

GAGOSIAN

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## A Modernist Return to Reality

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*Museum of Modern Art, Troyes/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris*  
*André Derain, Deux Femmes nues et nature morte, 1935*

Some of the darkest, most beautifully saturnine dimensions of the modern imagination are explored in an extraordinary exhibition mounted in Paris this summer. “Derain, Balthus, Giacometti: Une amitié artistique,” at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, plunges visitors into the melancholy of modernism, but a melancholy so vigorous, provocative, and heartfelt that it has its own kind of exhilaration. On the most basic level, this is an exhibition about the profound artistic sympathy that developed in mid-twentieth-century France between André Derain, an avant-garde hero of the first two decades of the century who many believed had become an arch conservative, and two much younger artists, Balthus and Alberto Giacometti, whose work first attracted attention in Surrealist circles in the 1930s. These three were determined to revisit the relationship between art and reality following the revolutions of early-twentieth-century artists, who had so often rejected the naturalism that dominated Western painting and sculpture for five hundred years. They were gathering together the broken pieces of what some disparaged as the sunny old reality. They wanted to discover a new, moonlit truth.

This is a show packed with ravishments and revelations. Giacometti, the one among the three artists who has earned something like universal acceptance, is beautifully presented as a painter, sculptor, and draftsman. You feel all the Mozartean grace, delicacy, and finesse that he brought to a bleak, brusque, Existentialist vision. Balthus, too often misunderstood as a chic pornographer, comes through as one of the most powerful minds and imaginations of twentieth-

century art. His poetic exactitude, as deeply pondered as Nabokov's, turns landscapes, still lifes, portraits, nudes, and interiors into haunted dreamscapes, by turns strenuous, serene, and ecstatic.

As for Derain, by focusing on his too-little-known and too-little-understood work of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Jacqueline Munck, the curator of the exhibition, has at long last done justice to an artist who may well be among the supreme tragedians of twentieth-century art. Paintings such as *Nu au chat* (1936–1938), *Geneviève à la pomme* (1937–1938), *Le Peintre et sa famille* (1939), and *Autoportrait à la pipe* (1953)—generally dismissed as the work of a revolutionary turned reactionary—have a concentrated power. Derain's intricate compositional rhythms and subtle color harmonies precipitate unexpected visual crescendos. The burnished chiaroscuro of his late nudes, portraits, still lifes, and figure groups is unlike anything else in twentieth-century art.

Picasso and Matisse, those supreme magicians of modernism, are the easiest twentieth-century artists to love. Their dramatic shifts in style and sensibility are playful even when they're somber; we admire their changeableness. Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus take a very different approach. They are the metaphysicians of modernism. They burrow into the enigmas of style; they investigate the relationship between style and truth.

All these artists, Derain as much as Picasso, embraced the fundamental modern discovery that the essence of the visual arts wasn't naturalistic truth but pictorial truth. A work of art was first and foremost an arrangement of forms, which had both emotional and symbolic implications. With Picasso and Matisse, the constant rearrangement of forms became a way of generating emotions and symbols that reflected the artist's kaleidoscopic personality. Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus were troubled by what they saw as the subjectivity of such constantly mutating forms. While they were too thoroughly modern to revert to the old idea that a painting was a mirror of the visible world, they wanted their imaginary worlds to have a logic and inevitability that transcended their own emotional appetites.



Centre Pompidou, Paris/Alberto Giacometti Estate/Licensed by VAGA and ARS, New York/www.vagarights.com  
Alberto Giacometti: *Isaku Yanaihara*, 1956

There was a paradox here, of which these three artists were perfectly well aware. The only way to arrive at an impersonal vision was through an intensely personal struggle. The luminous realization of the figure in Derain's *Nu au chat*, the lapidary articulation of facial features in Giacometti's *Isaku Yanaihara* (1956), and the crisp geometry of tables and chairs in Balthus's *Les Joueurs de cartes* (1968–1973) may reinstate certain traditional ideas about how an

imaginary world is constructed on the canvas. But they reinstate those ideas with so much thoughtfulness and passion that the result is a painting with an entirely new, entirely modern power. The artist's vision, however impersonal, is suffused with a particular person's avidities and perplexities. That's why the work isn't academic. Is it any wonder that Balthus's admirers included Antonin Artaud and Albert Camus?

The big, open galleries of the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris are the perfect setting for this meeting of three altogether unconventional minds. The clean, crisp installation wipes away the cobwebs that have settled around even Giacometti's reputation. For museumgoers who hadn't been aware of the younger Giacometti's and Balthus's invigorating friendships with the older Derain—there are some wonderful photographs of the three enjoying a meal together—the juxtapositions can have a revelatory power. Munck has set their work in a many-layered dialogue. She gathers together paintings, sculptures, and works on paper to considerable effect, in thematic groupings that focus on portraits, nudes, dreams, and darkness. She makes good use of the artists' linked interests in theatrical design.

