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Le Corbusier's Postwar Painterly Mythologies

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Abstract: *Le Corbusier's graphic output was prolific, consisting of hundreds of paintings, thousands of drawings and watercolors, and scores of collages, lithographs, and murals throughout his career. By the late 1940s his double-nature as artist-architect emerged as a key component to his work, as he highlighted the correlations and correspondences that informed his creative endeavors. His post-war works, specifically his series of Taureaux paintings, reveal the development of such themes as well as the transformation of earlier works as he turned to a mythologically-inspired vocabulary of totemic figures and animals, developing a private cosmology of sun and moon, male and female, the machine and Méditerranèità.*

Keywords: *Le Corbusier, Visual Arts, Painting, Taureaux.*

ACTION OF THE WORK on its surroundings: vibrations, cries, or shouts, (such as the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens), arrows darting away like rays, as if springing from an explosion; the near or distant site is shaken by them, touched, wounded, dominated or caressed.

REACTION OF THE SETTING: the walls of the room, its dimensions, the public square..., the expanses of the slopes of the landscape even to the bare horizons of the plain or the sharp outlines of the mountains – the whole environment brings its weight to bear on the place where there is a work of art... Then a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, *accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space.*

--Le Corbusier, 1948¹

The above statement, written for the catalogue *New World of Space*, characterizes the direction which Le Corbusier pursued in the years following World War II, when he actively promoted a synthetic vision of his artistic production. The publication itself aimed to act as a curated presentation of the multiple aspects of his work, and in his introduction he explains, “the illustrations in this book show an incessant desire to take possession of space by bringing into play architecture and city planning, sculpture and pictures, all capable of achieving that purpose through the never relaxed pressure of a continuing inventiveness.”² He slowly developed these themes, first discussing paintings alone, and then highlighting certain architectural projects, before presenting arrangements which mingle media in order to illustrate similar spatial conceptions. By visually spelling out the analogies which united his artistic production, Le Corbusier sought to open up new ways of thinking about space, and the relationship between architecture and the arts. Indeed, by the late 1940s his amalgam of roles had become part of an aggressively promoted image and his double-nature as artist-architect was proposed as the one character that made him unique in the universe of architecture, as he highlighted the correlations and correspondences which informed his creative endeavors.

¹ Le Corbusier, *New World of Space*, Raynal & Hitchcock, New York, 1948, p. 8.

² *Ibid* p. 9.

While presenting himself as a prophet in the field of architecture, he concurrently produced works which incorporated new perceptions of nature, cosmos and balance. His shifting conceptualization was particularly evident in the final ensemble of paintings he produced beginning in 1952, the *Taureau* series, featuring a mythologically-inspired vocabulary of totemic figures and animals, wherein he developed a private cosmology of sun and moon, male and female, the machine and Mediterraneanità. The sources for these new works were varied, and just as he sought inspiration in the architecture and landscapes of Brazil and Northern Africa from the late 20s onward, he would find new stimulations during in his Postwar travels as well, in India and beyond. Moreover, the porosity of the Corbusian palimpsest created the conditions wherein over the course of his career he himself would find fresh inspiration when he happened to come across his own works from an earlier stage of production viewed flipped or upside-down. Thus, in the early 1950s when he saw the painting *Le Grand verre à côtes et l'écharpe rouge* (a painting which he had revised and reworked between 1927-40) turned on its side, he drew inspiration for the first of this last major series of canvases, the *Taureau I* of 1952 (Figures 1, 2).³ This painting demonstrates a certain reflexivity as the “marriage of contours” that he espoused since the 20s was reconfigured in new, and at times completely abstract, ways. The horizontal lines dividing the *Taureau* canvas between head and body speak to the interplay that he saw between land and sky, human and animal. Indeed, the connection to the animal world was referenced explicitly in a series of sketches that he executed in India, dated March 16, 1952, where he noted “intuitively over the past 20 years I have evolved by figures in the direction of animal forms, vehicles of character, force of the sign, algebraic capacity for entering into a relationship between themselves and thereby producing 1 poetic phenomenon.”⁴ On a sketch a few pages later, he indicates, “The idea (notion) of a human bestiary perhaps came to me unconsciously through such frequent contact throughout the world and throughout all social classes with men and women, in business circles committees, intimate moments/ The characters appear, qualifying people and keeping or //proposing // their typology.”⁵ It was through his travels and lived experiences that he was able to conceptualize these mythical tropes. These developments thus speak to larger conceptions of condensation and replacement in his œuvre, and reveal organizing principles, networks, and cross-fertilizations that extend across the range of Le Corbusier’s production. The small always contains the large, the inside is always an outside, the female contains elements of the male, and vice versa.

