

CAMILLE CLAUDEL (1864 - 1943)

Dream by the Fireside

Bronze and white marble veined with grey, #12
Sand cast by Eugène Blot between 1905 and 1937
Signed (on the left side of the base): C. CLAUDEL.
Founder's mark (under the artist's signature): EUG. BLOT / PARIS
Number (under the founder's mark): 12
22 x 30.5 x 25 cm

Provenance

- French private collection

This work will be included in the *Catalogue critique de l'œuvre de Camille Claudel* being prepared at the Galerie Malaquais by the Camille Claudel Committee under the direction of Eve Turbat, with the number 2021-0463MB.

According to documents established in 1937 by Eugène Blot,[1] Camille Claudel's dealer, who also editioned her works, the *Dream by the Fireside* was cast in an edition of 65, which makes it Claudel's most reproduced model, as it includes a few more proofs than *The Implorer, Small Version*. *Dream by the Fireside*, though cast in a greater number than any other sculpture by Camille Claudel, remains extremely rare, both in museums and on the art market, and that is not the least of its paradoxes.

I/ Context of Its Creation and First Showings of the Work

From the beginning of the 1890s to the year 1900, Camille Claudel worked on small subjects that she called her “sketches based on life.” These subjects were the products of observations of the concrete world that the artist transposed and miniaturized. *The Gossips* (1893-1905), *Woman Reading a Letter* (circa 1895-1897), and *The Wave* (1897-1903) all belong to this series, bookended by the two *Cheminée* (*Fireplace*), the title used by the artist herself.

The first of the two fireplaces, created in 1898, is *Deep Thought*, also known as *The Yule Log*. It represents a woman kneeling before a fireplace, leaning her head against its mantlepiece. It was shown in bronze[2] at the Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1898: “36- La profonde pensée [Deep thought] (croquis d’après nature, statuette bronze)[3]. It was shown again, this time in marble, at the 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris. Later, in 1905, it was included in the exhibition of Camille Claudel’s works organized by Eugène Blot’s gallery at their premises in the boulevard de la Madeleine. That version was one of Blot’s edition, which is to say, in marble and bronze.

The second fireplace, *Dream by the Fireside*, described here, shows a woman seated on a chair with her head leaning on the lintel of the fireplace. It was commissioned in marble, most likely in 1899, by the Countess of Maigret, Camille Claudel’s principal patron at this time. The following year, the work was shown at the Universal Exhibition held in Paris.[4]

It’s useful to recall the position that Camille Claudel, at the age of 35, occupied in the world of French statuary at the beginning of the 20th century. She was so much in Rodin’s shadow that she was barely visible, while Rodin, in his sixties, was at the height of his glory. In addition, she suffered from isolation, recurrent financial difficulties, and deteriorating mental health.

Like *Deep Thought*, *Dream by the Fireside* was also shown later at the exhibition of her works at Eugène Blot’s gallery in 1905. In that case, it was a proof in marble and bronze that belonged to her dealer’s edition.

The catalogue from the exhibition at Eugène Blot’s gallery does not specify that the *Fireplace* pieces are composed of two different materials, though the sculpture is entirely in bronze, with the exception of the fireplace itself, which is in marble. Furthermore, the catalogue states that *Deep Thought* was cast in a limited edition of 50 proofs, while no limit to the number of proofs of *Dream by the Fireside* is mentioned. Neither work seems to have been included in two later exhibitions of Camille Claudel’s works that the Eugène Blot gallery organized in 1907 and 1908. That said, after the 1905 exhibition, the two versions of the “*Fireplace*” were permanently available for purchase at Eugène Blot’s gallery.

II/ Study of *Dream by the Fireside*

The two marbles

Before Eugène Blot acquired the model of the *Dream by the Fireside* from Camille Claudel in order to edition it in 1905, two marbles were made, the one mentioned above, commissioned by the Countess de Maigret (held today in the collections of the Palace of the Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, inv. 2018.88) and the one given by Alphonse de Rothschild in 1903 to the Draguignan museum (inv. 255).

The one that belonged to the Countess of Maigret was inherited by her beneficiaries until it was recently acquired by the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.[5] It is not dated but carries the signature "Camille Claudel." The marble from the Draguignan museum is both signed and dated on the plinth of the base on the left: "C. Claudel 1903." The two works can be distinguished by subtle differences in execution: the fine floor tiles drawn in the marble of the Draguignan work are not found in the San Francisco one; the lion-shaped andirons are only sketched in the work in San Francisco, while they are more developed in the Draguignan piece, and the mantels in the two works include different details, as do the chairs and the plinths.

