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Arp, Jean, *Die Grablegung der Vögel und Schmetterlinge*, 1916-17, Holzrelief, bemalt, 40 x 32,5 x 9,5 cm (Objektmass), Kunsthaus Zürich

Documentation level



Name

Arp, Jean

Other version/s of name

Arp, Hans

Arp, Jean-Pierre-Guillaume

Dates of birth and death

* 16.9.1886 Strassburg, † 7.6.1966 Basel

Municipality of origin (CH)

Locarno (TI), Meudon (F)

Nationality

D, F

Brief biography

Maler, Plastiker und Dichter. Vertreter des Zürcher Dadaismus und französischen Surrealismus. Verheiratet mit Sophie Taeuber

Fields of activity

Plastik, Malerei, Grafik, Holzschnitt, Zeichnung, Collage, Lithographie

Lexicon article

Jean (Hans) Arp made early acquaintance with circles in the form of smoke. His father Jürgen Wilhelm Arp from Wendtorf (Schleswig-Holstein) traded in cigars and tobacco in Strasbourg. His mother Marie-Joséphine Koeberle originated from Alsace. Latent emotion made a romantic of the teenage Arp, whose favourite authors were Achim von Arnim, Clemens Brentano, Eduard Mörike, Novalis and Ludwig Tieck and who began writing his own poetry at a

young age. It was not long before he met poets from the *Sturm* group. In 1900 he attended the school of decorative arts in Strasbourg. His initiation into modern art came in 1904 on his first trip to Paris. In November that year he began studying in Ludwig Hoffmann's studio at the art academy in Weimar. Here he befriended architect Henry van de Velde, who gave him the chance to exhibit at Bernheim-Jeune in Paris in 1907 alongside Henri Matisse, Paul Signac and Kees van Dongen. In 1908 he studied at the Académie Julian in Paris. Here Arp met [Walter Helbig](#), [Oskar Lüthy](#) and [Wilhelm Gimmi](#), with whom he was to found the association *Der Moderne Bund* in 1911. Arp was disappointed by the Académie, and so in 1910 he left Paris for Weggis on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, where his parents had settled in 1906. The first exhibition by *Der Moderne Bund* opened in Lucerne in late December 1911 and included works by Wilhelm Gimmi, [Paul Klee](#), [Cuno Amiet](#), Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Auguste Herbin. The group's second exhibition in 1912 was at the Kunsthau in Zurich. By now Arp was very busy. He worked on the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, briefly managed the gallery *Der Sturm* in Berlin, took part in Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon (First German Autumn Salon) in 1913 and met Max Ernst. Arp wrote *Kaspar* and other poems, which would be published in *Die Wolkenpumpe* in 1920. To avoid being mobilised with the German army, Arp went to Paris. He was influenced by Max Jacob, Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire, Arthur Cravan and [Viking Eggeling](#), Amedeo Modigliani. Wassily Kandinsky drew his attention to fashionable ideas from theosophy, eastern philosophy and western alchemy. In 1915 Arp's German passport made him persona non grata in France. He returned to Switzerland, first to Ascona, then to Zurich. Produced «pre-Dada» ink drawings and portentously made friends with [Sophie Taeuber](#). Co-founded the movement Dada with her, [Hugo Ball](#), [Emmy Hennings](#), Richard Huelsenbeck, [Marcel Janco](#) and [Tristan Tzara](#) in 1916. Worked on wood reliefs, illustrations for Tzara's *Vingt-cinq poèmes* and Huelsenbeck's *Phantastische Gebete*. Arp discovered and was inspired by biomorphic forms in flotsam from Lago Maggiore. Friendship with Francis Picabia broadened his horizons; the group exhibition *Das Neue Leben* at Kunsthalle Basel and Kunsthau Zürich risked imposing Swiss confines. On a trip to Berlin after the war he befriended the local Dadaists and the Merz artist Kurt Schwitters. In 1919 production of Fatagaga collages with texts together with Theodor Baargeld and Max Ernst for Dada Cologne. Dada Zurich was now losing steam. Arp published his *Silbergäule* poems and went to Paris. Holiday with Sophie on Sylt; converted wood found when out beachcombing into relief cycles *Trousse des Naufragés* and *Trousse d'un Da*. As Dada's mésalliances dissolved, Jean and Sophie married in 1922, bestowing legal status on the unio mystica that also generated joint works (duo drawings).

Magazines Merz and Mécano featured contributions by Arp; publication of the lithographic sequence *7 Arpaden*. Preliminary rejection of Arp's application for Swiss citizenship in 1923, definitive rejection in 1925. 1924 first group exhibition by the Surrealists: Arp in the company of Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, [Paul Klee](#), Man Ray, André Masson, Joan Miró and Picasso. 1926–1928 decorated the interior of the Aubette in Strasbourg with Sophie Taeuber and Theo van Doesburg. With Michel Seuphor and Paul Dermée co-edited the journal *Documents Internationaux de l'Esprit Nouveau*. 1927 André Breton wrote the catalogue text for Arp's first solo exhibition at the Galerie Surréaliste; Arp built his own house in Meudon near Paris. 1929 visited Carnac with Sophie and Robert and Sonia Delaunay and was deeply impressed by the prehistoric druid stones and dolmens. 1930 first *Papiers déchirés* (pictures of torn paper) and first *round sculptures*; publication of the little volume of poetry *weiss du schwarz du* with collages by Max Ernst. 1932 member of the non-figurative group *Abstraction-Création* in Paris. Contributions for the magazines *Minotaure* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*. Group exhibitions in Paris, Brussels, Zurich, New York and Chicago. 1937 *Sculpture Conjugale* with Sophie. Joined the Allianz group founded in Zurich by [Richard Paul Lohse](#) and [Leo Leuppi](#).

