

Exhibitions

Bronze

London

by MARK STOCKER

CHUTZPAH, PIZZAZZ AND the wow factor are not normally descriptions applied to exhibitions reviewed in this Magazine, yet it would be mean-spirited, even obtuse, to deny *Bronze* these accolades (at the **Royal Academy of Arts, London**; to 9th December). Its one-word title and concept are disarmingly simple: 'A unique testament to the works of art that one medium has inspired', according to the catalogue flyleaf.¹ The curators, David Ekserdjian and Cecilia Treves, go to immense compensatory lengths to deny any suspicions, *pace* Charles Baudelaire, that sculpture may be boring. The publicity poster, which uses a bronze reproduction by Massimiliano Soldani Benzi (1705–07; the Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna) of Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Damned soul*, promises excitement, and visitors will not be disappointed. It also signals a less obvious virtue of the exhibition: its recognition that bronze is *ipso facto* at a remove from the artist's hand. Some exhibits are not just copies but copies of copies. So conditioned are contemporary audiences to authenticity (and in turn to Walter Benjamin's disquisitions on reproduction), that a few sensibilities may be ruffled by the inclusion of casts of the *Laocoön* by François Girardon (c.1690; Houghton Hall, Norfolk) and of Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* by Clemente Papi (1844; Trentham, Staffordshire). Yet such works not only offer interesting insights into English aristocratic collecting, but are of excellent intrinsic quality and contribute to the drama of the exhibition.

33. Pair of leopards. Benin Nigeria, mid-16th century. Bronze, 69 cm. long. (National Commission for Museum and Monuments, Nigeria; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London).



34. *Queen Mother head*. Benin Nigeria, early sixteenth century. Copper alloy, 51 cm. high. (National Museum, Lagos; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London).

As visitors enter the rotunda, they are startled by the late fourth-century BC lost wax cast of the so-called *Dancing satyr* (Museo del Satiro, Church of Sant'Egidio, Mazara del Vallo, Sicily), which has been romantically attributed to Praxiteles himself. Romantic too were the circumstances of its discovery in 1998 by deep-sea fishermen in the Straits of Sicily. Beautiful in its saline patina and ecstatic in mood, the sculpture sets the tone of

what follows. This reviewer felt a mixture of emotions: initially succumbing but subsequently feeling periodic irritation, even resentment, at the designer Isambard Thomas's sensory manipulation, particularly when this compromised the visibility of exhibits. While conservators require low lux levels for works on paper, the whole point of bronze is how the medium withstands and transcends light and dark, and probably looks at its best in traditional, studio-lit spaces. The alternately showily and dimly lit *Bronze* will have none of that.

The thematic installation of the exhibition works admirably, however, and although the chronological arrangement of the catalogue seemingly conflicts with this, remarkably little confusion arises. Indeed, some of the juxtapositions – both in the installation and in the handsome catalogue – are highly effective. A good example is the Benin copper alloy *Queen Mother head* (early sixteenth century; National Museum, Lagos; Fig. 34), seen alongside Antico's *Bust of a youth* (c.1520; Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna; Fig. 35). They share a formal serenity that is an object lesson straight out of Roger Fry's *Vision and Design*, and which vindicates Ekserdjian's assertion in the catalogue that 'the best individual bronzes do as a rule seem to be uniquely capable of speaking a common language' (p.23).

The themes respectively comprise figures, animals (in two parts), groups, objects (in two parts), reliefs, gods and heads. A further gallery space provides admirable illustrative models of the respective stages of the making, casting and finishing processes, together with complementary video material. Both here and in its public programme, which includes both professional and family workshops and walking tours, the Royal Academy of Arts sets outstanding standards, while the audio-guide is enlivened by intelligent observations from Tom Phillips. Few exhibitions try harder; a sense of generosity and inclusiveness is genuinely conveyed. The mingling of Nigerian, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Cambodian, Indonesian, Mesopotamian, European and modern American bronzes creates not so much a postmodern as a multicultural ambience that poses few threats to even the most conservative of visitors. This goes hand-in-hand with a surprisingly traditional connoisseurial, decontextualised – one might almost say apolitical – approach, more evocative of a vast, latter-day *Wunderkammer* than the disciplines of art history or museology that tend to raise problems about such works. Thus to demand 'where is the argument?' is beside the point.

The *Dancing satyr* is but one of several coups that Ekserdjian and Treves have pulled off among the loans; 'as bold as brass' best sums up their remarkably fulfilled wish list. The 158 exhibits include not only predictable items such as Auguste Rodin's *The age of bronze* (1876) and Donatello's *Lamentation over the dead Christ* (c.1455–60), both from the Victoria and Albert Museum, but the fourteenth-century BC *Chariot of the sun* (National



35. *Bust of a youth*, by Antico. c.1520. Bronze with olive-brown patina under black lacquer patina under oil gilding, 56.5 cm. high. (Princely Collections, Vaduz-Vienna; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London).

Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen); the seventh-century BC Hallstatt *Cult chariot of Strettweg* (Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie, Graz); the *Chimaera of Arezzo* (c.400 BC; Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence); and the Hellenistic *Portrait head of King Seuthes III* (fourth-third century BC; National Institute of Archaeology with Museum, Sofia). It would be otiose to continue with this list, but suffice to say that Shang and Zhou dynasty China, Angkor Cambodia, Chola period India, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin Nigeria (Figs.33 and 34) are all handsomely represented too. The exhibition takes the

36. *Painted bronze ale cans*, by Jasper Johns. 1960. Painted bronze, 14 by 20.3 by 12 cm. (Museum Ludwig, Cologne; exh. Royal Academy of Arts, London).



viewer up to 2012 with Anish Kapoor's untitled but 'timeless homage to the metal of which it is made' (Kemal Haus Cingillioglu),² encountering Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Louise Bourgeois and Jasper Johns (Fig.36) en route.

The curators have a good eye and only very rarely are there exhibits of indifferent quality. One such is Ann Seymour Damer's *Mary Berry* (1793; National Portrait Gallery, London), probably there by default because 'marble dominated western sculpture in the latter part of the eighteenth century', as Patrick Elliott states in his catalogue essay (p.94). This, however, raises a question that is not properly resolved. Is *Bronze* an exhibition of objects or of sculpture? If there is room for Asante gold-weights from the collection of Tom Phillips, why then is there no Neo-classical ormolu by the *bronzier* Pierre-Philippe Thomire? Regrettably, the coverage of art from 1750 to 1850 is lamentable: there is no room, for example, for David d'Angers, although his bust of Nicolò Paganini, the epitome of Romanticism (1830-33; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Angers) is at least illustrated in Elliott's essay. David's omission in turn reveals a still more serious lacuna: that of the bronze medal, from Antonio Pisanello to David Smith inclusive. For once Ekserdjian is unconvincing when he claims that 'medals and plaquettes might have added to this array, but have been omitted principally because too many of them would have been required to make a real difference' (p.23). Not only does this omission mask shortcomings in the installation design, but it ignores an art form which is, as Charles Ryskamp and Earl A. Powell III jointly stated, 'a frequently neglected example of the most subtle and delicate form of relief sculpture'.³ To claim that Germain Pilon's *Lamentation over the dead Christ* (c.1583-84; Musée du Louvre, Paris) is his only known relief when his dramatic uniface portrait medallions are ignored is thus little short of breathtaking. There is no place either for Pierre Turin and his medals in the Art Deco style, both over-

looked in their entirety. Art Deco, a global phenomenon of the decorative arts, is characterised by some of the twentieth century's most spectacular bronzes, from Paulanship to Demetre Chiparus to Rayner Hoff. Such omissions prevent a very good exhibition from being a great one.

¹ Catalogue: *Bronze*. Edited by David Ekserdjian, with essays by Francesca G. Bewer, Timothy Potts, Jessica Rawson, Carol C. Mattusch, John Guy, John Picton, Ittai Weinryb, David Ekserdjian, Eike D. Schmidt and Patrick Elliott. 303 pp. incl. numerous col. ill. (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2012), £40 (HB). ISBN 978-1-907533-28-0; £27.50 (PB). ISBN 978-1-907533-29-7.

² *Ibid.*, p.280.

³ 'Foreword', in S.K. Scher, ed.: exh. cat. *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance*, New York (Frick Collection) and Washington (National Gallery of Art) 1994, p.6.

Spanish prints and drawings

London

by ZAHIRA VELIZ BOMFORD

THE EXHIBITION *Renaissance to Goya: Prints and Drawings from Spain* at the **British Museum, London** (to 6th January), is an excellent survey of the graphic arts in Spain from the fifteenth century to the early nineteenth. In recent years, Spanish drawings and prints, long overlooked in boxes marked 'Anonymous' in print rooms around the world, have attracted the attention of scholars who are actively cataloguing and contextualising these works within the broader framework of Spanish visual culture. Yet outside Spain, exhibitions of Spanish drawings have been rare, and only two or three took place in the English-speaking world in the course of the last century.¹ The breadth of *Renaissance to Goya*, however, could only be attempted at the British Museum, in whose print room we find one of the strongest collections of Spanish drawings anywhere outside Spain. The exhibition features well-preserved, handsome sheets, with only a few examples by most of the artists shown. From the sixteenth century, represented by Alonso Berruguete's *Assumption of the Virgin* (no.14, p.67) and *Entombment of Christ* (no.15, p.68), to the impressive finale with drawings and prints by Goya and his contemporaries at the turn of the nineteenth century, those already familiar with Spanish graphic art will relish the impressive sheets by artists whose names are well known to them; for the viewer who encounters graphic art from Spain for the first time, this exhibition is an excellent introduction, reflecting the wide variety in function, technique and handling of drawings and prints by Spanish artists.

The show is organised by region and chronology, and drawings and prints are grouped together. The eighteenth century