

MARCEL DUCHAMP – BAPTISM

Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp | The Forestay Museum of Art (KMD)
15 November 2020 – 10 January 2021.

Marcel Duchamp was baptized by Père Julien on August 1, 1887 in the church of Blainville-Crevon. The baptism was an important symbolic event for the artist throughout his life. Already at the age of 15 he painted two oil paintings showing his baptismal church: *Church in Blainville* (1902, oil on canvas, 61 x 42.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection) and *Garden and Church in Blainville* (1902, oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection). On the reverse of this second painting, Duchamp wrote (later) the following note: *Blainville / The House where I was born / and the church where I was baptized / one of earliest oils 1902 / To Brookes [Hubachek] from Mary [Reynolds] / Marcel Duchamp / 1951*.¹

At the age of 24, the artist also painted two Fauvist paintings with comparable subjects, one of which we know as *The Bush* (1910–11, oil on canvas, 127.5 x 92 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection) and the second as *Baptism* (1911, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 72.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection), on the reverse of which the following is written *Au cher Tribout Carabin / j'offre ce «Baptême»: M. D.*

A baptism is not only a religious but also a metaphorical ritual that can symbolize a waterfall, among other things. The waterfall is one of the most important, recurring motifs in Marcel Duchamp's artistic work: in the *Large Glass* (*La Mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même*, 1915–23, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection), for example, it is the energy-giver that sets the entire process of the “love machine” in motion. He breathes life into the work, so to speak, although it remains invisible because Duchamp ultimately dispensed with its pictorial realization.

In the Diorama *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* (1946–1966, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Kassandra Foundation), the waterfall is the only element that “moves” thanks to an optical illusion created by a special mechanism, and thus the waterfall is not only directly present in the title, but also comes to the fore visually in the work itself.

Duchamp's most famous work is his urinal, which the artist christened “Fountain” in 1917, a term that can also be used as a synonym for Baptismal Font. The artist Robert Smithson said in an interview in 1973: “I see Duchamp as a kind of priest of a certain sort. He was turning a urinal into a baptismal font.”² *Fountain* was to be exhibited in 1917 at the un-judged First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, but was rejected, contrary to the rules in the statutes, and disappeared mysteriously a short time later. The only document of this “original” readymade is the photograph by Alfred Stieglitz taken between April 13 and 19, 1917. However, *Fountain* evokes the reference to a baptism not only because of its title, but also because Duchamp signed the urinal with the pseudonym “R. Mutt” (Richard Mutt) and thus “baptized” himself quasi a second time.

Only one year later, when he realized his last and at the same time largest painting *Tu m'* for the library of Katherine S. Dreier (1918, oil on canvas, with bottle brush, safety pins and bolts, 70 x 303 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, donation from the estate of Katherine S. Dreier), he baptized himself a third time, as it were, by painting a hand with an outstretched index finger in the lower center of the painting and signing this hand with “A. Klang” at the same time. Duchamp later claimed that A. Klang was a professional poster painter whom he had specially commissioned to paint this hand on his painting. To this day, however, no researcher has been able to locate this poster painter. Thus we must assume that behind the pseudonym “A. Klang”—as already with *Fountain* and “R. Mutt”—Marcel Duchamp is hidden.

Finally, only two years later, in 1920, the artist “baptized” himself once again by assuming the identity of a woman and from now on signed his works with “Rose Sélavy”.

Finally, the exhibition is rounded off with his late Multiple *Bouche-évier*. The work was created in 1964

in Cadaquès and was produced and distributed in 1967 by the International Collectors Society New York in an edition of 320 copies - in bronze, silver and stainless steel. *Bouche-évier* is a sculpture measuring only 6.5 cm in diameter and 1.2 cm thick in the form of a medal, which in Duchamp's metaphorical sense concludes the continuous repetition of baptism. The (consecrated) water that pours over his head directly from his showerhead in Cadaquès collects in the tub, because his *Bouche-évier* virtually shuts off the drain.

The exhibition *Baptism*, curated by Stefan Banz, thus shows all of Duchamp's approaches to the idea of baptism in small format. The replicas were realized by Caroline Tschumi (*The Bush* and *Baptism*), Caroline Bachmann (*Fountain* and *Bouche-évier*), Stéphane Zaech (*Church in Blainville* and *Garden and Church in Blainville*) and Stefan Banz (*A. Klang* and *Rose Sélavy photographed by Man Ray*).

General information about the museum

The Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp | The Forestay Museum of Art (KMD) is the so-called smallest museum in the world. Its headquarters are in Cully, Switzerland. The museum was founded in 2009 by Stefan Banz and Caroline Bachmann. Since then, the artist Stefan Banz has organized around 50 exhibitions for the institution, including with Cildo Meireles, Karin Sander, Ai Weiwei, Haegue Yang, Thomas Locher, Vanessa Billy, Aldo Walker and Ecke Bonk, to name but a few. The current, second museum building was designed in 2016 by Jonathan Banz. The first building, designed by Mélanie Althaus, is now part of the collection of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg with the simultaneously permanent exhibition *La Broyeuse de chocolat* (2013), designed and executed by Caroline Bachmann and Stefan Banz.

Notes

¹ This inscription is no longer visible today, because the painting was doubled up with a second canvas. It is only known from a photograph.

² "Robert Smithson on Duchamp, An Interview", in *Artforum*, New York, October 1973, p. 47.