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Marquette's Joan of Arc Chapel *Her Spirit in Stone*

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Marie d'Orléans, Bois Chenu

Shortly after the First World War, a young architect and historian, Jacques Couëlle, travelling the byways of southern France, happened upon the village of Chasse in the Rhône valley about twelve miles south of Lyon. There he discovered the remains of a small chapel, built in the fifteenth century "or perhaps earlier"¹ and abandoned since the time of the French Revolution. Over five cen-

turies, the structure had fallen into ruin. But Couëlle recognized that the chapel represented an important discovery—an edifice "absolutely unique in its genre."² Convinced that it was worthy of reconstruction, he set about studying the structure, taking precise measurements and making photographs and detailed drawings.

A few years later, the chapel at Chasse attracted the attention of Mrs. Gertrude Hill Gavin, the daughter of James Hill, the American railroad builder. In the early twenties, Mrs. Gavin had purchased a Renaissance chateau once owned by the dukes of Orléans-Longueville and had it transferred from France to her Wheatley Hills estate on Long Island. In 1926, negotiating through Couëlle, she acquired the chapel. She arranged that it be shipped from France and reconstructed at Wheatley Hills under the supervision of the American architect, John Russell Pope, who used

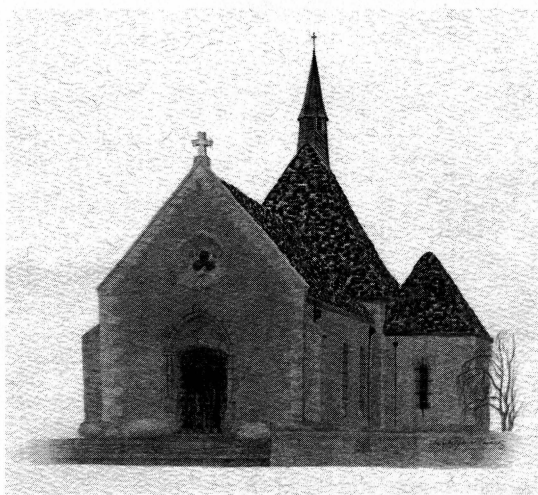
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Couëlle's drawings as a guide. Mrs. Gavin's decision was well timed. In a letter to Couëlle, written in the fall of 1927, Mrs. Gavin remarked: "It is very good news to know that all the stones for the chapel have left France. I was so afraid that something would happen, and that the government would prevent their being exported."³ Shortly after the chapel arrived in New York, a Commission of the Monuments Historiques de France halted the exportation of all such historic artifacts.

Mrs. Gavin had also purchased an early Gothic altar and the "Joan of Arc Stone," both of which were built into the chapel during its reconstruction. The latter, whose authenticity was endorsed by the Monuments Historiques de France, forms the base of a wall niche in the left side of the sanctuary. According to legend, Joan stood on this stone when she prayed to Our Lady for success in her mission to raise the siege at Orléans. As the story is told, she knelt at the end of her prayer and kissed the stone, which was subsequently believed to be colder than the stones surrounding it. In 1962, the Gavin estate was purchased by the Marc Rojzman family. Five days before they were to move in, however, a fire destroyed the chateau (excepting the façade, which the Rojzmans donated

to the Metropolitan Museum of Art) but did not reach the chapel. In a letter dated May 12, 1964, addressed to Father Edward O'Donnell, S.J., who was then Chancellor of Marquette University, the Rojzmans offered the Chapel to Marquette—notwithstanding the fact that "several [other] institutions ...[had] been most anxious to acquire it for some time." Mr. Rojzman wrote: "I am sure you fully understand that this chapel means far more to me than any donation I have ever made and transcends by far any mere monetary value. Naturally therefore I trust that the choice of location and the use of the chapel will be commensurate with its importance."⁴ In accepting the chapel, Marquette chose to place it in the heart of the campus, to serve as a living center of religious faith and not as a museum.

