

Modern Classic

AN EXHIBITION AT THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM REVEALS THE IMPACT OF ANCIENT ART ON THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN ART DECO SCULPTOR PAUL MANSHIP. BY JOHN DORFMAN



From top: Paul Manship, *Fire* (from *The Four Elements*), commissioned in 1914, installed 1921 in the American Telephone and Telegraph Building, 195 Broadway, New York (designed by Wm Welles Bosworth), parcel-gilt bronze relief; *Indian*, 1914. Bronze, black-brown patina.

AFTER THE demise of the French Academies and long before the advent of today's "Classical Realism," ancient Greek and Roman art exerted an important influence on modernism. One need only think of Picasso's Minotaurs and other reinterpretations of myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, de Chirico's eerie Roman ruins, and Rodin's muscular sculptures. In the period between the World Wars, ancient art had a particularly strong influence on a popularized version of modernism, Art Deco. The Yale professor Jay Hambidge claimed to have rediscovered the secrets of Classical proportion embodied in Greek vases, and his theory of Dynamic Symmetry proved very persuasive to American Deco designers, art-

ists, and illustrators. During the 1920s it seemed as if the U.S. had entered a second Neoclassical era, embracing architecture, sculpture, and the graphic arts—only this time in a streamlined, modernist form suited to the machine age.

One of the major figures of this movement was the sculptor Paul Manship (1885–1966), subject of an exhibition opening this month at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. "Paul Manship: Ancient Made Modern" (February 11–July 3) is the first monographic show devoted to the artist in 30 years and the first ever to focus on the ancient influence on his work. It pairs sculptures and sketches by Manship with relevant ancient artworks and artifacts.

Manship was born in St. Paul, Minn., and began his training at the St. Paul School of Art. From there he went on to the Pennsyl-

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Clockwise from top left: Assyrian, Nimrud (now Nineveh Province, Iraq), from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, *Relief panel*, 883–859 BCE, gypsum; Paul Manship, *Centaur and Dryad*, 1913, cast 1925, bronze; *Centaur and Dryad* (detail of base), 1913, cast 1925, bronze.

vania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and then to the Art Students League in New York, where he studied with George Bridgman. In 1909, at the urging of Isidore Konti, a Viennese-born sculptor whom he was serving as studio assistant, he entered the Rome Prize competition and won. Winners of the prize receive funding to study at the American Academy in Rome, and in the Eternal City Manship discovered ancient art. It was a particularly fruitful time for such an encounter because of an upsurge in archaeological excavation and research in Rome and around the Mediterranean generally.

The first section of the Wadsworth's exhibition, titled "Breaking Through in Bronze," examines the years Manship spent in Italy and their impact on his art. One of his first fully-realized bronzes, *Centaur and Dryad* (1913) is paired with a 1912 sketch of a frieze from the Treasury of the Siphnians in Delphi, Greece. The





From left: *Pronghorn Antelope*, 1914, bronze, black-brown patina; *Great Horned Owl*, c 1932, bronze.



