationship between an artist's studio and a gallery is intriguing, as each is traditionally associated with a specific part of the creative process. In the case of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—which marked its 20th anniversary last October—architect Frank Gehry let the studio space inform the gallery, with inspiration in part from an artist whose work, and studio, are currently the subject of a presentation at the Guggenheim in New York: Constantin Brancusi.

Brancusi stressed the importance of the spatial relationships between his sculptures by placing them in what he called “mobile groups” that he continually adjusted in order to find new connections and possibilities. As a Gallery Guide at the Guggenheim, I often talk to visitors in the current Brancusi presentation about the artist's particular use of the studio, showing them how they can get a sense of his approach by going back and forth between the sculptures and archival photographs of his space.

While designing the Bilbao museum, Gehry used the idea of Brancusi's studio—which was kept intact by the French state per the artist's bequest—as a metaphor for conceptualizing the dense interplay of forms and textures of the museum's atrium. Gehry imagined visitors would have an experience similar to entering an informal studio space where different materials and scales form chance relationships suggesting a lively, urban environment.



This was not always Gehry's approach to museum architecture. During the design process for Bilbao, Gehry remembered a conversation he had in the mid 1970s with the artist Daniel Buren. Gehry recalled saying to Buren, "My typical stance has been that the museum should be laid-back and a simple box, in which the artist can come and do anything." The architect was surprised by Buren's response: "In case you involve yourself in such a thing one day, make the best building you can do. I think to try to make simple, neutral space would be the worst way. For what?"

Buren was the first artist to design a work to fill the central void of Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda, which he did with his contribution to the Guggenheim International Exhibition, 1971. Although his artwork was removed by the museum before the exhibition opened, his engagement with the architectural and social space expanded our conception of art. The same year, Buren also wrote a series of three essays examining aspects of the art system. He concludes *The Function of the Studio* with an analysis of Brancusi's decision to keep his studio intact: "In order to preserve the relationship between the work and its place of production [and to] demonstrate that the so-called purity of his works is no less beautiful or interesting when seen amidst the clutter of the studio—various tools; other works, some of them incomplete, others complete—than it is in the immaculate space of the sterilized museum."

The example of Brancusi's studio enabled Buren, and later, Gehry, to conceive of the museum space in surprising new ways that revealed different possibilities both architecturally and socially.

Source:

https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/how-brancusi-influenced-frank-gehrys-design-for-the-guggenheim-museum-bilbao?utm_medium=Email&utm_source=ExactTarget&utm_campaign=GC_GlobalProjectsJan2018_012618