Forget Rudolf Belling
Getting the Carl Einstein We Deserve

Paul Monty Paret

Both camps make the Warhol they need, or get the Warhol they deserve; no doubt we all do.
Hal Foster, The Return of the Real

“It is extremely regrettable,” remarks Sebastian Zeidler in a wishful footnote to his astute study of Carl Einstein’s 1915 Negerplastik, “that Einstein never wrote at length about the work of Constantin Brancusi.” Zeidler’s comment about the French-Romanian sculptor, a now canonical and indispensable figure for any history of modern sculpture, expresses the desire to link Einstein’s theory of totality in Negerplastik, one of the twentieth century’s most important and confounding texts on sculpture, to Einstein’s later art criticism and the avant-garde practices of the 1920s. Zeidler reminds us that mining the archival and historiographic record of modernist art and criticism can be a frustrating and sometimes ugly affair. Writers, to say nothing of artists, only seldom produce what we may wish for to fuel our histories; to the contrary, they often leave us with an archival record we neither need, want, nor know how to use. It should be no surprise that the judgments and analyses of even the most insightful and highly regarded critics do not match up cleanly with the later formed consensus or always manage to rise above parochial concerns. Such fissures should have much to offer the historian. Too often, however, they are swept under the rug, quickly dismissed as not significant, or quietly ignored by what at times can be a juggernaut of contemporary scholarly agendas.

This paper re-examines one such instance of disconcerting judgment: Carl Einstein’s sustained and forceful support for the once prominent sculptor Rudolf Belling (1886–1972), an artist today regarded as a secondary or tertiary figure of modernism. Unlike Brancusi, Belling might be regarded as

dispensable; it is highly doubtful, for instance, that any scholar ever ex-
pRESSED regret that a major critic failed to address him. Yet beginning in
1924 and up through the revised 1931 edition of his Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhun-
derts, Einstein consistently championed Belling and placed him at or near
the pinnacle of his teleology of modernist sculpture. In this instance, Ein-
stein, so highly regarded as a prescient early champion of sub-Saharan Afri-
can sculpture, the cubism of Picasso and Braque, and the emerging surreal-
ism of Paul Klee, threw his support behind an artist very much on the other
side of history.³ Moreover, by the time Einstein first began to champion
Belling’s work in 1924, Belling’s once substantial reputation had peaked and
was already beginning to fall.

In what follows I shall look at Einstein’s conception of sculpture, his
sustained support for Belling’s work and the peculiar logical gaps and acro-
batic image selections to which that support sometimes led him. The later
part of the paper speculates on the near total absence of Belling from the
growing literature on Einstein, and the disjunction between the archival re-
cord of modernism and the needs and wants of contemporary scholarship.
It is not a matter of merely ignoring Einstein’s longstanding critical commit-
tment to Belling, a now little-respected artist. Particularly notable is the ap-
parent impulse, marked with unusual honesty by Zeidler, to replace Einstein’s
real commitments with exaggerated, even imaginary, allegiances to artists we
might wish Einstein had favored but in fact never did. My concern is not to
somehow rehabilitate Belling’s reputation and status within modernist his-
tories, nor is it to debunk Einstein or his view of Belling. Rather, I am inter-
ested in the historical discourse of sculpture and the disconnect in contem-
porary scholarship when a critic with an ascending scholarly reputation like
Einstein is found to champion an artist who has long ago been tossed aside.
Re-examining such episodes can offer new insights into well-worn areas of
modernism where, contrary to any notion of the heroic avant-garde, failure
is often the watchword for both artistic practice and criticism.

1.

