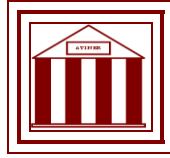


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
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**The Revival of Classicism and the Myth
of the Mediterranean between the two
World Wars - Artists and Architects in
Pompeii, Capri, and on the Amalfi
Coast in the 1920s and 30s**

**Adriana De Angelis
Art/Architecture Historian
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Italy**

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**The Revival of Classicism and the Myth of the Mediterranean
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Abstract

After the horrors of World War I, the necessity of rebirth and reconstruction was felt everywhere, and to immerse oneself in the waters of the Mediterranean sea - seen as amniotic fluid - from where it all had begun became symbolic of a new life. Mediterranean as the place on whose shores great civilizations had arisen such as the Greek and the Roman all along able to enter new life blood in the human being. Mediterranean as the supreme interpreter of the periodic return to Antiquity that has always marked Western civilization. To look again at ancient ruins and coasts to find that strength and vigor which had marked a glorious past became essential to build an equally bright future. The renewed excavations of the 20s and 30s of Pompeii and Herculaneum (after those of 1738 and 1748) influenced again the work of artists and architects such as Picasso and Le Corbusier and, while in Capri Russian intellectuals of the caliber of Gorky laid the foundation of a new revolutionary Russia, on the Amalfi coast local artists and architects together with those arrived from the North, such as Max Pechstein, Cornelis Escher and Bernard Rudofsky, identified in the forms of white cubist houses, typical of the Campania shores, the ideal for the life of the new man who would have inhabit the new world that they dreamed to build on the ashes of the one that the war had canceled.

Keywords: World War I, Rebirth, Reconstruction, Mediterranean sea, Classicism, Art and Architecture

At the end of the First World War, Europe was reduced to a pile of rubble; a strong and necessary impulse of rebirth and reconstruction was therefore felt everywhere. Rebirth and reconstruction not only of the destroyed cities, but of an entire universe that had to be totally rethought, redesigned, reshaped. *We are making a new world* is the title of an oil on canvas painted in 1918 by the British artist Paul Nash (see Figure 1) that gives us a perfect idea of the disconcerting reality and of the common feeling generated by that terrible conflict.

Figure 1. *Paul Nash, We are making a new world, 1918*



Source: Google Art Project Public Domain

As already happened in key moments of the human history that had led to epochal changes such as the Renaissance, which had seen the human being becoming protagonist of its own destiny for the first time, or the enlightened and revolutionary Eighteenth century, once again attention was placed on the research of an ideal place to live, a new biblical Jerusalem whose function was to enable humans to better achieve peace, harmony, prosperity, and happiness like in the Garden of Eden. Transforming Europe in an immense, utopistic garden city was, in fact, one of the most accredited - but never realized - symbolic answer to the urge of recreating a world that had dissolved.

If in the North spirituality was a constant of the rebirth pursued after the horrors of World War I, in the South the return to a new life meant to immerse oneself in the waters of that sea - seen as amniotic fluid - from where it all had begun: the Mediterranean. Mediterranean "*king of shapes and light*", as described by Le Corbusier, seen as the sea on whose shores great civilizations had arisen such as the Greek and the Roman all along able to enter new life blood in the human being. Mediterranean as the supreme interpreter of the periodic return to Antiquity that has always marked Western civilization. While in the North the vitality of the trees and the green of the forests that

cover, abundant, those lands were considered as something able to start a new life, in the South to look again at ancient ruins and coasts to find that strength and vigor which had marked a glorious past became essential to build an equally bright future.

The renewed excavations carried forward in the 1920s and 30s at Pompeii and Herculaneum (after those of 1738 and 1748 that were at the basis of Neoclassicism) influenced again the work of artists and innumerable Italian and foreigner architects.

