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## **ALEXANDER ARCHIPENKO**

(1877 – 1964)

Ukrainian-born American

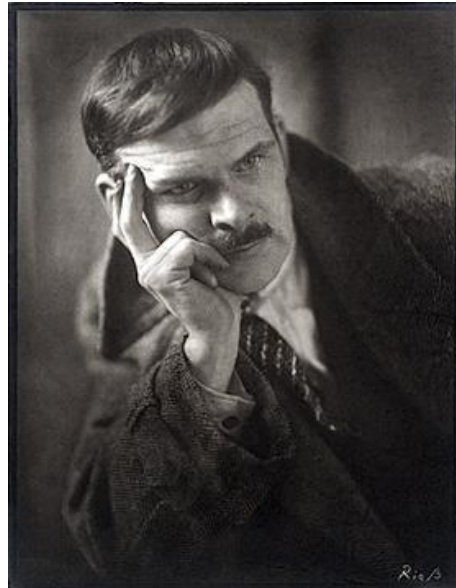
A Russian sculptor from the Ukraine, Alexander Archipenko joined the Parisian avant-garde in 1908. It was the same year in which the great Fauvist painters Georges Braque and Raoul Dufy met in L'Estaque and collaborated to deconstruct Cézanne's landscapes into the Proto-Cubism which soon blossomed into the style which revolutionized 20<sup>th</sup> art for a half century. While Braque united with Picasso to pioneer Analytical (1908-12) and Synthetic Cubism (1912-14), in 1911 Archipenko joined an eclectic group of artists known as the Section d'Or, whose generative salon exhibitions of the 1910s succeeded in disseminating Cubism to a much broader public.

By the mid-1910s, he had embarked on a novel and ambitious enterprise: to successfully synthesize the visual arts of painting and sculpture into a new discipline. While the Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni pushed the

possibilities of volumetric sculptural depth with his *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912), as did soon thereafter the American Cubist Max Weber in his 1915 bronze *Spiral Rhythm, I* it was Archipenko who invented the so-called "sculpto-painting", the consequence of tireless experimentation with both new means and techniques. This innovation represented a visual, tangible hybrid of both painting and sculpture. Many pieces have been lost due to their innate fragility, while *Woman with Hat* (1915), *Woman Pondering Face* (1916), *Woman in Armchair* (1918) and *Metal Lady* (1923) are reminders of Archipenko's irrepressible lifelong instinct to experiment, materialistically and stylistically.

Never fully abstract in his compositions, always wedded at least partially to the representational, and highly favoring female over the male figures, Archipenko's various "sculpto-painting" manifestations brought him to the attention of the celebrated American art patron Katherine Dreier. With her artist friends Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, in 1920 Dreier founded the Société Anonyme in New York as a venue for the exhibition of avant-garde European art in the United States. Timed with Dreier's symposium *The Psychology of Modern Art and Archipenko*, in 1921 the Société gave Archipenko his first American exhibition, "the most important held this season" in Dreier's own words. With a renewed sense of purpose, possibilities, and patrons, Archipenko arrived in New York City on October 16, 1923. He had immigrated to America.

Moving to Los Angeles for two years in 1935, Archipenko spent much time working and reworking a number of his most identifiable *torso* compositions, modeling his female figures to the streamlined, lustrous aesthetic of the prevailing Art Deco style. In 1936, Alfred H. Barr, scholar, taste-maker, and first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, invited Archipenko to take part in that institution's seminal exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*.



Photograph by Atelier Riess

In 1937, Archipenko moved to Chicago to be on the faculty of the New Bauhaus school, founded by László Moholy-Nagy who had taught at the original German Bauhaus in both Weimar and Dessau. While the American recreation of the School was short-lived, Archipenko's presence in Chicago and friendship with Moholy-Nagy resulted in perhaps the most successful and meaningful professional relationship of his life, with gallerist Katherine Kuh. Having studied art history under Barr at Vassar College, for seven years (1935-43) Kuh operated the most important Chicago gallery of its day, notwithstanding both the Great Depression and the Second World War, before being hired for her curatorial skills by the Art Institute of Chicago, where she became She was the first woman curator of European art and sculpture. An avid fan of Archipenko, she gave him five solo shows in six years. The first was in December of 1937 shortly after Archipenko's arrival in Chicago and included twenty-seven terra-cotta sculptures which he had produced in the preceding five years.

Kuh's first Archipenko exhibition included his 1935 terra-cotta *Leaning Figure*, a unique, singular sculpture which he partially polychromed with a thin layer of silver so as to add sheen, texture, and color contrast. Untreated clay-colored terra-cotta fills the figure's interior while the partly metallized skin coats portions with the suggestive effect of garb draped over the body. The sculpture's strength stems from its curvilinearity, its sensuality from the sinuous stance of the female form starting to sway and step, hip exposed but weight-bearing leg firm. As with the dancers of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes*, which Archipenko had so admired as early as 1910, her poise is never in question, her arms locked together as a single sphere, pushing upward a bare breast below the neckline as her unobstructed face beams back at the viewer.

"The impact of Archipenko's innovation is that it is embodied in the human form. {...} Archipenko's penetrated figures become a compelling metaphor for a public whose sense of reality was shifting with each new scientific discovery. The fact that the female form was the vehicle of this transformation carries its own vital resonance." (Leshko, Jaroslaw. Alexander Archipenko: Vision and Continuity, The Ukrainian Museum, New York, exhibition catalog, 2005, p. 68)