It may be surprising that in the early 1920s Rudolf Belling was frequently
identified in Germany as a leading contemporary sculptor, and sometimes
even as the greatest sculptor of the age. Belling is the last artist discussed in
Alfred Kuhn’s 1921 history of modern sculpture, Die neuere Plastik von 1800
bis zur Gegenwart, a text whose formalist trajectory concludes with a discussion

³ Another example is Einstein’s puzzling enthusiasm for the painter Moïse Kisling. See Liliane
Paris-Sorbonne 2002, pp.172–176 and passim; and Uwe Fleckner: Carl Einstein und sein jahr-
of Belling’s work as emblematic of “the new spatial feeling.” Belling also figures prominently at the end of A. E. Brinkmann’s 1922 *Plastik und Raum*, as well as in Paul Westheim’s 1923 *Architektonik des Plastischen*, both, like Kuhn’s, among the major texts on modern sculpture in postwar Germany.  

Einstein first wrote about Belling in 1924 for the catalog of his exhibition at Berlin’s Kronprinzenpalais, which during the Weimar Republic served as the contemporary wing of the National Gallery. This exhibition was the high point of Belling’s public reputation. Organized by Ludwig Justi, the exhibition included twenty-nine works, had a catalog with essays by both Einstein and Westheim, and resulted in Justi purchasing a new carved wood version of Belling’s 1919 plaster *Dreiklang* (Fig. 1) for the National Gallery.

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Einstein opens his essay with the boldly declarative statement that "Rudolf Belling is the first among German sculptors to break from the prescriptive lessons handed down by the classicists." Two years later, repeating significant portions of the 1924 text, Einstein gave Belling preeminent position as the final artist discussed in the sculpture section of his Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, part of the Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series. It is hard to overestimate the significance of Einstein’s placement of Belling at the concluding point of his discussion of modern sculpture. Far from an afterthought to Einstein’s text, Belling’s “powerful tectonic form” and “effective spatial bodies” mark the triumph of modernist sculpture in overcoming what Einstein considered the stifling adherence of European sculpture to the closed mass and a pictorial conception of sculptural form.

Belling came to prominence in Berlin following the end of the First World War. Having first studied applied arts and worked in theater and stage decoration, he began studying sculpture in 1912 at the Kunstakademie Berlin-Charlottenburg and worked through a range of cubo-expressionist idioms during the 1910s. In the immediate aftermath of the war – in which he had served in an aviation unit near Berlin, a posting that allowed him to continue some artistic pursuits – Belling participated in the briefly radical efforts to reshape Germany’s artistic culture as a member of the Working Council for Art (Arbeitsrat für Kunst) and as a founding member of the November Group (Novembergruppe). Belling’s 1919 sculpture Dreiklang became his first real success. Exhibited in the November Group section of the 1920 Berlin Art Exhibition, Dreiklang consists of three angular prongs that burst upward from a common base. The two taller prongs reconnect together in a sweeping attenuated arch at the top of the sculpture, which lacks a solid center and presents no frontal or primary view. Dreiklang became for some an emblem of Expressionist fervor and, in the merging of its three prongs, even a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, a metaphor for unifying the disparate arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, as had been demanded by both the Working Council for Art and the November Group. Pushing the idea of Dreiklang as a Gesamtkunstwerk, the catalog of the November Group section of the exhibition falsely implies that the exhibited plaster, just about three feet tall, was a scaled down model of an eighteen

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7 “Kräftig tektonische Form”, “wirksame Raumkörper”, in: K 1, 173 and 174.

8 The most detailed account of Belling’s career is Winfried Nerdinger: Rudolf Belling und die Kunstströmungen in Berlin 1918–1923, Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft 1980.
foot tall monumental version of *Dreiklang* made of bricks and painted stucco, although no such version ever existed.\(^9\)

