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SPIRIT OF PROGRESS

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EVELYN WAUGH AND MODERNISM | MEXICO CITY | VILLA CAVROIS | PERTH MODERNISM

FIVE BEAUTIFUL LADIES

Peter Sheridan AM

IVORY AND BRONZE SCULPTURES IN THE TRANSITION FROM ART NOUVEAU TO ART DECO

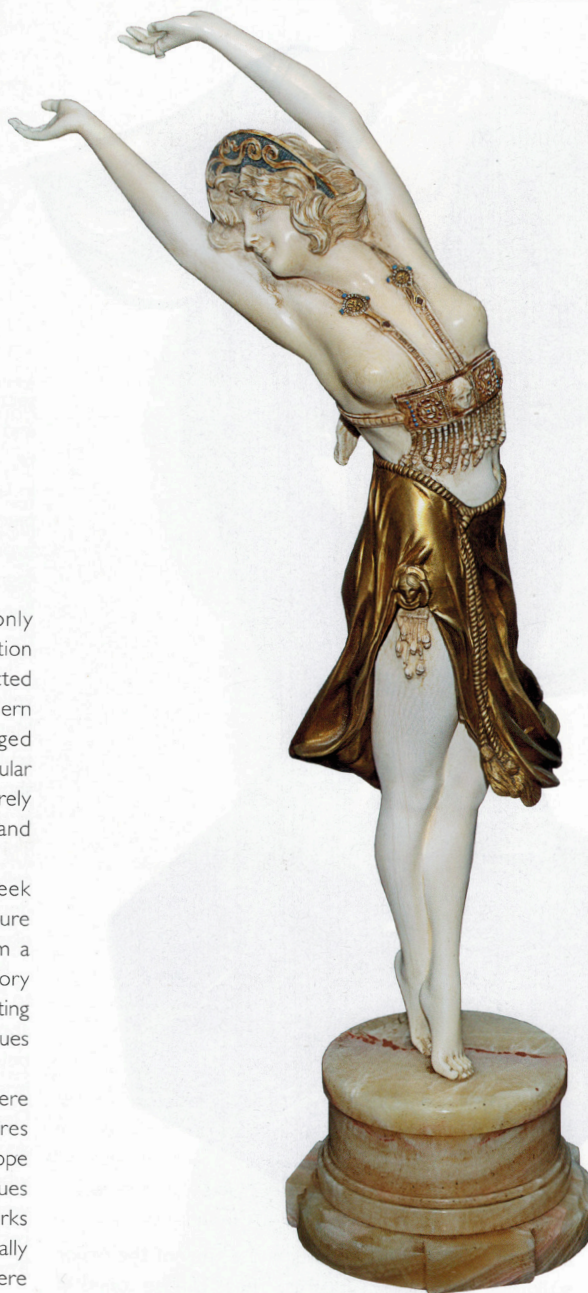
Art Deco was a truly global movement, not only regarding geographic distribution but also its permeation into all facets of life and society. Its emergence reflected the move from traditional and classical styles to modern interpretations. Within the arts, sculpture changed accordingly. This article focuses on changes in one particular medium, the combination of ivory and bronze, as rarely seen but exquisite examples of the transition to and expression of Art Deco.

The word *chryselephantine* was originally a Greek composite term for the use of gold and ivory in sculpture work. Temple statues in this style were made from a wood frame and covered with thin carved slabs of ivory (representing the flesh) and sheets of gold leaf (representing the garments, armour, hair, and other details). These statues enjoyed a high status in Ancient Greece.

After 1890 the term came to describe any statue where ivory was combined with other materials. Sculptures combining bronze and ivory became very popular in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s as artisans developed techniques and workshops to produce multiple copies of their works for a growing middle-class market. Clothes were usually painted bronze whereas faces, upper body and legs were in carved ivory. At this time ivory was plentiful and little thought was given to the plight of elephants being killed to service artwork. The sculptural benefits of ivory are its smooth texture, density, durability and integral elasticity. It is easily carved to fine detail and can be highly polished, conferring both the colour of skin and fluidity of human form.

