

Modern Dance and the Seduction of Minoan Crete¹

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Since the first decade of the twentieth century, the material culture of Minoan Crete has been a rich source of inspiration for modern writers and artists, as various articles and books on this subject testify.² But the Minoan influence on the performing arts, such as dance and theatre, has not yet received equal attention: whereas the Greek elements in the works of famous early twentieth-century dancers such as Isadora Duncan and members of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* are relatively well known, this chapter explores the connections between Minoan Crete and these representatives of modern(ist) dance.

A scandalous present and scandalous past: modern dance and the Minoans

In the first two decades of the twentieth century the innovative dancing of Isadora Duncan and of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* shocked and seduced audiences in European capitals and beyond. Isadora Duncan's free movements, bare feet, and semi-transparent tunics (Figure 2.1), coupled with her ideas about women and marriage, raised many eyebrows (despite her self-confessed puritanical streak), while the deliberate and explicit eroticism of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet caused considerable scandal.³ For example, in the ballet *Cleopâtre*, one of the sensations of the first *Ballets Russes* season in Paris of 1909, the veil-wrapped, mummy-like body of Ida Rubinstein, appearing in the title role, was carried onto the stage in a chryselephantine sarcophagus by black slaves, who then unravelled the veils, turning the scene into a kind of strip-tease.⁴ In addition, the choreographer and dancer Mikhail Fokine had



Figure 2.1–5: 1) Portrait of Isadora Duncan by Léon Bakst (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford); 2) Nijinsky, final scene with nymph's scarf in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (photo Adolf de Meyer); 3) Knossos, 'La Parisienne' fresco (after Evans 1900–1; Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford); 4) 'The Dancer' fresco (after Evans 1901–2; Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford); 5) 'Theatral Area' (after Evans 1902–3; Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford).

arranged a wild Bacchanal dance for this ballet, in which girls were pursued by satyrs: the dancer Vera Fokina ‘sweeps across the stage like a whirlwind, while Sophia Feodorova freezes into sensual poses. As the pace quickens, all revolve like a maelstrom, and the girls throw themselves on the floor in attitudes of suggestive abandon, while the satyrs hang over them lasciviously. Many people are shocked by this.’⁵ But the most famous example of the Russian sexually explicit and shocking ballets is, arguably, *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*. The ballet had its premiere at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, on the 29 May 1912: the music, by Claude Debussy, was composed in 1894 and was inspired by Mallarmé’s 1865 eponymous poem (cf. Ribeyrol, this volume); the sets and costumes were by Léon Bakst. This ballet scandalized the audience of its Parisian premiere with its unusual angular movements, frieze-like poses in profile, and, above all, with its final scene, in which the ballet’s choreographer and principal dancer Vaslav Nijinsky fulfilled his sexual awakening and desire by masturbating with a nymph’s scarf (Figure 2.2) – an act that was described at the time as an expression of ‘erotic bestiality.’⁶

A few years earlier, the excavations by the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, which had started in the spring of 1900, had sparked a remarkable interest in Minoan Crete, and his discoveries had reached a very wide audience through articles in established newspapers and art magazines.⁷ Evans’ discoveries, like Duncan’s and Nijinsky’s dances, had shocked and seduced the scholarly and general public with their imagery, which showed provocatively bare-breasted, snake-wielding, red-lipped and kiss-curlled females, such as the so-called Snake-goddess figurines and the wall-painting known as ‘La Parisienne’ (Figure 2.3), after the following description published by the French archaeologist Edmond Pottier soon after her discovery:

What would Racine or even Euripides have said, had they been introduced to this authentic image of a relative of Phaedra? ... Her dishevelled hair, the provocative “kiss curl” on her fore-head, her enormous eye and sensual mouth, stained a violent red ... the mass of ribbons tossed over her shoulder in a “come-hither” gesture, this mixture of naïve archaism and spicy modernism ... this Pasiphaë who looks like an habitué of Parisian bars – everything about this work conspires to amaze us; in sum, there is something about the discovery of this unheard-of art that we find stunning, even scandalous.⁸

But, apart from the real and/or perceived eroticism, and accompanying whiff of scandal, are there any other significant connections between early twentieth-century modern dance and the material culture of Minoan Crete?

The connections between ancient Greece and the work of Isadora Duncan and the *Ballets Russes* are relatively well known. Duncan's obsession with Greece, which was partly influenced or, at least, intensified by her reading of Nietzsche, is well documented,⁹ and several scholars agree that some of her Hellenic enthusiasm directly influenced the *Ballets Russes*, especially their 'Greek' ballets: *Daphnis et Chloë*, *Narcisse*, and the already mentioned *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.¹⁰ But how does Minoan Crete fit into this? To put it differently: is there any concrete evidence suggesting that these artists were interested in Minoan Crete and, if so, why were they fascinated by this ancient culture? I would like to suggest that connections between early twentieth-century dance and this ancient civilization occur at two interconnected levels. On the one hand, there is what one might call a direct or explicit level (the concrete evidence), illustrated, for example, by Duncan's impromptu dance at the site of Knossos and by the scenes and costumes designed by the Russian artist Léon Bakst (a prominent member of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*), which were directly inspired by specific aspects of Minoan material culture. On the other, there are connections at an indirect, broader but, arguably, deeper level, which were created by the intellectual climate of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernism, and more specifically by the emerging fascination with primitivism, sexuality, gender relations and especially with animal urges, female sexuality and power. These emerging concerns made Minoan Crete particularly seductive to writers and artists, for reasons discussed below, and also helped to produce modernist perceptions of Minoan Crete, such as Pottier's description of 'La Parisienne', quoted above.