The following year, Belling made the equally pathos-laden *Geste Freiheit* and worked on several collaborative architectural commissions, including the central fountain and stylized crystalline ceiling for the Scala Casino in Berlin, designed by the architect Walter Würzbach. Aside from *Dreiklang*, Belling’s best-known work is the futuristic robotic head, *Skulptur 23*, 1923 (Fig. 2), made first of plaster and wire, then cast in brass, using simplified, geometric parts formed around an open central structure. Throughout the early 1920s Belling moved rapidly between abstract and figurative work and between stylistic idioms of cubo-expressionism (*Erotik*, 1920) futurism (*Organische Formen, Schreitender*, 1921), constructivism (*Brunnen vor dem Hause Goldstein*, 1923), and a kind of stylized art deco by 1925 with *Kopf in Messing*, a portrait of Belling’s wife, the dancer Toni Freeden. During the second half of the 1920s and into the 1930s Belling worked increasingly in modes of naturalism (*Porträt Friedrich Ebert*, 1927, or *Max Schmeling*, 1929), and social realism (*Bergarbeiter*, 1930), and received numerous sculptural commissions from trade unions in Germany and Holland, such as the 1932 series of six bronze panels (destroyed) depicting labor and industry for the Gewerkschaft Gesamtverband in Berlin.

2.

It seems likely that Einstein and Belling met through Westheim, the art historian and editor of *Das Kunstblatt*, who had known and supported Belling since at least 1920. Einstein and Westheim wrote the two essays for Belling’s 1924 exhibition catalog at Berlin’s Kronprinzenpalais, and the following year included an illustration of Belling’s *Skulptur 23* in their co-edited *Europa Almanach* (EA, 137). In the spring of 1925 Belling, Einstein and Westheim were all in Paris where, together with Max Sauerlandt, they visited the studio of Aristide Maillol, whom all three greatly admired and with whom Einstein begins his discussion of sculpture in *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*.\(^10\)

Einstein privately confirmed his admiration for Belling in an undated letter from the second half of the 1920s to, of all people, his friend George Grosz. “Aside from you,” Einstein writes, “the only Berliner who matters to

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\(^10\) Lutz Windhöfel: *Paul Westheim und Das Kunstblatt*, Cologne: Böhla 1995, p. 17. On Einstein and Maillol see especially Fleckner (pp. 37–46), who references the visit to Maillol’s studio but without mention of Belling.
me is Belling, who is a true sculptor.” This striking, almost melancholic statement, offers intriguing insights into Einstein and his understanding of Belling’s sculpture. Einstein’s unlikely pairing of Grosz with Belling as the only two Berlin artists who matter to him reminds us of Einstein’s complicated, unhappy relationship with Berlin and its artistic culture. By almost any standards these two would seem an odd pair and it provides yet another example of Einstein’s unconventional analysis and sometimes peculiar critical judgment. There was, in fact, no love lost between Grosz and Belling, who knew and very much disliked each other from the early days of the November Group, when Belling sided with those moving the organization toward becoming primarily an exhibition society, a development that resulted in the resignations of Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Rudolf Schlichter, Otto Dix and others. Years later in his autobiography Grosz makes his opinion clear when he refers to “the sculptor Rudolf Belling, known for his money-grubbing greed.”

Most notable in Einstein’s comments to Grosz is the identification of Belling as a “true sculptor,” a man who “wirklich ein Plastiker ist,” a phrase which itself expresses Einstein’s certainty about the ontology of sculpture and the existence of such a thing as true sculpture and true sculptors. By calling Belling a “true sculptor,” Einstein was referring to the ideas he had first forcefully expressed in his 1915 Negerplastik that, put simply, “[s]culpture’s task is to render three-dimensionality.” Einstein regarded most European sculpture since the Romanesque as being trapped by pictorial concepts of form in which “[t]hree-dimensionality was eroded by optical sensations.”

The theory of sculpture Einstein proposed in Negerplastik is an attack on both Adolf von Hildebrand’s relief theory and equally so on the experiential, temporal model of the “impressionist” sculpture he identified with Rodin. Hildebrand had proposed that sculpture should allow the viewer to George Grosz, undated letter [1927?] Stiftung Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, George Grosz Archiv.


