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**IMAGES OF THE ORIENT BETWEEN SPONTANEITY
AND CIVILISATION: FROM NIKOLAY KARAZIN
TO LEON BAKST¹**

Beyond doubt, the 1890–1 Eastern journey of Tsesarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich laid the cornerstone of relations between Russia and the East, as Olga Sosnina stressed with the exhibition she organized in Moscow in 2010.²

On the first leg of his journey, Greece, the Tsesarevich was accompanied by his cousin George, son of the King of Greece. At that time Greece was viewed not as the land of classical culture, but rather as a country full of primordial colours, light and darkness, that had long been influenced strongly by the East, be it the Byzantine or Ottoman Empire. In other words, Greece was

E. Ukhtomsky
*A Journey to the East
of the Tsesarevich*
Saint Petersburg:
F.A. Brockhaus, 1893–7.
Photoprint of the party



¹ The text is translated by Ludmila Lezhneva.

² *Panorama Imperii. Puteshestvie tsesarevicha Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha na Vostok v 1890–1891 gg.* Catalog of the exhibition curated by Olga Sosnina. Tsaritsyno museum complex, Moscow, 2011.

a sort of antechamber to the East.

Almost simultaneously, at the turn of the 20th century, artists of the “World of Art” association (“miriskussniki”) of Saint Petersburg also addressed the East, which as a mirage or dream became an auxiliary means of the theatricalization of their creative world and formed part of their cosmopolitanism as a local version of chinoiserie and japonism.¹

A multitude of black-and-white photographs that were brought from the East and spread across Russia and Europe largely inspired that attitude. For instance, Alexander Benois obviously admired the so-called Chinese Palace of Oranienbaum (also referred to as “Dutch” or “Gothic”), which was, incidentally, built by the Italian architect Antonio Rinaldi (1710–1794) and decorated by another Italian, Stefano Torelli (1762–1768). Genuine Chinese tapestries imported by Count Alexey Bestuzhev-Ryumin on Catherine the Great’s personal order² were just part of the décor.

Benois saw Torelli as a representative of “decadence” (like the “miriskussniki” themselves), an admirer of their idolized 18th century and advocate of chinoiserie, who on the Empress’s whim, for instance, “copied” the gardens of Versailles in the icy winter of Saint Petersburg. Neither Benois, Sergei Diaghilev nor Leon Bakst had ever been to even Central Asia in Eastern Russia, to say nothing of the Middle or Far East, because they invariably went to Paris, Munich, Monte Carlo and Venice while Bakst and Diaghilev even to the United States.

However, Bakst, the most worldly of the “miriskussniki”, was the first to set himself the aim of upsetting that frivolous idea of the East and thus foreshadowed the advent of the avant-garde. To a certain extent his fresh approach, enriched by the new view of primitive art, changed modern art concepts in general. Bakst’s passion for the Orient of India, Persia and Egypt in particular, as well as South East Asia, is well “documented: in the bulk of his better-known stage sets and costumes made for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes from *Cleopatra* (1909) to *Schéhérazade* (1910), *Orientalia* (1910), *Le Dieu Bleu* (The Blue God, 1912) and others. Even the Paris studio of Bakst on Boulevard Malesherbes brimmed with Oriental objects d’art in the 1920s as seen on the famous photographs of Pierre Choumoff and Hélène Roger-Viollet. The Chinese dragon, two figurines of Hindu elephants, a tapestry from Thailand and a statuette of Siam Buddha from Sukhothai, similar to those in the collection Charles Plançon de Regnier (1859 – late 1930s), are now all in the Hermitage.³ Nevertheless, in none of his writings did Bakst ever mention anything

¹ See *Voobrazhaemy Vostok. Kitai “po-russki” XVII – nachalo XX veka*. Catalog of the exhibition curated by Olga Sosnina. Tsaritsyno museum complex, Moscow, 2016.

² In 1763, Catherine sent him as a diplomat to the Chinese border. See Uspensky, A. “Kitaiskii dvorets v Oranienbaume” and also Benois, A. “Kitaiskii dvorets v Oranienbaume”, both in *Khudozhestvennyye sokrovishcha v Rossii*, No. 1, 1901, pp. 184–95 and 196–201.

³ The Hermitage collection of artworks from Siam (or Thailand) includes not only the gifts of King Rama V of Siam brought in 1907, but also the collection of Charles Plançon de Regnier, a diplomat and Orientalist, who graduated from the law department in Saint Petersburg and was sent



S. Kononov. *Eos*, 1913,
tinted marble,
97 × 35.5 × 42
State Tretyakov
Gallery, Moscow

that would justify his predilection for Oriental objects (from miniatures to photographs) as the main source of inspiration. This omission may not be accidental: on the contrary, all his pronouncements are on classicism.¹

Perhaps, his love for the East was fake while that for classicism quite genuine, almost “physical”.² In fact, the easternmost point of his pilgrimages abroad was Greece, which he visited in May 1907 together with Valentin Serov.³ He felt that that country was not so much an Eastern outpost as the primordial cradle of culture itself, one syncretically identical and close to the Eastern world. That vision is contrasted with the tinted marble sculpture by Sergei Kononov, who for the most part “extracted” imaginary wood folks from roots and tree trunks. As for his *Eos*, the Greek goddess

of the dawn, he barely outlined her face in marble as a metaphor for the myth being born of marble itself, the very essence of the material.

Bakst, who started as a stage designer, had a passion for Greece and classicism that equalled and perhaps even exceeded his sincere love for the East (at least from the theoretical point of view). That was why his trip to Greece was a long-cherished dream come true. A letter to his wife written by Bakst upon his arrival in Athens after a stop in Constantinople is a sort of metaphorical description of the transfer and the connection between the East and Classicism: “I am delighted with Constantinople: motley, dirty, picturesque and oriental. Bought rose oil, sandal and lavender for myself!... Sophia stunned us, the best monument of Byzantium... Acropolis today is sheer delight... Got there by night, downright beyond description”⁴

to the court of the King of Siam as Russia’s ambassador general in 1910. He emigrated after the 1917 revolution, leaving behind his collection, which landed in the Hermitage and was not identified until 1997 in connection with the exhibition “The Art of Siam of the 14th – 19th Centuries in the State Hermitage Collection” curated by Olga Deshpande. Saint Petersburg, 1997.

¹ After formulating his special opinion of classicism in art, Bakst published an article, “Puti klassitsizma v iskusstve”, in the journal *Apollo*, No. 2, 1909, pp. 63–78 and no. 3, pp. 46–61. He attached special importance to that essay as attested by its publication in French and English: “Les formes nouvelles du classicisme dans l’art” in *Le Grande Revue*, No. 12, 25 June 1910, pp. 771–800, and “The Paths of Classicism in Art” in *Dance Chronicle*, No. 2, vol. 13, New York, 1990, pp. 170–92. See Bakst, L. *Moia dusha otkryta*. Eds. E. Terkel and J.E. Bowl. Moscow, 2012.

² Suffice it to recall the prank he pulled off when he stroked the breast and shoulders of Niobe on the pediment of the Temple of Zeus at the Olympia Museum. Bakst, L. “Serov i Ya v Gretsii. Dorozhnye zapisi”, *Slovo*, Berlin, 1923, p. 26.

³ Spencer, C. *Bakst in Greece*, Atene, 2009. See also *Muzy i maski. Teatr i muzyka v antichnosti. Antichnyi mir na peterburgskoi stsene*. Exhibition catalog. The Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, 2005. See Lev Bakst. *Serov i Ya v Gretsii*. Ed.E. Terkel. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2016.

⁴ Cit. Lev Bakst. Letter to Liubov Gritsenko-Bakst of 26 May 1907 in Bakst, L. *Moia dusha otkryta*. vol. II, p. 274.



Sketchbooks with drawings and notes have survived from his Greek journey, strewn about between the Lincoln Center in New York, the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg and several private collections, together with his brief survey of what he had seen published in Russian in Berlin in 1923.¹ *Terror Antiquus*, a picture that Bakst finished a year later, in 1908, was the high point of his impressions from that trip.

L. Bakst. *Terror Antiquus*, 1908, oil on canvas, 250 × 270, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

That famous painting offers a key to pinpointing the coordinates of the concept of the Orient in Russia to a greater extent from the anthropological and ethnographic than the geographical point of view.

The boundaries of that concept expand or shrink, or even “tumble”, depending on the place from which the East is considered.² Location takes us back to the Tsesarevich’s Eastern journey, as is confirmed by an illustration provided by Nikolai Karazin (1842–1908). It captured the moment when the Tsesarevich and his retinue stopped at the hills of Olympia, enraptured by the ruins of the Temple of Zeus. Prince Esper Ukhtomsky (1861–1921), who took part in that expedition as its official chronicler, Sinologist and a leading expert in Buddhism in Russia, described that visit to the ruins of Olympia in minute detail.³ A storm suddenly broke out and the lightning illuminated the gigantic ruins of the temple. In his vivid illustration Karazin the artist reproduced that literally supernatural scene. It could be claimed that the highly symbolical *topos* served as the first instinctive stimulus for Bakst to visually study another aspect of classicism, that is, not only archaic classicism, but the barbarian one, which had existed still earlier and which he named in Latin *Terror Antiquus*. In fact, although he did not finalize the work until 1908, he had begun working on his project already under that name three years earlier, soon after the publication of Ukhtomsky’s

N. Karazin
Self-Portrait
from N. Karazin,
My Tales. Saint
Petersburg: Editions
A.F. Devrien, 1895



¹ Cit. Lev Bakst. *Serov i Ya v Gretsii*.

² From the point of view of Russian geography and culture this was brilliantly demonstrated by Aldo Ferrari in *La foresta e la steppa. Il mito dell'Eurasia nella cultura russa*, Milan, 2003.

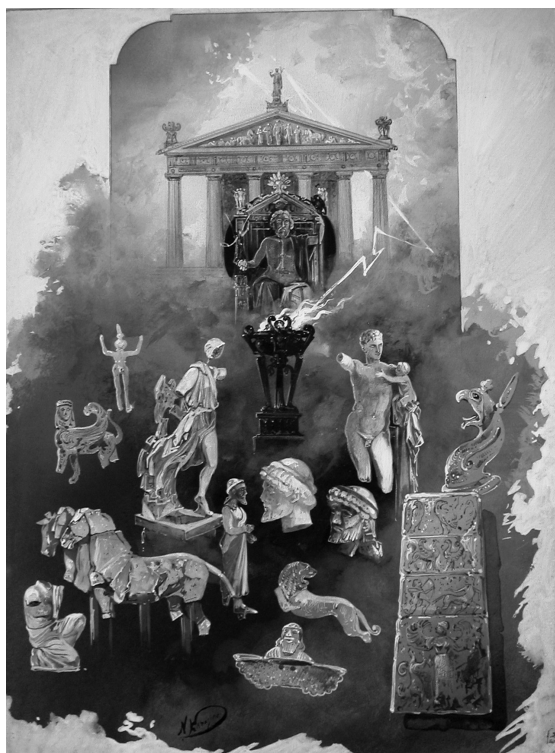
³ Ukhtomsky, E. *Puteshestvie tsesarevicha Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha na Vostok v 1890–1891 gg.* In three volumes published by F.A. Brockhaus in Saint Petersburg. The first volume came out in 1893, the second in 1895 and the third in 1897. See also Dmitriev, M. “Syn velikogo belogo tsaria. Puteshestvie Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha po vostoku”. *Antik-inform*, No. 26 March 2005, pp. 93–5.



N. Karazin. Illustrations
to E. Ukhtomsky's book
*A Journey to the East
of the Tsarevich*. Saint
Petersburg, 1893–7

a) *Among the ruins
of the Temple of Zeus
in Olympia*, India ink
and white on yellow
cardboard, 33.1 × 24.7

b) *Ancient sculpture
(Olympia Museum)*,
India ink and white
on yellow cardboard,
State Russian Museum,
Saint Petersburg





volumes (the first volume in 1893, the second in 1895 and the third in 1897). Their different and highly popular translations into English, French and German were published somewhat later.

The tongue-in-cheek representation of Zeus the thunder god that Bakst published on the cover of the journal *Satyricon* in 1908 references precisely Ukhtomsky's description of that storm.

Going back to the Olympia visit of the Tsesarevich and his party, we see that Karazin depicted the events in his engraving, analyzing the details and, above all, capturing with nearly photographic precision the most dramatic moment as Ukhtomsky related it:

"The air is sultry. The sky is enveloped with thick clouds. We have to hurry up with our examination of the ruins [...]. We keep walking, now and then stumbling upon rocks. Within the boundaries of the extinct altar of Zeus, by which the priests had foretold the future in the haze of

L. Bakst. Cover
of the journal
Satyricon, No. 1, 1908,
Saint Petersburg

burnt offering smouldering before them, Olympia was full of mystical nature.”¹

The mystical description of Olympia by Ukhtomsky is not surprising, taking into account his leanings towards Eastern religions and meeting with members of the Theosophy Society in Adyar, India. In his chronicle he devoted several fascinating passages to the Tsesarevich's journey. During the august visit Olympia was a sanctuary with numerous monuments, already partially restored, with the ruins of the Temple of Zeus still in the middle. The colossal statue of god made by Phidias of gold and ivory specially for that temple lived on not only in historical memory, but also in the countless replicas reconstructed based on several oral descriptions, one of which, hailing from Rome, was and still is in the Hermitage. Ukhtomsky went on as follows: “His Imperial Highness approaches the shattered seat of the ‘senior pagan celestial being’. The breath of the storm is ever more tangible in the air”.²

In spite of that static immersion into the ruins, “The lingering elements finally explode. Snakes of fire pierce the sky. The rain falls in large clear drops. The Crown Prince leaves the abode of Zeus and heads up the mountain”.³ The Prince and his retinue had to leave the Temple of Zeus fast and look for shelter in the museum. It was with the museum and the image of Zeus, which was in the eastern part of the temple pediment – a classical and calm image of the omnipotent god establishing justice – that Ukhtomsky carries on his narrative to assert that the development of that image of god could be taken as a measure of Greek art development: “Here, in Olympia [...] one gets to know the gradual and agonizingly long development of local art. The extremely naïve prehistorical images of people and animals [...], the increasingly well-thought-out manner and knowledge of anatomy in the impersonation of Zeus, who first appears only as power and storm and is eventually defined as the power of regal wisdom, justice and beauty with the features of a deity and ruler...”,⁴ possibly invoking refined and flattering associations with the autocratic rule of the Russian Tsar. Such interpretation of the storm – with Zeus in the centre – conveyed in Ukhtomsky's chronicle the connection between barbarity and Eastern culture, which was expected to become popular in Russia. It was not by chance that Ukhtomsky described that region of Greece only as an isolated land, yet one which “... constantly absorbed outside elements, and even the East had tangibly and profoundly influenced it from times immemorial. The Phoenicians settled there and inculcated the cult of Asian Aphrodite”.⁵

Bakst's contemporaries frequently identified the impassive “goddess” in *Terror Antiquus* as Aphrodite not only by her symbol – the dove in her hand – but also as a prototype of consummate female deity by her patently

¹ Ukhtomsky, E. *Puteshestvie tsesarevicha Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha...*, p. 47.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

“archaic nature”.¹¹⁷ “Any study of the history of female deities, whatever names the Polyonymous concealed herself under – be it Artemis or Aphrodite or Athena or Astarte or Isis – leads us to the traces of initial femino-monotheism. All images of female deities are varieties of the one goddess, and this goddess is the female beginning of the world, one absolutized gender.”²

Echoing the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov’s pronouncements on the matriarchy of the century, the philosopher Florensky enthusiastically welcomed Bakst’s painting: “Small wonder that the destruction of Atlantis became a source of inspiration for one of the most cultured Russian artists – Leon Bakst – in his picture *Terror Antiquus*, which seems the most significant thing that our historical painting of the past few years has produced”.³

Rather intuitively than philosophically, Bakst created that archaic primitive Eastern triangle in *Terror Antiquus*, as if reproducing the short circuit of Karazin’s lightning, to illustrate his first impression of the Delphi ruins: the panorama of steep Greek mountains, the outlines of which frequently crop up in the sketchbooks of his Greek journey, seems to have been taken from a bird’s eye view. A parallel with Karazin’s illustration is found in the description of the storm that “welcomed” Bakst and Serov right after their nighttime arrival in a Delphi hotel. The “stormy” welcome was described in the last, more comprehensive and private pages of Bakst’s brief account of his trip across Greece: “Endless wide lightnings are slashing the eye like huge blades – the bottomless abyss beneath the windows seems even more velvety and wilder”. In the unfathomable night “... the gigantic abyss at night – quite at my feet... somewhere deep below in the valley, to the blinding purple – like blue lightnings lie white marble temples. Fairy-like houses that have crumbled under the monstrous arms of the Cyclopes”.⁴

Regrettably, we do not know what his first drawing named *Terror Antiquus* (1905) and shown that year at the exhibition of the “Union of Russian Artists” looked like because it was lost, just as were all the subsequent versions preceding the big painting. However, his amazing account of the storm in Delphi might reflect the fact that Bakst saw it as a portentous and alarming event because in his mind’s eye he associated it with nightmares and death. An apocalyptic vision of a tsunami and swarming people, who are looking for shelter and moving towards, possibly, the Atlantis sanctuaries on the mountain. Karazin’s illustrations were beyond doubt chronologically and ethnographically precise and a far cry from those fantasies of Bakst. With his nearly

¹ C. Kondoleon, G. e M. Behrakis, *Aphrodite and the Gods of Love*. Exhibition catalog, Getty Villa, curated by D. Saunders, Malibu, 2012.

² Ivanov, V.I. “Drevnii uzhas” in *Po zvezdam*, Ory, Saint Petersburg, 1907, p. 413. Reprinted in Ivanov, V. “Drevnii uzhas. Po povodu kartiny L. Baksta *Terror Antiquus*”. See Ivanov, V. *Sobraniye sochinenii v 4-h tomakh*, vol. 3, Brussels, 1979, pp. 91–110.

³ Florensky, P. “Prashchury liubomudriia” in *Sochineniia*, Moscow, 1985, vol. 2, p. 84. See Florensky, P. *Le Stratificazioni della cultura Egea*, in P. Florenskij, *Stratificazioni*. Ed.N. Misler, translated by V. Parisi, Reggio Emilia, 2008, pp. 107–67.

⁴ Cit. Lev Bakst. *Serov i Ya v Gretsii*, p. 58.

maniacal thoroughness, Karazin really interpreted the “esoteric” spirit of the Tsarevich’s tour. It is known from the sundry brief biographies of Karazin¹ that he was not directly involved in the campaign and had been invited owing to his knowledge of India that expanded in the course of his expedition that coincided with the itinerary of the Tsarevich in 1890–1, his fame as an illustrator and author of books for grownups and children and, naturally, his close relations with Tsar Alexander III, for whom he had worked on several commissions to produce illustrations (some 700 pictures!) for different editions of the historical chronicles of Ukhtomsky.

Karazin started his career in the army, then was transferred to diplomatic service, afterwards became a battle scene artist affiliated with the Saint Petersburg Academy and, finally, emerged as an expert on Central Asia, Turkmenistan in particular, and an influential member of the Russian Geographical Society. Under the aegis of the latter Karazin took part in ethnographical expeditions to the Amu-Darya basin. During his long career of a war artist chronicler (in Turkmenistan and then in the Serbian-Turkish and Russo-Turkish wars of 1877–8) and ethnographer, he proved especially reliable for the veracity of his pictures. He did illustrations for Ukhtomsky’s book using the numerous photographs taken by expedition members and those purchased by or gifted to the Tsarevich in the lands he visited. Karazin was the first artist to make Russian postcards. He made them in the form of collages using elements typical of every country he had been to. He employed the same technique when illustrating Ukhtomsky’s chronicles, excelling in conveying the spirit of the author and scrupulously detailing the ethnographical distinctions between different countries and individual localities. Now and then, as in the case of the Greek episode, he nearly succeeded in making his presence felt. His representations of India and especially Siam are memorable not only for his exceptional technique, but also for his ability to achieve nearly tactile perception of the tropical atmosphere, the hypnotizing charm of animals and exotic monsters, and the ecstatic visions of monuments discernible in the sizzling tropical fogs. Needless to say, he owed the precision of his representations of monuments to the numerous photographs that King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, 1853–1910) of Siam gifted to the Tsarevich at their meeting in Siam.² Bakst, too, managed to convey the warmth and mystery of the jungle, especially in his picture of the *Siamese Dance* (1901, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), which reproduced one of the most ravishing dances – the Lantern

¹ Sadoven, V. *Russkie khudozhniki-batalisty XVII–XIX vv.* Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1955, pp. 301–5; Nagaevskaia, E. “N.N. Karazin 1842–1908” in *Russkoie iskusstvo. Ocherki o zhizni i tvorchestve khudozhnikov 2-oi poloviny XIX veka*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 357–68, Gerasimova, D. “Karazin Nikolai Nikolaievich”, <http://www.artsait.ru/art/k/karazin/main.htm>

² Over 200 photographs taken by V.D. Mendeleev (1865–1898), son of the famous chemist, at a semi-professional level during journeys are at the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg and the Naval Museum, St. Petersburg. Some were exhibited at “Journey to the East”. Introduction by Alexander Teriukov. EGO Museum and Exhibition Centre, Saint Petersburg, 1998. It was the reconstruction of an exhibition held at the Raphael Loggias of the Hermitage in the winter of 1894/5.



Dance performed by the ballet company of the royal court of Siam on a tour of Saint Petersburg in 1900.¹ I mean here the only canvas Bakst painted on the “Eastern” subject, which was neither transformed nor used in his countless stage sets on the Oriental theme. The fact that, just as in *Terror Antiquus* of 1908, Bakst did an oil painting and that, for all its dramatic nature and obvious “staginess”, that painting was never reworked for the stage, makes one believe that Bakst had no desire to comment on his work, regarding the two pictures as a single declaration of his creative and philosophical creed.

N. Karazin. Illustration to E. Ukhtomsky's book *A Journey to the East of the Tsesarevich Temples of Siam, India* ink and white on yellow cardboard, 33.1 × 24.7, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

¹ Misler, N. “Ex-Oriente Lux: The Siamese Ballet in St. Petersburg in 1900” in *Annali I.U.O.*, vol. 46, Napoli, 1986, pp. 197–21. For an updated version see “Siamese Dancing and the Ballets Russes” in *The Art of the Enchantment. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes 1909–1929*. Exhibition catalog. Ed. N. von Baer. M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, 1988, pp. 78–83.



N. Karazin. Illustrations to E. Ukhtomsky's book *A Journey to the East of the Tsesarevich* Photograph of Hindu temples, 1890–1, National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg

of early Symbolism he admired so much in the academic craftsmanship of Karazin and his fantastic illustrations.

Finally, Bakst faced the problem of self-identification, or rather, wished to be accepted by “good society” as a “Russian artist”,¹ and in this sense he could take Karazin as “an ally”. With his background of a traveller and ethnographer Karazin developed tolerance for and openness towards “others”, which was unusual in Russia at that time. In one of his well-known tales – *From North to South* (1890)² – that he illustrated himself, Karazin wrote that Father Stork reproached his son for misusing the term “ours” and explained its meaning as follows: according to him, although peoples, personalities and interests may differ, the word “ours” means “everybody”, so the world should not be divided into “ours” and “others” because in the long run life and death are the same for everyone.³

Now if Bakst could easily attribute the representation of a lightning on the Olympia ruins in Karazin's work to his apocalyptic vision of classical Greece, the precision of Karazin's ethnographical reconstructions was akin to the meticulousness with which Bakst himself studied and prepared his stage designs, paying more attention to the precision of individual detail than to the reconstruction of the historical context. This is seen, for instance, in a fragment from one of his Greek journey sketchbooks subsequently incorporated into the backdrop for Maurice Ravel's ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* (1912). The same is true of his costumes for Euripides's tragedy *Hippolytus* (1903) at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre of Saint Petersburg. It was the first time

Anyhow, in his free “Oriental” reconstructions Bakst seemed to have been inspired not so much by Karazin's illustrations as by the watercolours of the seascape artist Nikolai Gritsenko (1856–1900), who earned the title of the official artist of the Naval Ministry in 1894 and accompanied Tsarevich Nicholas in his capacity of the artist. He did about 300 pictures of localities, objects and people he met. Gritsenko and Bakst maintained close relations when the former was still the first husband of Liubov, who was to become the wife of the latter.

Bakst might have found the forms

¹ Bakst is known to have avoided speaking about his family and his native Grodno, a shtetl in the Pale of Settlement, and repeatedly claimed in his interviews abroad that he was born in Saint Petersburg. See Bakst, L. *Moia dusha otkryta*.

² Karazin, N. *S severa na iug. Putevyie vospominaniia Starogo Zhuravlia*. Saint Petersburg: Editions A.F. Devrien, 1890.

³ Cit. Gerasimova, D. *Karazin Nikolai Nikolaievich*.



that Bakst addressed ancient Greece. He had long studied the Hermitage collections and the motifs used in Greek and Egyptian vases. Later on, after his Greek journey, Bakst said that there he had found inspiration for his treatment of *Helen of Sparta*. He produced sets in the spirit of Minoan art for that production of 1912 and used the same colours that he had seen in Greek art.¹ By the time Bakst made his journey, Sir Arthur Evans had just finished restoring frescoes at the Knossos Palace, and fragments that are mostly disputed today, such as, for example, the *Dolphins Hall*, appeared in Bakst's sketchbooks. Bakst found "his Orient" in their colours, for instance, in the

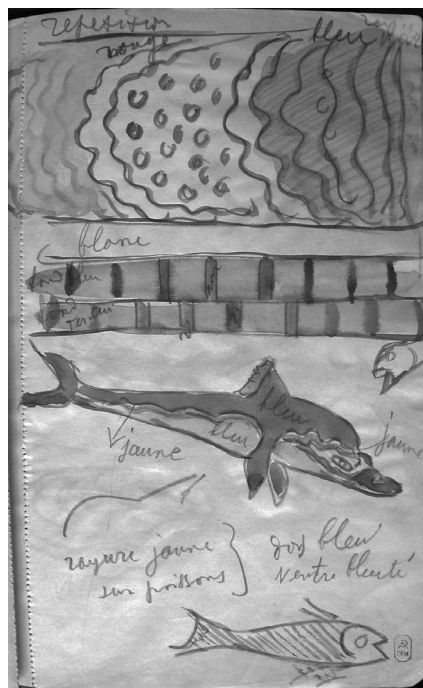
N. Karazin. Illustrations to E. Ukhtomsky's book *A Journey to the East of the Tsesarevich* The Dolphins Hall in the Knossos Palace

L. Bakst. Fragment of the Dolphins Hall, page from the 1907 Greek Journey Diary, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

shades of blue of Hindu and Persian miniatures. He used blue along with Minoan red (genuine or false?) in his sets for *Phèdre* (1915) and costumes for *Schéhérazade*. Along the lines of syncretic eclectics predominating in the East, one can also see a reflection of the Gandhara Buddha's calm detachment from the outside world in the enigmatic smile on Kore's face in *Terror Antiquus* (Kore from the Acropolis Museum of Athens in an attire of the same blue as the Knossos dolphins).

On the other hand, the stormy landscape and strange buildings (looking more like Maya than Greek architecture) in *Terror Antiquus* bring to mind another interpretation of culture, i.e., a vision of the demise of Minoan culture with the loss of Atlantis. The atmosphere of *Terror Antiquus*, with the symbolic meaning of the sky-blue dove and, what is more, the sea (like the unfathomable "bottomless" bosom where everything is born and dies) suggests an atmosphere of mysteries as another link between Greek and Eastern cultures. Indeed, in a letter to his wife Bakst wrote:

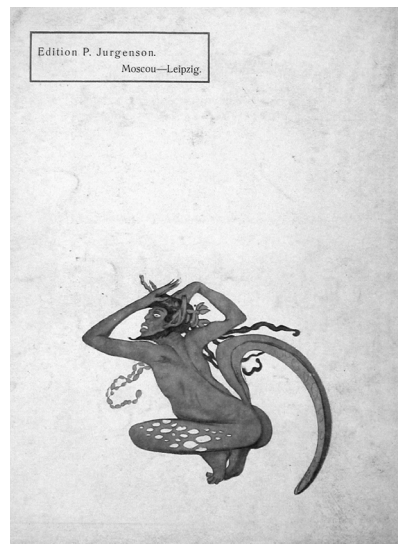
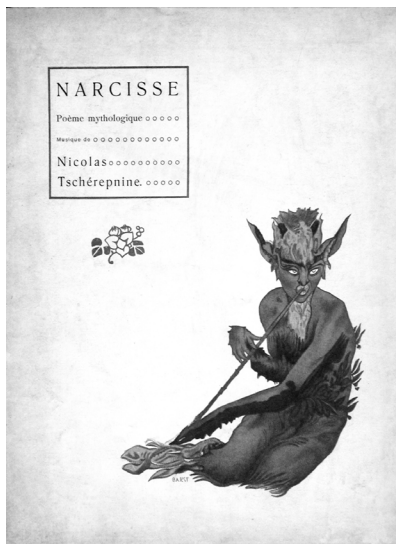
"The picture has seen many changes – the statue has become ominous and the background grimmer – I have



¹ Cit. C. Spencer, *Bakst in Greece*, p. 33.

L. Bakst. *Narcisse*,
1911. Music by
N. Tcherepnin,
playbill

L. Bakst. Front
and back covers.
Leipzig-Moscow:
Editions P. Jurgenson



been striving to make the picture baffle myself with terror; the water in the foreground is ‘bottomless’”.¹

He uses the same word “bottomless” when describing the stormy night in Delphi, lit up by flashes of lightning and turning ever more dreadful with a flock of eagles flying above the valley.

During the stormy spring nights, according to Bakst, the nocturnal Persephone on the black basalt throne is waiting for the sons of the sun with the threatening lightnings of Zeus in the background. This chthonic and Dionysian aspect of Greek culture graphically conveys Bakst’s vision of the Orient. This is corroborated by all the designs of ballet costumes he made both on classical and Oriental themes: those made for the orgiastic dances of nymphs, bacchantes and women of Boeotia (*Narcissus*, 1911), whose movements have much in common with the sensuality of odalisques in *Schéhérazaïde* or *Cleopatra*. His fauns (*L’après midi d’un faune*) or the “lower” deities and monsters in *Narcissus* evoking the much maligned monsters² of the Hindu empyreans are just as diverse. Now if Valentin Serov, his travelling companion, returned from Greece with a sunny picture of the virgin *Nausicaa in a Chariot on the Seashore* (1910, Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg), Bakst brought back the nightmares of *Terror Antiquus* and the oneiric fear of obscure rituals, the unaccountable link of which with the standard representation of eastern sensuality he had studied only too well.³

¹ Lev Bakst. Letter to Liubov Gritsenko-Bakst of 27 July 1908 in Bakst, L. *Moia dusha otkryta*, vol. I, p. 137.

² Mitter, P. *Much Maligned Monsters. A History of European Reaction to Indian Art*, Chicago, 1977.

³ Harris, D. “Diaghilev Ballets Russes and the Vogue for Orientalism” in *Sensualismens Triumf*. Exhibition catalog. Ed.E. Näslund. Dansmuseet, Stockholm, 1993, pp. 125–30.

While doing so, he established a far deeper connection between ancient culture (be it Greek or Eastern) and primitivism. This conclusion revolutionized the very concept of the primitive and soon found reflection in the desire of the avant-garde to take credit for its origin. For instance, Alexander Shevchenko offered the following explanation in his *Neoprimitivism* manifesto of 1913:

“The word primitive points directly to its Eastern derivation, because today we understand by it a whole pleiad of Eastern arts – Japanese art, Chinese, Korean, Indo-Persian, etc.”¹

This categorical conclusion is strongly supported by Natalia Goncharova’s well-known statement that the East is “the primary source of all arts”.²

¹ Shevchenko, A.V. *Neoprimitivizm. Ego teoriia. Ego vozmozhnosti. Ego dostizheniia*, Moscow, 1913.

² Goncharova, N. *Vystavka kartin Natalii Sergeevny Goncharovoi, 1900–1913*. Exhibition catalog, Moscow, 1913.