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### Review of 1900: Art at the Crossroads

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The catalogue for the exhibition can be read on many levels, from archaeological chronicle to art criticism. Each of the objects illustrated is accompanied by detailed documentation and commentary. The historical context for the exhibition is clearly outlined, so that objects that may seem ordinary in their daily use acquire other meanings when appreciated against their social and cultural background. Given the amount of detail pertaining to each of the objects, and the extensive concordance between museum holdings that is appended to the catalogue, one regrets the absence of an index. Even though the sections within the catalogue are clearly organized, which facilitates locating specific topics, the text is rich in unusual findings, hypotheses, and accessory information that would require a comprehensive index in order to be easily accessible. Without it, one has to work his way from cover to cover in order not to miss anything. The nature of the subject, the solemn beauty of many of the findings, and the wealth of information, however, make the task both an intellectual adventure and a pleasure.

JAMES MELO

RILM Abstracts of Music Literature

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Zettler and Lee Horne (ed.). *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1999), pp. 37-38.

<sup>2</sup> Zettler et al., *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the harp, for example, is suggested in the title of Thorkild Jacobsen's collection of Sumerian poetry in translation, *The Harps that Once...* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), which points to the prevalence of this instrument as an accompaniment to sung poetry and ritual music.

<sup>4</sup> Zettler et al., *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the items represented in this catalogue, examples may be found in Prudence Oliver Harper et al (eds.), *The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Zettler et al., *op. cit.*, p. 56.

The volume includes the following contributions: Richard L. ZETTLER, *Early dynastic Mesopotamia* (p. 1-7); *Ur of the Chaldees* (p. 9-19); *The Royal Cemetery of Ur* (p. 21-31); and *The burials of a king and queen* (p. 33-38); Donald P. HANSEN, *Art of the royal tombs of Ur: A brief interpretation* (p. 43-72); Holly PITTMAN, *Cylinder seals* (p.75-84); and *Jewelry* (p. 87-122); Jill A WEBER and Richard L. ZETTLER, *Metal vessels* (p. 125-140); Kevin DANTI and Richard L. ZETTLER, *Shell vessels and containers* (p. 143-146); Richard L. ZETTLER, *Stone vessels* (149-160); Jill A. WEBER and Richard L. ZETTLER, *Tools and weapons* (p. 163-173).

## LONDON & NEW YORK 1900: Art at the Crossroads

Royal Academy of Arts (16 January to 3 April 2000); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (18 May–10 September 2000). The exhibition curated by Ann DUMAS, Robert ROSENBLUM, Norman ROSENTHAL, Maryanne STEVENS, with Vivien GREENE and Cecilia TREVES (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000) 445 pages. ISBN 0-89207-230-X. US\$ 45 (softcover), US\$75 (hardcover).

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, the connection seems to end.

Clement Greenberg ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch", *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*; Boston, Beacon Press, 1961)

There is probably little doubt that the fissure between "high" and "low" culture is more conspicuous nowadays than it ever was. Clement Greenberg, that dashing arbiter of contemporary art, had already sensed it in 1939 when he wrote the seminal essay quoted above, as Adorno also perceived it decades before him. Their foreboding premonitions, however, could not hinder the relentless success of popular culture and the retreat of so-called high art into the safe harbors of the university campus, the museum, and the private sphere. This perhaps could explain why so many scholars, in the last two decades, seem to have been

fascinated by the strained dynamic between traditional and popular culture, literature and Hollywood films, oil paintings and advertising and, last but not least, concert music and Madonna. (I confess, I do not follow academic trends, but when I was a graduate student, in the early nineties, the field of Madonna Studies was developing rapidly. I often wonder about all those eager young scholars and their treatises on the Material Girl.)

*1900: Art at the Crossroads* brings together apparently disconnected manifestations: high and low culture, academic and avant-garde art, humanistic enterprises and

technology, painting and music. By assembling a collection of paintings made around 1900 and by connecting them to the Paris World Fair of the same year, the curators highlight the complex relationship between art, technology, politics, and society. One of the motifs that emerges pervasively (albeit tangentially) is music. Many of the artworks exhibited refer to music, depict musicians, and illustrate music-making scenes. Moreover, although music is not the focus of the show, some composers' names keep cropping up ubiquitously: Beethoven, Brahms, Charpentier, Debussy, Delius, Dubois, Dvorak, de Falla, Grieg, Mahler, Massenet, Schoenberg, Saint-Saëns, Scriabin, Sibelius, Strauss, Stravinsky, Wagner, and Williams.