15 Einstein: Negro Sculpture, p. 127.

to reconstruct three-dimensional space pictorially either through a single coherent frontal image, which Einstein countered “essentially cheats the viewer out of the experience of the cubic,” or through the synthesis of sequential images generated over time as the viewer moves around the object.\(^{17}\) Einstein; on the other hand, valued sub-Saharan African sculpture precisely for what he identified as the immediacy of its three-dimensional totality. “Cubic form,” Einstein insisted, “must be apprehended all at once. […] Three-dimensionally situated as they may be, all parts of the composition must nonetheless be represented simultaneously, i.e., the dispersed space must be integrated into a single field of vision.”\(^{18}\)

In the “On Sculpture” chapter at the end of Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts Einstein loosely charts the degree to which select twentieth-century sculptors have or have not approached such a cubic totality. His analysis begins with Maillol, whose “historical importance lies in his purging sculpture of painterly impressionism,” which Einstein associates with Rodin.\(^{19}\) He then proceeds through discussions of his principal figures: Wilhelm Lehmbruck, who favored “a graphic rather than cubic solution,” Ernst Barlach, Alexander Archipenko, who “remains unthinkable without the cubist painters,” concluding finally with Belling.\(^{20}\) (Other sculptors mentioned briefly, and generally negatively, along the way include Hermann Haller, Ernesto de Fiori, Brancusi, Jacques Lipschitz and Henri Laurens, but none receives more than a short paragraph.)

“Rudolf Belling,” Einstein begins, “attempted powerful tectonic form. He separated himself from the frontal schema and relief-like modeled layer that weakens the three-dimensional.”\(^{21}\) Alluding to his own critique of Hildebrand, Einstein stresses Belling’s embrace of three-dimensional space. “Belling,” Einstein continues, “avoids the flat contour and prefers to work with open vibrating constructions. Modeled masses of air and light penetrate the hollowed-out material form, which is ruptured or opened so that the contrast of forms is intensified, differences awakened, and three-dimensional excitement counterpointed.”\(^{22}\) Recalling something of the simultane-

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\(^{110}\) Paul Monty Paret

\(^{17}\) Einstein, Negro Sculpture, p. 132.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) “Die geschichtliche Bedeutung Maillols […] ruht in der Reinigung des Plastischen vom malerischen Impressionismus.” (K1, 163)

\(^{20}\) “eher zeichnerische, denn kubische Lösung” and “bleiben ohne die kubistischen Maler un- dendar.” K1, 167 and 171.

\(^{21}\) “Kräftig tektonische Form versuchte Rudolf Belling. Er trennte sich von frontalem Schema und reliefmäßig modellierter Schicht, worin das Dreiräumliche abgeschwächt wird.” (K 1, 173)

\(^{22}\) “Belling meidet das flächig Umrissene und arbeitet gern in offen schwingenden Gebilden. Geformte Luft und Lichtmasse durchdringt die gehöhlte Materialform, die abgebrochen oder
ity of the cubic he had described in *Negerplastik*, Einstein suggests that in Belling’s sculptures, “[t]he fleeting force of air is captured in formal groupings or encircled bodies that are fused to the sculptural object and, rather than merely passing over it, work together and shimmer as form.”\(^{23}\)

In support of such statements, the 1926 edition of *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* included seven illustrations of Belling’s work: *Der Mensch*, an expressionist work from 1918; *Dreiklang* (Einstein’s caption lists the work as wood, but the image shows the plaster; in the 1931 edition the wood version is pictured); *Erotik*, 1920, a work in wood with gold tinting, which was not included in the revised 1931 edition; *Kopf*, 1921; a close-up partial view of the 1918 *Gruppe Natur* (fig. 3) (called *Göttin* in Einstein’s caption); *Skulptur 23*, 1923; and *Kopf*, 1923, a drawing of *Skulptur 23*, to which Belling would later add a dedication to Einstein.\(^{24}\)

If the eclectic range of styles in these works from the 1926 edition of *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (it is unfortunately not possible to illustrate them all) was not extreme enough, for the revised 1931 edition Einstein left the text on Belling virtually unchanged, but had added three additional illustrations of more recent works: *Bildnis Richard Haertel*, 1926 (Fig. 4); *Kopf in Messing*, 1925; and *Versilberter Bronzeschild*, 1929–30 (Fig. 5), a commission for a retail cooperative, “De Volharding” in the Hague.

