

2021

Mediterranean Cubisms: Decoration, Classicism, Picasso and Professionalism

David Cottington
Kingston University London, d.cottington@kingston.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [Modern Art and Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cottington, David. "Mediterranean Cubisms: Decoration, Classicism, Picasso and Professionalism." *Artl@s Bulletin* 10, no. 2 (2021): Article 10.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC-BY-NC-SA license](#).

Mediterranean Cubisms: Decoration, Classicism, Picasso and Professionalism

David Cottington*

Kingston University London

Abstract

'A working countryside is hardly ever a landscape', Raymond Williams observed fifty years ago in his book *The Country and the City*; for to perceive it as such is to have both the leisure and the distance from it, to aestheticize it. This essay argues that, similarly, art practices have too often been understood 'from the outside in': that in Cubist representations of the Mediterranean, the picturesque quality of the Riviera insinuated itself—indeed that that the influence of the decorative was so far-reaching in the inter-World War years that it co-opted avant-gardism itself, and that the Riviera was one of its vehicles for doing so.

Résumé

« Une campagne que l'on labour n'est jamais vraiment un paysage », observait Raymond Williams il y a cinquante ans dans son livre *The Country and the City* ; car la percevoir comme telle, c'est avoir à la fois le loisir et la distance pour l'esthétiser. Cet essai soutient que, de la même manière, les pratiques artistiques ont trop souvent été comprises « de l'extérieur vers l'intérieur » : que dans les représentations cubistes de la Méditerranée, la qualité pittoresque de la Riviera s'est insinuée – en fait que l'influence du décoratif était si importante dans l'entre-deux-guerres qu'il coopta même l'avant-gardisme, et que la Riviera était l'un de ses outils pour y parvenir.

**David Cottington is Emeritus Professor of Art History at Kingston University London. He is the author of several books on Cubism including *Cubism and its Histories* (Manchester 2004), and on the avant-garde including *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2013) and *Radical Art and the Formation of the Avant-Garde* (Yale 2022).*

Any reflection on a topic as fundamental as the relation between the cradle of western civilisation and the pictorial idiom that gave the twentieth century its own language of cultural expression must begin with some basic questions.¹ What does ‘the Mediterranean’ mean in cultural terms? What does it mean to *be* Mediterranean? Is there, indeed, such a thing as a ‘Mediterranean identity’? The Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk offers some tellingly mordant answers, in an essay he published fifteen years ago. ‘The idea of the Mediterranean as a single entity is artificial’ he writes; ‘and the single Mediterranean character that derives from it is, likewise, a thing that had to be invented and elaborated before it was discovered.’ He offers ‘some ground rules’, as he calls them, ‘for those wishing to acquire Mediterranean identity’. They are worth stating: ‘First’, he suggests, ‘foster the view of the Mediterranean as a unified entity; it would be a good thing if such it were. This would provide a new doorway to the place of which we are a part for those of us who cannot travel to Spain, France and Italy without visas.’ ‘Second’, he notes, ‘The best definitions of Mediterranean identity are in books written by non-Mediterraneans. Don’t complain about this’, he advises; ‘Just try to become like the Mediterranean they describe, and you will have your identity.’ ‘Third’, he proposes, ‘if a writer wants to see himself as Mediterranean, he must give up certain other qualities. For example, a French writer who wants to be Mediterranean must give up part of his Frenchness. By the same logic, a Greek writer wishing to be Mediterranean must give up part of his Balkan and European identities.’ ‘Fourth’, Pamuk advises, ‘for those who want to become real Mediterranean writers, whenever you write about it don’t say “the Mediterranean”, just say “the sea”. Speak of its culture and its particularities without naming them and without using the word *Mediterranean* at all. Because the best way to become a Mediterranean is never to talk about it.’²