There were at least eighty independent sculptors working in this medium of ivory and bronze in Europe between 1910 and 1940 of which some 10% were women. Almost all the artists and their businesses produced similar series of statues in bronze alone. These are also highly collectable but not as rare or expensive. They are normally polished but, being of one material, lack the colour and contrast of ivory against painted bronze, as well as the vitality and energy of their chryselephantine siblings.

These bronze and ivory sculptures were not intended as



single items to be shown at exclusive exhibitions but were limited edition series of perhaps 5 to 30 pieces, often in different sizes. They were meant for retail sales in shops and galleries as gifts and as decorative items for the home. Their popularity was with a growing middle-class who embraced the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, Streamlining and the Machine Age. While borrowing from the past, the interpretation was new and the subjects exotic. The move to mass production was balanced by emphasising quality and retaining hand-crafted elements.

Looking at catalogues of the day there would appear to be so many examples that they would be common even now, some 100 years later. Yet today there are few remaining original examples, and these are coveted by collectors. Usually appearing for sale in major auction houses and through specialist dealers, there is unfortunately

THIS PAGE:
The Crimean Dancer
– Claire Colinet c1925

(Collection Peter Sheridan
& Jan Hatch)



THIS PAGE:
Spring Awakening
 – Ferdinand Preiss c1925
 (Collection Peter Sheridan
 & Jan Hatch)

also a thriving market in fakes and copies of the major sculptors, particularly Chiparus. These can be found in 'antique' shops and online stores such as Ebay®, most often at a fraction of the price of real versions, but usually with no indication they are not original and occasionally with the addition of 'after' before the name of the sculptor.

The mid 1920s was a time when the sinuous organic lines of Art Nouveau were reaching the end of their period of pre-eminence as the simple curves and straight lines of Art Deco were beginning to assert their dominance. These five beautiful ladies are chosen to show the stylistic evolution from Nouveau to Deco. All were beautifully made by the best craftspeople of the day. They all reflect a populist alternative to the commissioned pieces of furniture for wealthy patrons as seen in the work of designers such as Ruhlmann. Yet they were not items mass produced in bulk and sold cheaply to the average citizen. The principal designer would have overseen the whole process and perhaps carved the most intricate sections (e.g. ivory

sections, faces) but allocated other roles such as casting and cold painting of the bronze sections, carving lesser sections of ivory, polishing and assembly to trained staff. In larger examples legs, hands and head may be separate pieces of ivory from the torso, and in many instances the bronze sections of clothing serve to separate the ivory segments. Joins are almost invisible, although in some cases bangles on the wrists may indicate separate attachment of the hands to the arms.

Ivory tends to develop cracks with age as well as yellowing, so this is one simple check of authenticity. Materials which simulate ivory and are used in cheaper sculptures and fakes include ivorine and plastic, neither showing such age-related changes. Ivorine was developed in the late 1800s from cellulose and contained camphor. This was one of many flammable organic plastics (e.g. celluloid, gutta percha, vulcanite, galalith) used to make small decorative objects, before the advent of the first synthetic plastic, Bakelite® in 1907.

Amazingly, whilst depicting the evolution from Nouveau to Deco, all the artworks presented here were produced about the same time, circa 1925, in that glorious hiatus between two world wars. This golden period was very brief given the massive inflation of the early 1920s, the great Depression in 1929 and the rise of Nazism in 1933. In France and Germany during this time there was a moment of grace where 'the old' and the 'new' met sympathetically and there were less political, ideological, religious or commercial restraints to the flowering of novel artistic impressions. The period between 1919 and 1933 saw a loosening of censorship with resultant artistic and intellectual freedoms. New trends in fashion and entertainment cohabited with changing social mores and the popular Art Deco movement. Although the Nazi era and World War II impacted greatly on what was produced and who could work, there was a period in the early 1940s in Germany and France where the Nazis and collaborators had unfettered access to works available either for purchase or simply by seizure. Large numbers of these statues can today be found in major cities in South America and there is some conjecture that these were shipped by fleeing Nazis at the end of the war.