The extreme diversity of styles and forms evident in these works does not seem to have troubled Einstein, whose primary concern was never style, but rather conceptions of spatial experience and perception. In a somewhat unusual example of Einstein discussing specific works of art, he carefully articulates how *Dreiklang* and *Skulptur 23*, two stylistically very distinct sculptures, each produces cubic experience by different means.

Referring to *Skulptur 23*, Einstein offers that “[t]he sphere of the head is structured as both air and material form, and from such a contrast one gains a cubic concentration of two spatial modes.” This effect is secured, he goes on, by the “thin wire contour,” a reference to the wire coming out over the figure’s forehead and nose, as well as to the wire rising up from the sculpture’s base to support the spherical eye. The result, Einstein writes, is that “cubic lines in space delimit the three-dimensional breathing body.”\(^{25}\) If
in *Skulptur 23* the cubic space of the head is ultimately secured by the wire contour, in *Dreiklang* by contrast “the cubic is spun like a ball of forms and held in equilibrium.”

At times Einstein relies on very carefully selected images of Belling’s work to secure his point. *Gruppe Natur* (Fig. 3), for instance, a niche sculpture commissioned for the villa of the publisher Wolfgang Gurlitt, is reproduced in *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* in a cropped, close up image. Originally gold-tinted and painted in “bold colors” according to a design by the painter César Klein, the group’s central allegorical figure of Nature is flanked by figures of Adam, cropped out of the image in *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, and Eve, partially visible in the lower right, who is connected to the figure of Nature by a grotesque chain of linked putti extending out from her hands. To say nothing of the extreme sentimentiality of the subject and its treatment, the idea of a niche sculpture itself necessarily emphasizes a single, frontal, pictorial image and does not fit easily with Einstein’s ideas on sculptural form and three-dimensionality.

Belling, who always claimed spatial complexity for his work, was sensitive to this problem. He argued defensively that by having the leg of the central figure in *Gruppe Natur* protruding out from the flanking figures and

26 “Im *Dreiklang* [...] wird das Kubische wie ein Ball von Formen gewirbelt und im Gleichgewicht gehalten.” (Ibid.)
arranging the pedestal at a ninety-degree angle to the back wall of the niche, he was able to emphasize the work’s spiraling form and three-dimensionality.\(^{27}\) With his image selection Einstein seems to have tried to support Belling’s claim. The closely cropped photograph reproduced in \textit{Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts}, 1931, p. 611. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

\(27\) Belling letter to A.E. Brinckmann, undated [c.1920], cited in Nerdinger, pp. 39–42.
uses to illustrate Belling’s 1926 Bildnis Richard Haertel (Fig. 4), a close up taken from a side angle that emphasizes the protrusion of this hyper-realist head from it’s flat ground and downplays the relief’s banal symmetry and kitschy naturalism.28 These photographs help to bridge or at least minimize the gap that sometimes exists between Belling’s sculptures and Einstein’s language and ideas.

It is also true that if not all of Belling’s sculptures included in Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts – to say nothing of those not included – live up to Einstein’s analyses, neither do they follow the dictates of Adolf von Hildebrand, whose relief theory of sculpture had called for all sculptural form to remain behind a clearly articulated frontal plane, a kind of imaginary window pane beyond which nothing should protrude.29 That is certainly not the case even

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28 Along with a drinking fountain (see Fig. 6) and coat of arms by Belling, the portrait of Haertel, a founder of the Gewerkschaft Druck und Papier, was commissioned for Max Taut’s Verbandshaus der Deutschen Buchdrucker in Berlin. See Nerdinger, pp. 203, 241–2.

