

BRAQUE

MIRÓ CALDER NELSON

Varengeville, un atelier sur les falaises



**MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS
EXPOSITION ROUEN**

5 avril · 2 septembre 2019

**NOTEBOOK OF
THE EXHIBITION**

**ON-SITE CONSULTATION
ONLY. THANK YOU**

Varengeville, a cliff-top studio

Perched on the cliffs overlooking the Côte d'Albâtre, the village of Varengeville-sur-Mer (Seine-Maritime) has attracted a large number of artists, painters, writers and musicians since the late 19th century. Eugène Isabey, Camille Pissarro, Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir chose to set up their easels here; and it is here that André Breton wrote *Nadja*. In 1928, the American architect Paul Nelson bought a country house here, and showed the village to his friends Marcelle and Georges Braque. The latter, celebrated as one of the greatest French painters of all time, had grown up in Le Havre. Whereas his friend Pablo Picasso settled in 1930 in Boisgeloup, close to Gisors, he decided to set up home in Normandy, building a house in 1931 where he would spend long periods of time right up until his death in 1963.

Varengeville brought a breath of fresh air to Braque's works: new subjects, an interest in landscape and the age of Antiquity and the appearance of the bird motif; as well as the use of new materials in a new artistic practice - sculpture. His life in Varengeville, divided between artistic creation, walks and meetings was documented by the photographer Mariette Lachaud, who shadowed him in his daily life. Many artists, poets and writers came to visit Braque and his wife. In the summer of 1937, the American sculptor Alexander Calder, the Catalan painter Joan Miró, and the German painter Hans Hartung all spent time in Varengeville. Varengeville, situated at the very tip of Europe, became a cliff-top studio before the war broke out. For the first time ever this exhibition offers a complete overview of this story filled with artistic friendships

VARENGEVILLE, A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND POETRY

After years spent in sunny Sorgues and the South of France, Braque rediscovered the Normandy of his childhood in Varengeville. Together with his wife Marcelle, he spent every summer in the Normandy farmhouse they had built, sometimes remaining there until winter had set in. Braque, who would take daily walks in the countryside or on the beach, felt a deep attachment to the climate and imposing setting of Varengeville. This resulted in him taking up landscape painting again. There is no human presence in this vast landscape with which the painter felt so connected, except abandoned boats (*La Plage de Dieppe*, 1929) and the waves washing up against the foot of the cliffs (*Falaise d'Étretat*, 1930). Only the presence of the ancient Greek gods can be felt, to whom Braque liked to refer in his works (*La Plage*, 1931-1932).

The roundness of feminine forms, for which the landscape gave Braque inspiration, culminated in the great *Nu couché* (1935) painted in sweeps and patches of colour; its composition is a response to the soft forms of *Grande nature morte brune* (1932). Just as Picasso dealt extensively with the theme of the model in the sculptor's studio, in 1936 Braque also began a series of portraits of women, depicting the painter and a female musician (*La Femme à la palette* and *La Pianiste*). Braque superimposes a black profile onto the young woman's silhouette which is reminiscent of figures found on Greek vases.

SCULPTURE, A NEW PRACTICE

Not only did the immense cliffs at Varengeville ignite Braque's interest in landscape, they also inspired him to explore an as yet unknown area - sculpture. It was through the natural items he gathered during his walks - pebbles, fragments of chalk, driftwood and bare bones - that Braque engaged with this new language. His practice was twofold: actual carving of the soft stone which had created the great buildings of Normandy, from Jumièges Abbey to Rouen Cathedral; and the art of assemblage, recalling the collages of his cubist period, but this time created in plaster and cast in bronze.

At the same time, the art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard asked him to produce illustrations for a text of his choice. This great admirer of Greek mythology chose Hesiod's *Theogony* composed in the 8th century BC., which tells the story of the creation of the world and the genealogies of the Greek gods. These figures inspired by Ancient Greece appear frequently in engravings and sculpture, as if the artist were re-engaging with the age-old skill of the sculptor. The use of engraved plaster is reminiscent both of the incisions of Attic black-figure ceramics, and of the geological peculiarities of the cliffs at Varengeville, where lines of black flint traverse the immaculate whiteness of the chalk.