In the paintings of Picasso, who visited the area in 1917, the revival of Classicism – seen as something extremely solid to turn to in difficult moments like the one the whole world was undergoing after World War I – is palpable. Paintings like the several versions of *Three women at the fountain* (see Figure 2) and *Seated woman* (see Figure 3) as well as *Two women running on the beach* (see Figure 4) that remind us of those founded on the walls of the House of the Vetii at Pompeii (see Figure 5) are iconic, undiscussed examples both of the general revival of Classicism and the birth of the myth of the Mediterranean that influenced the idea of a new man and a new world born from the ashes of the war.

Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Three Women at the Fountain*, 1921



Source: Christie's New York catalogue, May 6, 2008

Figure 3. *Pablo Picasso, Seated Woman, 1923*



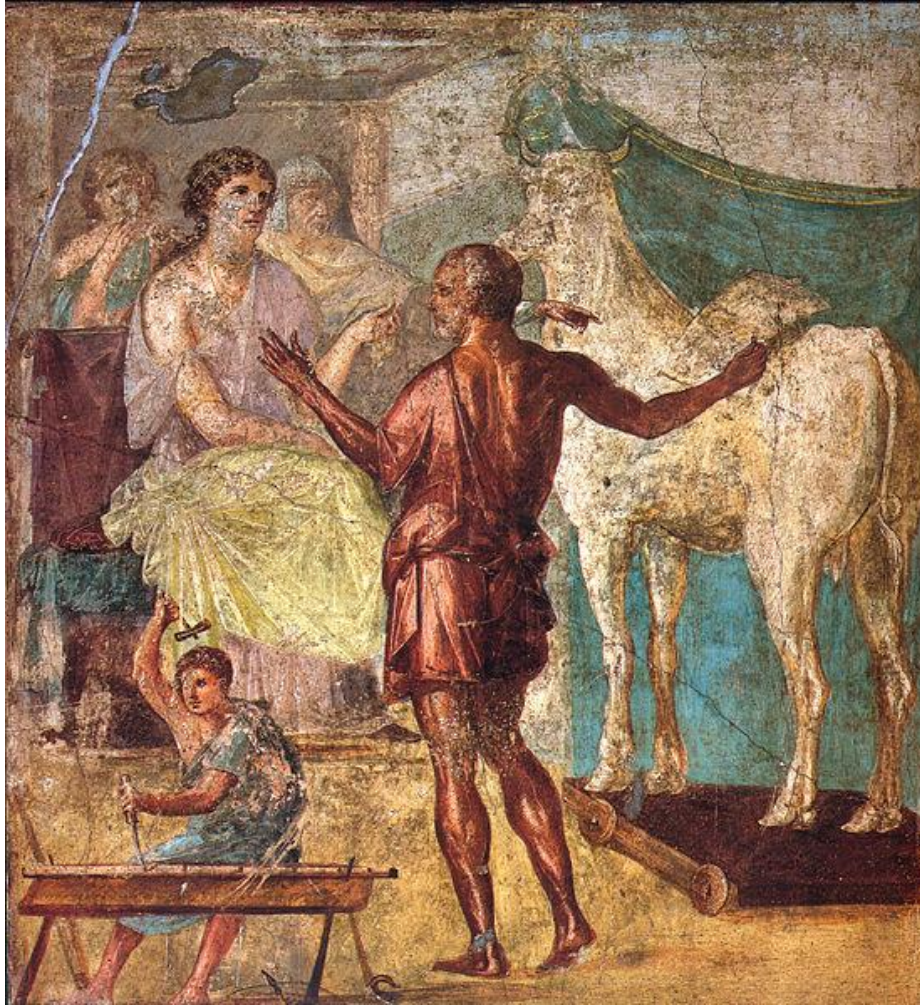
Source: WikiArt Visual Art Encyclopedia Public Domain

Figure 4. *Pablo Picasso, Two women Running on the Beach (The race), 1922*



Source: WikiArt Visual Art Encyclopedia Public Domain

Figure 5. *The House of Vettii, Daedalus, Pasiphae and the wooden cow, Pompeii, Italy*