Behind the bitterly ironic humour of this advice are two points relevant to this essay: first, that for those who are local to the region, there is no independent concept of ‘the Mediterranean’; it is just home. ‘A working countryside is hardly ever a landscape’, as the Welsh literary historian Raymond Williams observed fifty years ago in his book *The Country and the City*; for to perceive it as such is to have both the leisure, and the distance from it, to aestheticize it.³ So too, as Pamuk implies, for natives of the Mediterranean: to see their homeland as ‘the Mediterranean’ is to become estranged from it *as* home. Second, that—in consequence—the perspectives from which such concepts of it are constructed are, necessarily, those of the tourist, in that broad sense of this term that is the product of the sociological work of a quarter century ago: that is to say external, transitory, and serving to confirm an identity anchored elsewhere rather than to lose it in its object.⁴ As such, this ‘tourist gaze’ potentially includes the constructions offered by intellectuals, and artists in all media, as well as those provided by a more narrowly-defined tourist culture and industry.

Art historians have contributed to this understanding of the tourist gaze some useful analyses of the participation of painters, both orthodox and avant-garde, in the tourist ‘boom’ that brought thousands of visitors to the Côte d’Azur in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. James Herbert noted in his 1992 book on fauvism that this participation helped to frame the visual formulae through which the image of the region was marketed in the new medium of postcards;⁵ it did so by applying the protocols of the Claudian *grande tradition* almost unconsciously to the newly-discovered corners of its arcadia. At the same time, he noted, these artists shared, in their turn, the enthusiasm for the unspoiled ‘primitive’ qualities of *la vie littorale* that drove much of the industrialised tourism.⁶ A decade later, Kenneth

¹ This essay began as a paper for a colloquium on ‘Modernismes en Méditerranée’, held in Marseilles in March 2018. I thank the convenors of this, Rossella Froissart and Yves Chevrefils-Desbiolles both for inviting me to give it, and for including a revision of it in the present volume.

² Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colors: Essays and a Story*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Vintage, 2007), 196.

³ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).

⁴ Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds: the Tourist Papers* (New York and London: Routledge 1992); John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 2001).

⁵ James D. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), chapter 3: ‘Painters and Tourists in the Classical Landscape’; Aline Ripert and Claude Frère, *La Carte postale: Son histoire, sa fonction sociale* (Paris: CNRS, 1983).

⁶ Herbert, *Fauve Painting*, *ibid.*



Figure 1. Jean Metzinger, *The Harbour*, 1912, Oil on canvas, 32 3/8 × 39 5/8 in. (82.23 × 100.65 cm). Dallas Museum of Art. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2021. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

Silver curated a New York exhibition and wrote an accompanying book that were both devoted to the relation between modernism and tourism in the Riviera, including in it a chapter on ‘Cote d’Azur cubism’. Silver noted that even in the case of the cubists, ‘artists whose approach was resolutely High Modernist, the picturesque quality of the Riviera insinuated itself into works where one would least have expected it.’⁷ Metzinger’s painting *The Harbour* of 1912 (Fig 1), for example, presented recognisable views of the Vieux Port in Marseilles and the Pont Transbordeur that spanned its harbour basin in the years between 1905 and 1944.

⁷ Kenneth Silver, *Making Paradise: Art, Modernity and the Myth of the French Riviera* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2001), 75.

To do so, Metzinger applied the technique of simultaneity then fashionable in salon cubist circles, making a montage of the spectacular perspectives offered by the bridge, juxtaposing this ‘Eiffel Tower of the South’, as it was popularly called, with images of old-fashioned Mediterranean working sailboats. In comparable, if more decorative, fashion another cubist whom Silver selects, the Nordic Russian painter Léopold Survage imbricated delightful vignettes of the back-alleys of Nice with repeated silhouettes of a distinctly Parisian bowler-hatted figure, in his *Landscape* of 1915 (Fig. 2). Silver’s description of this painting is quotably apt:

Survage’s mysterious stranger is, like the artist himself, an outsider on the coast during wartime—the doubly displaced étranger, a cross between



Figure 2. Leopold Survage, *Landscape* 1915, oil on canvas, 74 x 95 cm. Paris, Musée d'art moderne. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2021. Photo © Paris Musées, musée d'art moderne, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image ville de Paris.

