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**DIALOGUES IN ARTS AND SCIENCE**

**THE SEE-SAW RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND  
THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE  
DISCOURSE OF MODERNISM**

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## ***The See-Saw Relationship Between Antiquity And The Middle Ages In The Discourse Of Modernism<sup>1</sup>***

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In the years after the Second World War, a certain idea of modernist classicism, or classic high modernism, was given striking three-dimensional shape in Philip Johnson's sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art, created in 1953 and enlarged in 1964<sup>2</sup>. With its deft juxtapositions of architecture and figurative sculpture — the severity of its marble and granite planes contrasted to the three-dimensional rotundity of works by Aristide Maillol, Gaston Lachaise, and Wilhelm Lehmbruck — along with the softening addition of water and trees, Johnson's *plein air* ensemble suggested a convincing modern arcadia. Accompanying the masterpieces of modern painting contained in the museum's galleries — including Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1911) and Henri Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911) — Johnson's garden might also be thought of as having played the supporting role of (female) nature to the (male) lead of culture inside its walls.

This impressive classical rebirth on 54<sup>th</sup> Street was, needless to say, not the antique classicism of the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders, but a modern, up-to-date transmutation of what were considered classical principles — measure, clarity, austerity, geometric harmony, a sense of proportion — rendered in the ancient materials of stone and bronze. Nor had the Edenic

garden of MoMA sprung full-blown, Zeus-like, from Johnson's head. In fact, the very idea of the garden and its execution were owed to the Museum's original director and guiding spirit, Alfred Barr, working with the architect John McAndrew. That original garden, hastily constructed in time for the opening of the Museum's new building in 1939, and Johnson's iteration of almost a decade-and-a-half later, were transatlantic reinterpretations of the classicizing modernity of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's great German pavilion for the Barcelona International Exposition, of 1929, the Uhr-structure of classicized modernism. There, a substantial nude by Georg Kolbe, *Morning*, whose raised arms shielded her from the strong light of early day (a gesture that also subtly recalled Eve's humiliated modesty at the Expulsion), was brilliantly placed by Mies in a shallow pool of water in the open-air enclosure just beyond the main reception room. The contrast of the modeled "flesh" of Kolbe's statue and hard marble of the surrounding walls provided the starting point for Johnson's own midtown New York contrast of voluptuous figures and the planar severity of his walls, walkways, and bridges.

Modernist classicism was in the air between the two World Wars, especially in Paris, and as a trans-European phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> It was most famously represented by Pablo Picasso's "classical" or neoclassical phase, typical of works like the artist's *Three Women at the Spring* (1921), in MoMA's collection. This "new classicism" was spearheaded in New York, by cultural amateurs and Johnson's fellow Harvard alumni, including Barr and Lincoln Kirstein, who

in 1933 commissioned a thoroughly classicized nude portrait of himself (his pose might be compared to that of a Greek kouros figure) by French-born, New York-based Gaston Lachaise<sup>4</sup> (there are two known examples, one at the Whitney Museum, New York, and another at the Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut). More significant still for this developing American classicism was Kirstein's role, also in 1933, of convincing Russian choreographer George Balanchine to leave Paris for New York, thus founding the School of American Ballet in preparation for establishing the New York City Ballet. It was in reference to his ballet *Apollo* (or *Apollon Musagète* as it was originally called), 1928, choreographed to music by Igor Stravinsky, that Balanchine said he realized for the first time that he could "eliminate . . . limit . . . clarify . . . reduce."<sup>5</sup> This was his translation in dance of an aesthetic of classical austerity that he had learned first-hand from Stravinsky and from Picasso, while working with the Ballets Russes in the late 1920s.