PAUL NELSON AND FRANCINE LE CŒUR

After taking part in the decisive Argonne offensive in the Ardennes in 1918, Paul Nelson hung up his pilot's uniform to become a student of architecture, returning to France in 1920 where he became involved with the Parisian designer Francine Le Cœur. His attachment to Varengueville, a village with which Francine was also familiar, led the couple to rent *Le Petit Manoir* - which housed the former studio of Camille Corot, Isabey and Monet - on the road leading up to the church, before buying it in 1929. Francine, who descended from a long line of architects, including her grandfather Charles Le Cœur who was friends with Renoir, introduced her husband to the artistic world of the French capital. Among their large number of friends were painters, sculptors, and gallery owners from both France and elsewhere, such as Vassily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, Christian Zervos, Henri Laurens and many others; these friends were invited to spend the day or a holiday on the Côte d'Albâtre.

After being accepted into the studio of the master of reinforced concrete, Auguste Perret, and graduating in 1927, Nelson became a vital force of the avant-garde. He focused his attention on hospital architecture where he could apply his humanistic theories. Nelson's research into prefabrication led to the formulation of his *Maison suspendue* project (1936-1938), a convertible home that was designed to be able to adapt to the changing needs of its occupants. Arp, Miró and Léger collaborated on the first prototype (since lost), which stopped off in Varengueville on its way to be exhibited in New York in 1938. Calder, Miró and Léger contributed to the second prototype, which was retained by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

1937 : THE SUMMER OF GIANTS

By 1937, when the pavilions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union came face to face at the Paris Universal Exhibition, war was already present in Europe. Picasso's *Guernica* was at the centre of the Spanish Republic's pavilion, along with Calder's *Fontaine de mercure*, an homage to the miners of Amaldén (Barcelona, Fundació Joan Miró), Miró's lost fresco, *Le Faucheur catalan*, and *La Montserrat* by Julio González (Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum). This was not just a meeting of artists all denouncing fascism, it was also a meeting of friends: the Nelsons invited the Calders to spend the summer with them in Varengueville, where they were joined by the owners of the galleries displaying Miró's works, Pierre Loeb and Pierre Matisse, the son of the painter, his sister Marguerite and her husband Georges Duthuit, who rented private houses. Miró, his wife and their daughter Maria Dolores joined them for one month, staying as guests in their friends' homes. With the music of the accordion played by Louisa Calder and Georges Braque in the background, the party came together for games of tennis and bowling, and to bathe in the sea; these activities were immortalised by the young painter Hans Hartung. Claude Duthuit, at that time still a child, recalls 'luncheons at the Braque household, picking blackberries with the Mirós, and discovering Calder's *Cirque*, which he had set in motion at the Nelson's house'. In the garage Calder made gossamer objects out of wire and sculptures in jars, which he then gave to friends as gifts. The summer of '37 was like a magical interlude atop a cliff.

VARENGEVILLE, HOME TO ARTISTIC FRIENDSHIPS

In seeking to be surrounded by artists, Nelson created a great deal of buzz around Braque in the pre-war years. He formed a strong friendship with fellow American Calder, who gave him a number of gouache paintings, a *Vache* made of wire, and a sculpture (christened *Le Danseur* by Francine and Paul). Calder's legendary generosity was also evident in his exchanges with Braque, to whom he gave the gossamer planetary composition *Sans titre* (c. 1937), and with Miró for whom he produced a portrait made of wire. Braque and Miró, who had spent the first few months of the 'phony war' in Varengeville, developed a mutual respect for one another. Braque gave Miró *La Plage de Varengeville* (1956), and dedicated his *Portrait de femme* (1955) to him.

These exchanges also allowed Nelson to experiment with his idea of applying the plastic arts to architecture, including domestic architecture. In the summer of 1938, Miró filled the walls of his home with an enormous, abstract fresco, *La Naissance du Dauphin*. Partly destroyed during the German occupation, and since removed from the house, this work evokes the body of a marine creature through its use of colour and distortion. Miró's trip to Varengeville gave him the chance to return to landscape art with *Le Vol d'un oiseau sur la plaine II* (1939), which transforms the movement of a train along a ploughed field and a bird in flight into a momentary vision.

