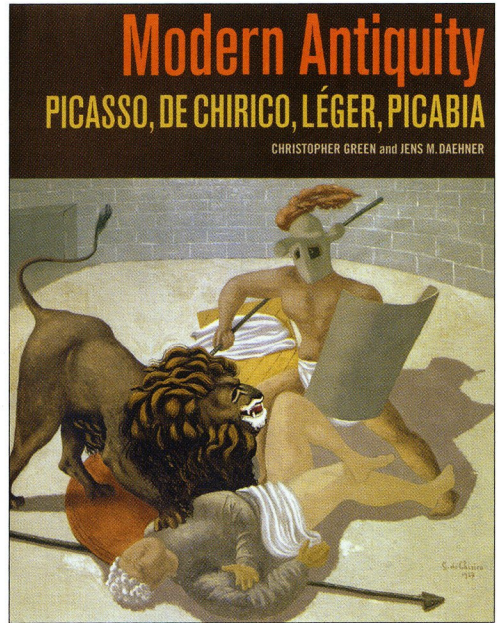


Modern Antiquity: Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, Picabia by Christopher Green and Jens M. Daehner, with contributions by Silvia Loreti and Sara Cochran. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 164 pp.

Review by Gail Leggio

This book, exploring modernist reinventions of antiquity, serves as the exhibition catalogue for “Modern Antiquity: Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, Picabia in the Presence of the Antique,” first at the J. Paul Getty Museum’s Getty Villa in Malibu (November 2, 2011–January 16, 2012), and now at the Musée Picasso in Antibes on the French Riviera (February 16–May 20, 2012). The avant-garde’s engagement with classicism was a complex phenomenon, aesthetically, philosophically and—in the post-World War I era—politically. Rather than aiming for a full-scale, exhaustive study, the scholars here focus on a few case studies, in essays that are both historically rich and refreshingly nuanced. *Nuanced* is the word collaborators Christopher Green, of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, and Jens M. Daehner, of the Getty, use in the preface to describe their approach. More than the huge, rather ham-fisted “Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy and Germany, 1918–1936,” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City (October 1, 2010–January 9, 2011), which generated considerable heat, the compact, thoughtful project at the Getty sheds light on the subject.

Daehner’s essay “Antiquities Made Modern: Double Takes at Ancient Art” points out that modern viewing habits changed how Greek and Roman art was perceived. The radically simplified forms of Cycladic figures (2500–2400 BC), for example, were dismissed as primitive in the nineteenth century, but they inspired modernist sculptors like Brancusi and Henry Moore. The fact that these elegantly minimal human abstractions would have been naturalistically painted was unknown until the late twentieth century. The silhouette technique of Grecian vase painting felt congenial to artists exploring the flatness of the picture plane. Changing fashions in restoration and installation betray con-



temporary preoccupations. The ancient sculpture type known as the *Sleeping Ariadne* (second century AD)—the most famous example is in the Vatican Museum—was central to Giorgio de Chirico’s iconography. A variation on the marble sculpture appears in four different paintings in this exhibition, always in an anxiety-haunted piazza and always on a simplified base. Hellenistic versions usually had a landscaped base, a stylization of the isle of Naxos where Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus, awaited rescue by the god Dionysos. The ancient setting underlined a narrative that ends in Ariadne’s triumph. De Chirico abandons her to a modern world of alienation.

During the Renaissance and the Baroque, sculpture fragments were frequently “completed” by fitting together parts from various sources and commissioning replacements. Bernini contributed a magnificent marble foot to an ancient statue of Ares now in the Palazzo Altemps in Rome. One reason Michelangelo looks more modern to us than many of his contemporaries may be his propensity for roughness and fragmentation, a celebration of the *non finito*. In the twentieth century, the trend was to show ancient works in their partial state, without later interventions. Where the original inlaid eyes were lost, restorers left empty sockets. Where different materials were combined—bronze, white and colored marbles—joining points were now exposed, giving the figures a mannequin-like appearance. De Chirico’s hybrid sculpture/mannequin figures—in *The Endless Voyage* (1914), *The Poet’s Anguish* (1914–15) and *The Poet and His Muse* (1925)—call our attention to the vagaries of the history of presentation. As Daehner remarks, the prescient modernity of ancient art may be “incidental.” There are always conceptual scrims veiling our responses. There was an excavation boom from around 1870 to 1914, opening sites at the Acropolis, in Delphi and Corinth and Pompeii. Picasso was particularly enamored, on a 1917 tour of Rome, Naples and Pompeii, of the Villa of the Mysteries, which had been sumptuously restored in 1909. For a discussion of the restoration, a far bolder intervention than would be countenanced today, see Mary Beard’s *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