tourist and immigrant, who finds himself in a lush and unexpected setting. The flickering planes of apartment house walls, with their myriad curtained windows and occasional doorways, are like so many eyes or potential vantage points from which the picture's protagonist may be watched, or from which he may observe... this unmistakably paranoid fantasy is heightened by high-keyed colours and surprising details [and] crowned by a frieze of Mediterranean nature's bounty... we might describe this as 'Côte d'Azur cubism in the shadow of war.'⁸

Silver's account of such 'Côte d'Azur cubism' centres, in this *noiresque* reading, on an equation of the artist with two other 'outsiders' that is perhaps

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77–9.

more telling than he perhaps intended. One of them—the artist as immigrant—I shall return to later. The other—the artist as tourist—draws on the coincidence of an increase in the number of cubist paintings of Mediterranean motifs both with the years of the First World War and with a vogue for the exploitation of the possibilities of synthetic cubism for decorative purposes. For Silver, it can be inferred, a linking of the collage-derived juxtaposition of details and perspectives both with the concurrent adoption by avant-garde artists of photomontage and with the techniques of the popular-commercial cultural media of postcards and film gave 'Mediterranean cubism' a decorative and touristic as well as 'avant-garde' character.

It is arguable, however, that the influence of the decorative was more profound than this, during the war years and after; that it was so far-reaching,

indeed, that in that period it co-opted avant-gardism itself, and that the Riviera was one of its vehicles for doing so. Such is the proposal of the present essay. To reach an understanding of how, and why, this happened, Pamuk's insights about the construction of 'the Mediterranean' from perspectives external to its lived experience are invaluable. For as useful as the above art-historical observations are, they too are the constructions of 'outsiders': external to the art practices themselves, they take both 'avant-garde' status and its relation to mainstream culture as given and familiar rather than constructs in need of explanation and contextualisation. If these practices are to be grasped 'from the inside', as it were, we therefore need to ask: what *was* the perceived relation, for modernist artists, between the 'picturesque' of the Claudian tradition and that of the tourist Riviera, and why did cubist painters work to bring these representations of 'the Mediterranean' together? The occupational context of cubist art practice is, I suggest, the key to answering these questions. Crucially, this context was the emergence and consolidation of the formation of the avant-garde that were driven, initially in Paris, in the thirty years around 1900, by the process of professionalisation of middle-class non-entrepreneurial occupations. This was a motor force in the development of western societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that of fine art was a part of it.⁹ What, specifically, were these dynamics? And what bearing did they have on visualisations of the Mediterranean?

Technie and decoration

This argument starts with the *avant-guerre*. For in 1914 the newly-consolidated Parisian artistic avant-garde was being shaped by two social and economic developments. One of these was that of those forces of professionalisation which both co-opted its experimentalist iconoclasm and narrowed its focus to an obsession with specialist aesthetic

technical expertise. I have elsewhere suggested that this process was both part of the broader development and yet also distinct from it—an 'alternative' professionalism', as I have termed it, whose status and standards were as carefully guarded as those of the bourgeois professionals, but on radically different terms. Fundamental to it were, I argue, three features: first, the elaboration of distinctive (energetically promoted and contested) aesthetic principles that were not only different from, but often opposed to, those of the mainstream; second, the emphasis upon, and development of, equally independent technical means and craft inheritances; and third, the mutual recognition of their common and distinctive aspirations—a shared sense of rupture from the mainstream that was signalled from around 1910 by the newly-available epithet 'avant-garde' itself.¹⁰

It was in mid-1880s Paris that the technicism was first prioritised (over both affective relations and market advantage) as the primary occupational cement of the avant-garde formation, especially via the neo-impressionists' competitive innovations in the application of colour science to painting. Their leading critical supporter Félix Fénéon coined a term for it: *technie*, meaning 'an absolutely new and unknown idea'.¹¹ The implicit professionalism of such technicism was always in tension with avant-gardist commitment to rupture with the aesthetic and often also political status quo, but with the retreat of most avant-garde artists into aestheticist autonomism from c.1906 after the collapse of the inter-class collaborationism of the Bloc des Gauches,¹² tension grew into conflict, explicit political allegiance was off the agenda, and by 1912,

⁹ For an overview of its history see Christophe Charle, *La Crise des sociétés impériales* (Paris: Seuil, 2001). For the presentation of this argument in full see David Cottington, *Radical Art and the Formation of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, forthcoming Spring 2022).