Additional premonitions for this series can be found in the 1952 canvas, *Metamorphose du Violon* wherein the essentials of the composition of the *Taureau* paintings are present: round orbs, an emphasis on the outline of forms, and an overlapping compositional effect (Figure 3). The ropelike braiding of lines is reminiscent of the thick ropes included in paintings of the 30s while the title itself is indicative of his post-painterly drive towards transformation and metamorphosis. By dating the work 20/52 he reveals a perceived link between earlier works and this later phase of production. He would articulate this more clearly in a letter to the British Curator Ronald Allen, when he explained, “From one thing to another, thirty years later, the mind busy with something else and particularly with the usefulness for human figures to possess their own ‘bestiary’ arose successive deformations. And one fine day the discovery of a bull on my canvases came to light quite out of my control. Then, development of the thing itself, its flourishing (*Taureau VIII* to *XIII* approximately) and finally a change of sensibility with respect to the theme and a new arrangement of elements of the painting.”⁶ The menu of forms and the processes that Le Corbusier mobilized in his painting and in his architecture reveal the ongoing dialogue aimed to achieve a “new world of space.” It is this feedback loop of reciprocity which makes the relationship

³ Le Corbusier describes this connection in *Creation is a Patient Search*, New York: Praeger, 1960, p. 32.

⁴ Le Corbusier, *Sketchbooks*, Volume 2, 1950-54, MIT Press, 1981. Notebook F24, 700.

⁵ *Ibid*, 707.

⁶ Le Corbusier, letter to Ronald Allen, June 25, 1958, translated by Jaime Coll, FLC C2-11-22.

between Le Corbusier's paintings and architecture so rich, consisting of an evolving constellation of elements which alternately inflect and reflect one another.

The paintings in this final series also exhibit anthropomorphic qualities which link them to his lifelong studies of women as well. This can be seen in *Taureau II* of 1953 where the prominent central placement of twinned orbs metaphorically alludes to breasts (Figure 4). In his notebooks he would identify these creatures with the spirit of his wife Yvonne, and the conjunction between male beast and female figure reveals again the myriad range of references which characterize his work. Indeed, he had described Yvonne as representing a humanity that was both earthy and anti-intellectual, full of common sense, a sort of archetypal primitive presence that he had celebrated in the pages of *L'Esprit nouveau* but also an ideal inspiration of femininity, which was very productive for the artist and enabled him to create – a type of modern muse.⁷ This interplay between male and female sources of inspiration can also be found in some of his earliest works, including a mythologically-inspired series of watercolors featuring Zeus as Bull spirited away Europa, from whose out-stretched hand rises a brilliantly colored bird (Figure 5). We see him navigating oppositions between masculine and feminine, light and the dark, the wild and the civilized, as he explores the typologies of animal nature.