In the last, magnificent room, Balthus's *Le Peintre et son modèle* (1980–1981), in which the artist is seen from the back adjusting the curtain on a window, is thrillingly set near Giacometti's six-foot-high bronze *Homme qui marche II* (1960), another figure forever withdrawing from view. And Derain's daringly lush *Deux femmes nues et nature morte* (1935)—in which the tradition of Titian, Delacroix, and Renoir is reimagined as modern brinksmanship—makes an eye-opening pairing with the austerity of Giacometti's *La Forêt* (1950) and its gathering of spectral figures. Each artist, in his very different way, is turning impossibilities into possibilities. And then, lo and behold, those possibilities become plausibilities.



Centre Pompidou, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris  
Balthus: *Le Peintre et son modèle*, 1980–1981

The show begins with a statement by Giacometti about Derain that has long been well known among admirers of these artists. Writing in 1957 in the art magazine *Derrière le miroir*, Giacometti recalled seeing in 1936 a small still life Derain had painted that year, of a whole and a cut pear, a couple of wineglasses, and a spoon, all set against a dark background; it's included in the current exhibition. Giacometti described the galvanic impression that painting made on him. "Derain excites me more," he wrote, "has given me more and taught me more, than any painter since Cézanne; to me he is the most audacious of them all."

By the late 1950s Giacometti was becoming an international celebrity while Derain, who had died in 1954, was widely regarded as a pioneering Fauvist who had pretty much lost his way between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Giacometti was suggesting that Derain was always a radical—a visionary. There was also an ethical question that clouded Derain's reputation, which Giacometti sought to dispel without confronting it directly. In 1941, during the Occupation, Derain had gone with a number of other artists on an official trip to Nazi Germany; there was some hope, which proved illusory, of persuading the Nazis to reconsider the fate of a number of artists whose lives were already imperiled. Although after the war Derain was cleared of charges of collaboration, the accusations, which Picasso helped to promote, never really went away.

By celebrating Derain's later paintings, Giacometti aimed to shake up what had by the 1950s become the standard model of modern art as a drive toward ever-greater purity, simplicity, and abstraction. The exhibition in Paris, grounded as it is in the testimony of Giacometti, bids us reexamine the adventuresome nature of the modern avidity for tradition that was shared by Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus. What interested these artists wasn't the beguiling surfaces of earlier art but the imaginative order that earlier artists had imposed on the world.

Near the beginning of the exhibition, visitors are confronted by the tough-minded, soberly geometric studies of ancient Egyptian sculpture and works by Michelangelo and Donatello that Giacometti produced in the 1930s. There is a series of vigorous oil studies by Balthus after frescoes by Piero della Francesca. And later there is a breathtakingly intricate copy of Bruegel's *Massacre of the Innocents* that Derain painted toward the end of his life. These works—in which the modern imagination recovers, through the manipulation of pencil, pen, and brush, the movements of older imaginations—reveal the vigorous, activist spirit that animates this exhibition. Here the search for the past isn't a retreat but an advance—a new kind of avant-garde intervention.

Of course nobody needed Munck's exhibition to tell them that the pull of tradition has been strong in twentieth-century art, profoundly affecting the work of Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and countless others who were emboldened by their studies of a variety of traditions: Asian, Byzantine, Early Christian, African, South Seas. For many artists a renewed interest in the Greco-Roman heritage—Jean Cocteau dubbed it “the return to order”—was a perfectly logical outgrowth of what André Malraux, who knew many of them, would later refer to as “the museum without walls.”

It was not only visual artists who were swept up in an interest in classicism beginning around the time of World War I; it affected the work of Satie, Stravinsky, Diaghilev, Gide, Eliot, and any number of other creative spirits. Among the exhibitions in Paris this summer is one at the Musée Picasso that focuses on Picasso's first wife, the ballerina Olga Khokhlova, and highlights the classicism that obsessed Picasso for something like a decade. Although much of the work on display is familiar, the especially rich showing of works on paper further underscores the surgical wit with which Picasso anatomized a French classical tradition that ranged from Poussin in the seventeenth century to Ingres, Corot, and Puvis de Chavannes in the nineteenth century.

What has remained a matter of contention, certainly among art historians, is how to interpret the turning away from the Cubist fracturing of the image that Picasso and Braque had inaugurated and that forever changed the nature of art. Exhibitions dealing with this subject—including “On Classic Ground,” mounted at London's Tate Gallery in 1990, and “Chaos and Classicism,” at the Guggenheim in New York in 2010—have tended to one degree or another to see a retreat from

modernism. Many of those shows—and the work of respected scholars, including Christopher Green in England and Kenneth Silver in the United States—have suggested the influence of political and social forces in a return to forms that were more closely aligned with naturalistic appearances. An interest among artists including Picasso, Matisse, Derain, Braque, and Léger in the work of French artists such as Poussin, Louis Le Nain, David, Ingres, Corot, and Puvis de Chavannes has sometimes been associated with right-wing nationalist tendencies in France in the 1920s and 1930s.