A REFUGE IN WARTIME

As war began to spread throughout Europe, the Miró family left Paris for good during the summer of 1939, returning to Varengeville where their friends were staying. They settled in Le Clos des Sansonnets where between August and December Miró produced two series of small paintings, *Varengeville I* and *Varengeville II*, both dominated by black surfaces with occasional strokes of colour. The omnipresent night, the ideas of escape and of elsewhere (*Femmes et oiseaux dans la nuit*, 1939) are among his favourite subjects in the period up to 1941. Miró retired into an ascetic life, and in January 1940 began the series *Constellation*, one of the most successful works of his career. At the same time, and entirely unaware of this work by Miró, Calder was producing his own *Constellations*, fragmented sculptures made of iron rods connected to each other by coloured pieces of wood in biomorphic shapes. Braque, who had withdrawn to Normandy in the first few months of the war, refrained from painting for one year in order to focus on sculpture. When he took up his paintbrush once again, it was to produce dark, austere vanitas still lifes, evoking the misery of war: the Christian fish (*Les Poissons noirs*, 1942), skulls and heavily-applied crucifixes (*Vanitas*, 1939). The artist, having withdrawn into himself, seems to have embarked on an extensive and serious dialogue with himself.

VARENGEVILLE, CITY AND COUNTRY

After the war, Braque divided his time between Paris and Varengeville, developing different, new motifs in each location. While in Paris, he grappled with the *Billards* (1944-1949), great silent, virtuosic compositions. In Varengeville, he delighted in studying the things all around him, painting his garden and the surrounding countryside. Fields of wheat, rainfall and bicycles evoke the simplicity of rural life. The banal garden chair, which is present in many photographs, captured his particular attention, serving as the subject of a whole series of works. The decorative arabesques of the backrest and the metallic mesh of the seat invade the painting, the rustic impasto and flat surfaces of faux wood play with perspective in order finally to refute its depth and bring the real object to the surface of the painting. As was the case with cubism, the everyday object sheds its own banality and picturesque quality in order to join the artist on his quest to represent space.

The introspective series, the *Ateliers*, would be produced partly in Paris, partly in Varengeville, with the paintings often being transported on the roof of a car. It is in these great paintings, with their suggestive, arranged disorder, that the bird appears; the main motif of the final fifteen years, it can be found perched on top of an easel in *Atelier VI*.

BRAQUE'S BIRD

The studio that Nelson built for Georges Braque in 1949 had no windows on the walls, only large skylights on the ceiling. It was in this new creative space that the bird was established as a subject. At the centre of the composition, mid-flight, it is the 'shock of the song', as Braque described it to the poet André Verdet. 'The song of its light floods the painting The painting ends up becoming a song'

Whether alone, with a partner, in a flock, sketched or stylised, Braque's bird is more than a simple motif. Universal, not belonging to any identifiable species, it is placed between heaven and earth like a pretext for painting space and responding to the artist's spiritual aspirations. The account of Mariette Lauchaud, Braque's loyal assistant, allows us to place the start date of *L'Oiseau et son nid* as Easter morning 1955 in Varengeville. Braque completed this painting after three months of work, and retained it until his death, taking it with him wherever he went. Even in his sick, weakened state, Braque returned several times to the figures of the bird and nest, which embody the place where life is reborn.

THE CIRCLE OF POETS

Since the 1900s, Braque had been developing ideas within a circle of poets, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob and Pierre Reverdy, who were closely tied to the avant-garde movement. After the Second World War, as engraving and lithography became more important to his work, Braque went back to these poets. He maintained a personal relationship with each of them that was founded on productive creative exchanges. His work with Reverdy, begun in 1910, culminated finally in *La Liberté des mers* just before the poet's death in 1960.

