Modernity Revisited

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- 1 *Cubisme et culture* refers as much to the French colonial adventure, when its authors, Antliff and Leighton, take a close look at the role of Africa-inspired “primitivism” in Braque and Picasso, as it does to new conceptions of space and time issuing from modern physics and the philosophies going hand-in-hand with it. The book’s chapters, needless to say, are very general, and offer a sound introduction to the topic.
- 2 But there is more to this book, which attempts to open up art of the years 1907-1920 by restoring to it a varied cultural context. There is, for example, an interesting discussion of the issue of knowing whether Cubism belongs to the Graeco-Roman tradition of the South, or the Gothic tradition of the North. From 1913 on, Albert Gleize veered towards the Celtic and popular Gothic, as opposed to the monarchist classicism of Action Française, or the Latin South of Maurice Denis.
- 3 These days, the debate is rounded off by what is woven around the Cubists in Roussillon. Véronique Richard de la Fuente soundly analyses how an intellectual and pictorial busyness sprang up in the South, around Picasso, Braque, Manolo and Burty. Down there, the spirit of Catalan “noucentisme”, gravitating around Eugenio d’Ors, was faced with the violence of Cubist modernity. Focusing on the Céret scene, this book helps us to understand how the debate about tradition, from one end of Europe to the other and under the onslaught of a culture undergoing radical change(s), takes on

different aspects, marked by local issues. In this respect, Antliff and Leighton also include interesting chapters on the “Norman” group of Cubists¹.

- 4 The fact remains that, in these books, the nub of their line of thinking is the still much-disputed question of the criteria of modernity in art. Here, Cubism only occupies centre stage for a few years—the war brought all that to a standstill. The debate between tradition and revolution was actually hedged by the united front against the foe which exercised everybody’s minds from 1914 on. But could the return to order itself take on the form of a new step forward on the part of modernity ? This is what these books, which revolve around Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, take a look at.
- 5 The United Front abruptly sorted out the debate between the Apollonian South and the Celtic North. France belonged to Latin-ness, and German barbarism to Gothic forms of irrationality. In this context, Cubism, which was too internationalist and too Gothic in the eyes of many trustees of the French tradition, was first of all submitted to a rationalizing re-reading, then abandoned. The escape from Cubism found by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant drew, for its part, from radical rationalism. It subscribed to the principle of discipline and logic, and dismissed the untimely manifestations of subjectivity. The outcome would be Purism. Antliff and Leighton see in these artists the advocates of the ultra-nationalism which was the destroyer of Cubism and pre-war debate. This is probably giving in to the nostalgia of the well-painted picture and to what Benjamin called the “aura” of oil painting, which, as is well-known, was determinedly opposed by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and, in their different ways, Léger and Brancusi. The industrial object which was ushered into art with Duchamp and the purists was an essential issue of the new culture, which would cling to it for ever more.
- 6 The book by Alexander Tzonis about Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, aka Le Corbusier, is a biography. But in his fairly comprehensive and systematic way, the author does not let himself be sidetracked by chronology. As his English subtitle announces, he deals with the “poetics of machine and metaphor”. Le Corbusier was first and foremost a poet, and if his projects were brilliant and at times outrageous, this was because his mind was steered not by the circumstances of the commission, but rather by the logic of the imagination. The primary duty was to nurture the imagination by way of a keen eye. On no account must sentimentalism get the upper hand. Bear in mind that you are living and constructing in the world of technical reproducibility. Think mass production, process, and industrialization. Tzonis, whose enthusiasm informs this book throughout, shows us a Corbu who is wilfully modern.
- 7 And what of Le Corbusier the painter ? Tzonis reminds his readers that for Corbu himself, all architects must be painters above all else—otherwise put, people who see things. But Le Corbusier was not a painter the way Amédée Ozenfant was. For some years, both artists shared a common passion for iconic abstraction, in other words, for a rational mastery of the image, which they called “purism”. Because architecture is a “pure creation of the mind”, Corbu, along with his friend, undertook the task of reinstating on canvas objects which would themselves also be “pure creations of the mind”. The preparatory and theoretical research, which would swiftly include city-planning and architecture among its topics, was published between 1920 and 1925 in *L’Esprit Nouveau*, a magazine edited by Ozenfant.
- 8 In her very thorough biography of Amédée Ozenfant, Françoise Ducros provides us with that crucial moment in the artist’s career, as well as the genesis of his theses in the pre-

war years, in the period of Cubism which he took part in just enough, and somewhat late in the day, to make him feel keen to remain absolutely aloof from it. The phases of this development are dealt with in evocatively titled chapters, in which the author makes a detailed analysis of a career about which still not enough is known (this is the first monograph devoted to the artist). In these chapters we follow the paths of the two friends after Cubism. F. Ducros has Ozenfant as the inspirer of Le Corbusier during these years. Could be. The fact still remains that both artists worked together for some years, like Braque and Picasso in the early days of Cubism.

- 9 From the strictly pictorial viewpoint, there can be no doubt that the path blazed by “purism” did not enjoy the successes expected by those promoting it. This is probably due to the fact that this aesthetics had to do with the modern object, its status and its image, and that this latter would be dealt with by advertising and in photography in a much more effectual way than painting could ever do. “Purism”—if we feel bound to stick with the term—would duly feel much more at ease in industrial design than in easel painting. Here, too, modernity had drawn a new boundary—and Le Corbusier’s hunch was on target.
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NOTES

1. The Société Normande de Peinture Moderne was founded in 1909. It included Léger, the Duchamp-Villon brothers, and Pierre Dumont, less well-known but a diehard Cubist from the outset, as is shown by his *Cathédrale de Rouen*, painted in 1912.