In a letter to Captain Tissier in 1899, Camille Claudel stated, "I almost never sign my works."[6] Despite that, though, the marble in the Draguignan museum is signed and dated on the left side of the base: "C. Claudel 1903." There are also other subtle differences that distinguish the two works.

Dream by the Fireside editioned by Eugène Blot

Dream by the Fireside was one of a group of Camille Claudel's works editioned by Eugène Blot. It seems that he began editioning this model in 1905 and stopped in 1937, when Blot sold his models of Camille Claudel's works along with the rights to reproduce them to Leblanc-Barbedienne. A document written by Eugène Blot some thirty years after he began the edition states, "As [*Dream by the Fireside*] sold very well and the great artist was always in need of money, she made me another figure in front of a fireplace called *The Yule Log* [or *Deep Thought*]."[7] Eugène Blot may well have been mistaken, for, as indicated above, *Deep Thought* was shown before *Dream by the Fireside* and thus must have been done before the latter work. Camille Claudel proposed to do a third fireplace work in 1905,[8] but it seems that that project was never realized, as no trace of the work has ever been found.

The two "*Fireplaces*" were editioned with a small electric light inside the fireplace itself, though few of the proofs still have that feature today. "I had a lot of success selling these works by placing a small red lightbulb behind the logs in the fireplaces."[9]

The proofs of *Dream by the fireside* editionned by Eugène Blot known until now always have two materials: the fireplaces are in marble (white or colored[10])

and the rest of the artwork is in bronze. The form of the fireplaces varies slightly.
Some of the proofs are numbered while others are not. In the catalogue for the exhibition at the Eugène Blot gallery in December of 1905, the work is listed without the number of proofs being stated. And when Eugène Blot presented the Camille Claudel models that he had edited to the Barbedienne company to cede their production to them, the edition was stated as unlimited[11].
Thre proofs from Blot's edition belong to public collections:
—One, unnumbered, in white marble and bronze, is in the Camille Claudel museum in Nogent-sur-Seine (inv. #2010.1.20).
—A second one, numbered 19, in colored marble and bronze, entered the collections of the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. in 2017 (gift of Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, inv. #2017.44).
—A third one, numbered 16, in white marble and bronze, entered the collections of the National Museum in Stockholm in 2023 (inv. #NMSk 2418).

III/ A Simple "Sketch Based on Life"?

Critical Reception of *Dream by the Fireside* at the Beginning of the 20th Century
Several articles that discussed *Dream by the Fireside* at the beginning of the century are worth citing here. As soon as it appeared in the once-a-decade exhibition in 1900,[12] *Dream by the Fireside* received great praise from Gustave Geffroy in *La Vie artistique*; he referred to its "robust grace" and "magnificent, life-like expression."[13] But Émile Dacier, in an article that came out in the *Bulletin de l'art ancien et moderne*[14] in 1905, was not persuaded by the artist's statement that she was engaging naturalist scenes; he preferred stronger subjects.
On the other hand, the author of an article that appeared in 1906 in *Psyché* recognized Camille Claudel's choice and audacity in this work: "The finesse of the beings that she sculpts seem to me to emanate directly from an extremely complex and intricate nervous system, with many tactile tentacles, more diverse even than that of Rodin. (His is the case of a giant caressing young girls; Mlle Claudel seems to be a more enveloping mother, less sexual …) And her physiological energy seems to be from nervous tension, brusque momentum, single-minded concentration, and perhaps even a kind of mysticism that Rodin does not have, closer to the earth. In short, all that one usually thinks of as a feminine and lyrical sensibility. The discreet poetry of a piece such as *Dream by the Fireside* is exquisitely delicate; its internal soul will remain a precise record of the sweetness of the modern, thoughtful woman."[15]
Thus, the work's reception at the time of its creation seems to have ocellated between two poles; on the one hand, it was recognized, without much

enthusiasm, as a good work, but without the true greatness of other works by the artist, while on the other hand, it was seen as a deep understanding of the capacity for feeling, which makes the work a masterpiece of restrained and internalized beauty.