¹⁰ Cottington, *ibid*. This analysis was first adumbrated in David Cottington, 'The Formation of the Avant-Garde in Paris and London, circa 1880–1915', *Art History*, vol. 35 no. 3 (June 2012), 596–621, 604–10.

¹¹ 'Je dis *technie* et non *technique*, suivant un néologisme de Wronski [the early nineteenth century Polish mystical scientist] qui habille une idée absolument nouvelle et incomprise. La psychromie est aussi vieille que l'humanité; et les *techniques* polychromes ont commencé avec les premières civilisations... Mais la *technie polychrome* est née avec la théorie de la sensation de couleur et ne pouvait naître avant...'. 'Thérèse' [pseudonym used by Fénéon], 'Une affiche', *La Cravache*, 15 septembre, 1888, reprinted in Félix Fénéon, *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin (Geneva: Droz, 1970), vol. 1, 132. For an assessment of this concept see Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chapter five.

¹² On this conjuncture see my *Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris 1905–1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

technie was central to Parisian avant-gardism, with cubism as its preferred painterly vehicle.

The other development was that of the complex intersections of the discourse of decoration. On the eve of the First World War, this encompassed several concurrent, and yet divergent, meanings in Paris. It was at once a vehicle for the pursuit by the Parisian avant-garde of the many varied and competing technical innovations *du jour*; a gathering hegemony of *anti-avant-garde* forces in that pre-war half-decade that produced the triumph of cultural consumerism; and an echo, in its love of useless splendour, of that utopianism of which the latter was a distortion. Thus—to take these in turn—for Gauguin and, following him, the nabis, Matisse and their acolytes within the avant-garde, *le décoratif* referred to non-mimetic qualities or emphases in painting, which both drew upon cognate connotations of symbolism and/or ornament and enabled the assertion of painting's medium specificities, while for the cubists it was a means of assimilating and yet mediating the advert-saturated visual environment of the commercial everyday.¹³ At the same time, for many artists and critics, most of them outside the avant-garde, the category of 'decoration' challenged the boundaries between fine art and *objets d'art*; moreover, if 'decoration' was the purpose of both, it opened the floodgates of cultural consumerism and turned that avant-garde's art practices into instruments of economic and/or nationalistic interest.¹⁴ And for those for whom both technician innovation and the 'creative industries' smacked of a professionalisation of art that was anathema, decoration stood for that amateurism of the best kind that characterised affective communities as opposed to the professional kind, as the Arts and Crafts movement and its widening pan-European influence testified.

Over the course of the war, as avant-garde practices were abandoned, many of the creative (and *technie*-driven) concerns there pursued were replaced by the second of these aspects of decoration,

that of cultural consumerism, as the dislocation between life on the 'home front' and the reality of the trenches became sometimes shockingly acute, and decorative, buyable distractions from the bloodshed were ever more eagerly sought. As early as 1915, the *Gazette du Bon Ton* reported on the *haute couture* of that season: "[i]n a heroic vein, Paris has created its own wartime elegance', it noted, describing this 'heroism' as 'a cheerful and athletic elegance, and untrammelled, permitting the utmost ease of movement, should it even be that of lifting a wounded man or brandishing a weapon. And this fashion, by good fortune, is aesthetic as well as ingenious', it added; 'ladies seem disposed to look like warriors'.¹⁵ This consumerism even reached Léger, mired in the mud and blood of the trenches at Verdun. Thinking longingly of what he might be doing in Paris, and hearing of the commercial opportunities being seized or planned by former cubist comrades—such as Gleizes's project with Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie for a Ballets russes production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which never, in fact, materialised), or that of Picasso and, again, Cocteau and Satie for another—*Parade*—which did, he made supreme epistolary efforts to launch a line of 'cubist dolls' for sale in the Printemps department store's *Primavera* design studio.¹⁶ Meanwhile, marooned in non-combatant Portugal, Sonia Delaunay turned her hand to the speculative design of adverts for consumer products, setting up a company, 'La Corporation nouvelle', in 1916 for the purpose of marketing them.¹⁷ Neither her nor Léger's initiatives were successful, although after the war, and capitalising on her commission in 1918 to design costumes for another Ballets russes production, this time of *Cléopâtre* in London, Delaunay was able to launch her business as an *haute couture* designer.¹⁸ After the war, too, cubist-milieu painter