29 Adolf Hildebrand: The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts, in: Empathy, Form and Space. Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893. Ed. by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou,
with Belling’s reliefs, such as the Bildnis Richard Haertel, where figures tend to pop out, almost fully separating from their ground. Belling’s disregard of Hildebrand’s sculptural principles – in his writings, too, he often used Hildebrand as a foil – may alone have been enough to make his work attractive for Einstein and justified his sustained support, despite any reservations. Indeed, Einstein was particularly excited about the Bildnis Richard Haertel, which he wrote about in Der Querschnitt in 1927 as a “surprising example” of Belling’s “fondness for carefully concretizing his fantasies of form. […] In this portrait free form and the highest objectivity are congruent. […] Let us say it clearly: with this achievement Belling has proven himself as the predestined [berufene] German monumental sculptor.”

3.

Einstein’s praise for Belling did have its limits. He notes in 1926, for instance, that Belling’s early cubist style at times remains just a “decorative vulgarization of a sketch” and allows that his work sometimes risks slipping into “stylized compromise.” On the whole, however, Einstein was remarkably tolerant of Belling’s rapid style change and eclecticism. If his praise of Belling has some qualifications, these were minor compared to his harsh treatment of other leading sculptors. There is the well-known story of Ernesto de Fiori, who, enraged at being referred to in Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts as Maillol’s “talented follower,” attacked Einstein shortly after its publication, hitting him on the head with copy a of the massive book.

There is also the example of Alexander Archipenko, to whom Belling is often compared for their shared interest in breaking open the solid mass of sculpture. Like Belling, Archipenko was enormously successful in Germany in the late 1910s early 1920s, before reverting to a kind of stylized naturalism as his career and reputation began a steady decline. In Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Einstein defends his pupil’s work by comparing it to Archipenko’s. Einstein notes: “While Archipenko developed this style from the very beginning, he usually had far more success in his works in Germany; Belling was successful only after a quite extensive change in his style and attitude. This means that Belling’s early works must be considered as the work of an artist who, through his productive activity, developed a personal style from the entire range of a very wide field. This is not the case with Archipenko, who at the beginning of the 1920s already had an extensive repertoire of his own.”

32 “dekorativer Vergröberung einer Skizze”; “stilisierendes Kompromiß.” (K1, 173, 174)
Einstein concludes that “[d]espite all his cubism, [Archipenko] emphasizes the usual frontality” and “almost nervously preserves a cloying closed contour.”

When we compare works by Archipenko and Belling, especially from the late 1920s, which Einstein included as illustrations, it is not entirely clear why it is only Archipenko who receives this verdict. An additional puzzling aspect of Einstein’s support for Belling is his willingness to ignore Belling’s many attempts to commercialize his sculpture practice. The most successful of his commercial ventures was the Modenplastiken or “fashion sculptures,” a neologism Belling coined for the stylized elongated mannequins he developed in 1921, and patented and licensed to

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34 “Trotz allem Kubismus betont man übliche Frontalität” and “Archipenko zerlegt wohl den Körper, doch fast ängstlich bewahrt er einen süßlich geschlossenen Gesamtkontour.” (K 1, 173) For the 1931 edition where these comments are repeated, Einstein cut his text on Archipenko in half and reduced the illustrated works from eight to four. On Archipenko’s reputation see Paul Paret: Archipenko’s Failure: Sculpture and Criticism in Post-World War I Germany, in Paret and Michael White: Russian Berlin in the 1920s (Essays on Sculpture, No. 54), Leeds: Henry Moore Institute 2006, pp. 7–15.
be manufactured in the following years. Belling’s *Moden-Plastiken* were heavily promoted and for a time commercially quite successful and widely used in department store display windows. In later years Belling distanced himself from this work, but in the 1920s he did not hold these commercial efforts separate from his other sculpture. The *Moden-Plastiken* received considerable favorable attention in the art press at the time and were included in Belling’s 1924 exhibition at the Kronprinzenpalais. Not surprisingly, Einstein does not mention them in his catalog essay or, for that matter, in his other writings on Belling. There is some irony in the fact that Einstein, who railed against art critics and historians who served only the interests of commerce and sales, consistently threw his support behind one of the most opportunistische, commercially minded artists of the Weimar Republic.