The five beautiful ladies presented here are:

The Crimean Dancer – Claire Colinet c1925

Spring Awakening – Ferdinand Preiss c1925

Snake Dancer – Otto Poertzel c1925

Starlight – Demetre Chiparus. c1925

Roman Lady – Roland Paris c1925

They all represent an appreciation and recognition of the female form which, in the author's opinion is not objectification but adulation or celebration. Understandably, women from every era can posit examples of denied rights and opportunities, of being patronised and victimised. And the art world can claim no exclusions from gender bias, restricted access and exploitation. Yet here is at least one female artist competing at the highest level of this art form, and all these works rejoiced in the elegance and refinement of the subject matter. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the nude body was not offensive in the 1920s in Europe where naturism was very popular. On the other hand, one must accept that there is a complete predominance of scantily dressed females in this art form and few men with exposed body parts.

These five examples show an evolving stylistic transformation from the natural lines of Colinet's *Crimean Dancer* and Preiss's *Spring Awakening* to the sharp angles of Chiparus's *Starlight* and Paris's *Roman Lady*. Much of the angularity is seen in the patinated bronze work reflecting the garments and their decorative elements, and particularly seen in the pleating of the dresses. In Poertzel's *Snake Dancer* the decorative costume and the pose combine to create a stylistically modern effect. Only in Paris's *Roman Lady* is the ivory figure slightly distorted to emphasise the Art Deco style and create more of a caricature.

Claire Colinet (1880-1950) was one of the few women sculptors of the time and she was never as popular as Chiparus or Preiss. However, her work is extraordinarily vital, and the large pieces of carved ivory are anatomically correct and exude a sense of feminine vitality and sensuality.

Born in Brussels, Claire Jeanne Roberte Colinet began her studies in Brussels and later settled in Paris. She began exhibiting at the *Salon of the Societe des Artistes Francais* from 1913 and became a member of the Societe in 1929. Between 1937 and 1940 she exhibited at the *Salon des Independants* and became a member of the *Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs*. Her second marriage to a Frenchman allowed her to gain French citizenship. As an artist she was drawn to exoticism and worked in a detailed, fluid style. Colinet's best known works are of Arab female dancers such as the *Crimean Dancer* shown here, and the extraordinary *Ankara Dancer*.

Her work is perhaps more classical and figurative than the obvious Art Deco designs of Chiparus but can be seen as part of the continuum in the evolution of this sculptural form from Classical/Nouveau to Art Deco.

Ferdinand Preiss was born in Erbach, near Frankfurt in Germany in 1882, the second of six children in a well-to-do family. Preiss's parents died when he was 15 and he was placed in the care of his uncle who was a master ivory carver and to whom he was apprenticed. He studied in Italy and Paris, but eventually settled in Berlin in 1907. Ivory statuettes were not highly regarded at the time, but Preiss and his partner Arthur Kassler concentrated on the quality of their carving, achieving their first successes with ivory and bronze Greek maidens.

The business closed during World War I, reopening in 1919, but business was slow and ivory hard to find. The boom that started in 1924 allowed Preiss to resume



production of statuettes on a large scale in a bolder, original and more modern style. By the late 1920s Preiss's work was not only successful in Germany but in England with his works for sale in major department stores in London.

Preiss's inspiration came from fashion and sports photography in magazines and live models from music

THIS PAGE:
Snake Dancer – Otto
 Poertzel c1925

(Collection Peter Sheridan
 & Jan Hatch)



THIS PAGE:
Starlight –
 Demetre Chiparus c1925
 (Collection Peter Sheridan
 & Jan Hatch)

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Roman Lady –
 Roland Paris c1925
 (Collection Peter Sheridan
 & Jan Hatch)

halls. His maturing style epitomised the new woman of the 1920s, slender and sporty. The demure goddesses of his early work gave way to the energetic and fashionable young woman, self-possessed and strong-minded.