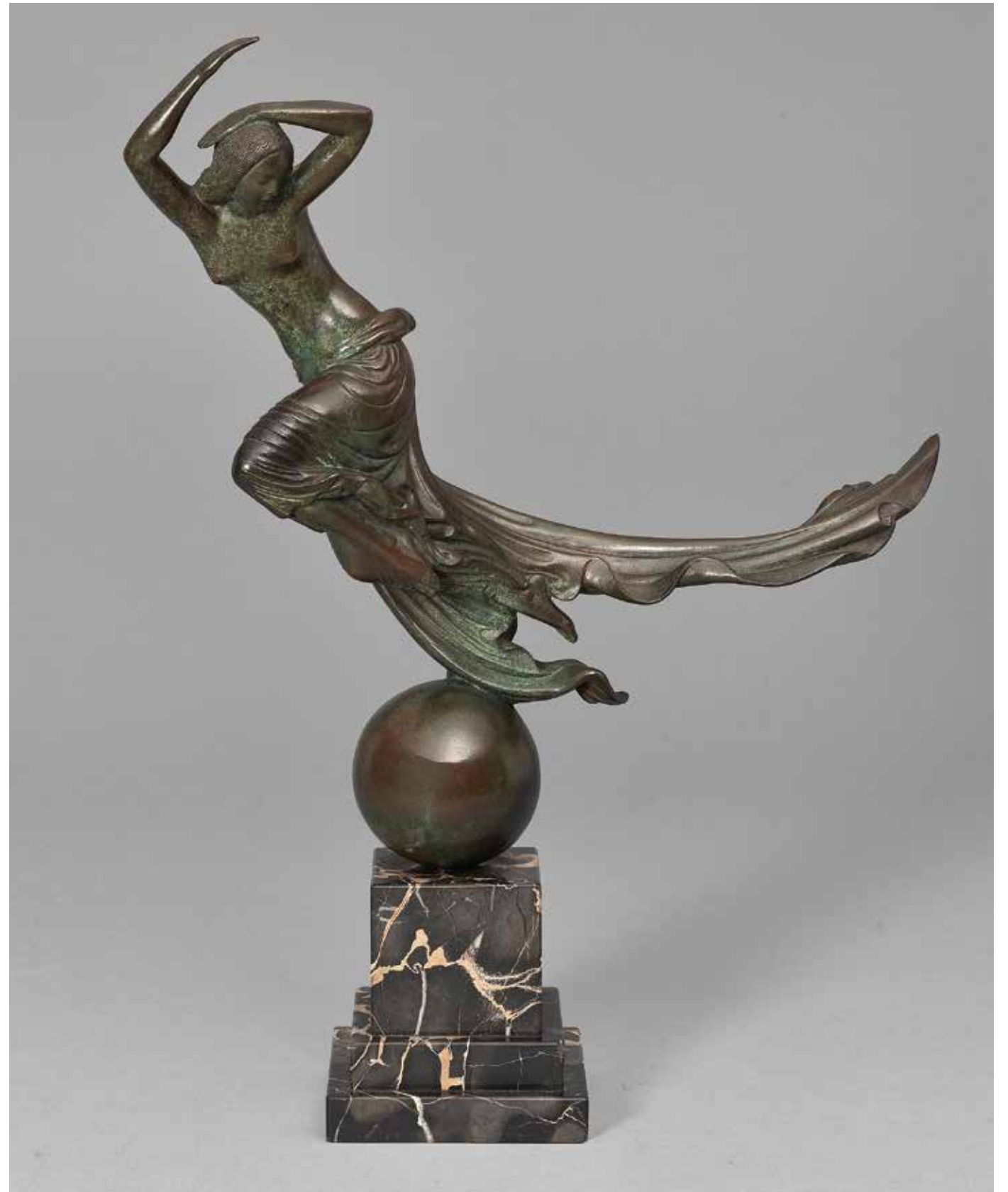
base of the *Centaur and Dryad* sculpture is elaborately decorated in relief, some of the elements of which are clearly derived from the frieze. The facial features and hair styles of the figures in Manship's sculpture evoke Archaic rather than Classical or Hellenistic styles, and in fact the artist was influenced by many styles and periods of ancient art, not just from Greece and Rome but also from the Near East and India. Among the pieces on view at the Wadsworth are a 5th-century B.C. Attic oil flask attributed to the Hermonax Painter, a 9th-century B.C. relief panel from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nineveh (modern Iraq), and a Cypriote statue of a standing man. The careful viewer can discern elements from all of these disparate objects in the sculptures of Manship. Trained in the old school method of copying from plaster casts of

"antique" sculptures, he sketched extensively that which interested him in ancient art and used those sketches as notes and raw material for creative endeavors of his own. Many of these sketches are on view in the exhibition and testify to Manship's precision and sensitive eye. The exhibition also features some plaster casts of the type Manship would have used for reference, such as one of Euthydikos' *Kore (Maiden)* after a circa-490 B.C. original in the Acropolis Museum in Athens, archival photos of Manship in his studio, and tools that he used in his work. The photos and sculpting tools are on loan from the Manship Artists Residency + Studio in Gloucester, Mass.

The second section of the Wadsworth's exhibition, "Modernizing Mythology," focuses on Manship's mature works using mythological themes, a favorite source of

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Flight of Night, 1916, bronze on a veined black marble base.



Clockwise from top left: *David*, 1914, bronze with black patina; *Prometheus*, c. 1933, bronze with gilding; Hermonax Painter, *Oil flask (Lekythos)*, made Attica, Greece c. 475-450 BCE, terracotta.

iconographic material for him. *Flight of Night* (1916) depicts the goddess Diana gracefully poised atop a sphere representing the moon, her planetary affiliation. The Classical forms are here simplified and streamlined, in what would become the standard style for Deco appropriations of ancient motifs. But rather than evoking the age of mechanization, this sculpture takes us to a mystical realm of celestial grace and beauty. Manship's relief *Fire*, from the Four Elements decorative series

of panels on the AT&T Building in New York (commissioned in 1914 and installed in 1921) is a powerful fusing of Classical and Asian styles, with the later particularly notable in the gilded flames, which suggest Chinese and Persian ways of depicting fire.


"Art for the Public," the third and final section of the exhibition, is dedicated to Manship's work for public spaces during the height of his career in the 1920s and '30s. The gilded Prometheus that presides over

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Actaeon, cast 1925 (one of a pair), bronze on marble base.

the ice skating rink in Rockefeller Center in New York is today the most famous of these and is emblematic of Manship's aesthetic (and represented in the show by a rare surviving small maquette), but there are many other examples of these ambitious commissions. One is the Paul Rainey Memorial Gates at the Bronx Zoo, which afforded the artist an opportunity to express his creativity in the animalier genre, as exemplified by a naturalistic, stern-looking *Great Horned Owl* in bronze. 

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