

[DOI: 10.20472/AHC.2017.002.004](https://doi.org/10.20472/AHC.2017.002.004)

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**DIAGHILEV'S RUSSIAN BALLETS AND THE 20TH CENTURY  
MANLY-WOMEN: TWO CONTRADICTORY NEW PROTOTYPES FOR  
THE CARYATIDES OF AMEDEO MODIGLIANI**

**Abstract:**

Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) is known for his paintings: the particular portraits and the provocative female nudes. However, it has just been recently noticeable the increased interest of the scholars in Modigliani's sculpture, which he practiced between 1909-1915. His sculptural subjects were two: the Heads and the Caryatides, for which he realized a large amount of preparatory studies. Nevertheless, the Caryatides have not been yet the subject of an excessive research, in contrast with the Heads.

As a result, the existing problems regarding the study of the Caryatides are numerous; one of which is the finding of the possible prototypes and the influences that Modigliani absorbed in order to create this stunning type of Caryatid, which encircles all the tendencies flourished at the begging of the 20th century in Paris (e.g. influences from the Egyptian art, ancient Greek art, primitive art, African art, Buddhist art etc.).

However, the Diaghilev's Russian Ballets - famous that time in Paris (1909-1920), have not been linked yet with Modigliani's Caryatides.

From the current research, Russian Ballets can be mentioned without a doubt as one more possible influence on the Caryatides, due to the similar poses of Caryatides and Russian dancers, presented in *Comœdia Illustré* - a magazine which made famous the Russian Ballets in Paris. Moreover, the Italian had known the protagonists of the Russian Ballets (dancers, scenographers, scriptwriters) as Modigliani's portraits reveal. At last, it should be noticed that the period in refer (1910-1912), the Italian boehm maintained a relationship with the well-known Russian poetess Anna Achmatova, who initiated Modigliani into the Russian culture.

Suddenly, during the summer of 1913 Modigliani changed the appearance of his Caryatides integrating details from the Atlas - the male architectural form. Based on the fact that Modigliani wanted to construct a Temple of Beauty, we turned to the contemporary woman in order to find an answer to this change. It is well known that at the beginnings of the 20th century -and during the World War I - the social role of the women had been transformed. The fact that women strengthened their character and became socially active inspired Modigliani. Therefore, his robust Caryatides possibly reflect the New Woman of his era, who is equal to a man as the poster of The 7th International Conference of the Suffragettes (June 1913) implies.

Coincidence or purpose?

**Keywords:**

Modigliani, Caryatides, Diaghilev, Russian Ballets, 20th Century Women, Prototypes.

Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920)<sup>1</sup>, the Italian bohemian artist who lived at the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Paris (*ill. 1*), is well-known mainly for his paintings: the peculiar portraits and the provocative female nudes. However, just recently, the interest on the sculptures that Modigliani created during 1909-1915 has been revived<sup>2</sup>. His main sculptural subjects were two: the *Heads* and the *Caryatides*. Although the *Heads* have already been studied, *Caryatides* have not been yet the core of an extended research.

As a result, there are many issues regarding the study of the *Caryatides*. Apart from the actual number of the drawings (more than a hundred), their chronological framework (c.1910-1915) and the real purpose of the two sculptural *Caryatides* (*ill.2,3*) (the construction of a Temple), another problem is the evince of their prototypes and the influences that Modigliani incorporated in order to create this original type of Caryatid, which includes all the trends that flourished in Paris at the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Modigliani sketched dozens of drawings presenting *Caryatides* in different sexes, styles and poses; male *Caryatides*, female *Caryatides*, hermaphrodite *Caryatides*, standing *Caryatides*, kneeling *Caryatides*, thin *Caryatides*, robust *Caryatides*, more abstract versions of them etc...

Based on secondary characteristics of the *Caryatides*, possible influences have been mentioned for all these drawings; from the Egyptian art, the ancient Greek art, the Buddish, the Etruscan, the Roman art, the Renaissance, the Mannerism, the Primitive art, from contemporary artists like Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Elie Nadelman (1882-1946) as from the Judaism (Modigliani was an Italian Jude).

However, the impact of Diaghilev's Russian Ballets that culminated in Paris (1910-1920) on the drawings of the *Caryatides* has not been explored yet (*ill.4a,b*).

In 1910 the Russian Ballets arrived in Paris<sup>3</sup>. This dancing group had formed at Saint Petersburg the year before by Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), who was also the founder of the Russian art magazine *World of Art* (*Mir iskusstva*). Diaghilev was a sophisticated, well-educated man, who was organizing spectacular shows, with the ambition to render famous Russian art and Russian culture beyond the borders of his country.