The task of supporting Belling likely became harder for Einstein over the course of the 1920s as Belling’s work moved increasingly toward stylized idioms of naturalism (*Porträt Friedrich Ebert*, 1927, or *Max Schmeling*, 1929) and social realism (*Bergarbeiter*, 1930), and was driven largely by commissions. Einstein, nonetheless, continued to support Belling throughout the late 1920s. We have already seen his admiration for the *Bildnis Richard Haertel* in 1927 *Der Querschnitt*, where Einstein also reiterates his fundamental praise that Belling “freely invents three-dimensional forms and does not believe something is sculptural if mass just sits behind a contour.” In 1928 Einstein published another positive article, “Les Fontaines de Rudolf Belling,” in *Cabiers d’Art*. Focusing on an elaborate art deco drinking fountain (Fig. 6) Belling made for the Max Taut’s Buchdruckerhaus, Berlin (where his *Bildnis Richard Haertel* was also installed), Einstein again makes the claim that “[a]mong German sculptors, Belling has reacted the most strongly against a too complacent tradition.” About this fountain in particular, Einstein writes, Belling “has succeeded in using light and air as architectonic forms and creates a polyphonic fugue of dense volumes and negative volumes, of resolute emptiness. He has in this way demonstrated that sculptural form is not only a mass locked in by line.”


36 “Er erfindet freie dreidimensionale Formen und glaubt nicht, daß ein Ding plastisch sei, wenn hinter einem Kontur Masse sitze.” (BA 2, 502)

37 “Parmi les sculpteurs allemands, Belling a réagi le plus fort contre un heritage trop facile. …Il réussit à utiliser la lumière et l’air comme formes architectoniques et réalise une fugue polyphonique de volumes denses et de volumes négatifs – de vides determine. Il a ainsi démontré,
For the revised, third edition of *Die Kunst des 20 Jahrhunderts* (1931) Einstein made many changes but left his text on Belling essentially intact—he eliminates only the concluding sentence, which had expressed hope for an architecture befitting Belling’s sculpture. At the beginning of the revised chapter, Einstein adds a new paragraph offering a partial overview and summary of developments. Belling, he clarifies, belongs to the stream of sculptors, including Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Henri Laurens and Jacques Lipschitz, who made the “turn toward cubism.” Referring to these figures Einstein writes: “Now one dares to break with classical tradition; the unified figure and the concentrated formal masses are dissolved and shattered.”

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38 “[…] die Wendung zum Kubismus. […] Nun wagt man den Bruch mit der klassischen Über-
Most importantly, for the 1931 edition Einstein extends his discussion of sculpture with brief paragraphs on Hans Arp and Alberto Giacometti, signaling his increasing interest in surrealism. Still prominent, Belling no longer occupies the highest point of sculptural developments, as it is now Giacometti who, Einstein tentatively concludes, “breaks away perhaps the furthest from inhibitions imposed by inherited concepts of mass.”

4.

If Einstein was not bothered by Belling’s stylistic eclecticism, sentimentality, commercialism, and increasingly reactionary social-realist figurative aesthetic, the same cannot be said for later historians of modern sculpture. Indeed, Belling’s 1924 exhibition at Berlin’s Kronprinzenpalais, the occasion of Einstein’s first writing on the artist, in many ways marked the height of Belling’s reputation, which soon began a quick and precipitous decline. Although in 1931 Belling was elected to the Prussian Academy of Art (from which he was forced to resign in 1937), after the exhibition in the Kronprinzenpalais his next solo exhibition would not be until 1935 at the Weyhe gallery in New York, and in Germany not again until the 1950s. In 1937 Belling’s Dreiklang and Kopf in Messing, both confiscated from the Kronprinzenpalais, were displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition. Astonishingly, at exactly the same time in Munich, Belling’s realist three-quarter length portrait of the boxer Max Schmeling was included in Great German Art Exhibition of officially recognized and approved German art. By January 1937 Belling had left Germany to accept a position in Turkey at the Istanbul Art Academy (he would not return to Germany until 1966), where he completed numerous neo-classicizing portrait commissions including a life-sized bronze statue and an over-life-sized equestrian monument for the Turkish president, Ismet Inönü. Not only did Belling never regain the status he briefly held in Germany in the early 1920s, but even his work from these years is rarely granted anything more than minor historical significance.

