



*Posing for a selfie: Hipster in Stone XVII by Léo Caillard*

## CLASSICAL HIPSTERS

Artist Léo Caillard famously combines the classical and modern in his *Hipsters* series.

**Caroline Mackenzie**

meets him and reflects on the *Modern Classicisms* project at King's College London

The term 'classical' may conjure up all manner of images: gleaming marble under the Mediterranean sun, perfectly proportioned temples furnished with pediments and supported by Ionic, Doric or Corinthian columns. Perhaps 'classical' evokes visions of the body beautiful, sculpted in marble or bronze – male nudes whose six-packs and bulging biceps inspire envy and admiration. Similarly, one may think of the many guises of Aphrodite, goddess of love: sensual, provocative, at times playful. For many, mythology will

spring to mind: stories of heroes and gods, their exploits and adventures. We often see the label 'classical' juxtaposed with 'tradition', 'antiquities' or simply 'ancient'. Does, therefore, 'modern classicisms' as a concept make sense, or is it a contradiction in terms?

This question lies behind an adventurous project of the Department of Classics at King's College London. A research team headed by Michael Squire has embarked on an ambitious odyssey by bringing together classicists, art historians, critics and contemporary

artists in a series of collaborative events and activities. The project – *Modern Classicisms* – which has already created quite a stir and provoked much interest and dialogue, is being run in partnership with MACM (Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins), the Courtauld Institute and *Minerva (The International Review of Ancient Art and Archaeology)*. Questions being raised include the following. How do we respond to the classical? Is it beautiful, or oppressive? Is it something to celebrate or something to subvert and challenge? Are

contemporary artists embracing the work of their ancient Greek and Roman predecessors or rejecting it? Either way, how much of their approach is conscious and how much simply a result of the ubiquity of the classical legacy? Greek and Roman influences pervade our architecture (the British Museum's façade is just one of many London examples), literature, films and music. At times, the classical heritage is exploited and held up as an example to which to aspire; at others, it is rejected as too idealistic.

*Modern Classicisms* was launched with a vibrant workshop in November 2017 and a major exhibition – *The Classical Now* – was held at Bush House on the Strand and the Inigo Rooms of King's College London from 2 March to 28 April 2018. Classical works of art were displayed in tandem with works of leading modern and contemporary artists, including Damien Hirst, Grayson Perry, Marc Quinn, Mary Reid Kelley and Rachel Whiteread. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to view the classical alongside the contemporary and to ponder the classical legacy and its influences – no less than their ideas about 'modernism'. Such a juxtaposition allows a direct comparison (or contrast) and an examination of modern and contemporary responses to classical art.

Contemporary artist Léo Caillard was commissioned to produce a new site-specific installation for the exhibition. Caillard had already won much acclaim for his series *Hipsters in Stone* (2012–2016), in which he dressed classical statues in contemporary attire. Not only did he clothe them, he also accessorized them – with sunglasses, jewellery, even (today's omnipresent) mobile phones.

Caillard's fascination with Greek and Roman sculptures began during his regular visits to the Louvre. In particular, he became intrigued by the space between the sculptural display and visitors to the museum. He started to people-watch, observing the interactions and reactions of visitors. On one

occasion, a particular member of the public caught his eye: a bearded man standing in front of a statue which, by chance, was of similar physical proportions, even sharing the same hairstyle and beard. The main distinction in appearance that struck Caillard was that the statue was unclothed. This observation sparked the ingenious idea to dress up ancient statues in modern clothing, as if to bridge the gap between the artefact and the observer.

Although the classical statues Caillard remodelled were of gods and heroes, 'the iconic figures of classical sculpture', he dressed them in everyday outfits: T-shirts,

jeans, shorts – not a toga in sight! This potential contradiction enhances the novelty of Caillard's project and certainly creates humorous effect (one which he acknowledges and which he hopes improves our experience of his work). Perhaps one of the most recognizable scenarios of everyday people in our society is of an individual posing intently for a 'selfie'. Caillard captures this brilliantly in his transformation of the *Apollo Belvedere*. Caillard's work therefore utilizes the classical to ask questions about modern behaviour, even to examine our vanity, and to consider contemporary society in relation to the past.



*Léo Caillard's Hipster Farnese Bronze Bust is particularly eye-catching*

The individual *Hipsters in Stone* certainly seem to take on personalities of their own; they are fashion-conscious, of course (Chanel jewellery and designer clothes the norm), but also self-assured and 'cool'. *Hipsters* is an apt title. Caillard is conscious of the irony of bringing statues to life having its own roots in antiquity, as in the story of Pygmalion, the Cypriot sculptor described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and elsewhere in mythology as having fallen in love with the ivory statue he created of his ideal of a beautiful woman. Aphrodite put Pygmalion out of his misery by bringing the statue to life.

Trendy as the *Hipsters in Stone* are, in 2016 Caillard escalated the 'bling' and created *Hipsters in Bronze*. By the very nature of the material, he was able to reflect a flashier, more ostentatious image of contemporary society. Here, the effect seems even more tongue-in-cheek. *Hipster Farnese Bronze Bust*, which references the Farnese Hercules, is particularly eye-catching, with the sunglasses in this and other sculptures in the series

being produced in the same material as the bust itself.

Caillard's work is thought-provoking: a conversation between classical and contemporary, a blurring of the lines between past and present. This merging of different times is a phenomenon in which he has taken a keen interest since childhood. He was 'obsessed with ideas of space and time' and fascinated by the stars and the galaxy. When we met, he told me that he realized his dream by studying physics for a few years when he was 18. But, during this time, he became increasingly interested in art and how he could look at space and time in a creative as well as a scientific way. Science, though, still forms the foundation of his approach, and he believes that this is one of the reasons he sees instant connections between classical and contemporary and is not hindered by the lapse of time between the two. For Caillard, with his scientist's hat on, 2,000 or so years is not that long in the great scheme of things. Caillard talks about science and art with equal passion; he tells me that

his grandmother was a musician and he credits her with his own enjoyment of music and art.

Another way in which Caillard has adopted and adapted the classical is by combining sculpture and light. A striking example of this is his interpretation of the *Discobolus*, a bronze statue by the Greek sculptor Myron, dated to around 450 BC, the original of which does not survive and is known to us only through Roman marble copies. Caillard's version exploits the contrast between light and stone – 'light constitutes the opposite of physical stone: stone lies in the ground and endures; by contrast, light defies our categories of space and time'. Caillard's scientific background again seems to be at work here. The marrying of science and art is perhaps not as unusual as it may first appear – another of the modern artists whose work featured in *The Classical Now*, Bruce Nauman, studied mathematics and physics before turning his hand to art.

As to the connection between classics and contemporary artists, Caillard suggests that 'contemporary art helps to establish a human connection with the art of the past, helping us understand it in relation to real individuals ... I think it's easy to forget – especially in museums – that all art has been contemporary'. *Modern Classicisms* has brought together old and new and offered opportunities to examine the two side by side, and reflect on them as part of one story. It has also invited us to consider our own responses to the classical and our acceptance (or not) of its legacy in art that is being created today.

*Caroline Mackenzie is one of the student ambassadors for the project. With thanks to Michael Squire of King's College London.*  
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[www.leocaillard.com/](http://www.leocaillard.com/)

*The Classical Now is a book designed to accompany the exhibition and is edited by Michael Squire, James Cahill and Ruth Allen.*

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Neon Discobolus by Léo Caillard