Diaghilev as an expert on discovering new talents, he chose famous composers, like Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), unique dancers and choreographers (among whom stands out the myth of dance Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950)), notable scene and costume designers, like Léon Bakst (1866-1924), as well as contemporary artists e.g. the multifarious Picasso, Georges Braque (1882-1963), Joan Miró (1893-1983) etc.

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<sup>1</sup> For biographical information; Soto, 2008. Parisot , 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Belli-Fergonzi-Puppo, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, 2010. Dixon-Bell, 2011. Woodbridge Wilson, 2010.

All these with many other artists contributed to raise the Russian Ballets at the sphere of legend.

Although it is has not yet been proved if Modigliani was attending the phantasmagoric performances of the Russian Ballets, it seems that he was familiar with their environment as he created various portraits of the protagonists and the contributors of the Russian Ballets e.g. Nijinsky (*ill.5*), Bakst (*ill.6*) and Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) (*ill.7*), who became famous through his collaboration with the Russian Ballets<sup>4</sup>.

In contrast with the last two portraits, which they seem to have been worked at the atelier, the *study of Nijinsky* (*ill.5*) is possible to have been created in situ, because of the quickness of the execution and the briefness of the lines. Furthermore, based on the date of the study (1910) and on the costume of Nijinsky with the particular hat, it is probable that Modigliani sketched the drawing in refer at *Scheherazade* (*ill.8a,b*), the Russian Ballet's play, performed at Paris the same year.

As a result, the above facts advocate Modigliani's presence at the performances of Russian Ballets. It could be assumed that his admiration for the Russian Ballets was so much intense that he introduced to his *Caryatides* theatrical poses and dancing moves (*ill.9a,b*).

Besides, as we know from P. Alexandre, Modigliani loved the theater, the opera, the pantomime, the circus even the street-performers. A fact that is verified by his drawings, a lot of which he realized in situ and today they form part of the collection of the doctor (*ill.10a,b*). Indeed, some *Caryatides* have been certainly sketched in a theatrical background with curtains and candles<sup>5</sup> (*ill.11a,b,c*).

Even if Modigliani had not the opportunity to assist to a Russian Ballets' performance, there was a bimonthly illustrated magazine, where their shows were presenting through photographs, and it is possible that Modigliani was aware of it. Two of his seven sculptural *Heads* that Modigliani had presented at the Salon d' Automne (1912) had been published in this magazine (*ill.12*) and as it is revealed by his letters<sup>6</sup> Modigliani was reading the Press.

We are referring to the famous *Comœdia Illustré*<sup>7</sup>, a magazine that published in 1908 by Henri Antoine Desgrange in Paris, which established the fame of Diaghilev and the Russian Ballets. Its coverings were well-noticed productions (*ill.13a,b,c*), while the photographs presenting the artists dressed in fashion, contributed radically in creating the essence of "celebrities" at the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Paris. The magazine – promoting the Russian Ballets – had found a topic that was serving its purposes: a team of young, exotic dancers – most of them astonishingly beautiful –

<sup>4</sup> In 1912, Cocteau collaborated with Bakst on *Le Dieu Bleu* for the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev persuaded Cocteau to write a scenario for a ballet, which resulted in *Parade*, in 1917. It was produced with sets by Picasso. He also wrote the libretto for Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, which had its original performance in Paris (1927).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Alexandre was a doctor and a patron of Modigliani. Alexandre, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Pontiggia, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> In Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

who rediscovered themselves on stage through various phantasmagoric and innovative shows.<sup>8</sup>

It is very likely, actually, that Modigliani was working on the idealistic, stylized poses of the dancers either in situ or via photographs and, afterwards, he adjusted them on his *Caryatides* (ill.14a,b). Indeed, the gestures of some *Caryatides* seem like dancing instead of being massive and powerful, as their function imposes.

Cross-legged *Caryatides* could, as well, have been inspired by Russian dancers, as relevant photographs had been published in *Comœdia Illustré* (ill.15a,b).

Furthermore, the jewels with pearls that adorn many Russian dancers are relative to the ones that *Caryatides* wear. Modigliani, indeed, chose pearled earrings, necklaces and body-chains in order to embellish his *Caryatides* (ill.16a,b,c).

Likewise, the characteristic fashionable headdress with the volume-wavy bun, which is presented at the *Comœdia Illustré*, crowns the heads of *Caryatides* (ill.17a,b).