lieferung, die einheitliche Gestalt und die gesammelten Formmassen werden aufgelöst und zerbrochen.” (K 3, 218)

39 “Giacometti […] löste sich vielleicht am weitesten von aller Befangenheit ererbter Vorstellungsmassen.” (K 3, 229)


Given Belling’s relatively low standing within the history of modernism, it is not particularly surprising that Einstein’s commitment to Belling remains far below the radar, even among the growing number of scholars re-examining Einstein’s complex work and legacy. Belling, in fact, has been almost completely absent, occasionally glaringly so from the expanding literature on Einstein’s writings on art and aesthetics. To take just one example, Belling is notably missing from Uwe Fleckner’s 2006 *Carl Einstein und sein Jahrhundert* and the related 2008 exhibition catalog, *The Invention of the 20th Century: Carl Einstein and the Avant-Gardes*. Although the subtitle of Fleckner’s ambitious book offers the defense of being only “fragments of an intellectual biography,” it seems that Belling simply does not belong to the 20th century that we imagine Carl Einstein “invented.” A partial exception is Klaus Kiefer’s use of Belling’s drawing *Kopf*, with its handwritten dedication to Einstein, on the cover of his edited volume *Die visuelle Wende der Moderne: Carl Einsteins Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, although as Kiefer notes Belling is nowhere discussed within the volume.42

The Einstein who wrote about and championed Belling is apparently not the Einstein we want. But if not Belling, who? This is the question that Zeidler answers candidly, if also unintentionally, with his almost off-hand lament that Einstein never wrote at length about Constantin Brancusi. The little Einstein did write about Brancusi turns out to be extremely negative, describing him in the first edition of *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* as an artist “who appears to seek something like archetypes; an attempt at the monumental with totally insufficient means. Effect: a bluff, or a chimera of a private Egypt.” Far from warming to Brancusi for the 1931 edition, as he did with Arp and Giacometti, not to mention Klee, Einstein adds that with Brancusi, “the simplified forms are all too lacking in contrast.”43

It is fascinating to imagine an Einstein who recognized Brancusi’s formal achievements and valued his surrealist and ethnographic impulses. Einstein after all included six well-chosen Brancusi objects and photographs for the 1931 edition.44 To many of us these Brancusi images may suggest something very different than “simplified forms lacking in contrast.” Informed by decades of visually attentive and theoretically rich scholarship on Brancusi we are more likely to see in these images evidence of Brancusi’s subtly destructive sculpture full of nuanced inversions, reabsorbed pedestals, exploded contours and multiplying forms. Yet that was not Einstein’s judgment; he saw none of those things. Instead of Einstein on Brancusi, we get Einstein on Belling.

44 K 3, 618–23. Only three Brancusis had been reproduced in the 1926 edition.
I suspect, finally, that it is not only the comparatively low regard for Belling that has made him such a dead zone in Einstein scholarship. There may also be the unconscious wish, even need, to imagine an Einstein who had actually championed Brancusi instead of Belling. Exceptionally expressed by Zeidler, this wish may perversely drive a continuing blind spot about Einstein’s commitment to Belling. In other words, to acknowledge Belling fully might be to foreclose on the fantasy of Brancusi or another figure who could carry Einstein’s theory of sculptural totality beyond the tribal objects of Negerplastik and into the European avant-garde. We may well deserve such an Einstein, one who recognized the formal rigor of Brancusi rather than the cloying sentimentality of Belling. But we do not get the Einstein we want and must deal instead with the Einstein we have.