Although the Nazis promoted healthy and fit young Germans as part of their 1930s propaganda, the style and ethos which permeates Priess' chryselephantine sculptures originated in the 1920s. After 1933 Priess became a member of the Reichkulturkammer (RKK) in order to continue working and had to prove he was neither a Jew nor communist. However, he was not a Nazi sympathiser, his work reflecting active and independent women rather than the Aryan ideal.

Otto Poertzel (1876-1963) was born in Germany, the third child of a porcelain designer and decorator and he trained accordingly. His apprenticeship was in a porcelain factory in his hometown of Scheibe and then at the Sonneberg Industrial School and the Technical Academy of Porcelain. From 1900 Poertzel operated as a freelance sculptor in Coburg working mainly in stone and bronze. He started his own studio in Munich in 1908 and married in 1909.

He is well known for his naturalistic Art Deco style statuettes in bronze and ivory depicting dancers, bathers, movie stars, circus performers and refined young women. His ivory and bronze 'snake charmer' depicts a figure of

a woman on tiptoe, her arms stretched upwards and her left leg in arabesque position. She is wearing a cat-suit that has a texture of snake scales. She is balanced on a simple green onyx base, with twin serpent trimmings.

The honorary title of Professor was conferred on him by the German State, this signature being seen on some of his pieces.

Demetre Chiparus was born in Romania in 1886, part of a wealthy landowner family, with French being spoken at home at the dinner table and in the drawing room. He moved to Italy in 1909 to study sculpture, then to Paris in 1912 where he studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts until 1919 (although his studies were disturbed by World War I).

The major influences on French decorative arts were the Wiener Werkstatte, Fauvism, Cubism and the Machine Age, but, in the case of Chiparus, it was the dynamism and vitality of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe that opened in Paris in 1909 that permeated most of his work for the next 20 years. So many of his sculptures are dancers in various poses, lavishly clad in extraordinary costumes in patinated bronze. Most of these works are substantial in size averaging 50-60cm in height, usually set on an extravagant base made from a mixture of marble and onyx.

By 1936 as Nazism and anti-Semitism swept through Europe, many of the foundries which Chiparus used were forced out of business, being Jewish owned. Having lived extravagantly he could not continue to support his lifestyle, ending up by war's end living with his wife in one room. He died shortly after, in 1947.

His work was not appreciated until the 1970s and his pieces now bring huge prices as collectors and curators appreciate more and more his mastery of ivory and bronze and the spirit of Art Deco.

Roland Paris was born in Vienna in 1894 but his parents were wealthy German writers. By 1900 the family had settled in Weimar in Germany. In the 1920s Roland boosted the family income by designing calligraphy to embellish his father's poems. Roland studied art in both Weimar and Munich.

In 1915 he was called up to serve in the German army, serving till 1919. He then decided to move to Berlin to begin his career as an artist, this city being tolerant, erotic and hedonistic. His wife Lisl was a dancer at one of the famous musical theatres. They lived in a small one room apartment, which was also Paris' studio, where he designed and produced many of his sculptures, as well as graphics and paintings, newspaper caricatures, posters, postcards and utilitarian art.

Lisl was the model for most of his female figures while Roland portrayed himself for the facial features of his male figures. Paris's art (and particularly his sculpture) is unmistakably Art Deco and the form of angular lines is infused with satire and mockery. He worked in media as diverse as bronze, ivory, porcelain, plaster, print and woodcut.

Paris was clearly not a Nazi follower and earned little in the years that Hitler was in power. He was called up again in 1943 at the age of 49 for active duty in World War II and died in 1945 in a bomb blast a few days before the end of the war.