A long line of Marxist thought about Picasso, of which John Berger's work is only the best known, has related his turn to classicism during and after World War I to the increasingly bourgeois existence that he was leading with Olga; Berger writes that Picasso, "having 'shocked' the distinguished and the wealthy" with his Cubist works, now "joined them," producing works that Berger describes as "impersonations or caricatures." "Chaos and Classicism," organized by Silver, a professor at New York University, created a historical continuum that without dotting every i and crossing every t at the very least suggested a link between Picasso's classicism of the World War I years and a Nazi or Fascist interest in classicism some years later.

A fundamental assumption underpins all these various arguments, interpretations, and assertions: that specific artistic styles and sensibilities have some symbiotic or at least some close relationship with specific social and political tendencies. By this logic, many art historians are inclined to believe that classicism tends to be reactionary and that newer artistic styles, forms, or media (Dadaism, collage, video, and so forth) tend to be politically or ideologically progressive. That such assumptions aren't supported by the facts doesn't seem to matter.

Here are a few of the facts. Futurism and Surrealism, movements with impeccable avant-garde (i.e., progressive) credentials, definitely had affinities for regressive politics. Some Futurists were proto-Fascists who turned out to be outright Fascists. André Breton, the ringleader of the Surrealists, was by most measures a reactionary when it came to women and their place in society. As for the classicism that Picasso and Léger embraced at various points in their lives, there is no reason to believe that it was inspired by conservative or reactionary inclinations.

Picasso's classicism in the World War I and post-World War I period, with its references to Greek and Roman sculpture and painting, was grounded in more personal and even autobiographical impulses. You might say that he was mythologizing his own life as he revisited the Mediterranean world of his youth and rhapsodized his first wife and young son by reimagining them as classical archetypes. As for Léger, soon after World War II he turned for inspiration to the French classical tradition of Poussin and David. He was working on a series of canvases celebrating the lives of ordinary citizens at work and at play that were meant to reflect the views and values of the French Communist Party. If anything, Léger's classicism was left-wing in spirit.

Whatever one ultimately makes of the collaborationist accusations that have clouded Derain's reputation, viewers will find themselves leaving "Derain, Balthus, Giacometti: Une amitié artistique" with a clear sense that artistic styles and sensibilities have their own lives and evolutions. What this exhibition demonstrates is that artistic visions, before they are political or social visions, are profoundly personal expressions—at least they are when great artists like Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus are involved. When we consider that Giacometti, a hero among Left Bank intellectuals who claimed Jean-Paul Sartre among his key supporters, was praising

Derain, by some arguments a collaborator and a reactionary, we can see that there are artistic affinities that cut across—or quite simply have nothing to do with—ideological lines.

And more is at stake here. The Paris exhibition makes clear that not only the conventional artistic and political alignments but also the conventional ideas about what constitutes an avant-garde can be downright misleading. Who is to say that Derain's later work doesn't constitute a series of adventures every bit as daring as his earlier adventures as a Fauvist, when he was closely aligned with Matisse? Let us not forget that Derain was one of the first Parisian artists to take an interest in the sculpture of Africa and the South Seas. Who is to say that his interest in Greek vase painting, Pompeiian landscape painting, and Baroque still life painting wasn't a product of the same questing, questioning spirit?

In the 1930s the German art critic Carl Einstein, a good friend of Braque's, became interested in the idea of nomadism, and there is a sense in which every modern artist had by then become a nomad, moving among a range of styles. Picasso and Matisse saw this pluralism as a source of unlimited freedom. But Derain, Balthus, and Giacometti, even as they embraced a variety of stylistic possibilities, recognized that such freedom came with a great price and a terrifying sense of responsibility. They felt obliged to constantly reaffirm the authenticity of style—to demonstrate that it had a *raison d'être* that transcended the artist's immediate imaginative appetites. Is it any wonder there is such a gravitas in the work of these three artists?

Derain is almost painfully sincere. Whether he is painting the dark silhouette of a humble jug, the shimmering flesh of a beautiful woman, or a dazzling highlight on a wine glass, he aims for essences. For modern sensibilities, attuned to the subjectivity of experience, that sincerity can seem a sort of arrogance. A similar misunderstanding has dogged Balthus's career. I have often suspected that what disturbs many people about Balthus's paintings of young women isn't so much the eroticism as the artist's refusal to leaven his visions with an ironic wink. If the eroticism were really the issue, then how are we to explain all the erotic content in other modern and contemporary art—from Egon Schiele and Picasso to Eric Fischl, John Currin, and Jeff Koons—that the critics and the public seem to accept more or less without question?

