

BOOK REVIEW

Art Nouveau and the Classical Tradition. Imagines – Classical Receptions in the Visual Performing Arts Series. By RICHARD WARREN. Edited by Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Martin Lindner. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 256, incl. 36 illus. Hardback, \$114.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-98551.

Richard Warren, Honorary Research Associate of Royal Holloway, has been tracing the connections between classical antiquity and nationalization during in the 19th century since he earned his doctorate at Durham University with the thesis “Tacitus and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Art” in 2014, and this book is one result of his research program. While acknowledging the strong impact that other cultures (Japanese, Celtic, and Islamic) and other epochs (Baroque and Rococo) have had upon Art Nouveau, he has made a strong case for seeing the classical influences that underlay much of Art Nouveau’s cultural production and worked to overturn the facile assumption that Art Nouveau and classical antiquity had little to do with each other.

Warren sees Art Nouveau as “one of the first truly global art forms” (8) and one which arose from a series of “blended receptions” (128). It “developed as a conglomeration of different stylistic influences” that occurred in a “new technological age” (4; 139). The period was further complicated, since the artists reacting against the canons of Academic Art no longer saw their work as limited to the fine arts only. He points to the Czech Secessionist Movement in particular, which sought “to break the hierarchy of the arts, elevating the status of the applied arts” (42) and which perceived “a fundamental kinship of the arts” that included minor arts such as print making, book binding, stained glass work and jewelry (54). Thus “the full richness of this artistic style” is one that “resists confinement to any simplistic framework” (13).

To explain his findings, Warren has arranged the volume into seven chapters: Re-Birth (i.e. new trends based on past traditions), Muse (i.e. sources of artistic inspiration), Hero (i.e. long-lived cultural icons like Heracles and Prometheus), Bloom (i.e. figures like Flora, Helios, and Selene), Desire (i.e. Leda, Medusa, Bacchantes, and Tantalus), Nation (i.e. Troy, Athena/Acropolis, Erech-

thonius/snake and Arminus), and Death (i.e. Hecate, Hypnos, Pythia, Thanatos and the Furies). He traces these themes through artwork that drew from “classical iconography” using motifs and characters from ancient history, mythology, and religion, and concludes that the artists visualized “their art as a sort of new artistic renaissance of the classics,” but one which expressed an ideal that wasn’t “always a moral or noble one” (187). Nevertheless, everything sprang from “a certainty that the classics were a sort of never-ending font of art and inspiration” and, while previous receptions of the classics might be “bastardized, the source itself remained pure” (187).

And while portions of “the subject matter” have been “re-used” and some examples may seem overfamiliar to experts, Warren has, as Alan Beale has pointed out, “brought together an impressive array of classical influences” to make his case (Accessed 23 February 2018 <https://classicsforall.org.uk/book-reviews/art-nouveau-classical-tradition/>).

He has also shown that in examining “Art Nouveau’s engagement with the classics,” one is “often faced with its double nature of both embracing the new and clinging to the old” (105). In that way the Art Nouveau is indeed Janus-like, looking forward to the future and backward to the past, but having had its own moment in time, it is perhaps better described as a Janus quadrifons that looks out upon vistas that are both diachronic and synchronic. If there is a fault in the book it lies in the illustrations. The 36 black and white images in no way represent the number of images referenced by Warren. In order to help the reader, the publisher has provided “a full list of links to online images of all works discussed” at Bloomsbury.com (ix). So sit near your computer while you read this fascinating book.

MICHELE VALERIE RONNICK

Wayne State University, aa3276@wayne.edu