¹³ Nicholas Watkins, 'The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic', in Gloria Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis and Roussel, 1890–1930*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), 1–28; Cottington, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Paul Adam, 'La Couture de Paris', *La Gazette du Bon Ton*, 2^e année no. 8-9 (été 1915), 7-8: 'Paris a créé dans l'héroïsme, son élégance de la guerre, une élégance allègre et sportive, dégagée, permettant au geste toutes les aises, dût-il relever de malheureux blessés, ou même brandir une arme. Et cette mode, par chance, semble esthétique autant que spirituelle. ...La dame incline à paraître guerrière.'

¹⁶ 'Fernand Léger. Une Correspondance de guerre à Louis Poughon, 1914-1918', *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, hors-série (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1997).

¹⁷ Daniel Abadie, 'Sonia Delaunay, à la lettre', *Art et Publicité 1890-1990*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990), 344-57.

¹⁸ Tag Gronberg, *Designs on modernity: exhibiting the city in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*.

André Mare stepped up that engagement with decorative art that had led to his *Maison cubiste* project of 1912, co-founding the upmarket *Compagnie des Arts français* with Louis Süe, employing several of that project's collaborators to cater to the demands of an increasingly sophisticated and wealthy clientele for the cubism-derived interior styles of decoration that became synonymous in the following decade with art deco.¹⁹

Towards the Riviera

Inevitably, the hedonistic lifestyle of this cultural clientèle, and its requirements, brought them to the Riviera, and with them the artists, including Picasso, who were increasingly being drawn into these circles. The strength of the American dollar, as well as the indirect consequences of US participation in the recent war, also brought the new plutocrats and celebrities of that country in increasing numbers, replacing some of the aristocrats and European royalty to whom it had not been so kind. Among Picasso's wealthy new friends was the American couple, Gerald and Sarah Murphy, who did more than many others to turn this part of the French Mediterranean coast from a winter-only fashionable resort into a year-round playground for the rich. The Americans were not alone; among European patrons of the Riviera and its artists were the French aristocratic couple the Count and Countess de Noailles, who chose Hyères, the oldest resort on the Côte d'Azur, for the site of the villa which they commissioned in 1923 from the architect Mallet-Stevens, and which they filled with furniture by a roster of leading European designers.²⁰ But this initiative continued an investment in modernist design as cultural capital that was by then conventional; the Murphys brought a new ingredient, that of a celebrity that had as much to do with popular as with high culture.

Arriving first in Paris in 1921, where Gerald immediately took up painting and adapted the severe

post-cubism of Ozenfant and Jeanneret's purist still lives to their sybaritic lifestyle, they discovered the Riviera for themselves in 1922 on a visit to Linda and Cole Porter who lived at Cap d'Antibes. Persuading the Hotel Cap d'Antibes to stay open for the summer, they stayed there the following year, before buying and developing their own house on the coast nearby, in 1924. Naming it Villa America, for five years they were the centre of a widening circle of high-society American and French tourists and accompanying avant-garde artists, hosting house parties devoted to beach pursuits and the flaunting of *haut-bourgeois* formality by a social circle that was the model for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*.²¹ The few paintings that Gerald found time to make marry the iconography of this lifestyle with the crisp geometries of the 'call to order' of the postwar decade (Fig. 3). For a few short years, until Murphy's contraction of tuberculosis in 1929 and the collapse of the US stock market the same year brought it to an abrupt close, the assimilation of the postwar artistic avant-garde to the leisure requirements of plutocratic capitalism seemed well under way.²²