Invasion by German troops caused the couple to flee to Méric, then Grasse, residing at Château Folie. Wooden sculptures and reliefs. Shortage of tools prompted Arp to make finger drawings and *papiers froissés* (crumpled paper). Sophie Taeuber died in Zurich on 13 January 1943, plunging Arp into a severe crisis and triggering a series of ink drawings: *Vie de pinceau: Méditations sur la mort de Sophie, L'Oiseau nocturne, L'Oiseau de mort*. Arp subsequently produced a number of «re-creations», compositions based on works by Sophie Taeuber.

In the 1940s major galleries in Paris and New York represented his work. International exhibitions. Trip to America and monumental wooden wall relief for Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1950 at the *Biennale di Venezia*. Trip to Greece sparked an interest in vase painting. 1954 Arp received the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the *Biennale di Venezia*. Publications of his own poetry and his illustrations of works by other poets. 1956 exhibition with Kurt Schwitters at Kunsthalle Bern. 1959 marriage to Marguerite Hagenbach. Public commissions. Major retrospective at the *Musée national d'art moderne* in Paris (1962), followed by Basel, Stockholm, Copenhagen and London. 1966 plaque by Arp on Spiegelgasse in Zurich (stylised navel) to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Dada. Death of Jean Arp in Basel. Burial in the cemetery at Locarno, as Ticino had been his last home and work base and the city had made him an honorary resident in 1965.

Arp was a painter, sculptor and poet. His talents were synthesised on paper: collages, drawings, woodcuts, lithographs. His early graphic works revealed Kandinsky's influence. Whether gesturally abstract or figurative, there was typographical finesse to Arp's illustrations for Dada magazines and manifestoes and he elevated the random factor to a design principle. His collages composed from small pieces were ordered automatically «according to the laws of chance». In the 1920s he focused on everyday

objects and formulated his «object language». The vocabulary: plate, fork, knife, clock, tie, moustache, lips, breasts. The «sur-real» depiction of realia was fed by a «bi-romanticism» (the term coined by art critic Ernst Kallai) that began to take hold from the mid-1920s as a self-critique within modern art in response to a tendency towards technical euphoria. «Biomorphism» embodied a new art hungry for the transcendental and for a world view, associated with the group Abstraction-Création and in particular with Kandinsky, Klee, Ernst and Arp.

From 1922, when the cosmopolitan flâneurs Ernst, Arp and Tzara turned their backs on the urban habitat and set off to their Dada marching song *Nous voulons retourner à la Nature, notre grandmère* (in: *Dada au Grand air*, Tyrol 1921), their reconciliation with nature had already begun to echo the mood of early romantic hillwalkers. These modern souls now rediscovered their natural roots (as Novalis once had). Adopting a paradigm that drew a structural analogy between the micro- and the macro-cosmos, they felt part of a unifying whole and sought to fathom it by phenomenological means. Oneiric, hallucinatory interpretations of microscopic insights into plants, amoebae and invertebrates offered a fruitful alternative to the rationalism of materialist reason. The physical fabric of nature was the gateway to its underlying energies: birth, death, rebirth. Inspired, Arp observed the mineral, vegetable, animal and anthropomorphic realms and visualised the creation of a fantastical world. In 1924, in occult vein, André Breton wrote in the First Surrealist Manifesto: «The flora and fauna of Surrealism are inadmissible». The intellectual precursor of this surrealist genesis was the Lebensphilosophie that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche and later Henri Bergson accused Darwin's evolutionary biology of merely projecting bourgeois utilitarian values. The counter-cry was «élan vital». The life force, claimed Bergson, would regenerate the Creation. It embraced inorganic and organic nature as well as human intuition and reason. Life exhausted its full potential only through creative abandon and immediate experience with no concern for finalities. This idea reflected Nietzsche's world view and its obsession with art: a cornucopia of form, a wealth of invention, an ocean of possibility, so unpredictable and adventurous that there was no need for an afterlife.

The art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker recognised the significance of this vision of nature in the 1930s, which Arp expressed by «making the invisible visible, the quest for an optical language that can capture the spiritual spheres beyond the world of appearances». In these vegetative forms, «biomorphism» found an emblematic code for the spiritual in art – at least until these microscopic close-ups, especially Arp's soft-flowing, organic forms, were deprived of meaning in the 1950s by decorative stencils to cater for petty-bourgeois tastes.

When Arp lent concrete form to this in sculptures made of white marble, wood, plaster and bronze, he was demonstrating how mass acquires solidity in stones, plants, animals and humans. Coagulation and coalescence, hardening and thickening were metaphors for nature as eternal transformation. Arp called the force behind this process «tension de sol» or «soil tension», a reference to nature's ceaseless cycles. He produced endlessly new constellations, drawing insights for his «moving ovals» not

only from observations of nature, but also from philosophical texts by Laozi, Jakob Boehme and others. The bipolarity of man and woman – Adam and Eve – prompted Arp, like Constantin Brancusi, to explore the egg as a paradigmatic symbol of conception. His intention was to restore humans to their original place within the Creation. In so doing, Arp playfully merged surrealism and constructivism/neo-plasticism as the dominant art movements of the inter-war years.

Works: Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus; Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum und Kupferstichkabinett; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Neue Nationalgalerie; Berlin/Remagen, Stiftung Arp; Duisburg, Wilhelm Lehbruck Museum; Museum Folkwang Essen; Meudon (F), Fondation Arp; New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; New York, The Museum of Modern Art; Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Solduno, Fondazione Marguerite Arp; Kunst Museum Winterthur; Kunsthaus Zürich.

Juri Steiner, 2004, updated 2019
Translation: Katherine Vanovitch

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Website

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