The direct level

Duncan's visit to Knossos

In chronological fashion, I shall start my discussion of the direct level of connections with Duncan's visit to the 'Palace of Minos', and her impromptu dance inside the reconstructed ruins. The exact date of this event is unclear, since no visits to Crete are recorded in her 1928 autobiography (*My Life*), but it was probably around 1903–4, i.e. when she was living in Athens and Evans' discoveries were gaining wide publicity both in the archaeological world and among the wider public. One should also bear in mind that by this date Evans had brought to light frescoes of women dancing (Figure 2.4),¹¹ and had even

claimed that the stepped area at Knossos, dubbed the 'Theatral Area' (Figure 2.5), was the actual *choros* or dancing place of Ariadne, who, in his evolutionary vision, was none other than a Greek remembrance of the female divinity (a Great Mother Goddess) who had presided over the origins of drama, before being replaced by a male god:

[I]t is difficult to refuse the conclusion that this first of theatres, the Stepped Area with its dancing ground, supplies a material foundation for the famous "choros" [of Ariadnê] ... It is symptomatic of the increased importance attached to male divinities in the later religion of Greece that 'choros' and theatre should pass from the Goddess to the God. In the more recent cult the 'choros' of Ariadnê is superseded by that of her Consort Dionysos.¹²

Our main source for Duncan's Knossian dance is an account by Evans' ward, James Candy, which shows that if, on the one hand, this episode did not make a sufficiently deep mark on the American dancer to be recorded in her autobiography, she, on the other, made quite an impression on the archaeologists who witnessed it, especially on Evans' assistant, Duncan Mackenzie:

In the earlier days of the excavations at Knossos, Sir Arthur did not have the time to show visitors around the Minoan Palace, so when the famous dancer, Isadora Duncan, arrived one day, Sir Arthur asked Dr Mackenzie to escort her around the site. She was very impressed with what she saw and on arriving at the Grand Stairway of the Palace, she could not contain herself and threw herself into one of her impromptu dances for which she was so well known. Up and down the steps she danced, her dress flowing around her. Dr Mackenzie was very shocked and told Sir Arthur that he did not approve as it was quite out of keeping with her surroundings. Sir Arthur was very amused and from time to time would tease him about the episode.¹³

In addition to her impromptu dance, which could be described as the perfect embodiment of her Nietzschean-Dionysian enthusiasm for a certain Greek past,¹⁴ especially for primitive, matriarchal Crete, one might also note that she was known to be a great admirer of Mariano Fortuny's 'Peplos' dresses and 'Knossos' scarves, thus named because the Spanish artist drew his inspiration from Greek and Minoan imagery.¹⁵ I was not able to ascertain, however, whether it was a Knossos scarf that caused her untimely and tragic death by getting caught in the wheels of her car and strangling her.¹⁶

Ballets Russes and Minoan Crete: Léon Bakst

Less tragic, but more substantial, are the direct connections between Minoan Crete and the work produced by the Russian artist Léon Bakst for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and for members of his entourage.¹⁷

Bakst's interest in things Greek can be traced back at least to the period 1902–4, when he spent much time in the St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum studying Greek art, which inspired his designs for Ida Rubinstein's production of *Antigone* (1902) as well as the stage performances of Merezhkovsky's translations of Euripides' *Hyppolitus* (1902) and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (1904).¹⁸ Merezhkovsky's translations are part of the contemporary Russian religious and artistic renaissance of the 'Silver Age', which included an interest in classical Greece, and was much influenced by Nietzsche's ideas.¹⁹ While working on these productions, Bakst wrote to his wife about his desire to visit Greece.²⁰ He was able to fulfil his wish in 1907, and he published a memoir of these travels in 1923.²¹ The journey included a visit to Crete, which took place between 16 and 20 May 1907, and left a long-lasting impression on Bakst, as shown by his subsequent artistic productions.²² For example, references to Minoan Crete can be found already in his 1909 cover design of the magazine *Apollon* (e.g. Minoan-type columns and spiral motif)²³ and in his large 1908 painting *Terror Antiquus*, which some have interpreted as a representation of the destruction of Minoan Crete.²⁴ This painting recalls the Knossian Town Mosaic faience plaques²⁵ as well as the famous Lion's Gate of Mycenae in some of its architectural details, although the central figure is the statue of an Archaic Greek *kore*, and other elements also recall Classical Greece. Since, however, the focus of this chapter is on Minoan connections with the performing arts, dance in particular, the following discussion will be limited to Minoan elements in Bakst's designs for sets and costumes. Readers should note from the outset that, although some of the specific archaeological parallels for Bakst's inspiration come from Mycenaean Greece, the motifs and iconography are ultimately of Minoan origin.

A good starting point is the notorious *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (Figure 3.6). Although the influence of Archaic Greece on this ballet is more obvious, especially if one looks at the general appearance of the nymphs – largely modelled on Greek *korai* – some Mycenaean and Minoan elements seem to have crept in, as can be seen in the details of Bakst's designs for the nymphs' costumes. For example, the shape of the nymphs' dresses in some of Bakst's sketches (Figures 3.7–8) are closely reminiscent of Mycenaean 'Phi' and 'Psi'