Classicisms

It was not only decoration that enabled this co-option; there was also a less trivial and hedonistic cultural current in play in that postwar conjuncture, that of classicism. The 'call to order' for which the classical high-cultural tradition was a cardinal frame of reference was, for European modernism, both aesthetic and social. It was also to a considerable extent, by implication geographically specific, since classicism inevitably indexed the Mediterranean. For Picasso, all three qualities were registered in a return, during and after the war, to legible, Ingresque paintings and drawings of monumentally classical figures, many of them on Riviera-like beaches, alongside his continuation of works in a synthetic cubist style—a juxtaposition literally

¹⁹ Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*; idem, *Couture Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁰ François Carrassan, *Noailles et les modernes : les traces d'un style* (Hyères: Or des files, 1990).

²¹ Fitzgerald first visited the Côte d'Azur with his wife Zelda in 1924, stopping at Hyères, Cannes and Monte Carlo – eventually staying at Saint-Raphaël, where he wrote much of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and began *Tender is the Night* (1934).

²² Abandoning the house, the painting and the Riviera, the couple returned to New York in the mid-1930s via several years in a Swiss sanatorium.



Figure 3. Gerald Murphy, *Cocktail*. 1927. Oil and pencil on linen, 73.8 x 76 cm. Purchase, with funds from Evelyn and Leonard A. Lauder, Thomas H. Lee and the Modern Painting and Sculpture Committee. Inv. N.: 95.188. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art. © Estate of Honoria Murphy Donnelly/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2021. Digital image Whitney Museum of American Art /Licensed by Scala.

and graphically summarised in a painted group of *Studies* of 1920 (Fig. 4).

Although it is a small, informal and notational set of images, its implicit interrogation of the relation of cubism to classicism and realism invites some reflections on a broader canvas: first, that in the context of the patronage and friendship of the *haut-bourgeois* circle of the Murphys and their friends, the play of styles deployed in these *Studies* can be seen, in avant-gardist terms, as a retrogressive

development on Picasso's part. However wittily reflexive the still-lives, and however cartoonishly exaggerated the classical volume and weight of the figures, and fragments thereof—especially the central head—in this montaged dialogue between pictorial idioms, its imbrication of styles would surely have been welcomed by this particular circle as an accommodation of his technicism to a cultural tradition that underwrote their social elitism—and that spoke *for them* their knowing assimilation—their



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, *Studies*, 1920, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. Paris, Musée Picasso. © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2021. Photo ©RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Adrien Didierjean.

'house-training', as it were—of cubism's potentially dangerous cultural dissidence; its *avant-guerre* avant-gardism, in short.

Yet the concept of the classic comprises a whole family of terms, and there are differences between them. Of the three correlatives 'classic', 'classical',

and 'classicism', only the last has a probably inescapably retrospective orientation; and thus it is only in the use of this that the charge of 'retrogressive' might apply. The other two terms can be uncoupled from their historical baggage—or at least, from the nostalgia for the past that 'classicism' implies—and

indeed can be argued to carry values that are central both to one current within modernism and to an articulation of avant-gardism. An example of this argument with respect to cubism is the essay 'Picasso, Cubism and Reflexivity' published just over thirty years ago by the late American art historian Edward Fry, on the cubism of Picasso and Braque, in the years of their elaboration of it before 1914.²³ Fry sees gallery cubism as what he calls 'reflexive'.²⁴ The 'special achievement of cubism, and above all Picasso', he asserts, 'was to reinvent classical, mediated representation, and in that reinvention also to transform it so as to reveal its central conventions and mental processes. This achievement of Picasso was that of the classical mind's becoming aware of its means for thinking and representing the world even as it carries out that representation'. Fry supports these assertions by outlining in turn the several components of classical style, and comparing them with Picasso's (and occasionally Braque's) engagement with them. He discusses classical draftsmanship, its treatment of space and time, its handling of volume and its reliance on memory. For the sake of space I shall summarise only the first of these, the classical and cubist approaches to drawing, which Fry outlines as follows. 'A classical draftsman must be involved simultaneously with three factors: what he sees: what he knows as *a priori* knowledge about what he sees; and what the conventions are, inherited from past art, for drawing what he sees and knows.' Fry adds: 'It is that threefold character of classical *disegno* (empirical observation, *a priori* knowledge, inherited conventions) which cubism, and above all Picasso, lays bare.' And he goes on to explain how: this, he explains, 'effect[s] a reflexive transformation of classical draftsmanship . . . through the negation or inversion of means used for the representation of organic forms: straight lines were substituted for the curved contours of a still-life object or of a human body; and organic volumes