Nonetheless, classicism had not always been the uncontested touchstone for modernity. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, medieval art and architecture vied for the position of most salient historical reference, with the Middle Ages enduring as a kind of shadow ancestor for the modern movement, useful and sometimes essential to deflect attention from classicism's dominance or to change gears when the classical idea seemed shopworn. Medievalism was classicism's essential "other," the yin to its yang, the provocative outsider to classicism's self-assured insider, the north to its south. With the Romanesque

church and Gothic cathedral providing the templates, the art of the Middle Ages was understood as collective, multimedia, hand-made, familiarly folkloric (as opposed to the primitivism of faraway exotic places), and idiosyncratic. For every Greek statue that modernists proclaimed as exemplary of classicism's perfect proportions, there was at least a murmur of medievalism's contrary and invigorating quirkiness. Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, placed casts of the Victory of Samothrace in a number of his greatest interiors, the effect of which — apart from the sheer exhilaration of its winged-ness — was to imply that his innovative architecture was deeply rooted in the antique past, as well as to suggest that classical aesthetics were alive and well in the contemporary world. But, this strong nod to the classical world was the exception rather than the rule for Wright, whose talent was nurtured and flourished in the fin-de-siècle decorative arts revival, for which the Middle Ages, not antiquity, were understood as the golden age of invention and craftsmanship. The vitalist allure of his Heller House capitals and the charm of the stained-glass windows of his Coonley Playhouse were dependent on Romanesque and Gothic precedent, and on John Ruskin and William Morris's advocacy of medieval craftsmanship, rather than anything remotely classical. It was the great Gothic cathedral of Rouen in Normandy, not the ancient ruins of Provence, that drew the extended attention of Claude Monet in 1894.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, being a neoclassicist, even a standard-bearer of French classicism, did not preclude one's also being, simultaneously, a medieval revivalist.

THE SEE-SAW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND  
THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNISM

For every one of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's tales from antiquity, as in his retelling of the story of Achilles receiving the ambassadors of Agamemnon<sup>7</sup> (École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris), we find a tale from the Middle Ages, like his *Paolo and Francesca*, of 1819 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers). Its subject taken from Dante and painted in what is known as the "troubadour style," the work depicts the eponymous lovers discovered *in flagrante* (as they are reading about the adulterous carryings-on of Lancelot and Guinevere), about to be pounced upon and murdered by Giovanni Malatesta, Paolo's brother.<sup>8</sup> And for every Roman god he paints, as in *Jupiter and Thetis*, 1811 (Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence), Ingres gives us a Roman Catholic, as in *Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII* (Louvre, 1854), where *La Pucelle*, standing tall at Reims Cathedral, is attired in elaborate, medieval armor. Although this kind of stylistic eclecticism might appear capricious, perhaps it was a question, rather, of function following form: the erotic and pleasurable may be able to travel back and forth between the antique and the medieval period, but it more comfortably resides in the pagan world; the religious or sacred, on the other hand, for obvious reasons, is more easily accommodated by reference to the Middle Ages. When Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the most important muralist in fin-de-siècle France, was commissioned in the 1880s to provide wall paintings for his hometown museum, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, his subject was the origins of art. These turned out to be, perhaps not surprisingly, one part antique and one part medieval, with a divvying up of discursive ideological markers — the profane and sacred — not unlike those of Ingres. *Ancient Vision* featured the predomi-

nantly female Puvis stock company of lolling water gatherers and wistful women in varying states of classical undress, along with the inevitable, piping male shepherd, as well as another male way up on the hill, an artist entreating his muse. This pastoral assembly is rendered in a blanched palette meant to suggest fresco or faded panels of some sort. The medieval part of Puvis portrait of art's origins, *Christian Inspiration*, on the other hand, depicts the cloistered male and religious side of creativity, its vaguely Romanesque architecture serving to remove its inhabitants from the presumed tainted world of lust and longing beyond the monastery's walls.<sup>9</sup>