Paul Claudel and *Dream by the Fireside*

In his own way, Paul Claudel himself ocellated between these two poles.[16] Though he never spoke directly of *Dream by the Fireside* before 1940, from 1913 on, he suggested ways that it might be understood, explaining that his sister's works invited meditation and poetry: "… from now on, excluded from public spaces and the open air, sculpture, like the other arts, retreats to its solitary chamber where poets shelter their forbidden dreams. Camille Claudel is the first artist of this interior sculpture."[17] In 1940, Paul Claudel wrote a reflection on the soul based on his sister's sculpture in a text titled "Assise et qui regarde le feu" ("Seated and Who Watches the Fire.")[18] In 1951, he referred to the first fireplace, *Deep Thought*, in the text that he wrote for the catalogue for the Camille Claudel exhibition at the Rodin museum, but these lines could equally well refer to *Dream by the Fireside*: "Later, it was this woman on her knees that she [Camille Claudel] sold to the dealer Bloch (*sic*); one has to live! A red lamp in the fireplace and the woman silhouetted in black. The effect was amusing."[19] Paul Claudel clearly thought of *Dream by the Fireside* as a work that his sister sold to her dealer in order to live, without dwelling on its aesthetic qualities and underscoring what the work had become: a trinket functioning as a nightlight. But the last time that he referred to the work directly, on January 22, 1946, at Brangues, it was to say that in it he saw a representation of his sister: "… a woman seated and looking into the fire. I associate the image, infinitely painful, with my sister herself."[20] Quite likely, Camille Claudel imbued this sculpture with sentiments that she had personally experienced, and it probably has an autobiographical aspect, even though completely transposed.

The Critical History of *Dream by the Fireside* Since the 1980s

Since the gradual rediscovery of the works of Camille Claudel during the 1980s, writers who've studied *Dream by the Fireside* have also tended to hold two opposite opinions. Some see the sculpture as a simple, perhaps banal, illustrative subject,[21] done from life, while others appreciate this stunning work, seeing it as rich with multiple interpretations. Laure de Margerie, for instance, explores them in her 2005 article,[22] referred to and at times expanded here. Laure de Margerie opines that *Dream by the Fireside* goes beyond illustration and represents the artist's discriminating choices: "Even though the initial impulse may have come from an observation of daily life, Claudel strips her characters bare, relieving them of any connotation of the here and now … "[23] This is immediately apparent in *The Wave* and *The*

Gossips, though less for *Dream by the Fireside* because the woman remains dressed. However, she is barefoot and in a dress that gives no indication of the era, the season, or the time of day. Added to that are strange details that seem to come out of a fairy tale, and, in fact, one of the work's titles, Cinderella, refers to that. These details include two andirons in the shape of sitting lions left roughly sketched in; in addition, one of the front rungs of the chair is missing and has been replaced by what seems to be the broken branch of a tree.[24]

This distinctive atmosphere, out of time and with much left unsaid, lets the imagination wander, in the same way that the woman's head resting on the lintel of the fireplace allows her to escape into her thoughts. "In the series of the *Fireplaces*, it is silence that reigns. It follows the babble of *The Gossips* and the noise of *The Wave*."[25] The crackling of the fire can only barely be heard, even though it is the central element of the composition. "Contemplating the fire, with its hypnotic power, leads to a dreamy state in which the spirit leaves the body to wander an elsewhere that is almost the beyond."[26]In Blot's editions, the bronze fire is enlivened by a small red light, while in the two marbles, the fire is amplified by a sketch of smoke on the stone front of the mantle. Françoise Magny has commented: "The fireplace, the image of home, of comfort, or, on the contrary, of solitude, is also the symbol of the unconscious and of secret aspirations."[27]

In 2001, another author, the psychoanalyst Danielle Arnoux, used *Dream by the Fireside* in a consideration of Camille Claudel's mental health issues in her book titled *Camille Claudel, the Ironic Sacrifice.* She states that the artist's complaints about the mass reproduction of the small fireplaces became part of her paranoia and suggests that this delusional focus is perhaps rooted in her decline or in the cessation of her creativity.[28] In her 2011 book, *Camille Claudel, Re-enchantment of the Work*, she returns to the *Dream by the Fireside* to consider, this time, its status as a work of art.[29] She explains that the artists of the time were trying to escape academicism by showing, among other things, that there was no boundary between fine art sculpture and decorative sculpture. "So much so that the intimate works sold by Eugène Blot as decorative objects, for example, the *Small Fireplaces* transformed into nightlights, which could be dismissed as minor pieces, have been re-evaluated and are seen as authentic creations."[30] She thus sheds light on the power of *Dream by the Fireside*, which hides its depth under an apparent simplicity.