These canvases were also connected to a contemporary series of drawings focused on the birth of the Minotaur, in which Le Corbusier deployed a mythologically-inspired vocabulary of totemic humans and animals. The mythical Minotaur—part man, part bull—had served as a potent symbol for many 20th century artists, including Salvador Dali, Andre Masson, and in particular, Pablo Picasso. It appeared as Picasso's alter ego in the *Vollard Suite* of the 1930s as part of a broader exploration of Classicism in his work, inspired in part by the group of 30 etchings he completed to illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in 1931. Le Corbusier's own lifelong interest in Greek mythology can be traced to his youthful travels, in particular his Voyage d'Orient, as well as studies based on black-figure Greek vases found in Parisian museums. It again found expression in the 50s and 60s as evidenced by the drawings Le Corbusier executed in the 1954 edition of Homer's *Iliad*, sketching over and reworking the original illustrations by John Flaxman. Moreover, the Minotaur had also been emblematic for Surrealists, and provided not only the name of the Surrealist-oriented magazine published from 1933 to 1939 (and to which Le Corbusier contributed a 1936 article on Louis Soutter) but also served as a potent symbol and personification of forbidden desires, lasciviousness, violence, guilt, and despair. The connection to mythical beasts in the *Taureau* paintings was commented on by the British art historian Herbert Read, who hailed Le Corbusier as a “universal artist” and applauded his achievements in these late paintings as “The theme of this work of grand design – Les Taureaux – is one that has haunted European civilization since its beginnings: the Minotaur, archetype of our ambiguous human destiny, of our terror and our deliverance.”⁸

Indeed, in Le Corbusier's creations, he blended both dark and light aspects of his psyche. The scholar Jaime Coll has examined the ways in which the *Taureau* paintings served to reveal the use of the “unconscious, the irrational, chance, automatism and eroticism in a personal, innovative and complex synthesis.”⁹ Yet, they also reveal a certain levity, as a contemporary reviewer of his work at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1956 observed:

⁷ For an insightful discussion of the relation between Le Corbusier and Yvonne see Guillemette Morel Journel, “En somme j'ai travaillé comme un zèbre à Vézelay,” in *Moments Biographiques*, Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 2008. p. 122.

⁸ Herbert Read, *Le Corbusier, Les "Taureaux" Recent Paintings 1952-1955*, Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York 1958. n.p.

⁹ Jaime Coll, “Le Corbusier. *Taureaux*: an Analysis of the Thinking Process in the Last Series of Le Corbusier's plastic work,” in *Art History*, Volume 18, Issue 4, pages 537–567, December 1995. P. 537.

“[Le Corbusier] enjoys and controls the counterpoint of irregular against regular shapes, linear networks against patterns of colored planes and right angles against curves, but he never loses an overall structural lucidity which one is tempted to call architectonic. The pictorial mastery, however, is only part of the pleasure, for these canvases sparkle with a delicious humor and verve. None of the fearful drama of the bull ring is here, but rather a mood of carnival gaiety and pageantry which has the contagious cheer of exposition murals.”¹⁰

This was especially true of the sketches he was completing at this time, such as FLC 6353, a drawing executed in Bogota showing a female nude strolling along a sunny expanse accompanied by a bull’s head, or FLC 6237, which pairs an outstretched nude with an ambling bull. In both his paintings and his sketches he explored symbols and signs: hands, footprints, snakes, lightning, sun, moon, clouds, trees, the course of the sun, all of which harken at a cosmological nostalgia, while retaining a “gaiety” that distinguishes his work from that of many of his contemporaries.

One sees a compilation of these themes and motifs in one of the final canvases that he executed in this series, *Taureau XVII* (Figure 8). In this work, abstraction and fragmentation align to produce a combinatory effect through the reduction of the Taureau figure to ciphers, revealing an interplay with symbolic forms. Both recuperative and regenerative, it reveals his continuous experimentation even in these later works. The bright and vibrant colors, as well as the inclusion of abstracted references to the symbolic bulls that had populated his earlier canvases along with more figurative allusions to leg and hoof in the lower portion of the canvas show his continued formal experimentation. The rotation and flipping of forms also allude to his earlier experimentations with flipping his own canvases in order to fund new wellsprings of inspiration for his graphic work.