Sometimes direct contact yielded straightforward results. Picasso’s *The Pipes of Pan* (1923) has been linked to a Pompeian wall painting in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples. Scholars and artists were taking a fresh look at the Archaic era, and the authors aptly juxtapose Picasso’s *Two Youths* (1906) and *Torso of a Kouros* (c. 550 BC). But these artists were very aware of how elusive an unmediated encounter was, given what Christopher Green calls the “crowd of images that filled the centuries separating antiquity from the present.” This is especially true for Picasso and de Chirico, both academically trained in drawing from plaster casts. De Chirico, born in Greece of Italian parents, announced his credo in 1913: “To live in the world as in an immense museum of the estranged.” In many of his best paintings, the presence of the antique is signaled by some second-hand artifact. An outsized plaster cast,

perhaps of the head of the Apollo Belvedere, is incongruously juxtaposed with a huge rubber glove in *Song of Love* (1914). Peculiarities of scale undercut the pseudo-logic of the piazza space; the perspective grid suggested by the arcades is oneiric rather than rational. In *Self-Portrait with Bust* (c. 1922), de Chirico stages a confrontation between illusionistic “flesh and blood” and his own plaster image. When de Chirico attempts to represent “living” figures from antiquity, as in the gladiator paintings (1927–28), the stylizations look crude, rather than evocative.

Picasso's approach was very different. Green astutely remarks: “The living and the antique would always exist interdependently for him; after all, in the academies drawing from the antique qualified students to draw from life.” Picasso's skills were prodigious, and the intelligence and daring of his responses to the antique are undeniable. He loved the gigantic form of the Farnese Hercules in Naples, which may have influenced the robust, massively sculptural bodies in paintings such as *The Source* (1921), a feminine river deity of monumental gravitas. He was equally adept at pure line, as in the pencil drawing *Nessus and Dejanira* (1920), an elegantly wiry outline of a bawdy encounter. Reducing ancient paintings to line drawings has been a useful—and creative—documentation technique at least as far back as the neoclassicist John Flaxman. The authors discuss an important guide by one of Picasso's contemporaries, Salomon Reinach's *Répertoire des peintures grecques et romaines* (1922). There is also an element of “automythography” in Picasso's plundering of the past, as in the Vollard Suite etchings from the 1930s, in which he casts himself as Dionysos or the Minotaur. Picasso's relationship to the past is a fascinating mix of knowledgeable innovation and perversity.

The two remaining artists in the exhibition lack the rich complexity of de Chirico and Picasso, but they do illuminate aspects of the modern perspective on antiquity. Fernand Léger, trained as an architectural draftsman, went to Greece with Le Corbusier in 1933, but he had already incorporated classical elements into his paintings, including *Kneeling Woman* (1921), a sort of mechanized version of the celebrated Crouching Aphrodite. The authors note that Léger's preference for gunmetal grey may have owed something to monochromatic magazine reproductions of ancient art. Francis Picabia created a series of Transparencies between 1928 and 1932 that literalize the palimpsestic layers of art history. Line drawings of centaurs and shepherds and deities, distorted but recognizable versions of well-known statues and wall paintings, are superimposed over each other. Ultimately, the effect is primarily decorative. Daehner's view that Picabia's borrowings present “us with an antiquity in quotation marks” seems fair, underlining the notion that there was an effort “to maintain a...distance from any true classicizing spirit.” Ambivalence toward the classical tradition is an undercurrent for these modernists. *Modern Antiquity: Picasso, de Chirico, Léger, Picabia* makes a solid contribution to the ongoing discussion about the survival of classicism in the modern world.