THE CLASSICAL CONTRIBUTION TO WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Last fall an exhibition with this name was assembled by the Museum and sent to the Toronto Art Gallery. It has now come back and is installed in the long gallery east of the Roman Court. The idea of this show was suggested when the Toronto Gallery purchased a painting by Poussin. In the course of a lively discussion, the question was raised “What is classical art?” and it was thought that an exhibition illustrating the legacy of classical antiquity would not only answer this particular question but also give an excellent outline of the development of Western art. The Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum agreed to send out on loan as big a collection as was feasible, the various departments of the Museum got together in selecting suitable material, and the final choice was made in consultation with representatives from Toronto. Mr. Hyatt Mayor then explained the theme of the exhibition in an illustrated handbook emphasizing the more important aspects of the show. In this booklet, which is available for the New York showing, Mr. Mayor figures side by side a “classical” Greek or Roman object and a postclassical work of art related either in form or in subject.

The exhibition is built around such comparisons; there are no charts or genealogies, and the public is encouraged to discover by itself the classical components of Western art. A historical note is struck in the vestibule to the exhibition proper: here are assembled portraits of great humanists and classicists from Budé and Erasmus to Winckelmann, amidst plaster casts and engravings of those familiar sculptures which, with the magnificent architectural remains of antiquity, did so much to foster the renascence of classical art—the Laocoon, the Spinario, the Apollo Belvedere, the Medici Venus, and others.

The classical contribution to Western literature, music, philosophy, and politics have been touched only tangentially. We have not placed a manuscript of Theocritus next to a first edition of Milton’s “Lycidas,” and the head of Socrates is not confronted with the bust of Voltaire. There has not been space to bring in the theater and the Olympic games, and there is no showcase to demonstrate the contributions of antiquity to science. These and other aspects of the classical heritage will suggest themselves to the visitor as he turns from a medieval pyx to its ancient counterpart or from a modern bronze to its Greek ancestor.

The indebtedness of Western man to his classical past is so great that there are few if any phases and activities of modern life that have not had their roots in ancient custom. The classical tradition has been a unifying factor; it is one of the few things common to us all, transcending the narrow boundaries of nationalism and bigotry. And this tradition is still alive today. Each generation feels afresh the vital influence of the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome. The classicism of the twentieth century is as different from the Greek Revival as the latter is from the Italian Renaissance. One need only compare the work of Picasso’s classical period with the figures of Ingres or David, or Maillol’s illustrations of Vergil with Flaxman’s designs for the Iliad and Odyssey. Ancient classical art, itself differing with style and period, can hardly be reduced to a simple formula to be readily applied or easily copied. Although the power of its persuasive vitality has been experienced by successive ages, its singular achievement has never been duplicated.