Also, we should mention that in 1911 Modigliani was inserted in Russian culture by the Russian poetess Anna Achmatova (1889-1966). Modigliani was composing some poems that period as well and, as Anna refers, the two of them had a mutual and strong understanding. In her texts<sup>9</sup> she points out that Modigliani had invited her at his atelier (at Falguière 14 Street), where that period he was occupied with his sculptures<sup>10</sup>, in order to draw her as a *dancer* (not as a poetess – perhaps because of the Russian Ballets, their influence and the origin of Anna).

In fact, there are drawings of Modigliani representing Anna that belong to P. Alexandre's collection (ill.18a,b,c). These drawings present similarities with the *Caryatides* both at the structure of the body and the background, where candles and curtains are making their presence again. These facts could provide a chronological classification of the *Caryatides'* drawings in general, as the skinny *Caryatides* and the theatrical references suddenly disappear during the summer of 1913 and numerous drawings of *kneeling Caryatides* appeared.

It is commonly accepted that Modigliani changed the type of his Caryatid after his travel to Italy (summer of 1913) resulting to the construction of two different types of sculptural *Caryatides*. The Canberra (Australia) one presents a standing, thin Caryatid, with her hands around her belly (c.1912) (ill.2). On the other hand, the one at MoMA (New York) presents a massive, kneeling Caryatid with her hands raised above her head on a dynamic pose (c.1914) (ill.3). An iconography that refers intensely to *Atlas* (e.g. *Atlas Farnese*), the equivalent masculine architectural type (ill.19).

Until today the reasons or the motive that drove Modigliani to alter his Caryatid remain without justification. Therefore, below, we will try to explain this sudden change of type of Modigliani's *Caryatides*.

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<sup>8</sup> Davis, 2010, pp.26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Achmatova, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup>Lottman, 2007, p. 82.

Initially, the primary element that we take into account in our research constitutes the fact that the *Caryatides* would be made in order to uphold a temple<sup>11</sup>. A Temple dedicated to Beauty that would be admired by all mankind. Therefore, a comparison between the *kneeling Caryatides* and the contemporary woman, the woman of the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who represented a prototype of beauty of that era, thought useful to be made. After all, Modigliani exalted the contemporary woman also through his famous *Female Nudes*.

Indeed, in contrast with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the social role of women had been transformed during the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and precisely at the World War I, when the *kneeling Caryatides* were created primarily.

More specifically, the movement of feminism flourished in the decadent atmosphere of 'fin de siècle', as a part of the ideological and cultural challenges of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the theoretical studies regarding the "gender". As a result, a gradual erosion of the obsolete beliefs regarding the concept of masculinity set off.<sup>12</sup>

Women through the Suffragette movement were claiming the right to vote. Especially, in France during the period 1909 – 1914, the movement became more organized, but unfortunately the efforts were interrupted by World War I, so that it will restart more strongly after the end of it.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the reduce of the number of the craft industries was followed by a wider mechanization, which, in turn, contributed to the non-exclusivity of men in the workforce. Male workers had to cope with a rapid change in the balance of the workforce worldwide. This radical change was highly determined by the penetration of about two million women in the labor arena, which resulted from the economic growth.

Women were occupying working positions in churches, insurance companies, banks, shops, telephone and telegraph centers. Indeed, the expansion of many community-institutions led many women of the middle class to be hired as teachers, librarians, nurses and government officials. However, home economics continued to be the main activity of most women, with the boost of the purchase of sewing machines to contribute to this social phenomenon.

Then, the New Woman, emerged from this environment confident of herself and her identity, in the turn of the century. The request for understanding, freedom, sexual satisfaction recorded in history through fiction and drama, which put forward - rather ironically - the entrance of the "manly-women" in the creative world (e.g. Henrik Ibsen's *A doll's House (1879)*, George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara (1905)*, Sigrid Undset's *Jenny (1911)*).<sup>14</sup>

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the growth of nationalist moral, women were asked to undertake unconventional roles in society. During the War, as the men

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<sup>11</sup> The Temple of Beauty has never been constructed.

<sup>12</sup> Meade-Wiesner-Hanks, 2006, p. 473.

<sup>13</sup> Husted Harper, 2009, pp. 800-801.

<sup>14</sup> Meade-Wiesner-Hanks, 2006, pp.473-4.

were missing in the trenches, the women came out in the professional arena occupying positions previously held exclusively by men. Consequently, the women of this era, that used to be housewives at home, ended up working as drivers, nurses, farmers or volunteers and even ranking in the army.