Not that all references to the Middle Ages presupposed the primacy of faith. "To be sure," wrote architect, architectural restorer, and theorist Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, in 1886, "those cathedrals were religious monuments, but they were also national edifices . . . the symbol of French nationality, the first and most powerful attempt to achieve unity."<sup>10</sup> Anticlerical by upbringing, Viollet-le-Duc's interest in the Gothic was rather a question of national reference; along with its rationalism and mathematical complexity, this made medieval architecture an appropriate precedent for modern construction. "If large pieces of cast iron had been available to Gothic builders," he reasoned, "they would have quickly seized this reliable means to get rigid points of support as thin as possible; and perhaps they would have used it better than we do."<sup>11</sup> The prevalence of medievalizing cast-iron-and-glass train sheds, like London's Saint Pancras Station, testify to the timeliness of Viollet-le-Duc's thinking about the

past, although railroad stations were but the tip of an ideological iceberg. The image of social and cultural wholeness that was most effectively deployed in Queen Victoria's Britain was based on a real or imagined link to the nation's medieval past — royal, political, *and* religious — a High Tory idea which John Constable's views of Salisbury Cathedral were also intended to convey.<sup>12</sup> Which is not to say that the Victorians were immune to the allure of classicism's worldly associations: playing on the resemblances between empires modern and antique, John Soane chose the Roman model for his great, defunct Bank of England building and Lawrence Alma-Tadema imagined from whole cloth a quite convincing image of Phidias showing a still-polychromed Parthenon frieze to his 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian friends up on scaffolding (1868, Collection of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), in a scene that looks like nothing so much as a Royal Academy Varnishing Day in contemporary London. Charles Cockerell's Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, of 1847, is neo-Baroque in its "fantasy Roman" or "Victorian Roman" phase, wholly appropriate for the display of booty in large part acquired by English men and women on the Grand Tour in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Antique masquerade notwithstanding, it was the neo-Gothic, not the neoclassical, that carried the day in England. Barry and Pugin's Houses of Parliament (1847-52) testify to just how potent a national image the Middle Ages were for Britain. And what was true for Victoria was relevant for her cousins in Germany, where the rhetoric of national identity was shaped especially by notions



of a rich medieval past. The painting of a Gothic cathedral, its apse rising up mightily like a ship's prow at the bend in a river (*Gothic Cathedral by River*, 1813, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen) , was not produced by a retrogressive Nazarene painter but by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Germany's greatest neoclassical architect, whose Altes Museum, on Berlin's Museum Island is among the very finest examples of that style. Schinkel, like the eclectic Ingres, could switch with ease between historical modes, designing Gothic revival churches one moment and neoclassical structures the next.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, an abhorrence for the eclectic taste of so many architects, designers, and artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of the foundations of modernist aesthetics: if those practitioners could so easily “put on and take off” styles, went the logic of this position, their work perforce must be superficial and inauthentic. Subtle allusion or allied structural conception thus replaced direct historical reference. Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau, for example, of 1925-6, while it eschews all historic architectural forms, is nonetheless “classical” in its modernity: the architect invents a contemporary language (inspired by modern factory construction) that, in the gridded glass curtain wall of the wings devoted to the workshop and vocational schools, and in the two-story bridge that connects them, is a brilliant translation of the trabeated severity, order, and clarity of a building like Schinkel's Altes Museum without any direct reference to ancient Greece or Rome.

Yet, things did not begin this way at the Bauhaus. To the contrary, it was the medieval (and the vertical), not the classical (and horizontal), which was

first symbolically offered: Ernst Feininger's woodblock print, *Kathedrales* accompanied Gropius's "Bauhaus Manifesto and Program" of 1919, a veritable call-to-arms for a modern day neo-medieval union of architecture and craftsmanship:

The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! To embellish buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts; they were the indispensable components of great architecture. Today the arts exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen. Architects, painters, and sculptors must recognize anew and learn to grasp the composite character of a building both as an entity and in its separate parts ... Architects, sculptors, painters, we all must return to the crafts! ... Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.<sup>14</sup>