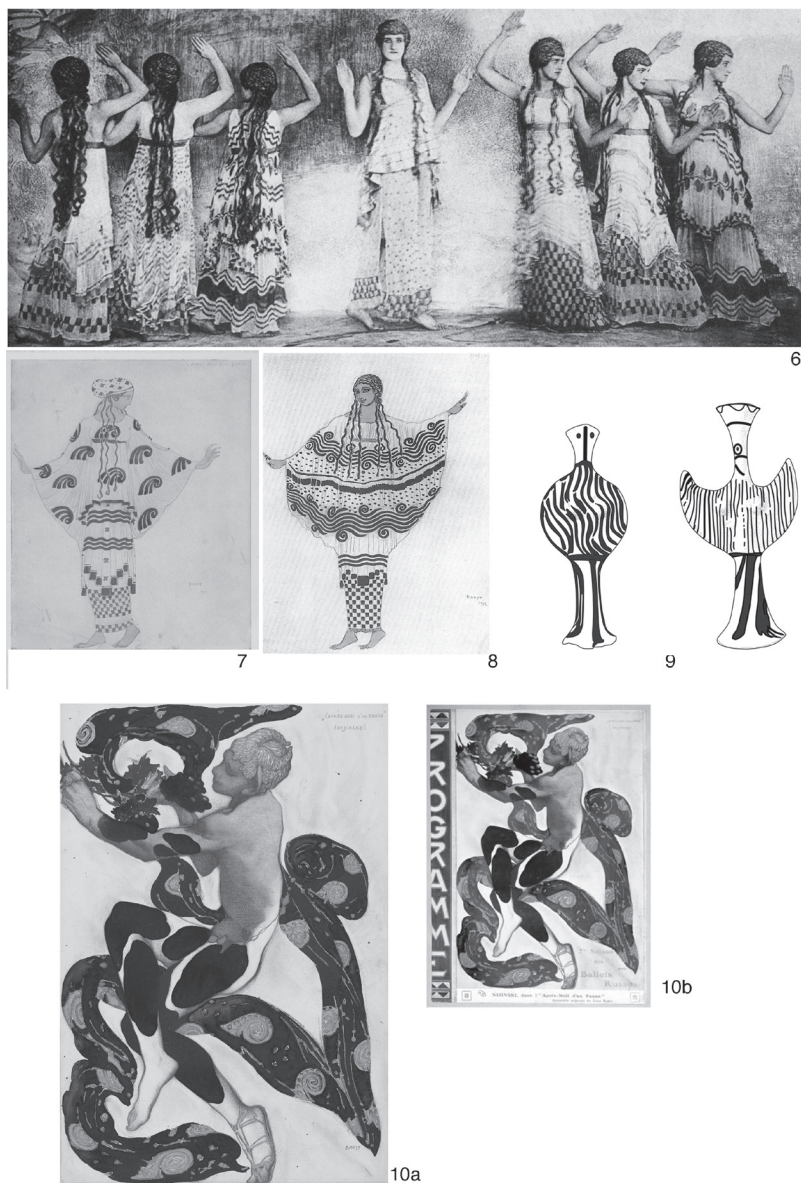


Figure 3.6–10: 6) Nymphs in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (photo Adolf de Meyer); 7) Bakst's design for nymph's costume in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (New York Public Library); 8) Bakst's design for nymph's costume in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut); 9) 'Phi' and 'Psi' Mycenaean figurines (based on Schliemann 1976); 10) Bakst's design for the cover of the ballet programme for *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut).

figurines (Figure 3.9), and the spiral-like motifs are most likely of Minoan inspiration.²⁶ Similarly, some of the costumes actually worn by the nymphs in photographs of the time are decorated with ivy motifs, which are very typical of the Minoan ceramic repertoire, although they also appear in Greek pottery of later periods.²⁷

For other aspects of Bakst's work for *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, however, a Minoan influence might appear, at first sight, more elusive, but still worth investigating. Let us consider the well known image used for the cover of the ballet programme, showing Nijinsky with his piebald costume, holding a bunch of grapes, with a sinuously arranged scarf in the background (Figure 3.10). As Fritz Blakolmer has pointed out,²⁸ this image looks to many art historians and Aegean Bronze Age scholars 'most Minoan', although there is no specific Bronze Age Aegean representation that was the direct model for it: the affinities, in Blakolmer's opinion, are too vague, and are largely due to 'coincidence'. In other words, there are unrelated stylistic convergences, similar visual and compositional principles that occur independently in Minoan art and in the work of many modern artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Bakst. Yet, I would argue that a Minoan element can be seen in the detail of the spiral-like motif in the scarf; moreover, the *Faune* is a half-human and half-animal creature: given the piebald pattern of his costume, it is, perhaps, not too fanciful to suggest that the Cretan myth of the Minotaur, and the representations of piebald bulls in Knossian frescoes might have influenced Bakst's costume in some way. In this context, a passage from Bakst's account of his Greek travels appears rather intriguing:

Greece is so surprising ... scattered clumps of dust-grey olive groves, and higher still there are more naked rocks, wild, classical, mottled like a leopard skin, with irregular, dark brown spots.²⁹

In other words, a combination of this memory of the Greek landscape, the Minotaur myth, and piebald bulls in Knossian frescoes – possibly refreshed by Minoan images available in various publications such as *La Revue de l'Art*³⁰ – could have provided some inspiration for Nijinsky's costume.

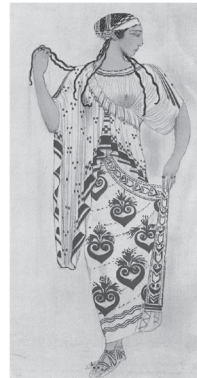
I will conclude this brief discussion of the Minoan elements in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* with some observations about one of the most characteristic and novel features of this ballet, namely the angular, frieze-like postures of the dancers. These, it is commonly accepted, were inspired by Greek relief-carvings and vase-paintings.³¹ Depictions of human figures in profile, however, are also common in Minoan and Egyptian art, and these too could have influenced



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Figure 4.11–15: 11) Bakst's design for the set of *Hélène de Sparte* (1912) (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris). 12) Bakst's design for Menelaus's costume in *Hélène de Sparte* (1912) (Collection of Prof. Boris Stavrovski, New York) also used in the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe*. 13) Bakst's design for Helen's costume in *Hélène de Sparte* (1912) (private collection, akg-images/Erich Lessing). 14) Pottery from Knossos (after Evans 1921–30, vol. IV.1, Figure 216). 15) Pottery from Knossos (after Evans 1921–30, vol. IV.1, Figure 220).

the ballet. In this context, an anecdote reported by one of Nijinsky's biographers may be illuminating: while working on *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Bakst and Nijinsky had arranged to meet in the ancient sculpture department of the Louvre, but 'the painter waited in vain in the Greek section and went away without making contact with the dancer, who was lost in admiration of Egyptian reliefs on the floor below'.³² Beside the posture in profile, one could also note other elements that are similar both in Archaic Greek sculpture and in Minoan iconography, such as the long locks of curly hair. On balance, the nymphs' appearance probably owes more to Archaic Greece, but the point that is worth making here is that in the work of Bakst, as in the work of many of his contemporaries, as well as later artists, allusions to the past are not always specific and clear-cut: Minoan, Greek, Etruscan, or Egyptian elements are often fused and re-elaborated into some kind of archetypal archaism and primitivism, and all act together as a source of inspiration.³³ Interestingly, Eric Shanover also used an Archaic Greek statue (the so-called Peplos Kore) as a model for Helen in his *Age of Bronze*.³⁴ But with these observations on Minotaurs and primitivism I am hinting at and trespassing into the field of connections that one can see at a broader, indirect and deeper level, to which I shall return later.

I shall now conclude this section on direct links between Minoan Crete and the performing arts by looking at two further theatrical productions by Bakst: *Hélène de Sparte* and *Phaedre*. These are also, arguably, his most 'Minoan' works, the latter in particular. They were not produced specifically for the *Ballets Russes*, but for a former member of Diaghilev's company, the aforementioned Ida Rubinstein, who was the heroine of two of their most famous ballets, *Cleopâtre* and *Sheherazade*. Rubinstein was also supposed to be one of the nymphs in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, but by 1911 she was collaborating with the Italian poet, dramatist and novelist Gabriele D'Annunzio on the drama *San Sebastian* (with score by Debussy), and eventually left the *Ballets Russes* to stage other works as her own impresario.³⁵

Thus, in 1912, Bakst, besides working on *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, produced the first of his 'Minoan' offerings for Rubinstein, the set and costumes for the play *Hélène de Sparte* (Figure 4.11), by the Belgian poet Emil Verharen, which tells the story of Helen after her return to Laconia from Troy, where she is pursued by the incestuous passion of her brother Castor. Commenting on this work, Bakst is reported to have said:

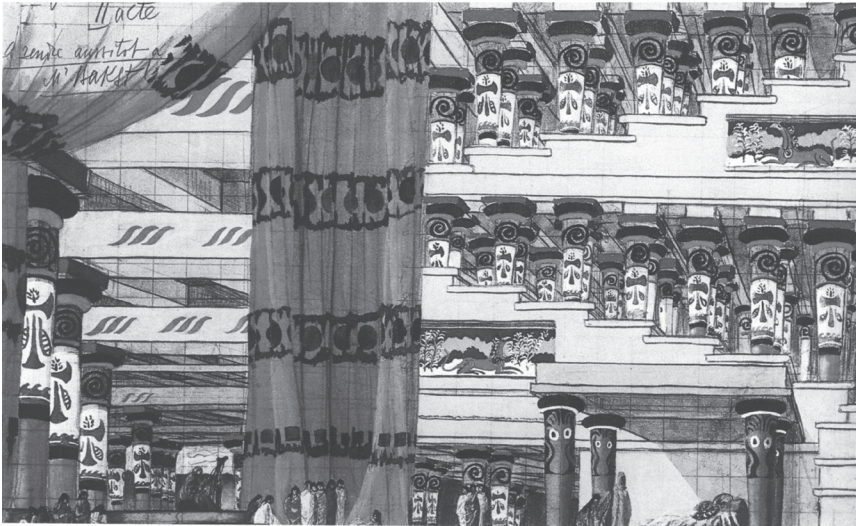
In my sets I have tried to show the Homeric world as I see it. I did my research on Crete, in the labyrinth of Minos. And I must admit that I found what I hoped

for there. In fact, I have always thought that early Greek art, which corresponds to the same Egyptian period, did not have that lack of colour which is generally ascribed to the classical period. Statues and monuments were all multi-hued and I have used traces of those vivid, even brutal colours.³⁶

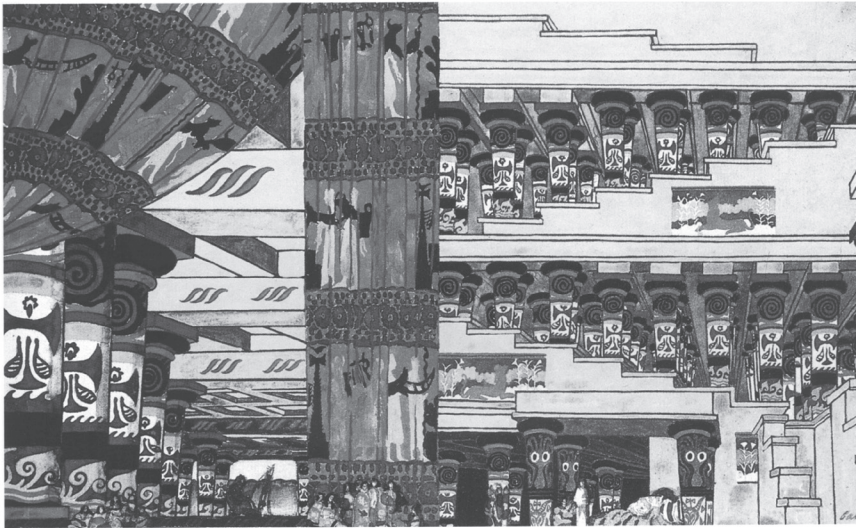
The drawing of the set design preserved by the Museum of Modern Art in Paris (Figure 4.11) is a wonderful concoction of disparate elements, of which the most striking, from a Minoan point of view, are the presence of two 'Lion's Gates', and of several Minoan tapering columns, decorated with Minoan spirals and 'brutal' colours. Further Minoan elements can be found in details of the costumes for Helen and Menelaus (Figure 4.12–13), and are mostly derived from pottery motifs common in the Late Minoan repertoire (e.g. papyrus, 'sacral ivy', pendant with festoons: cf. Figure 4.14–15).³⁷ As a note scribbled on the sketch indicates (top right corner), the costume for Menelaus was to be reused for three brigands in the ballet *Daphnis et Chloë*.

The most spectacular Minoan allusions in Bakst's theatrical art, however, can be found in his work for Ida Rubinstein's staging of the multimedia production of *Phaedre* at the Paris Opera in 1923 – a work based on the tragedy *Fedra* written by D'Annunzio in 1909, with music by Ildebrando Pizzetti. That this work shows the strongest Minoan inspiration is not surprising, since in 1922 Bakst was working on the manuscript, published a year later, of his 1907 travels in Greece (cf. above), rekindling therefore memories of his visit to Phaedra's homeland and, no doubt, finding inspiration from the sketches he had made during that journey. There are several versions of studies for the set of this opera,³⁸ but they all show an abundance of Minoan tapering columns, decorated with running spirals so typical of Minoan art and/or with other quintessential Minoan symbols, such as the double axe and the octopus. The examples conserved in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Madrid and at the Musée de L'Opéra in Paris (Figure 5.16–17) also make direct reference to the griffins in the frescoes of the 'Throne Room' at Knossos, and to the 'Grand-Staircase' in the east wing of the palace, where Isadora Duncan had performed her impromptu dance.

Concerning the costumes for *Phaedre*, one designed for a female character is directly based on a reconstructed fresco found in the Mycenaean palace of Tiryns, showing a woman in the characteristic Minoan ceremonial dress, with flounced skirt and tight bodice leaving the breasts exposed (Figure 6.18–19).³⁹ We do not know whether this type of costume was actually used on the stage – probably not, if we take into consideration the fact that even Ida Rubinstein, who



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Figure 5.16–17: 16) Bakst's design for the set of *Phaedre* (1923) (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid); 17) Bakst's design for the set of *Phaedre* (1923) (Musée de L'Opéra, Paris).



Figure 6.18–22: 18) Bakst's costume sketch for female character in *Phaedre* (1923) (private collection, after Spencer 2009, p. 166); 19) Reconstructed fresco from Tiryns (after Rodenwalt, G. *Tiryns: die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen des Instituts (Band 2): die Fresken des Palastes*, pl. VIII, available from <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/dilit/tiryns1912a>); 20) Bakst's sketch for costume of male character in *Phaedre* (1923) (private collection, after Spencer 2009, p. 92 top right); 21) Bakst's sketch for costume of nurse in *Phaedre* (1923) (private collection; akg-images/Erich Lessing); 22) Bakst's sketches for props in *Phaedre* (1923), showing Minoan inspiration (private collection: after Spencer 2009, p. 93, right).

was certainly not averse to scandal and showing off her body,⁴⁰ appears to have opted for something more demure, as indicated by actual photographs showing her in Phaedra's role.⁴¹ Other costumes show, once again, Bakst's predilection for the Minoan-like spiral and papyrus motifs, and even some of his prop designs include typical Minoan elements, such as the double axe (Figure 6.20–22).

Despite the demure costume that Rubinstein seems to have used on the stage, the opera/drama provoked quite strong reactions, at least to judge from some contemporary reports on the performance. These described Bakst's sets and costumes as 'barbaric', with strong colours that were well suited to the dramatic story of *Phaedre*, and created overwhelming psychological effects. The sets in particular were said to have 'related to all the conventional images of that nightmare of archaism to which the Ballets Russes inured us, like the viscous anatomy of the octopus.'⁴²

The indirect level

The examples discussed so far offer more or less concrete evidence of direct Minoan inspirations for the performing arts in the early twentieth century, from Duncan's impromptu dancing at Knossos to Bakst's set and costume designs for ballet and theatrical works. But these examples also hint at connections at a broader and, at the same time, deeper level, which can explain why artists such as Duncan and Bakst were inspired and seduced by Minoan Crete. I should like to suggest that there are complex strands in these deeper correlations, which, for simplicity's sake, could be brought under the broad umbrella of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fascination with primitivism (and especially the Dionysian primitivism of Nietzsche), combined with the emerging interests in the psychology of sexuality (especially female), as also discussed by Ribeyrol in this volume.

Both Isadora Duncan and Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* propelled the art of dance into European modernity: they represented a conscious break from tradition, which, interestingly and, perhaps, ironically, was partly stimulated by their encounters with and visions of the Greek past, of incorporating Minoan Crete. But the Greek past that inspired Duncan, Nijinsky, Bakst and many other artists of the period was not the serene Greece of Praxiteles, whose art Ezra Pound found so objectionable, because it reminded him of 'cake-icing and plaster of Paris' and was only suitable for 'super-aesthetes and matinee girls.'⁴³ It was, in fact, the Greece of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Frazer's *The*

Golden Bough (1890), Lang's *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (1887), Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Harrison's *Mythology and Monuments* (1890) and *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903): primitive and Dionysian, pagan and irrational. It was a Greece that mirrored modern concerns about the relationship between male and female, the tension between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, and represented modern challenges to the Enlightenment's rationalism and prevalent Christian values.⁴⁴

Minoan Crete offered a particularly suitable source of inspiration for artists working in this *Zeitgeist*. In an age used to viewing societies in an evolutionary, stage-development fashion, Minoan Crete was seen to represent a more primitive stage of Greece, and precisely because of its 'primitivism' it was also perceived as more 'modern'. The bold Minoan artistic vocabulary and imagery showed affinities with the non-classical and 'primitive' arts of Africa, India, Japan and Polynesia, which fascinated and inspired artists of the Modern Style, who were reacting against the ultra-refined classicism and aestheticism of the previous decades.⁴⁵

Other aspects of Minoan society could also be interpreted according to contemporary evolutionary and primitivist notions. For example, as Walter Burkert remarked,

[T]he discovery of Minoan civilisation coincided with the period of the Cambridge [Ritualists] School's greatest influence. Attempts had long been made to search out the original forebears of Greek religion, and now, it seemed, they had come to light, the pre-Greek religion had been uncovered. The antithesis of the Olympian, anthropomorphic and polytheistic world of Homer's gods was no sooner sought than found: a predominance of chthonic powers, matriarchy, and non-anthropomorphic deities, or a single divine figure [i.e. a Great Mother Goddess] in place of a pantheon.⁴⁶

This alleged Minoan monotheism, centred on a Great Mother Goddess (an idea now questioned by most scholars, but widely accepted at the time), the abundance of female iconography, and the perceived celebration of the female body (or at least of its breasts, as illustrated by the snake-goddess figurines and other Minoan female imagery) were often construed as a reflection of some kind of a primitive matriarchal society. The archaeological discoveries, interpreted in this way, in turn provided these evolutionary and primitivist trends with more grist to their mill.

In addition, Minoan Crete fascinated and seduced modern artists for its perceived embodiment and connection with some of the most famous and intriguing Greek myths. A generation earlier, Schliemann's excavations had

given flesh and blood to Nietzsche's Homeric heroes as 'blond Germanic beasts' with a 'healthy pagan morality'.⁴⁷ Since 1900, Evans' excavations had given flesh and blood to well known Greek myths involving female sexuality, power and seduction, such as Pasiphae's desire for and seduction of Poseidon's bull, or Ariadne's and Phaedra's tragic battles between their sexual and more rational urges – all themes that, yet again, closely reflected modern concerns. As remarked by Ziolkowski, Minoan Crete was seen to offer 'a culture of elegance and sophistication with a barely suppressed undercurrent of animal violence and sexuality – a tension that seemed almost paradigmatically to foreshadow European civilization as unmasked by such thinkers as Nietzsche and Freud, and the horrors of World War I'.⁴⁸

For Isadora Duncan, in particular, pagan, primitive Greece and its earlier incarnation, Minoan Crete, offered inspiration for her new modern dance, which she saw as a form of *theopraxis*, a religious activity in which the human soul could find the highest expression of human ideals, and which could replace the prevalent Christian values that mortified the body, especially the female body.⁴⁹ One could even suggest that, in the climate of the time, Duncan's dancing could be seen as a resurrection of primitive rituals, of the kind that Jane Harrison would have approved, especially now that Evans had 'proved' that Ariadne, instead of Dionysos, was the older, female divinity presiding over the origins of drama.⁵⁰ For Nijinsky too, dance was a way of embodying his own religiosity: in words that remind one of Nietzsche, he recorded in his diary that when creating *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* he felt the presence of God, and also that when he danced he felt 'I am the bull, a wounded bull. I am God in the bull. I am Apis. I am an Egyptian. I am an Indian. I am a Red Indian. I am a Negro. I am a Chinaman. I am a Japanese. I am a foreigner, a stranger. I am a sea bird. I am a land bird. I am the tree of Tolstoy'.⁵¹ Had he visited Crete, like his colleague Léon Bakst, perhaps he would have added 'I am a Minoan'. Last but not least, for Bakst the 'brutal colours' and the scantily dressed women of Minoan Crete offered a suitable match for his eclectic interest in Greece and the Orient, in violence and sex, and for his 'obsessive' eroticism.⁵² It is very appropriate, and perhaps no coincidence, that Bakst's most Minoan creations were offered to his muse Ida Rubinstein, a very powerful and seductive woman.

Also, it is certainly no coincidence that one of the first 'modern' and sexually charged interpretations of a Minoan artefact, the fresco known as 'La Parisienne', was produced by Pottier in early twentieth-century Paris – a city that in the decades before World War I was the capital and veritable crucible of early modernism in every art form.⁵³

To conclude, the new material culture of Minoan Crete seduced early twentieth-century artists with its bold colours as well as with its 'primitive' and 'scandalous' female imagery. Although new and shocking, it was also seen to embody old and familiar myths that resonated with modern preoccupations: it provided an alluring new stage, on which scholars and artists could perform their ideas, anxieties and utopias about gender relations, female power and sexuality. Duncan's Knossian dance, Bakst's 'Minoan' scenes and costumes, and Pottier's description of 'La Parisienne' as a 'distant relative of Phaedra ... a mixture of naïve archaism and spicy modernism' forcefully encapsulate this powerful and seductive combination.

Notes

- 1 Acknowledgements: my thanks are first and foremost to the editors of this volume, for giving me the opportunity to explore the relationship between the Minoans and modern dance. I should also like to thank my husband (Roger Lonsdale), various friends, and colleagues, who provided me with interesting references and/or commented on early drafts of this chapter (although I am solely responsible for its content and mistakes): Ilaria Caloi, Cathy Gere, Yannis Hamilakis, David Konstan, Regina Llamas, Derek Offord, Liz Prettejohn and Charlotte Ribeyrol (whose stimulating contribution to this volume forms a kind of prelude to my own chapter). Professor Boris Stavroski kindly showed me Bakst's design for Menelaus' costume in *Hélène de Sparte*/brigands in *Daphnis and Chloe*, which is currently in his possession.
- 2 For example, Farnoux 1993, 1996; Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006; Gere 2009; Caloi 2010; Ziolkowski 2008.
- 3 On Duncan's 'shockingly innovative and indeed scandalous' dances see, for example, Hargrove 2009: 49, 165–9. On Duncan's self-confessed Puritanism see Duncan 1928: 79, 255, and LaMothe 2006: 110; see also Van Vechten 1977: 28: 'she called her art the renaissance of the Greek ideal but there was something modern about it, pagan though it might be in quality. Always it was pure and sexless ... always abstract emotion has guided her interpretation.' On the explicit and intended eroticism of Diaghilev's ballet see, for example, Spencer 2009: 55: 'Diaghilev was now convinced that what the French audiences wanted and expected from the Russians, were daring tales of sex and violence "gift-wrapped" in superb music, brilliant dancing, and above all the outrageous colours and semi-nudity of Bakst's imagination.' On Bakst's eroticism see also below.
- 4 Cf. Spencer 2009: 55.
- 5 Buckle 1971: 103; see also de Cossart 1987: 15–18.