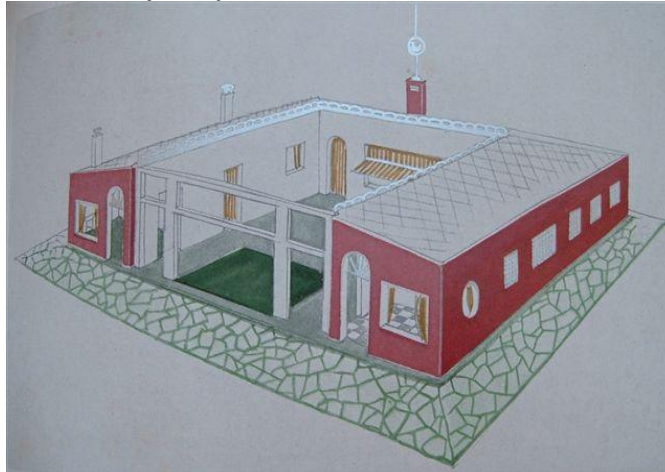


Source: Wikipedia Public Domain

For this entire new, craved universe the shape, the beauty and the connection with nature of the Roman houses and villas founded under the lava of the Vesuvius was thought to be the most suitable. If we look at the projects of the Italian architect Giò Ponti¹ (see Figure 6) or at realizations like Villa Savoye of Le Corbusier (see Figure 7) or the villa that Tony Garnier made for his sister Catherine (see Figure 8) it's again the house of the Vetii (see Figure 9) that comes back to our mind.

¹ In 1923, the painter Carlo Carrà, acknowledging the undoubted talents of Giò Ponti, defined the designer a Neo-classic.

Figure 6. *Giò Ponti, Project of a villa, 1934*



Source: Giovannini M., and Calistra D. 2006. Spazi e culture del Mediterraneo [Spaces and cultures of the Mediterranean], research catalogue, Roma, p. 625, fig. 100

Figure 7. *Villa Savoye courtyard, 1928-31, Poissy, France*



Source: <http://viviparigi.it/attrazioni/ville-savoye-poissy.htm>

Figure 8. *Tony Garnier, Catherine Garnier's villa, 1912-19, Lyon, France*



Source: Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon / P0546 S 3451, Creative Commons

Figure 9. *Atrium of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii, Italy*



Source: Wikipedia Creative Commons

Louis Kahn¹ who visited Pompeii wrote that when a building “*is a ruin, the spirit of its making comes back. It welcomes the foliage that entwines and conceals. Everyone who passes can hear the story it wants to tell about its making. It is no longer in servitude; the spirit is back*”. That was exactly the feeling that architects from all over the world felt in front of Pompeii and Herculaneum constructions whose spirit informed their idea of an ideal living.

If the form of the Roman houses so well preserved in those two sights of Campania were fundamental to conceive a new world for a new man, the splendid and luxuriant nature of that region of Italy contributed to enlarge the concept of beauty that had to be part of an ideal world that was a response to the horrors of war. Three places, Capri, Positano, and the Amalfi coast, like in the 18th century at the time of the *Grand Tour*, became the favorite destinations of intellectuals, artists and architects.

Russians were the first to arrive on those shores. Writer Maxim Gorkij was among those. The beauty of Capri inspired his idea of a new Russia that led to Revolution in 1917. On the island, together with his wife, he started a socialist school to form the men who dreamt of a new concept of life and were ready to fight for it. At this purpose, he invited Lenin who joined him for a short stay.

The wonderful see of Capri attracted also the Swedish doctor, Axel Munthe who, in search of some peace of mind, decided to build in that place that he considered his ideal, a villa that was called “San Michele” (see Figures 10 and 11) to whose construction he dedicated a book. Sort of a citadel of art that Munthe designed and built by himself with the help of the native skilled

¹In 1944, Kahn wrote an important essay entitled *Monumentality*, for the drafting of which the trips and the sketches he made in Egypt, Greece and Italy were essential.

workers, San Michele was inspired by models like the villa that emperor Tiberius had thought for himself on the uplands of the island and the local, simple, essential and ancient architecture realized by the inhabitants of Capri as well as by those of all the other islands and costs of the gulfs of Naples and Salerno.

