



EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

Pilgrimage Chapel at Ronchamp

Photographs by Maximus Clarke



In 1944, a bomb destroyed a small Christian chapel on a hill outside the eastern French town of Ronchamp. The structure had been built in the fourth century, probably on the site of a pagan altar, and had become an important pilgrimage site. After the end of the war, the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier was commissioned to design a new church. Though not Roman Catholic himself, Le Corbusier was moved to embark on a profound struggle with the principles of machine-age rationalism that had guided his earlier work. His sculptural chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut was consecrated in 1955, and is seen as a turning point not only in his career but in European modern architecture as a whole.

"In June 1950, on the hill, I spend three hours observing the sun and the horizons. To drink them in. . . The shell of a crab, picked up on Long Island near New York in 1946, is sitting on my drafting table. It will become the roof of the chapel: two concrete membranes, six centimeters thick, separated by a distance of 2.26 meters. The shell will be carefully placed on walls made of salvaged stone . . . The shell is positioned on these ridiculously—but intentionally—thick walls. They contain reinforced concrete posts, on which the shell will be supported, without touching the walls themselves. A horizontal stream of light 10 centimeters wide will provoke astonishment."

—Le Corbusier in *Ronchamp*, ed. Jean Petit (1961)

"Observe the play of shadows, learn the game . . . Precise shadows, clear cut or dissolving. Projected shadows, sharp. Projected shadows, sharply delineated, but with what enchanting arabesques and frets. Counterpoint and fugue. Great music. Try to look at the pictures upside down or sideways. You will discover the game."

—Le Corbusier in *Ronchamp*, ed. Jean Petit (1961)

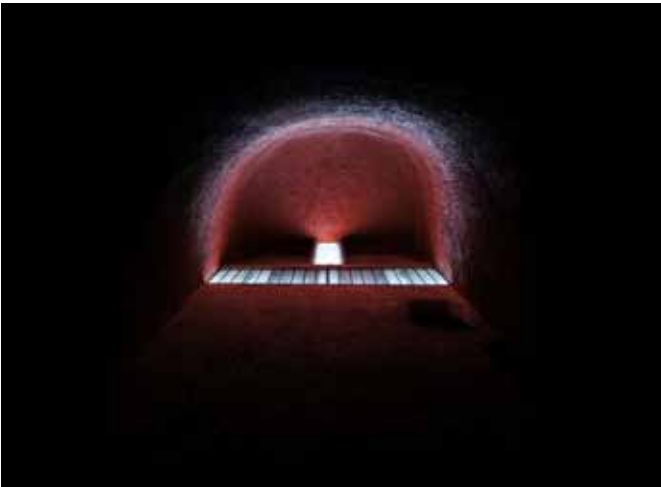


"The boat drifts onward
Voices onboard sing
As all become strange
and are translated
are carried on high
and reflect on
the plan of gladness."

—Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'angle droit* (1947–53)







“The exaggerated supremacy of ‘Art’ in [postwar] European Architecture probably denotes a hesitant attitude towards technology, which itself has possibly been retarded by our derisive attitude towards the myth of progress, the recent belief that true progress lies in charity, welfare, and personal happiness, having replaced the Victorian idea of progress as the invention and perfection of man’s tools and equipment.”

—James Stirling, “Ronchamp: Le Corbusier’s Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism,” *The Architectural Review* (1956)

“It is at once simple, strong, radiant—and above all a symbol of freedom. You see, Notre-Dame-du-Haut does not instruct. [Medieval] cathedrals were built to instruct. Here one finds what one is watching for, what one is seeking. Here, some receive a powerful shock. Others come and are completely unmoved.”

—René Bolle-Reddat, priest at Ronchamp, interviewed in *Coopération* (1987)



“Secularized architecture dwells on the difference between apparent and real to keep us alive to our own constructive perception, while sacred architecture dwelt on the same difference to keep us alive to the fallibility of our senses. Choice between these two ways of seeing is normally aided by context, but at Ronchamp they are elided in a such a way that it is impossible to tell whether architecture is exploiting a residue of popular faith in furtherance of its now secular aims, or whether faith draws architecture back into its service again. It depends, I think, on the balance of laughter and awe.”

—Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries* (1995)



Maximus Clarke is a photographer, stereographer, and multimedia artist who lives in Queens, NY. His stereographic and video works have been featured in exhibitions at the Chennai Photo Biennale, the Warhol Museum, the Clocktower Gallery, and the Center for Holographic Arts. His work can be viewed at MaximusClarke.com and ParallaxCity.com.