Within a few years this utopian side of the Bauhaus, understood in neo-medieval terms — this reaching for the stars in Gothic recrudescence — was displaced by something more down-to-earth and buildable: a modern classicism of form that renounced decoration of (almost) any kind, where neither the Romanesque nor Corinthian capital would have a place in the modern language of design. As Balanchine came to realize with modern ballet, the modern architect could distinguish him or herself, first and foremost, by eliminating the "inessential." In the case of Le Corbusier, this renunciation was less programmatic and his

classical sources intentionally more apparent. At the Villa Savoye (1929) outside of Paris, for instance, the whitewashed walls of the Greek fisherman's house, supported by slender columns (*pilotis*) derived from Greek temples, result in a kind of Mediterranean "high-meets-low." We know just how crucial a certain notion of the development of Greek architecture was for Le Corbusier's architectural theory and what rhetorical use he made of it, first in the pages of the magazine he co-edited with painter Amédée Ozenfant, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, and then in 1923, in *Vers une architecture (Towards an Architecture)*, where the "progress" of streamlining design from Paestum to the Parthenon was made parallel to that of French automobile design from the prewar Humber to the 1921 Delage Grand-Sport.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, by 1937, Le Corbusier arrived at the point where the Bauhaus had begun: with the Gothic cathedral and its associated notions of cooperation and social unity as precedents for modernity. "When the cathedrals were white," the architect sermonized in his eponymous book, "participation was unanimous, in everything. There were no pontificating coteries; the people, the country went ahead ... The cathedrals were white, thought was clear, spirit was alive, the spectacle clean,"<sup>16</sup> and, in a mathematical reading that Viollet-le-Duc would have found congenial, he explained:

In the immense hubbub of the Middle Ages, which falsely seems to us like a massacre in which blood never stopped flowing, human beings observed the Hermetic rules of Pythagoras; everywhere you could see the eager search for the laws of harmony. They had deliberately turned

their backs on “the antique,” on the stereotyped models of Byzantium; but they threw themselves passionately into the reconquest of the fatal axis of human destiny: harmony.<sup>17</sup>

Why had this brilliant architect and theorist, for whom Greece and Rome has been the unquestioned touchstones for all modern endeavor, changed his mind so completely, rejecting, at least for the moment, the antique in favor of the medieval? Part of the explanation may be found in the fact that the triumphalist rhetoric of classicism, verbal and visual, was now tainted by the (often kitschy) appropriation of Roman imagery by Mussolini’s regime,<sup>18</sup> as well as by the Nazis. “[E]ach politically historical epoch searches in its art,” Hitler declared in one of his first speeches as chancellor, in September, 1933, “for the link with a period of [an] equally heroic past. Greeks and Romans suddenly stand close to Teutons.”<sup>19</sup> The year that *When the Cathedrals Were White* was published in Paris, 1937 architect Albert Speer’s German Pavilion at the “Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne” offered the world an architectural shorthand for the new Nazi neoclassicism: three, colossal, squared, pilaster-like Doric columns (symbolic of the Third Reich?) make up the entire façade surmounted by a gigantic gilded eagle perched upon a wreathed Swastika. Interestingly, it was not only classicism that was thus tainted by association with fascism: the Middle Ages were correspondingly discredited. In his painting *Der Bannerträger* (“The Standard Bearer”), ca. 1935, Hubert Lanzinger portrayed Adolf Hitler in a manner that even Speer, a devoted follower of the Führer, found ludicrous: “It showed Hitler, who was hopeless on horseback,

staring sternly from the saddle and decked out as a medieval knight with a lance.”<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 1943, now the Armaments Minister, Speer had the painting removed from his new office.

