

## REVIEWS

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***Inspiring Walt Disney: the Animation of French Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 10 December 2021–06 March 2022; and The Wallace Collection, London, 06 April 2022–16 October 2022, Wallace Collection. Catalogue: ed. Helen Jacobson, London, The Wallace Collection, 2022, 102 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781781301180, £14.99.***

*Domenico Pino*

Readers of this Journal will be familiar with critiques directed at museums for not acknowledging the troubling histories of conquest, pillaging and exploitation behind their collections. On either hearing or uttering such arguments, one usually thinks of forms of imperialism faraway both in time and space, the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries being perhaps the most obvious example. When visiting the exhibition *Inspiring Walt Disney: the Animation of French Decorative Arts*, those with a mind accustomed to asking such questions will be reminded of another, still uncomfortably present form of imperialism: the American one.

Declaredly, the exhibition tries to bring the general public closer to the decorative arts of the eighteenth century, spanning porcelain, furniture, and gilt bronze objects. It does so by drawing comparisons with three cartoons produced by the Walt Disney

Studios, the *Silly Symphony* series (1929–39), *Cinderella* (1950), and *The Beauty and the Beast* (1991). The exhibition travelled from New York to London and each show privileged the holdings of their hosting institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Wallace Collection respectively. This made for very different shows, to the point that two different catalogues have been published.

So far so good, one may think. Where is the spectre of imperialism to be found in animation films for children? The exhibition, however, opens by discussing Walt Disney's first trips to Europe. He first visited France as a Red Cross Ambulance driver during WWI, and then again during an educational and shopping trip with his family in 1935. War, followed by education and high-end shopping: is this not remindful of the collecting of Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) in South-East Asia or of Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825) in Egypt? What's more, these rooms are titled 'The Discovery of Europe'. The point of view here is clearly American. The phrase denotes Europe as a geographically faraway continent, as well as culturally removed from the observer. It would seem that in this sense Europe was 'discovered' not only by the magnate of the entertainment industry in the 1930s and '40s, but also by the North American curators today. Like French depictions of China in the eighteenth century, both Walt Disney's and

the curators' vision of European decorative arts is wildly seductive, playful, entertaining. Yet it is pure fantasy and deeply inaccurate.

In the Wallace Collection iteration, one is presented at several points with unnervingly generalised displays combining Rococo pieces from the 1730s with Neoclassical ones from the 1770s. For example, a Louis XV Cartel clock and a pair of classically-inspired gilt-bronze candelabra are brought together on the same shelf, designed in imitation of a mantelpiece of an imaginary period room. Little is as opposed in aesthetics, affects, and uses as a clock produced in the early eighteenth century for a Royal patron to adorn the grand spaces of Versailles, and an intimate, exquisitely erudite pair of candelabra commissioned in the 1770s by a *marchand-mercier* for the open market. The display brings both of them under the generalising and generalised umbrella of the French eighteenth century as if it were a compact, consistent epoch with little evolution or nuance. Those familiar with art from the period, especially French, will know that nothing could be further from the truth. We understand that this show was directed at the general public, rather than specialists, but the present reviewer is of the opinion that museums should educate as well as entertain.

Coming back to Walt Disney and his cartoons, it is interesting to notice that the three main animated movies explored in the exhibition coincided with government-sponsored campaigns to consolidate the U.S. economy and its expansion on a global scale during the twentieth century. *Silly Symphony* coincided with the New Deal of the 1930s, *Cinderella* with the Marshall Plan of the 1950s, and *The Beauty and the Beast* with the fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s.

The acquisition by American collectors of the major pieces featured in the show also occurred in those very same years. I am referring in particular to the Sèvres tower vases, also known as 'pot pourri entouré', large and extravagant vases of soft-paste porcelain dating from 1762–63. Only two pairs are known to have been made, and they were here reunited for the first time in their history. The pink and blue pair of the Huntington Library and Museum was acquired in 1927, whilst the green and blue ones of the Metropolitan Museum were acquired in 1956. In other words, in the same years in which the United States was taking control of the continent militarily and financially, the American entertainment industry was crafting images (and imaginations) of Europe, while American collectors were acquiring important European works of art.

Visitors to the London exhibition will be able to see Fragonard's *The Swing* again after its conservation. The picture was included in the show for its obvious playfulness and its featuring in one of Disney's more recent animated movies, *Frozen*. It was exciting to be reunited with such a wonderful painting after years, seeing it afresh. Its conservation, it must be noted, was entirely sponsored by the Bank of America Conservation Project in 2021. One may think that thanks to the investment by the American institution we are now able to see this picture anew. In the wider context of the exhibition, however, this peculiar fact poses a series of questions: what are the current conditions of seeing eighteenth-century decorative arts? By which I mean, how is our understanding of these objects informed by the asymmetrical power relations through which they are acquired, conserved and displayed? I find it deeply unsettling that such questions could

remain unasked in the case of European art in the United States.

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**‘Francis Bacon: Man and Beast’, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 29 January–17 April 2022. Catalogue: Eds. Michael Peppiatt and Stephen F. Eisenman, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2020, 160 pages, hardback, ISBN 1912520559, £35.**

*Louis Shankar*

Ostensibly, ‘Francis Bacon: Man and Beast’ sought to interrogate the influence of the animal kingdom on the legendary painter’s work, and the relationship between the bestial and the humane. The precise logic of the exhibition, organised in a largely chronological manner, falters at times; the overarching theme seemed more of an excuse for, rather than the driving force behind, the retrospective. Visitors were first greeted with an early head (*Head I*, 1948); however deformed and leathery, with the texture of hippopotamus or rhinoceros skin, it is still a decidedly human figure. Why not begin with an animal? Certain portraits are, emphatically, portraits, which negotiate the boundary between individual and collective identities – but these are human identities, nothing bestial in sight. *Study of the Human Head* and *Study*

*for a Portrait* (both 1953), neatly juxtaposed in a corner, spoke only to issues of animality so general as to be critically irrelevant.

The catalogue, meanwhile, is organised neatly into six sections – ‘Furies’, ‘Wildlife’, ‘The Animal Within’, ‘Bodies in Motion’, ‘The Animalistic Nude’, and ‘The Bullfight’ – each of which interrogated the central theme from a specific perspective. Sometimes, an exhibition’s ideal arrangement cannot be mapped neatly onto its assigned galleries and compromises must inevitably be made. But it is a shame that the exhibition didn’t follow the same structure as the catalogue; I could have done without the room dedicated to portraits.

A room of four triptychs was emblematic of Bacon’s awareness of form, with each composition negotiating its three canvases and the relationship between them. *Three Figures in a Room* (1964) felt most out of place: a work more about architecture and behaviour than the animal kingdom. Hanging four triptychs together created additional rhythms, complicating relationships of figures and forms. Gilles Deleuze dedicates two chapters of his study of Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*, to the role and the question of the triptych: ‘And in the end,’ he concludes, ‘there are nothing but triptychs in Bacon: even the isolated paintings are, more or less visibly, composed like triptychs.’<sup>1</sup> There is no mention of Deleuze at the Royal Academy, though, likely for fear of over-intellectualising. Instead, Bacon’s own words are given primacy, such as: ‘Bullfighting is like boxing – a marvellous aperitif to sex’.<sup>2</sup> A marvellous quip, but what does this tell us about his art?

The most powerful room – at the centre of the exhibition, staged in the rotunda – brought together three bullfighting