



Lucía Vallejo and the golden ages

Blanca de la Torre

“ Whosoever knows this formula shall remain intact on earth, close to Ra, and shall have a wondrous burial, close to Osiris. Knowledge of this formula is very useful to man in the Beyond. Bread offerings shall not lack and he may come before (Ra) in the course of every day. This has been truly effective millions of times. ”

Chapter 71, *Book of the Dead*

A large golden portion of wall by way of altarpiece is accompanied by eleven mummies in a state of levitation, beneath which their earthly shadows project through cloth saturated in gold, achieving a sophisticated play of space with an elegant choreography.

Coherent with her previous work, Vallejo takes one more step in her way of sculpting paint, tearing it off the stretcher frame. It has been some time since this artist began to carve her canvas, decomposing the paint and modelling her forms to free-standing pieces in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction; a process entailing extraction from the canvas that is here

revealed as an emphatic and severe installation, where every piece affirms its autonomy while reinforcing the almost operatic character of the sculptural ensemble.

It is said that for Michelangelo, sculpture was a simple question of removing everything unnecessary from a block of marble. A certain Michelangelesque *pathos* is also contained in Vallejo's work, in this gesture of stripping the sculpture contained in painting, in releasing it from its two-dimensionality. To the renaissance artist, “good painting is the kind that looks like sculpture”.

Vallejo's work, although simple and bare in appearance, contains the entire history of art in one gesture. It speaks of metamorphosis, processes of transformation, media, forms, bodies, material.

Her work, moreover, enables us to follow multiple threads in the history of art, one of which could be gold. Since its appearance six thousand years before our day, during the golden age of the Palaeolithic, it has been an element bound to the history of civilizations, to their peaks and their decadences.

The first examples appear as early as Prehistory, one of the oldest being a votive chariot found in Trundholm (Denmark), done in gold and bronze as an offering to the sun god and dated around 3,000 B.C.

It was to be Egypt which would consolidate itself as the greatest gold-producing power of antiquity, achieving one of its peaks during the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Lucía Vallejo herself found inspiration in the mummy of a woman to be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Madrid, the cartonnage of which corresponds to that same dynasty. Egyptian mummies from the royalty and noble classes



were usually covered with masks of gold, a metal also largely present in the funerary furnishings that accompanied them. Vallejo's mummies are shaped from mannequins, likewise of women, wrapped in that type of sacking, a material that may also serve us in tracking another of those possible histories of art.

For the Phoenicians, gold was the objective of their business transactions. Even Herodotus points to the exchange of merchandise for gold that the Carthaginians plied along the coasts of West Africa. It was to be during the period of Constantine when it became mandatory to pay taxes in the precious metal.

Vallejo's work calls to both spirit and matter, reminding us of the telluric relationship between gold and death – in Egyptian funerary rites, but as well among the Greeks, who placed gold coins on the eyes of the dead (or gave them a golden branch) to pay Charon upon crossing the Styx, which served as the border to the underworld.

Here in Greece, it was to be mainly the Aegean islands and the coastal regions that counted as the principal sources of gold. Crete would become famous for the treasures of King Midas during the Minoan era, which possibly gave rise to the well-known story about the king who turned everything he touched into gold.

But Greek gold was possibly better-known through its myths than its history, such as the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, a group of heroes who sailed on the Argos in search of the golden fleece, a feat they would finally achieve thanks to the aid of Medea, who was in love with Jason. Or through the daughter of the king of Argos, Danae, imprisoned by her father out of fear that the prediction of an oracle who augured that he would be assassinated by a son of hers would come to pass. That would not impede Zeus from turning into a rain of gold and falling upon her, leaving her pregnant with Perseus, who would finally fulfil the fateful prophecy. And how can we forget the golden apples from

the garden of Hesperides, which gave immortality – two concepts bound together up to this day – and the first of the tasks that were assigned to Hercules. If we are to look at another historiographer, Pliny the Old (23-75 C.E.) points out that the first gem in history was the ring that Zeus obliged the liberated Prometheus to wear, a stone “mounted in a horn of gold kept in the Roman Temple of Concord”. This author gives the origin of this material as a region in India where the ants dug it up.

“ Therefore we searched around everywhere by ourselves and by our agents for an abundance of precious pearls and gems, preparing as precious a supply of gold and gems for so precious an embellishment as we could find; and convoked the most experienced artists (...) ”

Panofsky, E., *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasures*.

During the Middle Ages, the Byzantine and Carolingian Empires would use gold for its symbolic aspect, both political and religious, although book illumination and the decorative arts were to reflect best the mark of power underlying the use of this material.

These allegorical attributions were well-understood by the man who would lay the foundations for Gothic art and the opulence associated to all religious art forms: Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis (1140), advisor to Louis VII of France, who opposed the aesthetic ideas of Bernard of Clairvaux, the driving force behind Cistercian influence. For Suger, gold and riches brought men closer to God, as churches were not merely temples for prayer but also places where lay persons contemplating the light that came in through the glazed windows, striking the gold, would feel the reflection of divine light.