were replaced by a new set of quasi-geometric volumes, the facets of which became the planar blocks of analytic cubism.'²⁵

Space prevents my précising this essay's parallel analyses of other classical devices and their cubist inversions. Fry's conclusions from these analyses, however, are that '[b]y the beginning of 1913 the project of cubism was thus essentially realised, with every classical convention turned inside out and the entire hermeneutic circle [that is, the reciprocal relation between a representation and the foregrounding of the means of its making] critically illuminated'.²⁶ It is this reflexivity, this relentless yet often playful focus by Picasso on the devices themselves of pictorial illusionism, that is for Fry (and, in his view, for the artist himself) the 'truth' of cubism. It is a valuable, insightful argument, and an instructive exercise in formalist analysis. Yet there is no history in this assessment, no interest either in why, in that *avant-guerre* moment in Paris, such an engagement with classicism should have become paramount, nor in what became of it after 1914; and there should be, if the nature of this reflexivity is to be understood. As to the first, history: while Picasso's wit and precocity set his cubism apart, this was yet, at that moment, part of a collective project of focused *technie* comparable to that of the 1880s, an interrogation of the premises and entailments of painterly representation for which the achievements of Cézanne, and his *rodage* with the classical tradition, were a key point of reference. This moment did not last. As to the second, classicism: we should note that the 'classical' to which Fry refers, and whose qualities shaped the character of *avant-guerre* gallery cubism, was one crucially determined by the French contribution to it, particularly that of the seventeenth century, of Claude and Poussin, and its hallmarks were those of order, harmony and equilibrium. There have been throughout European history other versions of this concept in contention, however: the 'authentic' Greek as against the 'inherited' Roman, the primitive as against the resolved, the Dionysian classicism of chaos, unreason and

²³ Edward Fry, 'Picasso, Cubism and Reflexivity', *Art Journal* vol. 47 no. 4 (Winter 1988), 296-310.

²⁴ I term 'gallery' cubism the private cubism supported by the dealer Kahnweiler before 1914 and accessible only via his gallery) as opposed to the 'salon' cubism of those Parisian artists orientated to the public forums of the Salon des Indépendants and the Salon d'Automne. See David Cottington, *Cubism and its Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

²⁵ Fry, 'Picasso, Cubism and Reflexivity', all quotes 298.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

emotion as against Apollonian stasis and balance.²⁷ When the outbreak of war in August 1914 brought to a close the ‘moment’ of Apollonian classicism’s paradigmatic status, it was largely replaced by the Dionysian values that the catastrophe unleashed. While a small coterie of cubists sought to preserve the former through the war years,²⁸ Picasso had moved on—leapfrogging the war into the milieu of the Ballets russes, whose dancer Olga Khokhlova he met in 1917 and married the following year. This last binarism, of course, was that of Nietzsche, yet for this philosopher, all was not sheer dystopia; Nietzsche famously sought ‘the return to nature, health, cheerfulness, youth, *virtue!*’ To capture that experience, he proclaimed in *Der Fall Wagner*, ‘il faut méditerraniser la musique.’