This in depth transformation of the woman's life was reflected on her clothes as well, since trousers appeared in the female wardrobe.

Therefore, a new image of freedom and self-esteem turned women away from their traditional roles, indissolubly linked with their sex.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, the transformation of the woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to a more dynamic entity, as it is also reflected on both the workplace and the way of dress, permits us to make a connection with the way the Italian artist “saw” his own Caryatid.

It can be assumed that the penetration of women into the world of man is mirrored to a certain extent in the studies of dynamic *Caryatides* of Modigliani. The *Caryatides* –like an Atlas – do not hesitate to bend their legs and with a dynamic gesture to lift the (invisible) weight with their robust hands, not losing, though, their grace and elegance. No retreat, no passivity, no weakness, only BOLDNESS (=audace in french) as characteristically is indicated to an architrave (*ill.20*).

Perhaps the explosion of the War and the participation of women in the work arena were the reasons why Modigliani had changed suddenly (1913/14) the body structure of the *Caryatides*; from weak to robust forms. Besides, Modigliani not having participated in the battle because of his health problem (he was suffering from chronic tuberculosis) and having stayed behind, he could have noticed the effort and the motivation of women-workers and the consequences and the impact of the war in their personal life (widowhood, loneliness, etc.).

Is this suggestion a bold hypothesis or an actual reflection of the increasingly dynamic role of the woman of the era of Modigliani in society?

Besides, it seems that the combination of the two architectural types, the *Caryatid* and the *Atlas*, in order Modigliani to express through this amalgam the new dynamism of the modern woman of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was not an exclusive inspiration of the Italian artist, as it will be explained below.

During the time that Modigliani radically altered the type of *Caryatides*, by creating studies that resulted in the statue of MoMA with the large masses (summer 1913), the Seventh World Congress of Suffragettes in Budapest (15-21 June 1913) took place.

According to the article published in the newspaper *Humanité* (16/6/1913), the Seventh World Congress convened on the occasion of the right of women to vote, and it was attended by thousands of representatives worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Winter, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> *L' Humanité (Paris)*, 16/6/1913, v. 3347, p. 3.

The conference topics were published in the magazine of Suffragettes *Jus Suffragii*<sup>17</sup>, which was released in Paris in May 1913. This Conference would have become quite known regarding the reports appeared in the Press, but also because of its posters that were printed and circulated worldwide, especially in France.

The poster in refer (ill.21), indeed, caught our attention, as it depicts an Atlas with hunched shoulders and bent knees to low his head, apparently due to his inability to withstand the weight of the globe. He seems to be saved from his martyrdom by an archaic female figure, which dynamically tends to get that burden and lift it to her robust shoulders.

A Woman, equal to Atlas (i.e. to man), seems to be depicted on the poster regarding the right of women to vote, which chronologically coincides with the change of the type of the *Caryatides* of Modigliani: from upright to kneeling with strong references in the iconography of the Atlas (ill.22a,,b,c).

Is it a coincidence or another element that leads us to the conclusion that the Italian desired to enrich the ancient type of Caryatid with modern characteristics in order to create a modern Caryatid, as a reflection of the dynamic modern woman (ill.23)? So in order to achieve this, did Modigliani incorporate in his Caryatides elements of the male architectural type?

Therefore, would a modern Caryatid, corresponding to the modern dynamic woman, uphold the Temple of Beauty, with her powerful hands as an Atlas, just like the contemporary (manly) women support their homes, families etc. with their work?

To sum up, this type of woman was the New Woman of the era, and deserved to be admired on a contemporary Temple of Beauty, because, despite all the difficulties and the social changes, the New Woman did not lose her elegance. Consequently, the dozens of different *Caryatides* of Modigliani absorbed two aspects of the contemporary women as she was presenting via the Press or the fiction; with the grace of a dancer and the strength of an Atlas (ill.24a,b).

This is the contradiction between the two new prototypes proposed on this paper regarding the *Caryatides* of Modigliani. Contradictions that until today exist on the female nature, as well. Of course, this is only an example of many contradictions on the multiple prototypes or influences that probably Modigliani adopted to his *Caryatides*, as we referred at the beginning of this article.

Since Modigliani did not leave any documents regarding his sculptural work, the only thing left to the researcher is to keep searching, hoping that one day the puzzle of the prototypes of the *Caryatides* will be completed successfully...

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<sup>17</sup> *Jus Suffragii*, 25/5/1913, n.8, y.7.

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