



Maillol, *Torso of the Ile de France*, 1921

On Classic Ground, Picasso, Léger, De Chirico and the New Classicism, 1910-1930

At first sight this very beautiful exhibition contains a persuasive argument for viewing the “new classicism” as an alternative theme in modern art which avoids both the extremes of the avant-garde, and the literary and dogmatic nature of the academy.¹ The Tate has been able to obtain some very major pieces, notably Léger’s *Le Grand Déjeuner*, both the Braque *Basket Bearers* and many fine

Picassos, including the *Large Bather* (1921) from the Orangerie. The exhibition attempts to explore the common ground between a very broad range of French, Catalan and Italian artistic styles over a long period. Continuity is apparently established across national boundaries and across the divide of the war, which, at least in France, is generally thought to have signalled the *rappel à l'ordre*. Extremely conservative realist works by artists such as Achille Funi or Enric Casanovas are seen alongside paintings by Masson and Miró.

The possibility of making these juxtapositions is dependent on defining the notion of classicism very broadly. It can be taken to mean simply a stylistic debt to some form of “classical” art, from Etruscan painting to the work of Ingres. It can also be seen as a matter of the qualities of a style (discipline perhaps or economy, symmetry, linearity), or it can be the attribution of the moral force behind these qualities to the subject matter of the piece. Alternatively, it can simply be the use of classical subject matter from a broad iconographical repertory from depictions of Arcadian scenes to portraits of Italian women.

Most of the works shown here share some of these features and a core of the exhibits share them all. This generous definition of the classical allows the inclusion of for instance *Summer* (1917), a work by Bonnard, on account of its Arcadian subject matter. It also permits the display of artists concerned with the primitive such as Arturo Martini, disciplined Cubist work, and most strikingly some pieces which are in outright opposition to the classical ideal. In establishing these curious links the exhibition is highly stimulating but tends to blur the historical context of some of the works. The contemporary view of Bonnard as an instinctive sensualist painter (a judgment founded on the evidence of his style) is hard to reconcile with any supposed classical element in his art. Even Cézanne, presented here as the unassailable precursor of the classical revival, was attacked for being tainted with a perceptual Impressionism in the post war period. The presence of pieces such as Masson's *The Abandoned City* (1923-4) and Picasso's *Still Life with Plaster Head* (1925) is fascinating as they use features of classicism against its ideals. Both feature illogical spaces and fragmented bodies, the Masson using a grid like structure, the Picasso the very instruments of classical culture in a setting where they are undermined; they erode the distinctions between inside and outside, real and fabricated, subject and object. De Chirico's early work had of course (at least as interpreted by the Surrealists) a similar project and it is revealing to see his later pieces, some of which could still be

read in the same way, open to use by conservative critics such as Waldemar George who saw the mannequins as symbols of modern decadence.

It is often difficult to take those works that share most or all of the classical attributes seriously. A section of the show is devoted to images of women; indeed the entire exhibition is dominated by heavy limbed Mediterranean creatures, barely capable of movement, figures that are depersonalized, not only tied to the earth but made of the earth. They are of course types rather than portraits. The association between woman and landscape is a dogma of this classicism², which is expressed both where they are literally juxtaposed as in Joaquim Sunyer's *Pastoral* (1910-11), and in sculpture where the material predominates or where more radically (as in Enric Casanovas' *Mallorcan Peasant Woman* (1916) and Joseph Bernard's *Modern Sphinx*) the heads are literally merged with the stone. The lack of expression in the features, where the blank eyes of classical sculpture often feature, depersonalize the figures. The same effect is achieved through the truncation of the body in Maillol's *Torso of the Ile de France* (1921). These pieces supposedly represent an internalized natural power, of potential but never of action. Such women, like the works of art themselves, are autonomous and timeless, and share the moral qualities of the classical style. In general the fixed and stable nature of these images forms the exact obverse of the shifting and elusive women portrayed contemporaneously by Morand and Proust. There is a blatant attempt here to fix an image of Woman suitable for safe and constant contemplation.

The most interesting artists in the exhibition share a deeply ambiguous attitude towards classicism and use some of its features as a device. This is sometimes the case even with artists whose style is conservative: we might for instance question the relationship of the perfect classical women that embrace each other in Ubaldo Oppi's *The Friends* (1924). The work of Felice Casorati and Mario Sironi contains highly disturbing expressive elements behind the façade of a highly disciplined manner. Lyotard defined classicism as an art produced for a unitary audience which shares the precepts of the artists. Such an audience was largely lacking in this period and, if we can define the "new classicism", it should be seen as an attempt to recover or recreate a shared community in which meaning would no longer be problematic.

On Classic Ground, Picasso, Léger, De Chirico and the New Classicism, 1910-1930 is at the Tate Gallery until the 2nd September.

¹. This is the position taken by Elizabeth Cowling in her introduction to the catalogue. Elizabeth Cowling/Jennifer Mundy, *On Classic Ground*, London 1990. A book of essays accompanying the exhibition will be available shortly.

². See the essay by Teresa Camps, 'Models for the female figure in Catalan art, 1906-11' in the book accompanying the exhibition.