In this age, we find the relationship between the mineral and the myth in both Rhenish gold and the ring of the Nibelungs – a Germanic legend that would later inspire the four Wagner operas – and in the extensive discussion we would open, were we to think of alchemy.

“ (...) Ransack'd the Center, and with impious hands Riff'd the bowels of thir mother earth For Treasures better hid. Soon had his crew Op'nd into the hill a spacious wound And dig'd out ribs of Gold ”

Milton J., *Paradise Lost*

Gold would continue dominating Renaissance culture, that historical and cultural category brought to us by Vasari, which still persists as a reference for eras of western development: Fra Angelico, Masaccio, Piero de la Francesca... but as well for Brueghel and Van Leyden.

Yet, it is in the Baroque, particularly in Caravaggio, where we will find more references for Lucía Vallejo: chiaroscuro, altarpieces and altars, *memento mori*, humidified cloth and a taste for theatrics, dramatic effect and complex compositions and structures. Her fabrics – both those she covers in gold leaf and those of previous works, generally high-toned red and blues achieved with pure pigment – adopt the same Baroque movements and dynamism: that slow and violent exaltation that also speaks of an undisputable mannerist influence. It could be in the work of two great women artists of that day where we might derive her fabrics and apparel: the Flemish artist Clara Peeters or the Italian, Artemisia Gentileschi.

Despite the fact that her work rings clearly of Italy and, above all, Flanders, Vallejo also finds inspiration in a pathos reminiscent of Spanish baroque sculpture. The sizing on the wrapped

mummies recalls how Gregorio Fernández portrayed skin, giving them a patina of brilliance similar to that underscoring the tension of bone and muscle in the works of this artist from Valladolid. However, we might also glimpse influences from the school of Seville, recalling those cloaks of the Immaculate Conception to which Martínez Montañés applies the technique of gold leaf *estofado*.

Then, there is the obsession with death. A rhetoric of death and life in Vallejo's work – not necessarily religious, although verging on an exercise in spirituality and solemnity – evokes that sacred iconography populated by skulls. The artist approaches *vanitas* with the same courage with which she deconstructs and constructs pictorial sculpture of her own.

It is hard to talk about gold without alluding to the pre-Hispanic and colonial. Wonderful examples of pre-Columbian art may be seen in Bogotá's Gold Museum – not necessarily symbols of wealth in this case, but of power and divine qualities. Some examples of colonial art gave rise to a wondrous syncretism of elements, such as golden Solomonic columns with decorative foliage indigenous to Peru. Golden as well the formidable armour of Hernán Cortés, of whom the legend recounts that the Aztecs mistook him for Quetzalcoatl, opening the chapter of bloody colonization masterfully portrayed by Werner Herzog in "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" (1972).

Neither was this lacking in fiction, and lands where gold did not spring from the Waters through myths

“ If I place honey [and gold] on my head, it is inferred that
I am doing something related to thinking ”

Joseph Beuys

such as El Dorado or Atahualpa are few.

Romanticism, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, the Viennese Secession ... so-called contemporary art is filled with a whole range of periods and schools marked by gold. Curiously, the golden phase of Gustav Klimt would be what launched its great commercial success.

Louise Bourgeois, Orlan, Silvie Fleury, Jannis Kounellis, Georg Baselitz, Andy Warhol, Franz West, Terence Koh, Teresa Margolles ... the contemporary artists tempted to fall into the power of the precious metal are not few. One cannot avoid thinking of the horizontal golden paint of Yves Klein or of his gold body-prints, of Sherry Levine's urinal, the backgrounds in the paintings of Gabriel Orozco, Robert Rauschenberg's gold paintings, Dahn Vo's US flag on carton, Chris Burden's bullets ... In a Prague Art Festival for which I was one of the curators in three editions, a Swiss artist, Enrico Centonze, offered gold soup to viewers. Even establishments such as the Bass Museum in Miami and PS1 have devoted specific exhibits to artists working in gold.

The gold in Vallejo's fabrics substitutes time. It is painting that dies and is reborn, a process of transmutation that talks to us about the life of the material, about a certain mysticism that consumes, an old dream of homo faber: that of collaborating in perfecting matter, while ensuring one's own perfection, as Mircea Cantor would say.

This association between gold and immortality has persisted since antiquity, since it is still advertised as the star ingredient in some creams designed to combat the inevitable passage of time, or even as a component of bottled water. Signals like these are what Gilles Lipovetsky interprets as reflections of a new consumer concept, a sign of the will to transcend in our surroundings: the eternal luxury of hypermodern times.



Vallejo's way of capturing history with gesture, archaic and contemporary, calls upon these great histories, which Arundhati Roy claimed was her great secret – precisely, not to have them. Lucía Vallejo's work resolves itself in a spot-on synthesis of disparate influences: east and west, the pagan and the profane, different periods, styles and currents containing a sort of historiographic pharmacopoeia. We should be grateful for artists who remind us that the histories of art were made without periods or interruptions, and that what is contemporary is never so. Vallejo shows us the palimpsest that is the history of art itself, beyond the epochs, periods or ages. Perhaps, as Gombrich said, in reality art as such does not exist, and there are only artists.

