

Augustin Lesage

Born 1876, Saint-Pierre-les-Auchel, France; died 1954, Bubure, France.

Augustin Lesage was a coal miner in the far north of France who asserted that, at the age of 35, he had heard a voice tell him that he would become an artist. Up until that time, the only direct contact Lesage had had with the fine arts had been a visit to the art museum in Lille. Ultimately, the voice Lesage heard, which he believed was that of his younger sister, who had died at the age of three, instructed him about what subjects to paint and which materials to use to make his pictures. Lesage went on to make art and also to serve as a medium in spirit-summoning séances.

Guided by spirit voices, including that of his dead sister, Lesage made his first drawings. During the early 1910s, he set to work on a large canvas that took him two years to complete. Similarly, throughout his art-making career, large-format paintings featured prominently in his oeuvre. Recalling his first compulsion to make art, Lesage once said, “In January 1912, powerful spirits came and revealed themselves to me, ordering me to draw and paint, something which I had never done before. [...] ‘Do not worry about insignificant details,’ was their response. ‘We are the ones working through your hands.’” Lesage claimed the voices he heard also had told him, “Don’t be afraid. We are next to you. One day you will be a painter.”

Although his service in World War I interrupted his art-making, Lesage returned to painting in 1916. By the early 1920s, he was able to make a living from his activities as a spirit medium and artist. In a body of work that consisted of some 800 paintings, Lesage created intricate, colorful images that featured neatly laid-out, often symmetrical or architectonic compositions, with rows of detailed patterning or figures in profile, similar to (and in some cases unabashedly imitating) Egyptian hieroglyphics.

In the late 1920s, in Paris, Lesage offered public demonstrations of his spirit-driven painting technique while being observed by scientific researchers who were interested in his kind of “spiritualistic art.” He continued making art right up until the end of his life.

- Edward M. Gómez

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2023

Culturas Paralelas: Works from the Treger Saint Silvestre Collection, Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, PT.

2021

5th Art Brut Biennial: Beliefs, Collection de l'art brut, Lausanne, CH.

2020

Spirit, are you there? The Painters of the Beyond, Musée Maillol, Paris, FR.

2019

Floral Fantasies: Between Symbolism and Outsider Art, Wilhelm-Hack-Museum, Ludwigshafen, DE.

2018

The Museum of Everything, Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, AU.

2017

Art Brut: A story of individual mythologies, Treger Saint Silvestre Collection, Oliva Creative Factory, São João de Madeira, PT.

2016

Architectures, Collection de l'art brut, Lausanne, CH.

2014

Art Brut Masterpieces and Discoveries, Carte Blanche à Bruno Decharme, Christian Berst, Paris, FR.

Art Brut, abcd collection / bruno decharme, La maison rouge, Paris, FR.

Art Brut: Breaking Boundaries, curated by Christian Berst, Oliva Creative Factory, São João de Madeira, PT.

2013

The Encyclopedic Palace, main exhibition of the 55th Venice Biennale, Venice

2012

Arte Bruta Terra Incognita, curated by Christian Berst, Oliva Creative Factory, São João de Madeira, PT.

2010

The Museum of Everything, Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin

2008

Augustin Lesage, Elmar Trenkwalder: Les inspirés, La maison rouge/Fondation Antoine de Galbert, Paris

2006

Inner Worlds Outside, Fundacion la Caixa, Madrid; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Irish Museum of Art, Dublin.

2005

Dubuffet & L'art brut, Museum Kunst Palast, Dusseldorf, DE; Collection de l'art brut; LAM, Villeneuve d'Ascq.

2000

Arte Spirite, Mediumnique, Visionnaire, Messages d'outre-monde, Le Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, FR.

1979

Outsiders, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Collection abcd, Montreuil

Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne

Lille Métropole Musée d'Art Moderne, d'Art Contemporain et d'Art Brut, Lille

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Museum of Everything, exhibition catalogue, Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli & Electa, Turin/Milan, 2010.

Roulin, Geneviève. "Raw Classics: Augustin Lesage." *Raw Vision*, U.K., issue number 26, spring 1999.

Peiry, Lucienne, *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art*. Paris: Flammarion, distributed in the U.S.A. by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.; second English-language edition, 2006; originally published in French as *L'Art Brut*, Paris: Flammarion; 1997.

Deroeux, Didier, Annick Notter, Michel Thévoz et al., *Augustin Lesage 1876-1954*, Philippe Sers Éditeur/Vilo, Paris, 1988.

Thévoz, Michel, *L'Art brut*, Albert Skira, Geneva, 1975.