

*What a blessed time that was when we were
on the beach,
went there early with bare head and bare feet,
and fast as a toad's tongue
love bruised the heart of fool and sage alike.¹*

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

Pablo Picasso is rightly considered to be *the* artistic Prometheus of the twentieth century. For like that upstart Titan before him, he, too, fashioned people (for the most part) out of dead matter, investing them with life with the fire of his own unquenchable creativity—a creativity that age would not diminish and that evoked both fear and fascination in his contemporaries. Having embarked on a quest for the one “true,”² but unattainable picture, he created works of tremendous power that, while certainly not beautiful in the conventional sense of the term, nevertheless reflect the artist’s aspiration to absolute beauty. It is a beauty unfettered by canonical chains that paradoxically derives its magical intensity from the reality it represents. It is a beauty that goes far beyond mimesis, but never once degenerates into autonomous contrivance: “Whenever the objects I wanted to depict demanded a different mode of expression, I never once hesitated to appropriate that mode of expression for myself. . . . Different motifs inevitably demand different methods.”³

The artist who pursued the analytical fragmentation of the object even to the point of almost “abstract”

Cubism, and is therefore frequently interpreted as if his primary concern had always been the autonomous analysis of form, would later object vehemently to this modernist apprehension of his works, insisting instead on the expressiveness of his post-Cubist pictorial language: “Of course it would be easier to do a warrior without a helmet, without a horse, and without a head. But then I’d lose all interest in him too, because he might just as well be a man in the Metro. What interests me about the warrior is the warrior.”⁴ And elsewhere: “The painter who best represents a step forward in the history of painting is the one who discovers a new subject.”⁵

With his countless depictions of bathers, depictions that tend to cluster around each new departure in form and content, Picasso had certainly not discovered a “new subject.” Like most of his themes, so this one too, as the only truly outdoor theme in his entire oeuvre, is treated in both traditional and modern terms at the same time.⁶ Giorgione’s (or rather, Titian’s) *Concert Champêtre* (Louvre, Paris), Ingres’s *Turkish Bath* (1859–62, fig. 1), Puvis de Chavannes’s Arcadian sea-