

# MASS MoCA



Photo: Nicholas Whitman

## Joseph Beuys

German, born 1921, died 1986

### *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* (*Blitzschlag mit Lichtschein auf Hirsch*)

1958–85

**Bronze, iron, aluminum**

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gifts (by exchange) of Bernard Davis, Mr. and Mrs. Stuart P. Feld, the estate of Anna Goldthwaite, Mr. and Mrs. R. Sturgis Ingersoll, James N. Rosenberg, the Chester Dale gift, and bequest of Lisa Norris Elkins.

The work of European sculptor Joseph Beuys is grounded in a tradition of narrative sources that is often absent in American art of the same period. The historic symbolism of Northern Europe, Christianity, and an invocation of the spiritual power of animals and nature course throughout Beuys' diverse activities, from performances and lectures to sculptures and drawings. For Beuys, all these works share a common purpose: "the victory of socialist warmth and self-determination over materialist greed and alienation."

Beuys' dramatic *Lightning with Stag in its Glare* is the only environment that the artist cast in bronze. An offspring of Beuys' seminal *Workshop* exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 1982, this monumental work is encrusted with layers of meaning. At its core, it enacts a dramatic moment in nature: A bolt of lightning (the large, suspended sculpture) strikes the ground, illuminating a stag (cast in highly reflective aluminum). Other animals are present, but are not so well illuminated. There is a goat (a metal cart with a pick resting on it) and worm-like primordial animals (the dark bronze forms scattered on the floor). The final element present, the *Boothia Felix*, is a metal tripod with a roughly rectangular mass on top of it and a small compass resting on top of that. This element is named for a strip of land in northern Canada that was the first established location of the north magnetic pole.

Beuys invokes the creative energy of nature with the forceful bolt of lightning in this work. In many other works, he incorporated conductive metals to symbolically draw energy from the universe or blocks of lead to represent stored energy. The *Stag*, illuminated by the lightning, has a special role in Beuys' work and in northern European mythologies. Beuys repeatedly referred to it as a conductor of the soul, a Christ figure, whose shedding and regrowth of antlers symbolized resurrection and the possibility of redemption. According to Beuys, the stag is a guardian for the *Primordial Animals*, which squirm on the floor without intelligence or direction. These simple creatures, like the dramatic *Lightning*, were cast from a pile of loam in the center of the *Workshop* exhibition and have broken metal tools for heads. Finally, the humble *Goat* recalls an imaginary laborer, constantly and silently working in the background.

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