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RONCHAMP: A MANIFESTO

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“(…) It only remains to decide whether occupying one’s self with poetic phenomenae, manifested by volume, color and rhythm, is an act of unity or one of chaos – whether architecture, sculpture, painting, that is to say volume, form and color are incommensurable or synchronous – synchronous and symphonic. And whether life, admittedly not dedicated to the glorification (…) of the famous ‘functionalism’, a word which was never invented here, can but touch unknown beings along its path, by the means that one commonly calls ‘art’. The dictionary says that art is ‘the manner of doing’”.

Le Corbusier

**FOREWORD**

The Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp has inspired the compilation of a rich and varied range of reference material comprising a whole gamut of texts and a veritable treasure trove of illustrations. Few of Le Corbusier’s buildings have done so much to fire the enthusiasm of photographers and researchers; similarly, few of his other works were referred to with so much affection by the architect himself, who honoured the chapel at Ronchamp with a rare grace in his decision to publish the study sketches and accompanying notes he had made for the building. Several sources of material collected by the architect provide insight into the genesis of this project. This can be compared with the publication of the *Œuvre complète*; both were singular gestures. By means of the sketchbooks, the corpus of plans and the archive documents that have been preserved on the subject, Ronchamp, of all Le Corbusier’s projects, furnishes the best reading of his architectural creation and his treatment of the conceptual phase.

This guide is not only an invitation to a promenade through the building – it is also an exploration of the different stages of the project itself and the architect’s design process, largely drawn from Le Corbusier’s own spoken and written comments. Ronchamp is without a doubt the most frequently visited of Le Corbusier’s buildings; on the hill of Bourlémont wave upon wave of visitors flock in their thousands from the four corners of the Earth, rendering the site not only a Mecca of religious architecture, but also an architectural place of pilgrimage, promoted to the ranks of the most cherished and venerated of worldly treasures.

The generating idea for the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut was conceived in 1950 and the chapel’s construction was completed in 1955. It was the first religious architectural work built by Le Corbusier and, apart from the Monastery of La Tourette (built in 1960), was the only such work to be completed during the architect’s
lifetime. Of the other two projects published in the *Œuvre complète* one never saw the light of day (an underground basilica on the site of Sainte-Baume, near Marseille, designed in 1948), whilst the other – the church of Firminy, designed in 1965 – only began to be built after Le Corbusier’s death and was not completed until 2006, by José Oubrerie. This underscores the extreme importance of Ronchamp and La Tourette. It also illustrates the sheer power of expression contained in both edifices. The chapel is generally perceived as a manifesto within Le Corbusier’s work. It was the cause of many a controversy during its construction period, provoked a torrent of reaction and debate from critics and historians and has stamped the indelible mark of contemporary architecture on the annals of the twentieth century.

“Architecture *alone* is an instance of total plasticity. Architecture alone represents the medium for total lyricism. A total thought can be expressed through architecture. Architecture is self-sufficient. It is a genre that was created for expressing both through and in itself a whole cycle of emotions, the most intense of which stems from the influence of mathematics (proportions), where the play of plastic forms is symphonic (volumes, colours, materials, light)”.

These remarks, made by Le Corbusier in 1935, appear to have found their perfect vehicle of expression fifteen years on in the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp.