

Longus in the *Mir Istkusstva*: Léon Bakst, Maurice Ravel and Marc Chagall

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In the introduction to George Moore's translation of *Daphnis and Chloe*, the publisher, George Braziller, writes:

When it was suggested to Chagall that he illustrate the fable of "Daphnis and Chloe" he began his preparation by making two trips to Greece. And it is the very essence of the Greek landscape that was absorbed by the artist and then recreated on pages drenched in blue, shimmering with the sunniest yellow, shadowed in palest mauve. (Preface)

Before Marc Chagall was commissioned to create the lithographs that accompany the 1961 *Tériade* volume,¹ the artist had been asked in 1958 to design the scenery for an Opéra de Paris performance of Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* – a background which Franz Meyer in his monumental work, *Marc Chagall: Life and Work*, writes as having origins in both Chagall's "theatrical experiments in Russia" and "the impact of Greece."² Meyer states in addition that just as the painter had traveled to Palestine before creating his Bible illustrations, in the same manner Chagall went to Delphi and Poros in 1952, and Poros and Nauplia in 1954, where he "stood spellbound before the great masterpieces of the Archaic sculptors and felt the profundity and joy of the Greek world with all his heart and soul."³ Jean-Paul Crespelle in his 1969 biography of Chagall and Sidney Alexander in his 1978 profile

¹ The book was originally published for *Tériade*'s French edition in Paris in 1961 and republished in English in New York in 1977.

² Meyer 1961, 574.

³ Meyer 1961, 547.

of the artist both concur with Meyer's statement.⁴ In none of his own recollections does Chagall state that this is so.

Chagall's Russian training and experience, moreover, have been for the greater part been ignored in the creation of the paintings of Longus' novel, as is evidenced by the most recent biography by Monica Bohm-Duchen, who comments as follows on these trips and the 1958 production:

Although Chagall produced a number of sketches directly inspired by the landscapes and monuments of that country, the main artistic outcome of these visits was the series of coloured lithographs on the theme of *Daphnis and Chloë*, commissioned by Tériade in 1952 and published in 1961. In 1958 the Paris Opéra would commission him to produce the sets and costumes for Ravel's ballet of the same name.

This ballet had been originally commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev in 1907, if the notation made by Ravel in his autobiographical sketch is accurate,⁵ or 1909, if one of Ravel's biographers, Victor I. Seroff, is correct.⁶ Whatever the date, the play was first presented by the Ballet Russe in 1912,⁷ and garnered for Ravel the "reputation as one of France's leading composers."⁸ The scenery from the 1912 production, however, had been designed by Léon Bakst, which in Chagall's opinion "adhered far too closely to the classicist image of Greece, which suited neither Longus nor Ravel."⁹

A brief biography for each of the men involved in the musical and artistic interpretation of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* is here supplied in order to put these great men in some historical context. Leon Bakst was born to a middle class Jewish family in Belarus. He was educated in St. Petersburg at the Imperial Academy of Arts but was expelled after painting a too realistic *Pietà*. He wanted to be an illustrator but changed his mind when he met Aleksandr Benois, with whom he traveled throughout Europe. In 1898, to-

⁴ Crespelle 1970, 256; Alexander 1978, 452–453.

⁵ See "An Autobiographical Sketch by Maurice Ravel" in Orenstein 1990, 31 and 36 n.22.

⁶ Seroff 1970, 148–149 argues for the later date as more acceptable because Ravel's libretto was probably composed "after Ravel saw the Russian Ballet and Nijinsky [I]t is evident from Ravel's score of the ballet that Nijinsky had inspired many passages in *Daphnis et Chloë*."

⁷ Orenstein 1975, 9 and 48.

⁸ Orenstein 1975, 48.

⁹ Meyer 1961, 550.

gether with Benois and Sergei Diaghilev, he founded the group *World of Art* (*Mir Iskusstva*). In 1906 he became a teacher in the Elizaveta Zvantseva art school where, among other students, he taught Chagall. Bakst's greatest achievements are related to the theater: he debuted with the stage design for the Hermitage and Aleksandrinskii theaters in St. Petersburg in 1902–1903, and in 1906 he went to Paris where he designed stage sets and costumes for Diaghilev's newly formed ballet company, the Ballet Russe. Bakst acquired international renown with his sets and costumes, which conveyed a flavor of the idyllic and distant past.¹⁰

Maurice Ravel was an eclectic artist who displayed his skills in operas, in ballet productions, and in orchestral, vocal, chamber and piano music. Ravel wrote two operas, the first a comédie-musicale, *The Spanish Clock*, and the second, with a libretto by Colette, the imaginative *The Child and the Enchantments*. Ravel composed his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* in response to a request from the Russian impresario Diaghilev. The work, a symphonie choréographique, is based on the novel of Longus.

Marc Chagall was born on July 7, 1887, in Vitebsk, Belorussia. Chagall began his studies in Vitebsk, then moved to St. Petersburg, hoping that his art would find approval there – he failed his first art examination. In 1907 Chagall applied and was accepted to the school of the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg, but, disenchanted with the school, he transferred to Zeidenberg's private art school and later to Zvantseva's School, where he studied with Bakst. After the Revolution Chagall was active as an art educator, and in 1919 became a founder, director, and the most popular teacher at the Vitebsk Academy. However, because he wanted the school to express all points of view on art, he was ousted by the Malevich faction (Suprematists) and left Vitebsk for Moscow. In Moscow, Chagall worked at the Kamernyi State Jewish Theater and with the Habimah Theater. The sources of his inspiration are found in his childhood, the life of a provincial city of Vitebsk and its Jewish community, the Scriptures, Russian folk art and icon painting, and I suggest, in his association with Bakst and the *Mir Iskusstva*.

Although Chagall was probably thoroughly enthralled by Greece, he must have been introduced to Longus' novel by his former teacher Léon Bakst while a student at the Zvantseva School in St. Petersburg. Bakst by

¹⁰ For a more complete biography consult Kennedy 1976, 277–300, and Bowlt 1982, 216–232.

this time had been a key member of the *Mir Iskusstva*, which was the “center of the Russian modern movement.”¹¹ Indeed Bakst was at the height of his fame when Chagall made his acquaintance. They were student and teacher for the year and a half that Chagall studied at the Zvantseva school. Although the teacher and student did not completely get along, because Bakst thought that Chagall’s talent was limited, nevertheless Chagall “appreciated Bakst’s stress on free color, united to optical reality.”¹² On this relationship Crespelle writes:

...Bakst did reinforce Chagall’s innate sense of the importance of color as opposed to line, a concept which would divide him from most of the painters influence by Cubism. The characteristic qualities of his painting had appeared: a disdain for realism, the dreamlike atmosphere, folk themes, shimmering colors....¹³

It was Bakst who not only helped form Chagall’s conception of art¹⁴ and of Longus’ novel, but, as mentioned, he was also the person who had initially designed the scenery for Ravel’s 1912 production.

How do Longus, Bakst, Chagall and the *Mir Istkusstva* all tie in? The answer is found in the *Mir Istkusstva* artistic phenomenon and Bakst’s vision of art, which in turn influenced Chagall in his depictions of the ancient novel. The accepted paradigm of influence of Longus on the works of Ravel and Chagall should be as follows. Bakst read J. Amyot’s 1559 French translation of Longus’ novel and considered it the example *par excellence* of the kind of literature and art that epitomized the *Mir Istkusstva*’s *ars gratia artis* motto.¹⁵ The *World of Art* condemned any moralistic utilitarian view of art, and placed heavy emphasis on symbolism, historical novels and religious

¹¹ Alexander 1978, 93. This artistic movement had three phases: 1898–1906 (from its founding—the journal—to the end of publication), 1910–1924 (art shows under said name), 1921 and 1927 (art shows in Paris). The aims of this society were to accelerate the evolution of Russian art, to establish a vehicle through which the *miriskusniki* (the members of this circle) could bring about this acceleration (the art shows and the founding of the Ballet Russe), and to document this development in a journal (the *Mir Iskusstva*).

¹² Alexander 1978, 94.

¹³ Crespelle 1970, 78.

¹⁴ In Alexander’s (1978, 156) discussion of Chagall’s *Golgotha* the following observation is made: “This is the crucifixion not as Calvary but as a Russian ballet staged by Diaghilev and Bakst.”

¹⁵ Alexander 1978, 88–89.

mysticism.¹⁶ Although “there is no explicit evidence”¹⁷ that Chagall had been affected by this agitation, it must be agreed that Bakst, one of the founders of the movement, must have had some influence on his student.

Up until this time the Russian view of art had been a realist one and consequently preferred Russian reality to Grecian Arcadia, focused on social troubles, perceived art as a narrative sequence, and emphasized social theme in a social context.¹⁸ This view of art clashed with the *Mir Iskusstva*'s view which had a greater concern for manner than content. Its predominant interests were with the intrinsic elements of art rather than with its social allegiance or importance, and elected form over content, style over nature. It is no wonder that the *miriskusniki* chose *Daphnis and Chloe* as their model – for them, as for Longus, art was something too ethereal, too mobile to be anchored to the realities of life. Bakst's selection of this ancient novel illustrated the *Mir Iskusstva*'s new artistic code of the rediscovery and appreciation of an ancient culture. It looked back to classical Greece, popular myth, and the primordial state of man.

As mentioned previously, during a brief but important period of time at the Zvantseva Chagall had been a student of Bakst, who had already sketched decorative panels depicting moments from Longus' narrative (e.g., plates V and VIII in Levinson). Moreover, Bakst had been the first person in “the world ...to try to work out a stage and a conventional plastic language” of ancient Greece that was in accord not only “with our modern conception of ancient art,”¹⁹ but also as close as possible to the ancient originals.²⁰ Indeed, while in Russia Bakst had made it a point to include in his art and in his teaching “the forms and images of ancient drawing depicted on Attic vases, bas-reliefs, and sculpture” that would later surface in his and Mikhail Fokine's classical designs for the 1912 production of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*.²¹ Serge Lifar, the biographer of the impresario Diaghilev, comments as follows on this Greek stage setting:

...it would be the greatest injustice to Diaghilev, Benois and Bakst to contend that this erudition was Fokine's alone, and not that also of these

¹⁶ Alexander 1978, 88–89.

¹⁷ Alexander 1978, 90.

¹⁸ The following information on Russian art is from Bowlt 1982 and Kennedy 1976.

¹⁹ Levinson 1971, 99–100.

²⁰ Levinson 1971, 89.

²¹ Seroff 1970, 156.

others. It is possible to believe, for instance, that Fokine alone created ...*Daphnis et Chloé*, when it was Bakst who reconstructed each pose from works of art of the period...²²

The aesthetics of the *Mir Istkusstva* circle and Bakst's fascination with and loyalty to ancient Greece²³ demonstrate that there were factors other than the trips to Greece that influenced Chagall's selection and treatment of Longus.

Before Serge Diaghilev's request that he compose the music for Fokine's libretto based on Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, Ravel knew little of this ancient novel.²⁴ The composer admits this in a letter written to Michel D. Calvocoressi on May 3, 1910, part of which reads as follows:

In *Daphnis*, what are the exact names of (1) the very obliging lady (Lycea, I think); (2) the old shepherd who brought up one of the two kids (something like Lammon)? Still to the companion of Ganymede: I'm incapable of recalling (neurasthenia) the name of Pan's pipe. Which other instrument, played in the orchestra by an E sharp clarinet, might a shepherd be holding? (No, not the old shepherd, a different one.)²⁵

Ravel, in fact, had no special attraction to Greek subjects. Calvocoressi, a close friend of the composer, comments on the misconception that Ravel had a special attraction to Greece:

The two facts that the Greek songs were Ravel's first venture in the harmonization of folk-tunes, and that one of the most important works is a ballet on a Greek subject, have given rise – though not very generally, it is true – to the idea that Greek subjects may have had some special attraction for him. There is absolutely no foundation for this idea. *Daphnis et Chloé*, like the Greek folk-songs, owes its existence to purely accidental circumstances, and Ravel did not think of the subject himself.

He had studied nether Greek nor Latin; all his acquaintance with the classics and with foreign authors he owed to French translations, and I am sure that

²² Lifar 1940, 141.

²³ Levinson 1971, 102, 107–108.

²⁴ Chailley 1969; Orenstein 1975, 215 n. 8.

²⁵ Orenstein 1990, 116.

often the French flavour conferred by these translations played a part in his enjoyment of them.²⁶

It is assumed that he was familiar with Amyot's translation²⁷ and perhaps he was acquainted with the artistic illustrations of the novel by Pierre Bonnard²⁸ and Aristide Maillol.²⁹ It has also been speculated that Ravel may have been inspired more by Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* than by Longus in his scoring of the ballet.³⁰ It was mere "coincidence," however, that Longus became the subject of one of Ravel's most spectacular creations: it had been offered to him as a project by Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballet Russe.³¹ The composer, moreover, differed completely from Bakst and Fokine, the set designer and choreographer for the 1912 performance, in his interpretation of ancient Greece.³²

Bakst visualized the ballet developed against the background of archaic Greece, while Ravel pictured a "vast musical fresco, concerning itself less with archaic fidelity, than with fidelity to the Greece of my dreams, which in many ways resembled that imagined and depicted by the French artists of the end of the eighteenth century." Fokine's choreography did not suit Ravel. He demanded constant changes, and Fokine and Bakst in their turn asked him to compromise – leading to a not too harmonious result.³³

Ravel wanted to filter Longus through the depictions of the late eighteenth century,³⁴ while Bakst and Fokine wanted to approximate as accurately as possible the "pagan scenes depicted on ancient Greek vases and friezes."³⁵

²⁶ Nichols 1987, 185–87.

²⁷ Calvocoressi 1934, 78–79.

²⁸ Pérez Gutiérrez 1987, 260; Watkins 1994, 73.

²⁹ Cowling and Mundy 1990, 148.

³⁰ Pérez Gutiérrez 1987, 253–55; Hyman 1998, 74–75.

³¹ Seroff 1970, 142–143.

³² Cf. Larner 117: "Faced with a concept which did not suit him, he had had to persist with adapting Fokine's archaeological image of second-century Lesbos until it became compatible, as he said, with 'the Greece of my dreams, which is not unlike that imagined and depicted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century.' Even if Bakst would not adapt his authentic-Greek vision for the sets and costumes – and, in fact, he did not – Ravel needed to be able to imagine a setting he could identify with. More important, by taking Daphnis and Chloe out of their authentic background and displacing them into a neo-classical landscape by some such artist as Jacques-Louis David, he was separating Longus's goatherd and shepherdess from their pagan sexuality."

³³ Seroff 1970, 152–153.

³⁴ Orenstein 1975, 60–61; Nichols 1997, 7.

³⁵ Larner 1996, 115; see also Fokine 71–73.

It is clear that Ravel did not choose the subject, nor even like it; this dislike may have stemmed from the striking sexual content of the novel.³⁶ In the end, however, Bakst's views triumphed and the scenery and costumes of the ballet "were inspired by a more realistic vision of Greece than the French neo-Classical Greece which Ravel had in mind."³⁷ The 1912 ballet, however, after some negative reaction by critics, was admired even by those who differed with Ravel. Fokine "loved the score" from the first time he heard it,³⁸ and Jean Cocteau noted that the ballet was "the archetype of those works which belong to no school; one of those works that land in our hearts like a meteorite, from a planet whose laws will remain for ever mysterious and beyond our understanding."³⁹

In conclusion, George Braziller was only partly right in finding the inspiration for Chagall's paintings in his trips to Greece. The influence of the *Mir Iskusstva*, previous ballet designs, Bakst's own representations of moments from the novel narrative, and Chagall's tutelage under and association with Bakst must be noted as more forceful inspirations in the depictions of Longus' novel. Ravel, moreover, had little, if any, influence on the paintings and stage designs.

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³⁶ Larner 1996, 115–117.

³⁷ Larner 1996, 131.

³⁸ Nichols 1987, 43.

³⁹ Nichols 1977, 84.

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