- 6 Calmette, the editor of *Le Figaro* (as reported by Reiss 1960: 106) commented on the ballet as follows: 'We have seen a faun, incontinent and vile with its movements of erotic bestiality and gestures of heavy shamelessness ... the true public will never accept such animal realism.'
- 7 See, for example, Sherratt 2009. The widespread popularity, at least among the cultured classes, of Minoan Crete is also captured by references to Evans' discoveries in contemporary works of literature such as Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (*A L'ombre des jeune filles en fleur*: 'Les géographes, les archéologues nous conduisent bien dans l'île de Calypso, exhument bien le palais de Minos; *La côté du Guermantes*: 'ces chambres sans toit et en plein air avaient l'air d'être celles du Palais du Soleil, tel qu'on aurait pu le retrouver dans quelque Crète'; cf. Proust 2002a: 526: Geographers and archaeologists may well take us to Calypso's island or unearth the true palace of King Minos; Proust 2002b: 152: 'these airy roofless chambers seemed to belong to some Palace of the Sun, such as might have been found somewhere like Crete,') and Ford Madox Ford's 1915 novel, *The Good Soldier*, (Part I, chapter II: 'my whole endeavours were to keep poor dear Florence on topics like the finds at Cnossos and the mental spirituality of Walter Pater').
- 8 Pottier 1902: 86 (also cited in Farnoux 1993: 105 and Lapatin 2002: 54). On the discovery of the 'Snake Goddess' figurines and 'Parisienne' fresco see Evans 1900–1: 56 and Figure 17 ('Parisienne') and Evans 1902–3: 38–94, esp. 74–7 ('Snake Goddess' and votary). On the 'Snake Goddess' see also Lapatin 2002. At the risk of reinforcing national stereotypes, the British archaeologist, who discovered the 'Snake Goddesses' and 'La Parisienne', unlike the French Edmond Pottier, either deliberately suppressed or was completely oblivious to their potential erotic charm, preferring to see them as representations of a nurturing Great Mother Goddess, and an ancestral Virgin Mary (Evans 1902–3: 86). For an historical understanding and critique of Evans' Mother Goddess see introduction and relevant chapters in Goodison and Morris 1998 and Morris 2006, with further bibliography; see also Hutton 1997.
- 9 On Duncan's obsession with Greece see, for example, Duncan 1928, chapter VIII, *passim*, where she recounts how she and her brother spent much time in the British Museum studying ancient Greek vases; in chapter XII she narrates her first visit to Greece in ecstatic terms, kissing the soil when landing at Karvasaras, and building a 'temple' on the hill of Kopanos, opposite the Acropolis, and 'living under the reign of other kings – Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Priam.' On Duncan and Nietzsche see LaMothe 2006. Duncan's autobiography notably starts with an epigraph from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.
- 10 According to Duncan, her Russian colleagues started wearing Greek costumes and dancing bare-footed after her first visit to their country (Duncan 1928, chapter XVII: 173–84, esp. at 184). Carl Van Vechten (1977: 32) reports that 'Fokine

- thanks her for the new Russian Ballet. She did indeed free the Russians from the conventions of the classic ballet and but for her it is doubtful if we should have seen *Scheherazade* and *Cléopâtre*. *Daphnis et Chloë*, *Narcisse* and *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* bear her direct stamp'. On Duncan's influence on Fokine see also Buckle 1971: 35; Spencer 1973: 103; and Hargrove 2009: 170.
- 11 Evans 1901: 55–8, Figure 28 ('Dancing Lady' fresco), where he suggests that 'it is not difficult to believe that figures such as this, surviving on the palace walls even in their ruined state, may lie at the root of the Homeric passage describing the most famous of the works of Daedalos at Knossos – the 'Choros' of Ariadne'.
- 12 Evans 1902–3: 99–112, esp. 111. Cf. also note above.
- 13 Candy 1984: 26; see also Momigliano 1999: 68–9. When I interviewed Mackenzie's nephew, Alistair Bain Mackenzie, in the spring of 1992, he confirmed that his uncle had told him about his meeting with the American dancer at Knossos. Mackenzie's reaction can be compared and contrasted, to some extent, with the outrage caused by the naked dancers on the Athenian acropolis photographed by Nelly in the late 1920s (Hamilakis and Yalouri 1999: 118–9 and Figure 1; Van Steen 2002: 384 n.37). The 'Grand Stairway' referred to by Candy was excavated and restored in the first years of the excavations (cf. Evans 1900–1 and 1901–2). Duncan also influenced to some extent Eva Palmer-Sikelianou's vision of ancient dance in her staging of Greek drama at the Delphic Festivals of 1927–30 (Wiles 2000: 185–8; Van Steen 2002: 378 n. 14).
- 14 Cf. Gere 2009: 95.
- 15 On Duncan, Fortuny, and his 'Peplos' dresses and 'Knossos' scarves see De Osma 1980, esp. 132; see also Nuzzi *et al.* 1984 (especially, the contributions by De Osma and Peri). On Fortuny and Minoan Crete see Caloi 2010.
- 16 On Duncan's death see, for example, report in *The New York Times* of 15 September 1927: <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30C10F9355F17738DDDAC0994D1405B878EF1D3> (accessed 5 December 2010).
- 17 On Bakst's artistic production, especially for the performing arts, see Schouvaloff 1991; Spencer 1973, 2009.
- 18 Spencer 2009: 31, 37–9; de Cossart 1987: 9–11.
- 19 Rosenthal 1974, 1975, 1986; Scholl 1994: viii and 40–1; Grillaert 2008; Coates 2010. Interestingly, Merezhkovsky also wrote an intriguing book about the Minoans as proto-Christians (Merezhkovsky 1925).
- 20 Spencer 2009: 37.
- 21 Bakst 1923.
- 22 For Bakst's obsession with Crete and Greece after his visit see also Garafola 1998: 52.
- 23 Spencer 2009: 25.
- 24 Spencer 2009: 48.

- 25 Evans 1901–2: 14–22, Figure 8.
- 26 On Mycenaean figurines see French 1971 and 2008. For spirals see, for example, Furumark 1941, Figure 60 and Betancourt 1985, *passim*.
- 27 For ivy in Minoan pottery cf., for example, Furumark 1941: 268–74; Betancourt 1985: 98.
- 28 Blakolmer 2006: 228.
- 29 Schouvaloff 1991: 54.
- 30 Cf Pottier 1902.
- 31 See, for example, Buckle 1971: 164–5. On Nijinsky's interest in things Greek, see also Nijinsky 1937: 82: 'I have a daughter Kyra. I gave her this name because I love Greece. I always had a great interest for Grecian Art: it reminds me of my *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.' As Wiles (2000, 188) has remarked, Emmanuel's *La danse grecque antique d'après le monuments figurés* (1896) was influential in establishing the idea, very common at the time of Isadora Duncan and the *Ballets Russes*, that ancient Greek dance could be reconstructed from ancient material culture, especially vase painting.
- 32 Buckle 1971: 163. Cf. also Buckle 1971: 276, suggesting that in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* the 'basic position ... had been that Egyptian combination of a full torso with heads, hands, and legs in profile.' The failed meeting in the Louvre is reported in Reiss 1960: 102, as an anecdote related to the author by Michel Larionov in an interview of July 1954.
- 33 Cf. also La Rosa and Militello 2006: 249–51.
- 34 As he explained in the discussion following his paper at the conference, and pers. comm.
- 35 Spencer 2009: 153; Spencer 1973: 127–56; de Cossart 1987: 15, 24, 44.
- 36 As cited in Spencer 2009: 86 (cf. Spencer 1973: 144).
- 37 For 'sacral ivy' cf. Furumark 1941: 268–74, esp. Figure 35–6, motif 12.z; for papyrus cf. Furumark 1941: 261 Figure 33, esp. motif 11.1; for pendant with festoons cf. Furumark 1941: 333, Figure 56: esp. motif 38.1 and Betancourt 1985: 142 Figure 108. The motive on the female costume appears to be a combination of an upside-down 'sacred ivy' and 'crocus' (Furumark 1941: 261, Figure 33, 10.9).
- 38 See, for example, Schouvaloff 1991 and Spencer 2009.
- 39 It is actually based on the reconstruction made by E. Gilliéron of fragments coming from different figures: see Immerwahr 1990: 114–5, pl. 55.
- 40 De Cossart 1987: 11, 16, 18, 20–21.
- 41 As illustrated, for example, in Spencer 2009: 91.
- 42 De Cossart 1987: 96, paraphrasing and quoting from Heugel 1923.
- 43 Pound 1914. On the 'super-aesthetes' frowned upon by Pound see Charlotte Ribeyrol, this volume. Also note that Pound's views on Greek art seem to have been partly shared by Nijinsky, since, according to his wife, he preferred 'the severity of

- Attic carving, the simplicity and faith of the pre-Phidias sculptors against the charm and elegance of Praxiteles' (R. Nijinsky 1933, cited in Spencer 2009: 72).
- 44 On the 'paradigmatic shift' from 'Olympian gods to Chthonian divinities' at the turn of the twentieth century see also Ribeyrol, this volume. On the importance of Nietzsche and other figures such as Marx, Freud and Frazer, in fashioning certain views of ancient Greece, and in preparing the ground for an enthusiastic (and modernist) response to the rediscovery of Minoan Crete see, for example, Ziolkowski 2008: esp. 14–18, 165 and Gere 2009: esp. 35–8. On Duncan as a devotee of Nietzsche see above. On the interest in primitivism in early twentieth-century art, music and literature see, for example, Butler 1994, *passim* and Blakolmer 2006, with further bibliography. On the interest in primitivism especially in the performing arts in the early twentieth century, and the role of Jane Harrison, see Peters 2008, 2009; Wiles 2000: 100. In this context, it may be worth remembering here that exactly a year after the premiere of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* presented the even more 'primitive' and shocking ballet *Le sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring), with choreography by Nijinsky, designs by Nichola Roerich, and music by Igor Stravinsky. On Nietzsche's influence on Russia see Rosenthal 1986; Grillaert 2008; Coates 2010.
- 45 For example, Flinders Petrie in a letter of 1890 compared some Minoan pottery with 'the savage neatness of Polynesian ornaments' (cited in Fitton 1995: 114). See also Blakolmer 2006: 232 with further references.
- 46 Burkert 1985: 39.
- 47 Gere 2009: 35–6.
- 48 Ziolkowski 2008: 24.
- 49 Cf. LaMothe 2006: 107–8
- 50 Cf. above and notes 10–11. Peters 2008: 26 on Harrison's place in the history of drama/performance studies.
- 51 V. Nijinsky 1937: 37 and 151. Cf. Nietzsche 2000: 23: 'In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher communal nature ... he feels himself as god'.
- 52 Spencer 1973: 165: 'No student of Bakst's costume designs, especially for the early oriental ballet, could fail to recognise their obsessive eroticism.' Cf. also Spencer 1973: 69 (on Diaghilev's and Bakst's shared interest in sex and violence); *Léon Bakst. Sensualismens Triumf* (1993); Buckle 1971: 127 (on Bakst eclectic personality and tastes).
- 53 See, for example, Hargrove 2009: 1 citing Shattuck 1968, and 5, on the remarkable, renaissance-like intellectual and artistic atmosphere of Paris before World War I.

