

TLS
UK, Online
10 April 2024
MUV: 28,160
EVE: £9,000

Rees & Co

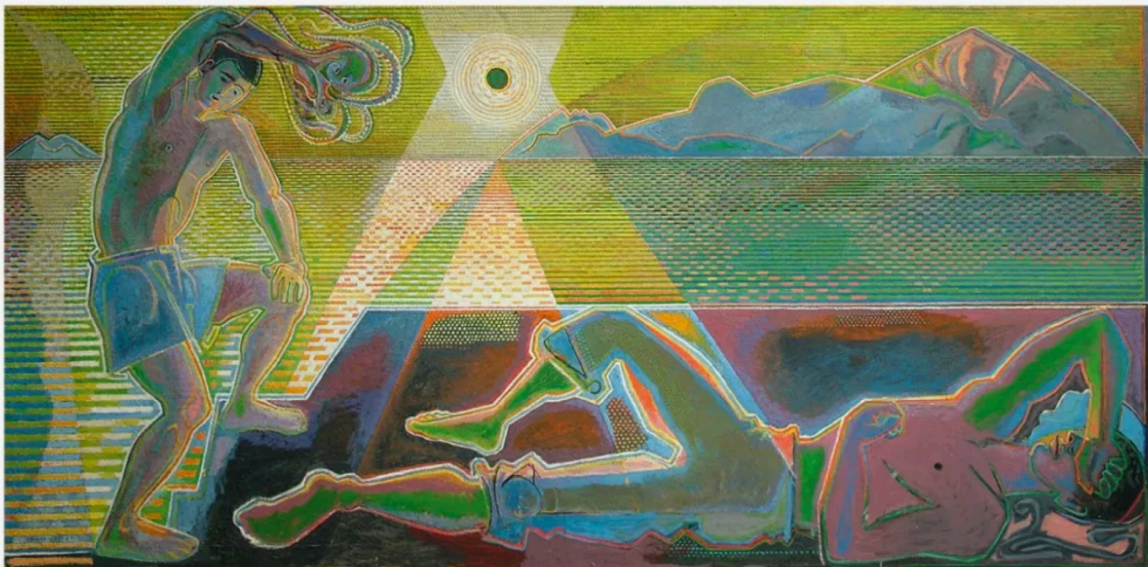
TLS

Visual arts | Arts Review

Greek gifts

A pagan pantheist who melted cubism or surrealism into sun and fun

By **Boyd Tonkin**



"Two Figures and a Setting Sun" by John Craxton, 1952-67 | © Estate of John Craxton/DACS. All rights reserved, 2023

IN THIS REVIEW

JOHN CRAXTON

A modern odyssey

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, until April
23

In the cold new year of 1967 a large retrospective of John Craxton's light-filled, sun-warmed art began at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Opened by Jennie Lee, Britain's first arts minister, the exhibition gathered lenders and visitors whose famous names tracked Craxton's merry progress through the High Bohemia of his native England and his adopted Greece: Lucian Freud and Stephen Spender; Roland Penrose and Patrick Leigh Fermor; Lee Miller and Kenneth Clark. Despite his celebrity chums, however, some critics worried that the vagabond hedonist was enjoying himself too much. *The Times* even wrote that Craxton's paintings "push hard against the handicap of happiness".

It wasn't a novel charge. Wyndham Lewis, also a gadfly, but one with a sharper sting, had likened Craxton's 1940s work to "a prettily tinted cocktail, that's good but does not quite kick hard enough". Ian Collins, author of a delightful biography of the artist and now curator of *John Craxton: A modern odyssey* at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, wonders if sexual suspicion also lay behind the puritan disapproval ("this artist was way too gay"). After all, male homosexuality was only decriminalized in England and Wales later in 1967. Craxton's frank and (for the time) open celebration of his sexuality in life and art - Edmund White calls him "an important painter in the history of gay liberation" - helped to fuel his six-decade pursuit of pleasure and rapture, both outside and inside the studio. His paintings, drawings and illustrations keep faith with the everyday bliss of body and sense discovered on his initial trip to Greece in 1946. Then he wrote ecstatically of "the lovely hot sun all day and at night tavernas: hot prawns in olive oil & great wine & the soft sweet smell of greek pine trees. I shall never come home. how can I?" In spirit, he never did.

Craxton (1922-2009) had a long, productive and largely blessed life. His friends and admirers stretched from Freud - first inseparable soulmate, later deadly rival - to David Attenborough; Margot Fonteyn (also his lover) to Tacita Dean. In *John Craxton: A life of gifts* (2021), Collins remarks on the artist's catlike gift for falling on his feet. But the toughness and resilience of this motorbike-loving adventurer made that good luck stick. Among the artistic expats of postwar Greece (first on Poros and Hydra, then in Chania, on his beloved Crete), he flourished while frailer souls succumbed to idleness, addiction or ennui. Although Craxton liked to assert that "Life is more important than art", he worked with focus, flair and clarity. The result was a luminous, invigorating body of painted and graphic work. It puts an assortment of twentieth-century styles - Craxton never cared much for loyalty to schools or movements - in the service of a kind of pagan pantheism, tempered by a discipline of form that melts cubism or surrealism into Greek sun, and fun.

