

RECONSTRUCTING THE BODY: CLASSICISM, MODERNISM AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR, ANA CARDEN-COYNE. Oxford: OUP, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-19-954646, 360 pp., £72.00

With 'sex' coming in second place, 'beauty' is the key word in Ana Carden-Coyne's beautiful, though loaded and difficult, book on the influence of art and medicine on reconstruction and rehabilitation after World War I as shown by memorials, fashion or body culture. As she says, art and medicine sometimes came together; plastic surgeon Harold Gillies, for instance, was not only interested in classicist art (and classicist beauty), but also made use of the skills of painter and former physician Henry Tonks in his Sidcup Hospital. In spite of – or because of – an abundance of disfigurement, loss of limbs and venereal disease, beauty and sex are words seldom used when referring to the trenches of the Somme, Ypres and Verdun, but this makes the longing for these attributes after 11 November 1918 all the more imaginable.

According to Carden-Coyne classicism – and especially classical statues and dance – were influential in striving to achieve (corporeal) beauty, and in so doing at the same time restoring, or better, reconstructing, civilization after four years of savagery; a decline into barbarianism that had to be forgotten and overcome. Sometimes this showed itself in changing definitions of what is normally seen as beautiful. Death, a dead body, was defined as beautiful referring to the, according to Homer, 'beautiful bodies' of Hector and Achilles once slain before the walls of Troy. The sculptor Kathleen Scott who worked with Gillies, even remarked that soldiers who had lost their nose, which, in fact, is a truly ghastly sight, were 'very beautiful', because it made them look like a Greek statue. The results of reconstruction were not always pleasing to the eye and, in spite of Scott's opinion, and unlike in France and Germany, veterans in Great Britain whose looks or mental resilience were permanently destroyed by the war, were not welcome in parades. Nor were they represented in memorials, which showed only beautiful, or at least unharmed corpses, and strong, determined men.

Carden-Coyne explores this theme in seven chapters on classicism, disability, war monuments, male and female body culture with much emphasis on the revival of classical dance, and she closes with a discourse on healing and forgetting. It is the chapters on the rebuilding of masculinity – after those years of 'malingering, shell shock, venereal blindness, disfigurement, self-inflicted injuries, desertion, and cowardice' – and the shaping of female 'flapper' beauty and sexuality that are at the heart of Carden-Coyne's book. Artificial limbs had to restore functionality and strength. Male as well as female bodybuilding became popular (making men insecure again because bodybuilding propaganda claimed women only wanted them strong and powerful, an idea strengthened by movies in which the perfectly shaped Adonis, and not the limbless veteran, gets the girl). Men and women tried to shape their bodies to classical perfection, making use of medical expertise and military experience, thereby improving individual confidence and sexual longing. But this was not without tension, for women not only had to be liberated (read: scarcely dressed) and beautiful (read: slim and boy-like) individuals, but at the same time socially-accepted mothers as well. The time when women had replaced the fighting men in the factories, was over; they had to know their place.

Carden-Coyne focuses on the so-called Anglophone world, the warring countries Great Britain, Australia and the United States. Her study therefore is 'neither comparative nor nationalizing' but trans-national, pointing more at the combining and not at the differing factors. This is intriguing and important, but also in some ways a bit of a pity because the war experience – and with that the theories on and practice of reconstruction and rehabilitation – of the United States, having actually fought for less than a year, will have been different from those who had been in the turmoil right from the start. Also she does not adequately consider changing attitudes over time; 1919 was different from 1929, and in my view Carden-Coyne goes, a bit too easily, back and forth in time. This focus also hinders comparison with, for instance, Germany, a country in which, as far as I can tell, the great artists (Kollwitz, Grosz, Dix) made few references to classical beauty when coming to terms with the war. But, this is a challenge for some German medical or war historian. *Reconstructing the Body* is a highly valuable and thought-provoking work on how the inhabitants of Great Britain, Australia and the United States tried to cope with the ugliness and trauma of the First World War.

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