It took nine months to dismantle the chapel; each stone was carefully marked on three sides and coded into an overall plan. The first of a fleet of trucks carrying thirty tons of stone, terra cotta tiles, and stained glass arrived in Milwaukee in November of 1964. Reconstruction began the following summer, closely following the original plan of Couëlle. At Marquette, however, some modifications to the



Joan of Arc Chapel, Marquette University
Watercolor: Charles James Kaiser

original were made, including a longer nave to accommodate more visitors and in-floor heating to avoid unsightly pipes. Among the treasures arriving at Marquette that spring were the stained glass windows designed for the chapel by Charles J. Connick, who modeled them on the vibrantly colored vitraux of Sainte Chapelle in Paris. The crates also included a twelfth century baptismal font and numerous furnishings for the chapel—additional gifts of the Rojtmans.

True to their promise to erect the chapel as soon as possible, Marquette workers affixed the cross to the chapel spire in the spring of 1966. On May 26 of that year, four days before the 535th anniversary of her death, Marquette dedicated the chapel to Joan of Arc.

In the thirty years since, the chapel has been used for weddings, memorial services, ordinations, first communions, confirmations, and even social protest. On April 23, 1969, fifty students locked themselves in the chapel to boycott the Marquette University ROTC program. Police kicked down the sacristy door and forcibly expelled the students. The following week, dozens of students staged a peaceful rally on the chapel steps. In October of the same year, hundreds more assembled at the chapel to march in support of fourteen Milwaukeeans charged with burning their draft cards.

The subject of this essay, “Her Spirit in Stone,” recognizes the historic fact that after five centuries, Joan of Arc is memorialized in a building on the Marquette University campus. But beyond the metaphor, how does the chapel evoke Joan’s spirit?

First, linking the terms “spirit” and “stone” extends our understanding of them beyond their ordinary use. In speaking of the material elements of the chapel as being permeated by spirituality—by which I mean the highest qualities of mind or soul—one is speaking of a work of art. The Joan of Arc chapel at Marquette is undeniably a work of art. It is aesthetically pleasing, it has a conceptual focus, and it is able to inspire in visitors a sense of the spiritual. As a chapel, it also has a societal function beyond pleasure or understanding.

According to the philosopher of art, Nelson Goodman, a work of art can both denote—that is, represent someone/something—or it can exemplify—that is, present formal and expressive qualities.⁵ The painting by Andrew Wyeth, “Christina’s World,” represents a woman named Christina; at the same time it exemplifies certain textures, light, and perspective as well as a sense of tenuous hope. While traditionally pictorial works of art such as the Wyeth both denote and exemplify, modern abstract art tends only to exemplify. An abstract painting by Kandinsky, for

example, does not denote (nor does it intend to), it simply exemplifies particular qualities of form and color. In the case of architecture, which is essentially an abstract art form with additional functions to perform, the relationship between denotation and exemplification is unique. For example, a 555 foot high obelisk in our nation's capitol is named "The Washington Monument." It is, of course, not a pictorial representation of our first president. However, it evokes an awareness of his place in American history. The qualities it exemplifies—whiteness, strength, height—are thus translated into qualities that we associate with Washington: purity of character, strength of purpose, single-minded devotion.

So it is with the Joan of Arc chapel. When Coëlle found the chapel in France, it was named St. Martin de Seysseul. The story of this particular St. Martin was unknown to the villagers and the modifying "de Seyssuel" had been a matter of political contention for many years as locals unsuccessfully fought to call the chapel "St. Martin de Chasse." When Mrs. Gavin installed the "Joan of Arc Stone" in the building, she began informally to refer to the edifice as the "Saint Joan chapel." Reconstructed at Marquette University, it was officially dedicated to the saint as the corner stone indicates. The rough hewn character of the chapel brings to mind the simple, steadfast, peasant saint of Lorraine.

Aura is a term used by the aesthetician, Walter Benjamin, to refer to the uniqueness and the authenticity of an original work of art, as well as to our experience of those qualities. Aura here helps explain the symbolic power of the Joan of Arc Chapel. The aura of a work suggests the mysterious presence of the artist-creator, of creativity and genius; these features inspire a sense of awe and a feeling of respectful distance in the viewer. Aura embraces as well the permanence of a work, its timeless value.