Braque had a strong relationship from the very beginning with René Char, who was 25 years his junior. Before he knew him, the young poet sent the first work he published, following fighting with the Resistance, called *Seuls demeurent*, to the painter at Varengeville. Their meeting, arranged by the publishers of the *Cahiers d'Art* Christian and Yvonne Zervos, would prove to be productive: each studied the other's work. Char would go on to write more for Braque than any other artist; and Braque would be the first of Char's 'alliés substantiels', illustrating many of his poems and ballets. Their common objective was to 'give man back to himself', as Char wrote.

Braque had illustrated more than fifty works by authors and poets, many of whom would make the journey to Varengeville: Frank Elgar, Paul Eluard, Marcel Jouhandeau, Jacques Prévert and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes ... One motif is common to all of these works: the bird, which Saint-John Perse would take up in his 1962 work *L'Ordre des oiseaux*, published together with twelve of Braque's etchings for the painter's 80th birthday.

BRAQUE'S STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS IN À VARENGEVILLE

Though he never mentioned any religious beliefs, Braque did not reject the spiritual dimension of painting. Together with Matisse, Léger, Chagall and their contemporaries, he took part in the movement galvanised by two Black Friars, Fathers Couturier and Régamey, who ran the pioneering journal *L'Art sacré*. His pious wife Marcelle organised for him to meet the parish priest of Varengeville, Abbot Jean Lecoq, who had the task of reinstating the oratory at the Clos Saint-Dominique at the centre of the town that had burned down during the war. For this new sanctuary, inaugurated in 1954, Braque designed his first ever stained-glass windows, *Dominique marchant vers la sainteté*, in a converted barn; these were then made in the glass painter Paul Bony's studio.

He continued this collaboration in the ancient church of Saint-Valéry - at the centre of the seaside cemetery where he had reserved himself a plot - freely interpreting a medieval motif, *L'Arbre de Jessé*. Within a harmonious combination of deep blues and splashes of turquoise, he condenses the genealogy of Christ by adding to the image the powerful rhythm of flat, white areas that evoke wings, waves, or the cliffs dominated by the church. Thanks to the patronage of the Association des Amis des Musées d'Art de Rouen, the mock-ups of both of these stained-glass windows were added to the collection of the city's Musée des Beaux-Arts in spring 2018.

RETURN TO LANDSCAPE ART

If Georges Braque re-engaged with landscape art upon moving to Varengeville in 1930, it was in the final years of his life that he would again make it central to his works. This tireless surveyor of coastal paths, whose meditative image would be captured by Robert Doisneau, would take from his walks a series of small, pared-down landscapes, stripped of all context to try and achieve more synthetic, universal depictions.

The sea, the cliffs, the fields, birds soaring through the skies; all are depicted in a narrow, elongated form that accentuates the feeling of horizontality. Through these paintings, with their broad strokes made by a palette knife, and reduced to just two thick strips of paint separated by the horizon, Braque re-affirms the materiality of painting. As is the case in the works of Nicolas de Staël, with whom Braque engaged in meaningful dialogue, the canvas of the painting is no longer simply a space of representation but rather an actual surface on which the viewer faces himself.

La Sarclouse is Braque's final great painting; he passed away on 31st August 1963 at his home in Paris. He was buried on a wet day in the seaside cemetery at Varengeville-sur-mer, the day after his state funeral which was held on 3rd September 1963.

USEFUL INFORMATION

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

HOURS

Exhibition open every day from 10h to 18h.

Closed Tuesdays, December 25th, January 1st and May 1st

RATES OF THE EXHIBITION

Full price: 9 € / Reduced price: 6 € /

Free for children under 26 years old and beneficiaries of social minima

Open from April 5 to September 2, 2019

ENTRANCE

Esplanade Marcel-Duchamp 76000 Rouen

SUCH. : + 33 (0)2 35 71 28 40

ACCESS

- Access by train: SNCF station Rouen Rive droite 1h10 from Paris Saint-Lazare
- Bus access:
 - Square Verdrel stop, rue Jeanne d'Arc (F2, 8, 11, 13),
 - Beaux-Arts stop, rue Jean Lecanuet (F2, 5, 11, 13, 20)
- Metrobus: Station station Rue Verte or Palais de Justice
- Parking: Palace area