The Pallant House Gallery show follows a centenary retrospective in Athens, which moved to Istanbul. Craxton's rejection of his damp, dour homeland has until now been returned in the form of British art-world condescension that found little to savour in these gaudy Mediterranean cocktails. Yet any bookshop browser is still likely to spot his covers for the memoirs and travelogues of his fellow Hellenophile Leigh Fermor: not just testimony to their close friendship, but capsule exempla of the firm line, radiant colour and decorative zest the artist sought in oil, tempera, pencil, textiles and ceramics.

The Chichester selection roams, but never sprawls. We track the fast-developing maverick as he outgrew the mannerisms of the "neo-romantic" cultural mood in wartime Britain (he detested that label) and quickly settled into his sun-struck Mediterranean aesthetics of clear outlines, sharp contrasts and geometrically flattened landscapes and figures. Some signature elements did survive the move, in body and mind, to Greece after the war's end. A youthful devotion to the uncanny pastoral of Samuel Palmer and the visionary intensity of William Blake ("a great, great genius, a master of the imagination") never faded; it can lend an otherworldly quality even to Aegean scenes of noonday dazzle. Otherwise the dense, brooding ink- and brushwork of early-1940s pieces from Dorset or Pembrokeshire (where he worked with his mentor Graham Sutherland) give little hint of the blaze of joyful light to come, with their grey, gnarled landscapes and anguished symbolic topography.

By several measures Craxton had less than most people to brood over. Raised among a happy clan of six siblings by well-connected musician parents, Harold and Essie, he romped through an easy-going childhood in St John's Wood and Sussex. He missed war service thanks to damaged lungs and soon fell in with both his co-conspirator Freud and a faithful patron, Peter Watson. Craxton came from, and later cultivated, a milieu in which freewheeling charm did not so much stand in for cash as mint a currency of its own - one that kept its value. Blitz-era London mingled physical danger with the thrill of erotic discovery. By 1944 the fashionable newcomer could earn £300 - almost an annual wage - from a solo show at the Leicester Galleries. Still, Craxton yearned for the light, and life, of the South. In 1945 he even found a local foretaste on a jaunt with Freud to the sunlit Isles of Scilly.

In Greece itself, after 1946, the shutters open on Craxton's once muted palette and the sun roars in. Early Poros works such as "Hotel by the Sea" distil land and water into stark coloured blocks, while a stylized goat - a favourite Craxton motif - munches on a tree. Miró feels as close as Picasso here, while ancient myths hover around his semi-abstract eye. Yet he remained a quick, sharp portraitist: the Greek sailors who now assume a lead role in his art (and life) are not static icons, but breathing individuals, often captured mid-dance. The worlds of archaic frieze and modern taverna meet and harmonize. Craxton's associates could hardly miss the erotic context of these acrobatic matelots. Peter Pears purchased "Two Greek Dancers", perhaps as a coded image of his partnership with Benjamin Britten.

As an artist, and a man, Craxton knew, and found, his heart's desire at a relatively early stage. In Greece the risk would therefore be stalled development: that dubious "handicap of happiness". To a degree the Pallant House exhibits reveal a stable continuity of style and vision that lasts through the century's second half. But Craxton never quite turns into a lotus-eater. He repeatedly explores fresh media, from the acclaimed Covent Garden ballet sets for Frederick Ashton's *Daphnis and Chloë* (1951) to 1970s ceramic designs with the potter Ann Stokes and a Cretan-inspired tapestry for Stirling University.

Crete, where in 1960 he acquired a crumbling Venetian house on the harbour in Chania, led his work along some new (and very old) paths. Byzantine icons and Minoan frescoes, set within complex labyrinthine patterns, now inform many scenes, even as his radiant geometry endures. In “Five Goats”, for instance, his intertwined caprine figures writhe and nestle into a dream of god-haunted antiquity. Pictures of Cretan ravines in full sun or moonlight strip geology and vegetation down into a sort of psychedelic abstraction.

Yet sheer pleasure never stands too far away. Neither does the cheerful eclecticism that made the perpetual sun-seeker as much magpie as gadfly. In his “Still Life with Three Sailors” (1980-85), Leigh Fermor detected traces of Watteau, commedia dell’arte and the biblical supper of Emmaus in the cluttered taverna table at which three mariners sit and drink in a reverie of cream and blue. But Craxton also gave one sailor the features of his current lover. The artist’s own commentary on the work, quoted by Collins, insists that “All I care about is what is called cross-pollination”, an impure creative ecology in which painters and writers are “killing the sacred frontiers stone dead”.

John Craxton had a fierce talent for slipping across the frontier from trouble into contentment. It saw him survive clashes with the Greek authorities (most seriously during his exile-from-exile during the Colonels’ regime after 1967), bitter rifts with old comrades (notably Freud) and the death of inspirational friends such as the Greek painter Niko Ghika, whose Hydra house became a sacred place for him. Throughout he stayed true to his eye, his palette and his special brand of myth-shadowed sensuality. In “Cretan Cats” (2003), two felines wrap around a kitchen chair as they scrap over fishbones. Against the floor’s antique patterning they spar and twist into an ouroboros figure, locked around the skeleton in an eternal cycle of life and death - or, maybe, just endlessly at play.

Boyd Tonkin was awarded the 2020 Benson Medal of the Royal Society of Literature