

LA POETIQUE DES LAVOIRS Exposition d'Art Contemporain, Saorge

In the spring—the season when melting snow fills creeks, sources, and fountains—the mountainside village of Saorge in the Maritime Alps will host an art exhibit by Liselott Johnsson called “La Poetique des Lavoirs” in its three historic washbasins: Fontana de Mèdge (1871), Fontana da Caranca (1898), and Fontana Soutana (year unknown). The community is invited to attend the opening on Friday, May 24 at 11.30 PM at Fontana de Mèdge hosted by the Mairie de Saorge. The installation will be on view from Thursday, May 23 until Wednesday May 29.

Johnsson will use geometry, text, sound, and materials, such as aluminum and river rocks from the Roya River, to express her views on the subject of the three lavoirs, inviting the public to reflect on their past and poetic dimension. Johnsson says, “It is not my intention to describe the history of the lavoirs; rather I attempt to perform an excavation of their diverse cultural meanings and relate them to our contemporary life. According to Michael Foucault, the only way one can understand the meaning of one’s own culture is to treat it as if it were a foreign one. I see my art as a catalyst or a tool in this process.”

Johnsson is not the first artist to be fascinated by the plentiful sources of water in Saorge. In the late 17th century, the Duke of Savoy, Charles-Emmanuel II, commissioned draftsmen and engravers to produce *Theâtrum Sabaudiae*, a two-volume oeuvre that served to promote the Dukedom of Savoy. The Saorge engraving shows two views. The lower one depicts the steep mountainsides below the village, where numerous abundant natural springs plunge into the River Roya below. The cultural wealth and defensive strength of 17th century Saorge are featured in the upper image, where the castles, churches, monastery, and villagers’ houses, all surrounded by agricultural terraces, perch on perilous slopes.

During the 17th century, white linen and an obsession with cleanliness resulted in the construction of the first private lavoirs in France. At the time, water was perceived as contributing to illness, and rightly so because water sources in urban areas were very polluted. Water was not supposed to touch the skin; instead, white undergarments were designed to absorb the body’s impurities. The use of white clean linen underwear became both a fashion and a measure of wealth. After a devastating 19th century cholera epidemic that affected mostly the poor, clean water was considered a necessity for public health. This led to the construction of the first public lavoirs and separate sewage systems.

Lavoirs became important architectural elements in area villages, along with the church, town hall, and community center, reflecting each town’s wealth and importance. In Saorge, the most prominent lavoir is Fontana de Mèdge, which is located on the town’s main commercial street. As seen in many hilltop villages in the South of France, this lavoir features a drinking fountain, a trough, and washbasins. Its arched neoclassical architecture, covered by a timber roof structure, offers protection from rain and sun, while allowing women to do their laundry and converse openly.

The flowing water, the beating of the laundry, high volume conversation, and adjacent sounds of children playing filled the lavoir areas with activity. Author Mireille Roddier describes the lavoir as “a dynamic social space that mirrored the perfidious complexities of life, accentuating the contrast with today’s empty, silent space that only reflects inverted images in the water’s too stagnant surface.” The lavoir represented a uniquely feminine space and in a sense served the

same function as the village café frequented by men. The main difference was that the women had to work while socializing.

Initially, clothes-washing was a three-day process that started with a day of soaking the mostly white linens and the gathering of firewood. On the second day, the laundry was layered with blends of lavender and ashes. Hot water was then repeatedly poured on top, seeping through slowly and bleaching the clothes. On the third day, the laundry was carried to the lavoir, where it was washed with soap, rinsed, and spread out to dry in the sun.

With the development of low-cost cleaning products, the washing process was reduced to one day. This prompted the creation of two basins, one downstream for washing and one upstream for rinsing. Two basins can be observed at all the lavoirs in Saorge. These basins were cleaned weekly. Labor-intensive and time-consuming hand washing was replaced by machine-washing in the mid 20th century.

Today, the lavoirs are rarely used for their intended purpose, but water still flows through them as persistently as in years past. According to philosopher Gaston Bachelard, water is a poetic material. The attraction and mesmerizing effects that water has on the creative human mind cannot be disputed. Water's symbolic qualities are often given prominence in the arts. In literature, they are embodied by the death of Ophelia; in myth, they are represented by the self-admiring Narcissus; and in painting, they are depicted in Sandro Botticelli's, *The Birth of Venus*, where they signify the very essence of life, birth, and vitality.

In contemporary everyday life, water is conveniently delivered and disposed of in conduits, hidden away from sight and touch, allowing for little poetic contemplation. The village of Saorge is one of the few places where the sound of flowing water is continuously present. Its monuments tell the story of a heroic past, while its fountains represent the poetry of the everyday. The movement and rhythm of water and its different transformative stages seem to depict the flow and substance of life, a theme that will always be relevant.

The community is invited to attend the opening of Johnsson's "La Poetique des Lavoirs" on Friday, May 24 at 11.30 PM, hosted by the Mairie de Saorge at Fontana de Mèdge, Saorge 06540. The installation will be on view from Thursday, May 23 until Wednesday, May 29.

For more information about Saorge, please visit: www.saorge.fr

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