The following pages, illustrating works of art that have been added to the exhibition, are intended to serve as a supplement to Mr. Mayor’s handbook.
Wounded Amazon. Roman copy of a Greek bronze, 440 B.C. The artist has combined masculine vigor with feminine beauty. In contrast to the Hellenistic Laocoon, the expression of pain has been minimized. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1932
Adam, by Tullio Lombardo (1453?-1552). The sculptor turned to classical antiquity for his statue of the first man. He admired, however, not the muscular strength of Polykleitos’s athletes but rather the supple grace of a Roman favorite. Fletcher Fund, 1936
In the Hellenistic period, when Greek artists for the first time portrayed children, the winged attendant of Aphrodite began to be shown as an infant. This type became so popular in Roman art that it even survived in the minor arts of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance rediscovered the charms of pagan cupids and used them as cherubs.
Woman with a stringed instrument (kithara) and young girl. Mural from the east wall of the great dining room of a villa at Boscoreale. Second Pompeian style, about 80-30 B.C. The little site on the south slope of Vesuvius now known as Boscoreale, though buried by the same eruption of A.D. 79 that overtook Pompeii and Herculaneum, was not discovered until about fifty years ago. This mural is the only monumental painting from antiquity in the exhibition and as such invites (and stands) comparison with the "classical" composition of Picasso shown on the opposite page. They are similar in scale, dimension, and subject matter. In both the background is left neutral, and the figures themselves are heavily built. But while the youths painted by Picasso are absorbed in the music of the pipes, the kitharist and her companion have their eyes fixed on the spectator and seem to await a signal to begin. Musical scenes were popular subjects in classical art, and mythology abounds in stories of the power of music. Most ancient music is now irrevocably lost; we do not know what songs the Sirens sang or what tunes Orpheus played to charm the beasts and stones. All we know is the effect on the listener, well expressed in classical art and literature. But from Plato's strictures we can surmise that music, less bounded than representational arts, was as controversial in his day as in ours. Rogers Fund, 1903
The Pipes of Pan, by Picasso, 1923. The pipes of Pan are traditional shepherds' music, but there is nothing pastoral in this painting, no shaded woods and dancing nymphs, only the massive forms of two youths in a barren setting, against the monochrome of sky and sea. Picasso's style of the early twenties contrasts with his earlier "rose" period—actually more classical in concept than the one that is called classical—in which the figures are interrelated and recall in attitude and mood the pure outlines of classical vase-painting or, in sculpture, the tenderness of Attic grave reliefs and the elegance of the Parthenon frieze. These youths remind us rather of pre-classical pedimental sculpture, in particular the detached and quiet figures of the east pediment at Olympia. Lent by the artist, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.
The v century vase painting differs as much from earlier Greek representations of the myth as Cranach’s panel does from the Attic pyxis. In archaic scenes Paris is bearded and runs away from Hermes and his embassy. The v century, with its accent on youth, transforms Paris into a young herdsman, who, in the company of his father Priam, may show surprise but no fear in the presence of the deities. Cranach’s Trojan prince is no herdsman but a knight in armor, and his goddesses are grouped like the three Graces, each revealing charms which the Greeks stressed in Aphrodite alone. In Cranach’s painting the apple of discord has become a crystal ball and the wings on Hermes’ cap two exotic birds. The Greek painter has given each goddess her attribute: Hera, as wife of Zeus, holds a scepter, Athena is distinguished by her armor, and Aphrodite, the winner of the contest, has brought Eros, her attendant. Cranach has emphasized Aphrodite by showing her in front view and by giving her a modish hat, but which of the other two is Hera and which Athena is hard to say. The judgment of Paris, with its dire results for Troy, was a favorite subject with postclassical moralists.
Venus and the Lute Player, by Titian (1477-1576). Munsey Fund, 1936. The reclining nude figure of Venus with a flute in her hand may bring to mind those gay banquet scenes on red-figured vases in which hetairai and flute-players performed. But the goddess of love herself is never shown in ancient art as Titian, and before him Giorgione, painted her. Here, however, though placed in a nonclassical setting, with an Alpine landscape in the background, and herself not classical in proportions, she suggests in pose and bearing the majesty of classical grandeur.
Odalisque in Grisaille, by Ingres (1780-1867). Wolfe Fund, 1938. Ingres's idealized, and thus classical, representation of a nonclassical, that is, oriental, subject contrasts vividly with Titian's nonclassical rendering of an ancient goddess. The painting is a study for the Odalisque Couchée in the Louvre. Of the two, the grisaille is more classical in form, with its restrained use of tints and suppression of oriental details. Like Canova's Pauline Borghese it reflects, however, the classicism of Napoleon's time rather than that of the ancient world.
Marble relief of a dancing maenad. Roman copy of a Greek work of the late 5 century B.C., perhaps by Kallimachos. Dancing figures like this maenad, with swirling draperies, were ideally suited in Hellenistic and Roman times for decorating marble vases and candelabra and for murals and stucco reliefs. Fletcher Fund, 1935
The Roman frescoes of bacchantes (now in Naples) shown here became known soon after their discovery through engravings in the “Pitture d’Ercolano.” The French sculptor of the late xvm century who designed the gilt-bronze appliqués has somewhat altered his models to suit the taste of his time and his decorative purpose. Thus the illusionary effect of the frescoes, already lessened in the engravings, has given way to crisp outlines and precise forms. Rogers Fund, 1926.
The two panels by Piero di Cosimo belong to a series that depicts the primitive age of mankind, based on a celebrated passage by Vitruvius (quoted by Boccaccio) describing the conditions on earth before fire was tamed and mastered. In the pictures the forest is aflame and the landscape is peopled with beasts and men and their monstrous offspring, centaurs, fauns, and satyrs. Beasts are fighting among themselves and with men, and the only weapons used are clubs. The Greeks were well aware of the gradual development of mankind from primitive beginnings. The elements of the preclassical ages were remembered in classical myth, and the semihuman monsters of woods and mountains were kept alive in the repertory of classical art.