The tradition of portraiture, for example, is widely represented in this exhibition and we find many revealing examples of musicians' portraits. P.S. Krøyer's *Edvard and Nina Grieg at the Piano* (1898) "is really about the shared, inward experience of listening to music" (p. 156) says the catalogue. One is tempted to say, however, that the painting is also about *playing* and, more specifically, about nineteenth-century home music-making. A modern viewer could see in the canvas a hint of nostalgia for that experience. This affable image contrasts with the robust *Beethoven Monumental Head, Study for the Metropolitan* (1902) by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle and Max Klinger's *Head of Brahms*. They both reinforce – or perhaps they helped create – basic conventionalized ideas about those composers: they are rough cuts of the subjects and, in both renditions, the face seems to emerge from the rugged stone; their unfinished quality points to ideas of innate genius, unschooled talent. Emile Bernard's *Spanish musicians* (1897), however, is quintessentially picturesque, although the large family with a boy begging with a small dish conveys disturbing images of the relationship between street music making and poverty.

The 1900 Paris *Exposition Universelle*, as it was known, brought together a collision of artifacts from all over the world; as a result, it became an opportunity for nationalistic display. In an age when tourism was only for the very wealthy, a taste of the "Orient" was highly appreciated by middle-class Parisians (consider the impact of Javanese music on Debussy, when he heard a gamelan ensemble in 1889). Take, for instance, the case of Finland and its "national" composer, Sibelius. In 1899, one year before the fair, Finland fell under Russian legislative rule and Sibelius responded by composing his celebrated *Finlandia*. At the fair, Finland had its own pavilion, but artists such as Akseli Gallén-Kallela were obliged to show his paintings in the Russian section. Gallén-Kallela's iconography, nonetheless, paid homage to his homeland by depicting the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, whose hero also inspired Sibelius.

The year of the fair, 1900, was also the year of the premiere of *Louise*, Charpentier's verismo *roman musical*. Its sweatshop scene with its chorus of seamstress was a shock for Parisian audiences: the beauty of engineering and the advances of technology (celebrated by the fair), had also a dismal side – poverty, sickness, and the rapid growth of the underclass. To Louise's escapist singing of "Je suis heureuse...", Charpentier opposes a grim depiction of the workers and their living conditions. Coincidentally, the World Fair, *Louise*, and the meeting of the International Socialist Party all happened in Paris in the same year.

Conceivably as a reaction to the harshness of the new industrial city, around the same time garden and landscape painting acquired unprecedented importance. Take for instance Monet's gardens; they are almost contemporaneous with the musical depictions of gardens by Manuel de Falla, Delius, and Debussy. One of the Monets exhibited in this show, *The Water Lily Pond (Japanese Bridge)*, "would provide suitable backdrops to Debussy's wraithlike opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which had its Paris premiere in 1902" (p. 45). On the other hand, Santiago Russinyol's *The Green Wall* (1901) depicts the manicured gardens of Valldemossa, the town where Chopin and George Sand spent the winter of 1834-35. *Sunset over the Sea* (1898) by Ludwig von Hofmann, fuses the subjective experience of landscapes, typical of the romantic period, with Symbolist undertones. Here, the geographical facts are diluted in vaporous light; the canvas attains a dreamy, otherworldly quality through atmospheric hues and subtle tints. Notwithstanding this, the painting's frame includes a mask-like rendering of Beethoven's face presiding over the sunset depicted in the painting. Music, for the Symbolists was an imprecise, vague, ineffable art form; Beethoven *was* music. Hence, his portrait on the painting's frame.

As I walked through the serpentine galleries of the Guggenheim in New York and, later, when I read the elegantly written essays in the catalogue, a thought kept coming to my mind: namely, that mediocre and even bad art, when curated with cleverness and taste can often appear to be as absorbing and engaging as so-called good art. "How could we give" asks Robert Rosenblum, "these forgotten figures another chance, a century later, to stake a fresh claim on posterity?" (p. 27) Obviously, some of the artists represented here are no Cézannes. Their work, however, allows us to reconstruct a crucial historical period. This is why, in a time in which the distinction between kitsch and the avant-garde has mostly disappeared, as Greenberg predicted, a show like this can certainly claim ample legitimacy.

ANTONI PIZÀ

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