In the years after the Second World War, artistic allusions to antiquity and the Middle Ages by no means disappeared, although these were likely to be subtle, sublimated, or indirect: one thinks of Morris Louis’s “unfurled canvases,” ca. 1961, named for letters of the Greek alphabet which they do not resemble, or Louise Nevelson’s *Sky Cathedral* (MoMA, 1958), where the reference to a Gothic façade may well have occurred to the artist after the fact. Philip Johnson’s garden at the Museum of Modern Art, where our discussion began, is a case of what we might think of as sublimated classicism, whereas, contrarily, Ellsworth Kelly’s final work, his chapel-like structure, “Austin,” at the University of Texas, maintains the form of a Cistercian or Romanesque structure, but stands entirely aloof from religious practice. Classical “spirit” or medieval conceptualization may be attributed to any number of contemporary artistic endeavors,<sup>21</sup> but references to antiquity or the Middle Ages is more easily found nowadays in the popular arena, where Classic Coke and Goth subculture reside, rather than in the rarified world of avant-garde art. Perhaps the serious legitimizing power of these two great moments in Western culture has run its course, simply too local to have much impact in a global context.

THE SEE-SAW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND  
THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNISM

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1 This paper is based on a talk, “Classicism Triumphant: How Antiquity (Nearly) Eradicated the Middle-Ages in the Discourse of Modernism,” which I delivered at the symposium “Antiquity in the Twentieth Century: Modern Art and the Classical Vision,” at the J. Paul Getty Museum (Malibu California: November 2011). I am also indebted to the students in my advanced seminar, “Medieval/Modern” (Department of Art History, NYU: spring 2011).

2 Johnson reworked a sculpture garden that was originally designed by John McAndrew in consultation with Alfred Barr for the Museum of Modern Art’s opening in 1939. See Mirka Beneš, “A Modern Classic: The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, in John Elderfield, ed. *Philip Johnson and the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MoMA, 1998), pp. 104-51.

3 This is a subject about which I have written a good deal: see my *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918-1936* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2010).

4 See Peter C. Sutton, “Gaston Lachaise, Man Walking (Portrait of Lincoln Kirstein,” in Kenneth E. Silver, ed. *Face & Figure: The Sculpture of Gaston Lachaise* (Greenwich, CT: Bruce Museum, 2012), pp. 52-63.

5 Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 74.

6 For Monet and Rouen Cathedral see Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the 90s: The Series Paintings* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), and, more generally, on

medieval artistic revivalism in the period see Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2003). It is also noteworthy that sculptor Auguste Rodin was fascinated by medieval art and architecture a bit later, see his *Les Cathédrales de France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1914).

7 See “Profiling Homoeroticism: Ingres’ *Achilles Receiving the Ambassadors of Agamemnon*” *Art Bulletin* (June 1993), Vol. 75, pp. 259-74.

8 For an interesting take on the work see Susan Siegfried, “Ingres’ Reading—The Undoing of Narrative,” *Art History* (December 2000), Vol. 23 Issue 5, pp. 654-80.

9 Jennifer Shaw, *Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism, and the Fantasy of France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 70-101.

10 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, “Cathedrale,” in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du Xie au XVI siècle* (Paris 1886), cited in Ronald R. Bernier, *Monument, Moment, and Memory: Monet’s Cathedral in Fin de Siècle France* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), p. 15.

11 Martin Bressani, *Architecture and the Historical Imagination: Eugène-Emanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1814–1879* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 429.

12 See Timothy Wilcox, *Constable and Salisbury: The Soul of Landscape* (London: Scala, 2011).

13 See John Zukowsky, ed. *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: The Drama of Architecture* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1994).

THE SEE-SAW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND  
THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNISM

14 Walter Gropius, “Bauhaus Manifesto and Program” (1919).

15 See my discussion in *Esprit de Corps*, pp. 375-7.

16 Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White (Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches)* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, trans. by Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. 1947), pp. 5-6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 6

18 For example, the (extant) “Foro Mussolini,” in Rome (1928-33), designed by Enrico del Debbio.

19 Cited in Alex Scobie, *Hitler’s State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), p. 16.

20 Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), p. 199.

21 See, for instance, Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).