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L'Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris 1918-1925

By Carol S. Eliel, Françoise Ducros

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The Purist movement in art, founded by Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (better known as Le Corbusier) and Amedee Ozenfant, championed a traditional classicism while it simultaneously embraced new technologies and materials. The only book on Purism, *L'Esprit Nouveau* is a key contribution to the study of classic 20th-century modernism in painting and architecture. The book serves as the catalogue for an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The revealing volume examines over 75 paintings by Le Corbusier, Ozenfant, and their closest colleague, Fernand Leger. At the heart of the study lies a single work: Le Corbusier's striking design of the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs, at which the term "Art Deco" was coined. The architecture of Le Corbusier's pavilion, along with its interior decoration -- paintings, sculpture, furniture, glassware, rugs, and other objects -- offers a complete summation of Purist aesthetics. Included here too is the full translated text of Le Corbusier's and Ozenfant's 1918 manifesto, *Apres le cubisme*.

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L'Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris 1918-1925 By Carol S. Eliel, Francoise Ducros Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #589832 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Harry N. Abrams
- Published on: 2001-04-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.25" h x .88" w x 8.38" l, 2.40 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 192 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A painter and an architect, both in their early 30s, met in Paris in 1918 and recognized each other as soul mates. Both believed that the carnage of World War I would be followed by a brave new world based on "the industrial, mechanical, scientific spirit."

As editor of a short-lived magazine, the painter, Amédée Ozenfant, had written about cubism as a form of "purism" that removed art's extraneous baggage. Idealistic Swiss architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (a.k.a. Le Corbusier) had returned from travels through Europe and the Mediterranean convinced that the best buildings were based on modular geometric forms.

Together, the two developed an aesthetic based on what they saw as the overwhelming human need for order and the "remarkable refinement and purity" of machines. Both men painted distinctively geometric and architectural still lifes, in which bottles, vases, or even a pile of plates took on the forms of Greek columns. Joined by Fernand Léger, whose paintings included geometric human figures, more obvious references to machinery, and a brighter palette, the Purists presented their vision at the 1925 International Exposition in Paris.

The most intriguing chapter in this otherwise straightforward art history book is Tag Gronberg's essay on how the Esprit Nouveau pavilion at the exposition offered a "masculine" counterpart to the feminized postwar image of Paris. While the fashion and beauty industries evoked "a modern consumer culture defined in terms of mobility and constant change," the Purists celebrated "the engineer's aesthetic" and praised the standardized design of men's clothing.

This modestly sized, elegantly designed volume--which reproduces a good number of the paintings in color, though in a small scale that doesn't do full justice to their eccentric beauty--accompanies an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (through August 5, 2001). --*Cathy Curtis*

About the Author

Carol S. Eliel is curator of modern and contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of art.

Francoise Ducros is the world's leading expert on Amedee Ozenfant. Tag Gronberg is Head of the School of History of Art, Film, and Visual Media at Birkbeck College, University of London.

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Wanda Legros:

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