

CELEBRATING ART BRUT'S VENERABLE HOME

As it marks its fortieth anniversary, the Collection de l'Art Brut looks back –
and ahead – at its special role in a unique field

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ



The Château de Beaulieu in Lausanne, home to the Collection de l'Art Brut. Sculptures by Nek Chand



This year, the Collection de l'Art Brut, the world's first and most important museum devoted to the examination and presentation of the kind of unique, unusual artistic creations that are recognised by its name, marks the fortieth anniversary of its opening to the public at the Château de Beaulieu, in Lausanne, Switzerland. This milestone comes at a time when interest in the most original self-taught works appears to be greater than ever. At the same time, gaining a clear understanding of just what "*art brut*" signifies – as a particular slice of art history, a way of evaluating and classifying artworks, and an aesthetic sensibility that has become associated with them – has never seemed more urgent.

As the keepers of the vision of its founder, the French modern artist Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985), who invented the term "*art brut*" and articulated the critical-aesthetic concerns that identify the works to which it refers, the Collection de l'Art Brut acknowledges the challenges it is facing at a time when art-category labels appear to be more fluid than ever. Its plans for this year's fortieth-anniversary commemoration and for the museum's future programming reflect a commitment to honouring its history while moving forward as a cultural-educational institution with a distinctive mission.

Throughout 2016, the Collection, which now holds more than 60,000 works, will present special events to celebrate its big birthday. The centrepiece of this programming is its newest exhibition, "Jean Dubuffet's Art Brut, from the Collection's Origins", which offers a vivid recreation of the one Dubuffet mounted in 1949 at the René Drouin Gallery in Paris. Leading up to that historic presentation, in 1945 Dubuffet had made an exploratory trip to Switzerland with his friend, the French literary critic and writer Jean Paulhan. Dubuffet and Paulhan went prospecting for works that had been produced by art-makers outside the mainstream of academically trained, "professional" artists.

Sarah Lombardi, the museum's director, writes in the current exhibition's catalogue that during their trip they sought "works on the margins of elite and official culture." Already in 1942, Dubuffet had expressed his intention, as he recalled in an interview many years later, "to call into question the rites of culture and to seek out an art less constrained by pre-established norms." Dubuffet gave the French name "*art brut*" (literally, "raw art") to the remarkable creations he encountered and gathered up; they had been made by people living and working on what he viewed as the margins of mainstream culture and society. Among them: psychiatric-hospital patients, prisoners and other individuals who produced objects of aesthetic merit primarily for themselves and who felt driven to do so. Dubuffet regarded their works as unique and unclassifiable according to conventional art-historical criteria or art-category labels.

In 1948, Dubuffet founded the Compagnie de l'Art Brut along with Paulhan, the Surrealist artist André Breton, the collector-art dealer Charles Ratton, the avant-garde writer Henri-Pierre Roché, the publisher Edmond Bomsel and the critic Michel Tapié. The Croatian-born artist Slavko Kopač served as the association's curator. Through its presentations, such influential intellectuals and artists as Jean Cocteau, Karel Appel, Joan Miró and Claude Lévi-Strauss became aware of the *art brut* phenomenon.

It is the Compagnie de l'Art Brut's late-1949 exhibition, "L'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels" ("Art Brut Preferred to the Cultural Arts"), whose original content in large part the Collection de l'Art Brut is featuring and whose spirit it has evoked in its fortieth-anniversary show and its accompanying, well-researched catalogue.

In the pamphlet that accompanied the original 1949 Paris exhibition, Dubuffet, defining *art brut*, famously wrote, "By this we mean... works executed by people free of artistic culture, [in which] mimicry, contrary to what happens among intellectuals, has little or no part." The makers of such artistic productions, Dubuffet argued, followed "their own heart[s]" in choosing

their subject matter, materials and working methods and were not motivated by the "clichés of classical art or fashionable art." Art's origins, Dubuffet asserted, lay in what he called "clairvoyance", something ineffable, which had nothing to do with "the algebra of ideas".

Lombardi observes in the catalogue of the current remounting of that historic show that, in reconsidering it almost 67 years later, "we are struck by its audacity and can appreciate its critical impact", for to have labelled as "art" "objects made by autodidacts who had no place in the field of culture questioned the very notion of art and what it signified at the time".

Those same works, which are now being displayed again in Lausanne, constituted the historical core of the collection Dubuffet donated to that city in 1971 and led to the founding of the Collection de l'Art Brut, which opened on February 26, 1976, with the art historian Michel Thévoz serving as its first director. (A friend and

Adolf Wölfl

Couronne d'épines de Rosalie en forme de coeur, 1922
coloured pencil and lead pencil on paper
19.8 x 26.3 ins. / 50.5 x 67 cm



close associate of Dubuffet's, Thévoz wrote numerous important books, including *Art Brut* (1975) and *Dubuffet* (1986), both of which were published by Éditions Skira of Geneva.)

Also to mark its fortieth-anniversary commemoration, the museum has created a new space, in which a selection of works from Dubuffet's original, founding donation will be permanently displayed. This history-themed, didactic exhibit will serve as a reminder of how much the institution has evolved. Thévoz, who served as director until 2001, oversaw the museum's development and the collection's growth in the spirit of Dubuffet's guiding principles. Among other accomplishments, Thévoz and his senior colleague, the late Geneviève Roulin, brought works by such American artists as Judith Scott, Henry Darger, Dwight Mackintosh and Morton Bartlett into the collection. Thévoz also took interest in and made visible the so-called annex collection of works that Dubuffet, as Lombardi notes in the current exhibition's catalogue, "hesitated to categorise as either *art brut* or cultural art". In 1982, he gave such works the collective name "*neuve invention*" ("new invention"). Today, the Collection de l'Art Brut owns some 15,000 pieces of this kind, which have been produced by artists who consciously disassociated themselves from mainstream art. It might be said that such creations share an *art brut* sensibility, although they still do not qualify as *art brut* works per se.

Thévoz's successor, Lucienne Peiry, who served as the museum's director through 2011,

further expanded its curatorial and collecting horizons. During her tenure, it acquired, for example, works by the Indian sculptor Nek Chand and drawings by the Chinese artist Guo Fengyi. In 2008, under Peiry's watch, the museum also presented its first-ever survey of contemporary *art brut* from Japan.

Since becoming director in 2012, Lombardi has continued to build on her predecessors' efforts to develop educational programmes related to the museum's exhibitions and to broaden its audience. "In effect and most ironically, Dubuffet's very 'anti-cultural' art and the ideas surrounding it have succeeded in ways he probably never could have imagined," Lombardi observed with a nod to the popularity *art brut* has gained in the art world today.

Still, for all his contrarian spirit, looking back, it seems that Dubuffet strongly sensed that Switzerland would provide his ideas, his collection and one of the biggest components of his artistic legacy with an appreciative home. In a 1976 letter to the mayor of Lausanne, he wrote, "I am convinced that the demystification of cultural-cum-commercial art (and of the conditioning straitjacket that results from its noisome prestige) would prove a singularly salutary exercise. I am heartily glad to see the city of Lausanne become a metropolis for this reforming and regenerating process."

Edward M. Gómez is *Raw Vision's* senior editor and the first non-European member of the Collection de l'Art Brut's advisory council.

Clément Fraise, *Untitled*, 1930–31

low-relief carved wooden cell wall, 67 x 150 ins. / 170 x 383 cm