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[1] These documents are held in the Archives Nationales in Paris under 368 AP3.
[2] This was a bronze done before the Eugène Blot edition, that edition having begun in 1905.
[3] 1898 CATALOGUE, p. 48.
[4] "140.—Le Rêve au coin du feu (The Dream by the Fireside), marble statuette." 1900 CATALOGUE, group II, Works of art—Classes 7 to 10, #140.
[5] The work was restored when it entered the collection; not only were broken pieces of the back of the chair put back in place, but it was also no doubt thoroughly cleaned, which reveals the fact that it is not pink marble, but white. In François Pompon notebook, it is noted under the date May 23, 1899 that the prize given to Camille Claudel for materials and execution of a "figurine at a pink marble fireplace" was 700 francs. (Paris, archives of the musée d'Orsay, account books of François Pompon, July 1884 to August 1908, collection of François Pompon René Demeurisse ODO 1996-46-1 2/3, p.73 left). A note on p. 73 on the side at the right reads: "#3 Mussetti. Clarification of the fireplace 180." And finally, underneath (p. 73 right) "received from Mlle Claudel fig. seated 350 December 1, 1899, in complete or partial fulfillment 350." Are these notes in reference to the Countess's marble? That is what has always been thought (2001 RIVIÈRE-GAUDICHON, p. 178), but the color of the marble leaves room for doubt.
[6] Letter from Camille Claudel to Captain Tissier, see 2013 CLAUDEL, #180, P. 180. According to Danielle Arnoux, it is possible that Camille Claudel did not sign her works when she was suffering from paranoia, in order to "protect" them. 2011 ARNOUX 1, p. 249.

[7] Citation taken from the article by Laure de Margerie in 2005 CATALOGUE, p. 246. Eugène Blot, *Souvenirs d'Eugène Blot à propos de sa rencontre avec Camille Claudel* (*Memories of Eugène Blot in Relation to his Meetings with Camille Claudel*), meant for Jules Leblanc-Barbedienne, December 17, 1936, 2 f., 27 x 21.2 cm, Paris, Archives nationales de France (368 AP3).
[8] Letter from Camille Claudel to Eugène Blot, see 2013 CLAUDEL, #237, p. 236-237.
[9] Eugène Blot, *Souvenirs d'Eugène Blot à propos de sa rencontre avec Camille Claudel* (*Memories of Eugène Blot in Relation to his Meetings with Camille Claudel*), meant for Jules Leblanc-Barbedienne, December 17, 1936, 2 f., 27 x 21.2 cm, Paris, Archives nationales de France (368 AP3), consulted in the documents department of the musée d'Orsay (box Iconography Camile Claudel, *Cheminée*). When Blot evokes the first, he is certainly referencing *Dream by the Fireside*, as he considered it to be the first of the two "*Fireplaces.*"
[10] The colored marbles have very beautiful colors and veins. Unfortunately, at present, no study can say more about them. Martine Droit's article, "Camille Claudel and onyx marble" focused only on the stones used by the artist for *Les Causeuses* and *La Vague* (1991 CATALOGUE, p. 31-32).
[11] The collection of documents held in the 368 AP3 files of the national archives mention an unlimited edition for the *Dream by the Fireside*. This collection leaves the impression that the model was, in the end, not ceded to Leblanc-Barbedienne (see 2008 RIONNET, note 91, p. 64).
[12] This exhibition was part of the 1900 Universal Exhibtion.
[13] 1901 GEFFROY, p. 291.
[14] 1905 DACIER.
[15] 1906 L.T., p. 103-104.
[16] The texts by Laure de Margerie (2005 CATALOGUE, p. 237-249) and Marie-Victoire Nantet (2020 NANTET, p. 168-170) allowed me to reflect upon Paul Claudel's attitude toward *Dream by the Fireside*.
[17] 1913 CLAUDEL, p. 16.
[18] 1998 CLAUDEL, p. 1310.
[19] 1951 CLAUDEL, p. 12.
[20] 1998 CLAUDEL, p. 126.
[21] In 1984, Bruno Gaudichon noted that the subject has more equivalents in painting than in sculpture (1884 GAUDICHON, p. 81). In 2017, in the *Guide to the Collections of the Musée Camille Claudel Nogent-sur-Seine*, Françoise Magny evokes the "Nabi paintings of Édouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Félix Vallotton" (p. 351).
[22] 2005, DE MARGERIE, p. 237-249.
[23] 2005, DE MARGERIE, p. 241.
[24] These details do not exist in the two versions in marble.
[25] 2005, DE MARGERIE, p. 246-247.
[26] 2005, DE MARGERIE, p. 247.

[27] 2017 MAGNY, p. 351.
[28] 2011 ARNOUX 1, p. 249-251.
[29] 2011 ARNOUX 1, p. 148-149.
[30] 2011 ARNOUX 1, p. 149.