CLASSICAL PASTS AND PRESENTS – THE AVANT-GARDE, COUNTERCULTURE AND ANCIENT GREECE?



Jody (Maxmin) has directed us to a review of an exhibition in New York City –

"Mirrors to the Past: Ancient Greece and Avant-Garde America" is at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 111 Amsterdam Avenue, at 65th Street, Lincoln Center, (212) 870-1630, through Jan. 8. The Hellenic Festival, presented by the library in collaboration with the Queens Library, offers various public programs and performances; information: (212) 642-0142.

Edward Rothstein reviews it in the New York Times – How the Ancients Became Trendy: The Road From Euripides to Revolution

Chris (Witmore) takes issue with Rothstein:

Review:

If someday, ages hence, archaeologists were to come upon the objects now on display in the Vincent Astor Gallery of the New York public Library for the Performing Arts, what would they make of them all? The items in the exhibition “Mirrors to the Past” all refer in one way or another to ancient Greece. A pomegranate-colored gauze wrap is meant to be a reconstruction of Greek fashion. A dancer in a white tunic is shown dreamily posing at the Parthenon in erotic reverie. A director broods in Greek peasant dress as if straining to hear the chords of the Delphic oracle. Posters and photographs show Trojan women, the citizens of Colonus, Antigone and Medea variously reincarnated as European exiles, gospel singers and earnest political rebels.

Judging from much of the material, an archaeologist might conclude that ancient Greece was a civilization of sensuous narcissists, antiwar activists and ardent feminists that had little patience for convention and little taste for bourgeois life. It was a culture, in other words, that closely resembled some avant-garde movements in the 20th-century United States, for that is the real focus of this exhibition, which bears the subtitle “Ancient Greece and Avant-Garde America”.

CW

This “what if … ?” motif often comes up in popular understanding of archaeology. It has archaeologists in the future digging up contemporary society only to come up with wild images of what we might have been like. It assumes that as the world changes archaeologists will always be getting on with business as usual. This public image of archaeologists as arbiters of the distant and disconnected past has changed little since the professionalization of the discipline in the nineteenth century. Sure we have interrogated such divides within the discipline, but these ideas have hardly filtered into the public imagination. Would Mr. Rothstein be shocked to find out that archaeologist deal in the contemporary past? That our mobilizations, our manifestations of the material past form are chasmatic because they intertwine with aspects of the present? This “what if” scenario may seem a harmless literary trope for writers who have difficulty coming up with a more original beginning for a story, but it perpetuates a radical divide between past and present and makes archaeologists out to be complacent in the maintenance of this divide.

I do hope Cornelius’s new book on popular culture and archaeology will be part of a

wider debate about these matters.

Nevertheless, the exhibition itself precisely foregrounds the intermingling of classical past and present. Of late ancient Greece seems mostly to be again the reference point for rather conservative political opinion. It is good to be reminded that radical counterculture has also taken ancient Greece as a founding moment. Throughout the 20th century, for example, Greek plays were increasingly seen as celebrations of internationalism, pacifism, dissent and women's rights. Such ideas inspired the productions whose programs, posters and images make up the largest section of the exhibition. Rothstein criticizes the exhibition for not questioning more deeply the reasons for the different attitudes to classical Greece. I wholeheartedly agree with Rothstein – what is really needed is a reexamination of ancient Greece itself in the light of contemporary interest and desire to find ourselves in such pasts. This would indeed be a chiasmus or intermingling of pasts and presents.



Emma Hamilton as three muses – eighteenth-century classical avant-garde?