Thus the conjunction of dualities in his late canvases represent his most abstract production, and when considered in light of the translations and changes in perspective, size, and shape witnessed in his explorations of the forms over the course of his career, one perceives the negotiations, assimilations, and hybridizations evident in Le Corbusier’s production. Such processes speak to the poetics of his modes of conceptualization, as figures are combined and reworked. These figures provided a fertile field of projection for Le Corbusier’s myriad conceptions of form and space, nature and culture, inner and outer. Throughout, ambiguous signs of looking and disclosing, desire and its satisfaction, play together. Moreover, in his late paintings Le Corbusier strove to achieve a “synthesis of the arts,” and his repositioning was indicative of larger shifts reflecting a new humanism through a fusion of the poetic expression of technology, the vernacular, and regional influences, as well as a responsiveness to social needs. Yet he would always insist that synthesis should not be mistaken as a mere subordination of painting and sculpture to architecture or vice-versa. Rather it was defined as the problem of how to arrive at a unity without compromising the autonomous status of either. Each of the three media is said to have its own poetic function, which, under the correct circumstances, can be brought into play and create new visions and energies. He thus continued the reworking which characterizes all stages of his artistic production, from the Purist period onward, and yet, at the same time enacted the continuation of experimentation in the drive toward abstraction, the invention of new form, which is not just a reworking, but a reinvention. He developed a pictorial language which explored the “fantastic possibilities, [and] unexpected relations which reveal a latent poetry...there is a world in a painting. . . there are illuminations and scenes . . . radiant or menacing skies, houses and mountains, seas and lagoons, suns and moons. And there are besides all the cries of the subconscious, sensual or chaste, and everything that you can imagine.”¹¹

¹⁰ *Art Digest*, February 1956. FLC C1-1-217

¹¹ Le Corbusier, “Biographical Notes,” in *New World of Space*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1948. p. 11.

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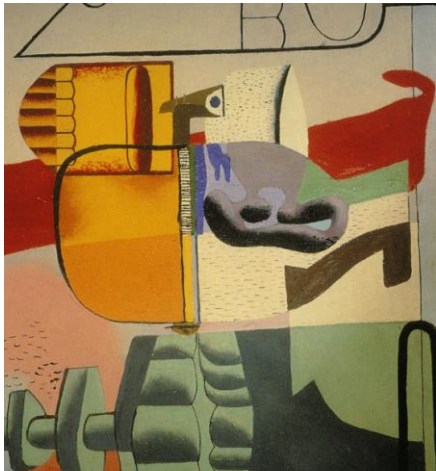
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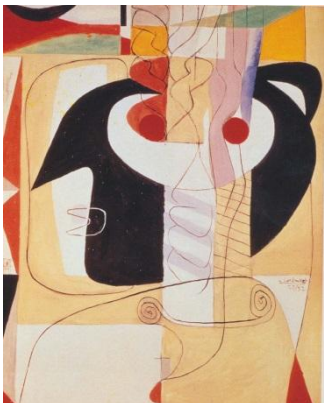
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1. *Taureau I*, 1952, FLC 158.



2. *Le Grand verre à côtes et l'écharpe*, 1927-1940 (rotated clockwise), FLC 226.



3. *Metamorphose du Violon*, 1952, FLC 432.



4. Taureau II, 1953, FLC 159.



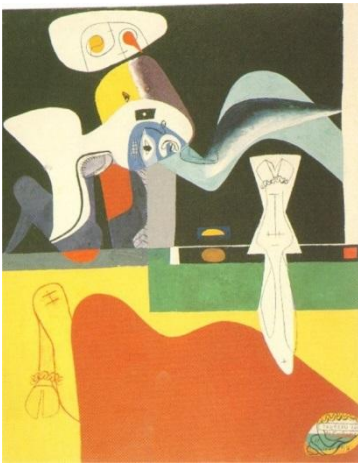
5. Zeus and Europa, FLC 4494.



6. FLC 6353.



7. FLC 6237.



8. Taureau XVII, FLC 441.