



Sert's Maeght Foundation

Cultural crusaders

EDWARD WINTERS

Modernism and the Mediterranean: the Maeght Foundation

By Jan Kenneth Birksted. Ashgate, 2004. 208pp. £55

This book is a handsome object. It is printed on chrome paper and is illustrated throughout – including eight full-page colour plates. Birksted has accomplished a rare task. He has written a book of fine scholarship; he has managed to make it read like a gripping story; and he draws us into a world of reflection upon the nature of landscape and architecture.

The Foundation of Aimé and Marguerite Maeght, while being the subject of the book, also focuses our attention on some of the great names of European Modernism. The cast of characters includes Braque, Miró, Giacometti, Calder, Tal-Coat, Chagall, Bazaine, Palazuelo, van Velde, Adami, Chillida and Ubac.

This set of artists was supplemented by a group of philosophers bringing their analytical skills to bear upon the developments of Modernism. Henri Maldanay, the phenomenologist, wrote the text for the inaugural issue of *Derrière le miroir*, the magazine published by the Maeght Foundation. Maurice

Merleau-Ponty gave the inaugural speech on 28 July 1964. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about Calder; Gaston Bachelard about Chagall; Martin Heidegger about Braque. Poets and architects were associated with the foundation and with the artists it supported. The picture emerges of a cultural collaboration in which creative thinkers within and beyond the visual arts came together; and whose joint enthusiasm and energy made for a flourishing and fruitful environment.

In 1957 the Maeghts commissioned Josep Lluís Sert, the Catalan architect, to design the foundation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, after having had him recommended by Miró, for whom Sert had designed a studio in Parma de Mallorca. (Interestingly, Sert was then dean of graduate studies in the architecture school at Harvard, and so we see that there was already an indication of a shift away from Europe, with its artistic heart in Paris, across the Atlantic to where Modernism would be taken up as a symbol of the free world.)

Birksted's book, however, is firmly rooted in Europe. It casts our minds back into a history that reveals the Maeght Foundation's importance in its support of Mediterranean Modernism. Miró's Labyrinth, designed in collaboration with Sert, abolishes the distinction between internal and external space by layering in such a way that the 'narrative' takes the spectator from one to the other along a single 'conceptual promenade'. Thus the division of architecture and wilderness is dissolved; the landscape becomes one with the architectural design, which also appropriates the Mediterranean horizon as its physical and cultural setting.

When Birksted leaves scholarship behind and moves into the space of argumentative speculation he treats us to rich, rewarding and exigent thought. I do not particularly agree with him, but it would take an age (and several pages) to argue that his version of phenomenology is fundamentally flawed; and would take readers into a version of Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind that they might not care for. However, I am glad to see this kind of work being undertaken. It gives you something to argue about – something important.

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