Figure 10. *Garden of Villa San Michele, Capri, Italy*



Source: <http://www.capri.it/it/s/villa-san-michele-axel-munthe>

Figure 11. *Garden of Villa San Michele, Capri, Italy*



Source: <http://www.capri.it/it/s/villa-san-michele-axel-munthe>

The structure of this typical white rural homes with their roofs, terraces and external stairs hit writers, artists and architects that after the war decided to move to Positano and the Amalfi coast to find a new paradise. We find these

constructions in the designs and paintings of Max Pechstein¹ (see Figure 12) and Maurits Cornelius Escher (see Figures 13, 14 and 15) as well as in those of Russians painters Ivan Pankratovič Zagorujko (see Figure 16) and David Davidovich Burljuk (see Figure 17) and of Dutch artist Adriaan Lubbers² (see Figure 18).

Figure 12. *Max Pechstein, Water carrier, 1925*

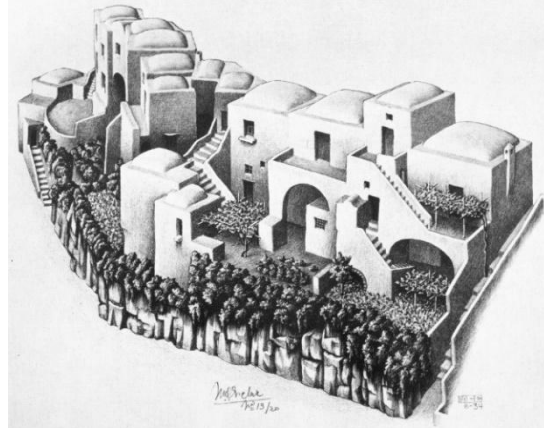


Source: <http://www.kunstsammlungen-zwickau.de>

¹In 1913 and in 1924, before going to Positano, Pechstein had gone to Monterosso, a centuries-old fishing village part of the Cinque Terre (The Five Lands: Vernazza, Corniglia, Riomaggiore, Manarola, Monterosso), in the Liguria region on the Italian Riviera. There he was struck by the explosion of nature and pure colours that he tried to reproduce in his paintings.

²Lubbers is famous for the record he did of New York architecture and atmosphere between the first and second world war. He lived in New York fewer than six years, mostly from 1916 to 1919 and 1926 to 1928. During these stays he made not only paintings, but also copious drawings which depicted the city landmarks with dark colours. After his stay in Positano, Lubbers transferred the brightness of the Amalfi coast to the New York skyline.

Figure 13. *Maurits Cornelis Escher, (Old) Houses in Positano, 1934*



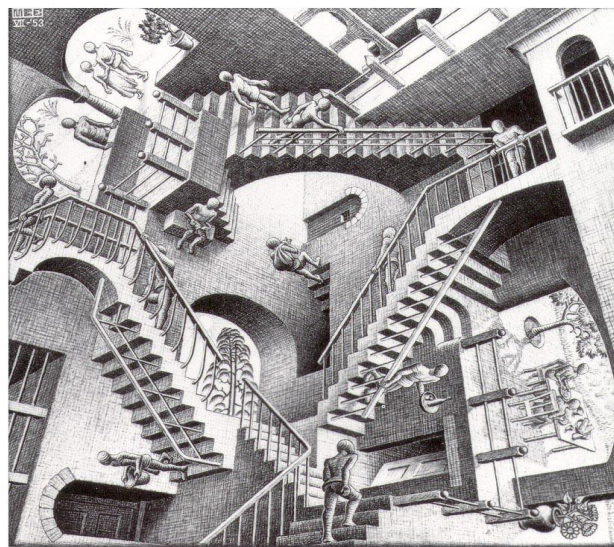
Source: Christie's New York catalogue, April 28, 2004