Reconciliations

How might Fry’s concept of ‘reflexivity’ be applied to Picasso’s painting in the post-First World War conjuncture of an avant-gardism co-opted by, or reconciled with, the patronage of Riviera sybarites? And within this, a cubism whose reflexivity, now distanced from the Apollonian classicism of the pre-war years, comprised a gamut of devices correspondingly broader and looser, expressively and representationally, than the rectilinear visual syntax of that earlier moment? One answer is that of T. J. Clark, who suggests that the spatial properties of Picasso’s inter-war paintings of the Mediterranean can be equated with the categories of Nietzschean philosophy.²⁹ Part analysis, part ekphrasis, Clark argues for an understanding of the artist’s interwar cubism in terms of Nietzsche’s ‘Mediterranean values’, and offers an interpretation of it in paintings in which, using the full range of reflexive devices that synthetic cubism has given his painting, Picasso imbricated the interior space of a room with the exterior space of blue Mediterranean skies. Both the motivation for and the

significance of this dismantling of cubist ‘truth’ by ‘the sunshine looking in’ and the ‘untruth’ that this device constructs can, he suggests, best be understood in terms of Nietzsche’s critique of Christian asceticism and his espousal of the ‘Mediterranean values’ of the sensuous qualities of a godless world. In close interpretations of some paintings of the mid-1920s (Fig. 5), Clark sees Picasso as presenting both the sunny and the dark side of Nietzsche’s vision: ‘brightness, lightness, cheerfulness, clarity—art on the balcony saying Yes to the world’³⁰, but also the terrifying wildness of a world of experience without mystery.

The argument is rich and complex, and the severity of my précis does it no justice. However, the interpretative freedom that Clark permits himself in these readings is unanchored in any awareness of the *character* of Picasso’s avant-gardism: that investment by this artist in questions of technique which derived not only from his love of painting *per se*, the depth of engagement that his sometimes astonishing visual imagination and graphic facility gave him, but also from the conditions, *as a painter*, of working within that professional formation that I have emphasised. Without acknowledgement of this anchorage to one of the key institutional and discursive foundations of cubism’s experimentalism, any interpretation is in danger of being simply subjective, however nuanced, vivid and articulate the ekphrastic account may be. If Picasso’s avant-gardism means anything, we should recognise that it was formed by the context of, and a commitment to, the ‘alternative professionalism’ of the Parisian avant-garde that I have outlined, and without acknowledgement of it, any interpretation of his pictures is in danger of joining the many mythic narratives of his career. Like Côte d’Azur modernism—indeed, like any ‘tourist’ representation of the Riviera—an intellectual construction of avant-garde painting that leaves out of consideration the material inheritances and *metier*-based, professional dispositions of its practitioners is, arguably, like the concept of the Mediterranean to the people who grew up, live and work there: one that is external,

²⁷ Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the ‘Classical’* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

²⁸ Christopher Green, *Cubism and its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916–1928* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

²⁹ T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.



Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *The Three Dancers* 1925, oil on canvas, 215.3 x 142.2cm. London, Tate Gallery. © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2021. Photo © Tate Gallery.

arbitrary, and serving an agenda purposed elsewhere.³¹ *With* such an acknowledgement, on the other hand, Silver's suggestion that the artist was an immigrant on the Mediterranean littoral can be

enlarged not just into a recognition of Picasso's outsider status in this *haut-bourgeois* milieu, but also an assessment of its relation to, and consequences for, the reflexivity that informed his art practice—a recognition that, as for Orhan Pamuk's visa applicant from the eastern Mediterranean, there was for Picasso a social as well as cultural cost to immigration. Seen within this context, the paintings

³¹ For a development of this suggestion of interpretative agendas, see Malcom Bull's review of *Picasso and Truth*. 'Pure Mediterranean', *London Review of Books*, vol. 36 no. 4, 20 (February 2014), 21–23.

register the artist's awareness of this. At bottom, they are not about the nature of the Mediterranean itself (whose representation in Picasso's referencing of it is as stereotypical as any tourist view). Instead, this setting is a trope, a figure by means of which Picasso staged the conflicts of his position as

a house-trained avant-gardist: a tension between the taming qualities of the apollonian classical and the wildness of the dionysiac for which—in Clark's reading—Nietzsche stands, but which also signifies an unruly avant-gardism for which capitalist modernism had little use.