The Joan of Arc chapel is unique, not only at Marquette University and in Milwaukee, but in North America. Even in Chasse, Coëlle attested to the chapel's uniqueness of style, to the unusual accretion of details in the chapel's form which reflect its cultural history. A sheaf of official documents housed in the Marquette University Archives attest to the chapel's authenticity. It is a Gothic chapel from a Gothic age as opposed to a replica. Several practical details, such as the lengthened nave, have been added in the Marquette reconstruction, but these remain faithful to the dominant style of the original structure. Apropos of this, a comparison of the chapel with Gesu church, a Gothic replication which stands across campus from the Joan of Arc chapel, reinforces the chapel's authenticity. Benjamin includes permanence as a part of aura. Perhaps he would object to the fact that the chapel has been dislodged from its original context, considering its permanence to have

been thus compromised. I would answer that the meticulous stone-by-stone reconstruction of the chapel and the respect shown for the original underscore its permanence—that it has remained essentially unchanged in its transfer from Chasse to Marquette University.

Aura, as Benjamin points out, is directly related to history: “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”⁶ It is through its history that the aura of the chapel is connected to Joan of Arc. The chapel was built in rural France around the time of Joan’s life, in the early years of the fifteenth century. While it is improbable that Joan ever visited Chasse—her home lies some 250 miles north of Lyon and her journeys led her mainly to the east (to Orléans and Chinon) and north (to Reims and Rouen)—she likely prayed in dozens of similar small oratories. We know that during her journey from Vaucouleurs to Chinon in 1429, Joan could not attend Mass for fear of being recognized. Instead she prayed in small, unattended chapels along the way. The “Joan of Arc Stone” is said to have originated in one such chapel. Although not originally from the Chasse structure, it may have come from a similar building.

One final point, again from Benjamin, and perhaps the most important: “It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”⁷ For centuries, art was associated primarily with the practice of religion. This was true not only overtly, as in mosaics having religious subjects, but also in the formal qualities of Gothic churches, with their heavenward soaring vaults and their dependence on “divine numbers” for their proportions. Benjamin makes the point that *any* work of art traces its power of spiritual evocation to religious ritual, no matter how apparently disconnected from religion the work seems to be. With respect to a chapel that is a work of art, Benjamin’s point is especially clear. Here are two cases. The Sainte Chapelle in Paris, built by Louis IX to house the religious relics that he had collected, is a great work of art, boasting magnificent stained glass windows. Sainte Chapelle no longer functions as a church: the lack of predieux, altar fixtures, and sanctuary lamp and the thirty-two franc admission fee attest to this claim. It is a museum and, as such, is perceived differently from a functioning church. The Joan of Arc chapel, modest in scale and significance by comparison, is nevertheless a work of art which continues to honor its primary mission as a chapel. The Rojtmans specified, as a condition of their gift, that the chapel should continue as a place of worship. Marquette’s Joan of Arc chapel is, in fact, the only medieval structure in North America which still serves its original purpose. In this chapel, whose aura expresses the confluence of

art and the holy, we are reminded of Joan of Arc. Of all the things to be said of her—that she was a peasant, a politician, a soldier—she was above all a woman of the spirit. She knew herself as a “daughter of God;”⁸ we know her as a saint. In this chapel named for her, in its simple aesthetic, its historic and religious aura, its daily use as a place of worship, we are reminded of Joan of Arc—we perceive “her spirit in stone.”

Notes

- ¹ “peut-être plus tôt.” Document letter from M. Bertholony, mayor of Chasse, February 18, 1927. Unprocessed material, Marquette University Archives, B9.2, Series 1.
- ² “ce monument absolument unique en son genre.” Jacques Coëlle in a letter to Mrs. Michael Gavin, July 1, 1927. Unprocessed material, Marquette University Archives, B9.2, Series 1.
- ³ October 25, 1927. Unprocessed material, Marquette University Archives. B9.2, Series 1.
- ⁴ Unprocessed material, Marquette University Archives. B9.2, Series 1.
- ⁵ See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 3-6, 52-57.
- ⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” in *Illuminations/Walter Benjamin*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221.
- ⁷ Benjamin, 224.
- ⁸ Raymond Oursel, *Le Procès de condamnation et le procès de réhabilitation de Jeanne d’Arc*. (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1959), 66.