There is a total absence of irony in this exhibition. And in our obsessively ironic age that can leave visitors feeling unmoored. The trickster, the magician, and the connoisseur of paradox—those heroes of a time when anything goes—have no place in “Derain, Balthus, Giacometti.” As Fabrice Hergott, the director of the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, comments at the beginning of the catalog, even in Paris Derain's later work remains relatively little known. There hasn't been a retrospective of Balthus's work in Paris in more than thirty years. Many of Derain's most important later canvases are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Troyes, but when I went to see them there, admittedly many years ago, they were poorly presented. The collection of the Pompidou Center in Paris contains some of Balthus's largest and greatest works—including *La Chambre Turque* (1965–1966), *Le Peintre et son modèle* (1980–1981), and *Grande composition au corbeau* (1983–1986)—but they are by no means always on display.

The current exhibition and its excellent catalog—one wishes an English edition would appear—build on what has been a steady but slow drumbeat of interest in this alternative modernism. Galerie Patrice Trigano, on the rue des Beaux-Arts on the Left Bank, has mounted as a sort of accompaniment to “Derain, Balthus, Giacometti” a substantial show of works by Derain that

contains some beautiful late, intimate landscapes of a variety not represented in the larger exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

What is perhaps not made clear enough in the catalog, at least for American audiences, is the extent to which the US has contributed to the appreciation of these artists. Pierre Matisse, the son of the painter and a legendary New York dealer, represented Giacometti for many years and was Balthus's dealer for some fifty years. The Pierre Matisse Gallery was where Giacometti's new figurative sculptures were originally seen after World War II; they were a bolt from the blue. *A Giacometti Portrait*, the American writer James Lord's 1965 account of the days he spent with the artist while he was painting his portrait, was among the earliest pieces of writing to really plumb the artist's imagination; it has deservedly been reprinted a number of times.

No doubt with some encouragement from Pierre Matisse, the Museum of Modern Art in New York became, in 1956, the first museum to mount a retrospective of Balthus's work. It was Pierre Matisse who in the 1980s first presented to the public Balthus's reinterpretations of Japanese painting, in an exhibition that remains bright in the memories of many of us who were lucky enough to see it. It is also worth noting that an important Derain portrait in the Paris show, *Le Boa noir* (1935), was a gift from Pierre Matisse and his wife to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Although the bibliography of the catalog includes a translation of some of Derain's writings that the poet Rosanna Warren published in *The Georgia Review* in 1978, America's part in a continuing effort to shed light on Derain's later achievement is inadequately represented. One of the finest of all essays about Derain, perhaps second in importance only to Giacometti's heartfelt tribute, was written by the American painter Leland Bell; his "The Case for Derain as an Immortal," a cover story in *ArtNews* in 1960, has a near-mythic status in certain New York circles. The poet John Ashbery, when he was the art critic at *Newsweek*, wrote with some enthusiasm about what he referred to as Derain's turn "toward what is timeless," the occasion being an exhibition, "André Derain in North American Collections," which toured the country in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Both in Europe and in America, there have always been artists, critics, and museumgoers who see Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus as representing not a rejection of modernism but a different kind of modernism. Anybody who wants to fully grasp the nature of the artistic friendships so beautifully explored in this exhibition would do well to begin by confronting the considerable resistance to these artists and these works that remains.

Although the figure sculptures that Giacometti was doing after World War II have reached extraordinary prices in the auction houses, there are still more than a few highly sophisticated art historians who have never forgiven him for turning from the exquisite Surrealist visions of his early years to the portraits of the 1950s and 1960s, in which he sometimes recalls Rembrandt's soul-stirring verisimilitude. The exquisite poetry of Balthus's later nudes—which I believe rival some of Titian's supreme achievements—has been dismissed as senile sentimentality by many thoughtful observers. And what Leland Bell so acutely characterized as Derain's "virtuosity without self-interest"—those glistening surfaces and lustrously illusionistic volumes—has been regularly misunderstood as maudlin showmanship.

To all of this skepticism the magnificent exhibition currently at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris responds with a clearheadedness and an intrepid confidence rare in the museum

world. What we have here is nothing less than another side of the great modern adventure. That Derain, Balthus, and Giacometti are so absolutely insistent on rejecting irony in favor of sincerity and magic in favor of metaphysics gives this exhibition a particular urgency in our own dark times.

1

“André Derain: Le retour à l’ordre” [André Derain: The Return to Order], Galerie Patrice Trigano, Paris, May 18–October 21, 2017. ↵

2

As part of this record, it seems appropriate to mention here my own first book, *Paris Without End: On French Art Since World War I* (1988), which contains linked chapters on nine artists, and emphasizes Derain’s later work and its relationship with the achievements of Giacometti and Balthus.