Figure 14. *Maurits Cornelis Escher, Convex and concave, 1955*



Source: <http://www.mcescher.com/Gallery/gallery-recogn.htm>

Figure 15. *Maurits Cornelis Escher, Relativity, 1953*



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Escher's_Relativity.jpg

Figure 16. *Ivan Pankratovič Zagorujko, Terrace in Positano, 1935*



Source: <http://www.costiera-amalfitana.com/personaggi-positano-ivan-zagorujko.htm>

Figure 17. *David Davidovich Burljuk, Positano, no indication of the date of execution*



Source: <http://www.eliteauction.com/catalogues/092411/catalogue.php?start=50>

Figure 18. *Adriaan Lubbers, A landscape with houses in Positano, 1924*



Source: <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/adriaan-lubbers-a-landscape-with-houses-in-1464699-details.aspx?intObjectID=1464699>

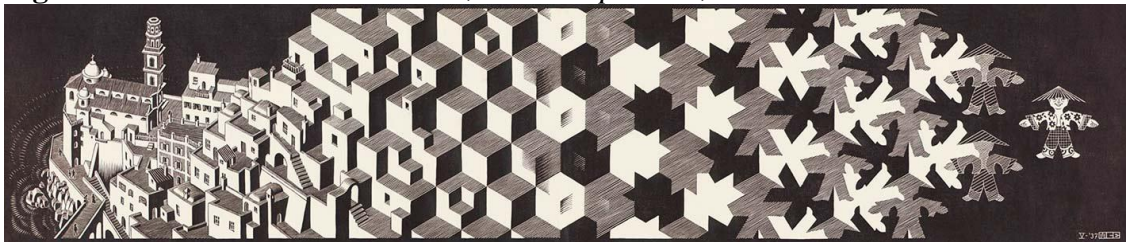
In the geometrical, rationalistic serenity of those white, cubic houses, completely absorbed in the surrounding nature which they totally respected, artists founded their ideal of life. If expressionism after World War I was directly tied to the city seen by the artists as an extension of the battlefield, as they struggled with the ravaging effects of war on their collective psyche and on the country's economy and people, cubism, with its simple and pure lines, was perceived as the right response to the anxiety of their and everybody else's lives. Capri, Positano and all the sights of the Amalfi coast became in their eyes a kind of a *Gesamtkunswerk* able to bring peace and harmony to the new world they wanted to build around them. Thanks to those small villages where living was so perfect, artists became architects and architects feeling the poetry of those places were transformed in artists. Giò Ponti, Luigi Cosenza, Bernard Rudofsky and many others from all over the world were going around the Neapolitan islands and coasts sketching those old examples of constructions, trying to learn from them capturing, like artists of the 18th century *Grand Tour*, their magic which they transferred into their new creations. Villa Oro (see Figure 19) built by Cosenza and Rudofsky on the Posillipo hill, overlooking the town of Naples is one of the most perfect example of what we are talking about.

Figure 19. *Luigi Cosenza, Bernard Rudofsky, Villa Oro, 1934-37, Naples, Italy*



Source: http://www.archiportale.com/news/2009/06/eventi/villa-oro.-una-ricerca-per-l-abitare.-luigi-cosenza-bernard-rudofsky_15636_32.html

Figure 20. *Maurits Cornelis Escher, Metamorphosis I, 1937*



Source: http://eschersite.com/EscherSite/Metamorphosis_%5B1%5D_298.html

The beauty that had been an essential part of the Greek and Roman constructions was back in architecture and urban realizations. Once again architecture, as wished by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, was *parlante*, able to speak to people with its pure forms (pyramid, sphere, cube) and its innovative and simple language derived from Antiquity. Buildings became symbols of the world and of its transformation into an etic one, fitted for the new man who wanted to build it. This double metamorphosis - from houses and nature to a new man and from the man to a new world - is perfectly expressed in a wooden print called *Metamorphosis I* (see Figure 20), realized by Escher in 1937 during his stay at Atrani, a small town on the Amalfi coast, where the Dutch artist, like many others, founded his ideal city, his Garden of Eden.

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