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“The nobility of the sea and landscape”: John Craxton and Greece*

David Wills

John Craxton (1922-2009) was one of the generation of travellers who in the 1950s and 60s, in the aftermath of wartime terrors, rediscovered for the British the joys of living in the Mediterranean. But unlike his friend and long-time correspondent Patrick Leigh Fermor, Craxton’s representations of Greece did not reach a mass audience, nor did his artwork attain the celebrity of his sometime housemate Lucian Freud. Nonetheless, Craxton’s achievements were recognised by his fellow professionals when he was awarded the title of Royal Academician late in life, and since his death several exhibitions have sought to establish his place in twentieth century art. This article is the first to set his work and writings within the context of the representation of Greece by other British travellers and writers of the same time period. Central to this will be my analysis of John Craxton’s own thoughts, taken from his archived letters.¹

* This article is based, in part, on a lecture of March 2018 given in connection with the exhibition *Charmed Lives in Greece* at the British Museum. My thanks to the Society for Modern Greek Studies for the invitation. I would also like thank Helen Symington (John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland), Claire Percy (archivist, Northbourne Park School), and Stephen Sides (former Headmaster, Northbourne Park School).

¹ Unless otherwise referenced, the words of John Craxton in this article are taken from his letters to Joan and Patrick Leigh Fermor: Acc. 13338/32, John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland. These are written in “what my prep school teacher accused me of, witty anglo Craxton”, and Craxton did worry that Joan would be “irritated by my spelling mistakes and strange grammar”. In addition, his letters are usually undated and lacking in punctuation. For this article, I have largely left these various eccentricities unchanged.

Following an outline of his life, contacts and achievements, centred on his travels and residency in Crete, I will briefly summarise Craxton's current reputation within the art world. I then move to the main purpose of this article, which is the consideration of various themes within his art which comprise his representation of Greece. This will be set within a theoretical context: his vistas of Greek mountains and coasts will be illuminated through reference to Simon Schama's seminal analysis of the cultural construction of landscape, alongside Lencek and Bosker's work about *The Beach*; aspects of Queer history will inform my discussion of Craxton's portraits of local sailors and shepherds; the work on animal-human relations by the anthropologist Garry Marvin provides the starting point for understanding Craxton's representation of goats and cats; and, above all, Craxton's thinking about Greece will be considered in the historical context of British artists and travellers in Greece, their rhetoric of authenticity and primitiveness, and their worries about the changes wrought by modernity.

A long life in brief

Craxton's childhood home in the St John's Wood area of London was often alive with soirees hosted by his professional musician parents. Like his later friend Patrick Leigh Fermor, he had a rather unconventional school career: he was, says his biographer Ian Collins, "beyond education".² Of the series of boarding schools he was packed off to, the most successful from the young Craxton's point of view was what was known then as Betteshanger School in Kent. The unusual educational philosophy of this establishment was that pupils should learn what they wanted: it thus attracted those who were, according to one of the first cohort, "a bit odd".³ One of the benefits of this freedom were frequent sketching trips to local landmarks such as Betteshanger Colliery, the Mill at Wickhambreaux, and Dover Harbour. When it was determined that the former laundry of Lord Northbourne's great house should be converted into the school chapel, the death of Thomas Becket in Can-

² Collins 2011, 25; Worth 2015.

³ Personal communication from Stephen Sides, May 2014.

terbury Cathedral was chosen as a suitably local Kentish theme for the altar wall. In 1936, Craxton and another pupil's design were "adapted, combined, and painted across the east end [of] the Chapel during the summer term". This was effectively his first art commission. Other activities at school included "a witty and even creative performance" in *Twelfth Night*, as Olivia.⁴

Moving on from the Kentish locations near to his school, the inspiration and subject for Craxton as a teenager came from his stays in rural Dorset and Wales. The resulting works often featured a rather lonely figure, based on himself, dreaming or reading amid a tangled profusion of foliage and trunks, as he admitted himself in a letter to the artist E.Q. Nicholson: "I'm drawing tree roots & farms & melancholy farm hands".⁵ Medically tested and rejected for wartime military service, his artistic career was furthered by entering the circle of the collector and critic Peter Watson. Craxton's London contacts thus came to include the poet Stephen Spender, photographer Joan Leigh Fermor, and artists Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, John Piper, and Graham Sutherland. Joan, a well-known society figure in London, took Craxton with her to night-clubs during the wartime blackout. On a 1946 visit to the Continent, he met Pablo Picasso, and Paul Klee's widow.⁶

Watson felt that Craxton and Freud needed further guidance, and facilitated their formal training at Goldsmiths College of Art. Convinced that artists needed the right conditions in which to work successfully, Watson also generously paid for Craxton to rent a studio in St John's Wood, where he was joined by Freud who took the top floor of the building.⁷ The Craxton-Freud partnership was a lively one, surviving their initial joint residencies in Greece, but later descending into acrimony: "Lucian now has two sparrow hawks (alive) in his studio. Local kittens I'm sorry to say are purloined to satisfy [their] cruel cravings".⁸ Peter Watson's co-biographers argue that he was closer to Craxton than

⁴ *The Betteshanger Chronicle* 1936, 20-21; 1935, 7.

⁵ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

⁶ Fenwick 2017, 108; Collins 2011, 75.

⁷ Clark and Dronfield 2015, chapter 14; Martin 2007, 28.

⁸ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

he was to Freud, “perhaps because [Craxton] was more genial, less intense”, but have concluded that, despite an attraction, there was never a sexual relationship between them.⁹ Craxton’s large masterpiece which now hangs as part of the Tate collection, an early outing for his later signature theme of goats and shepherds, was dedicated to his patron: *Pastoral for P.W.*

But according to his friend and collector Sir David Attenborough, Craxton “felt imprisoned in this country”.¹⁰ In a letter from East Anglia, the young artist wrote that “The willow trees are nice and amazing here but I would prefer an olive tree growing out of a greek ruin”.¹¹ It was Lady Norton, the wife of the British ambassador in Athens, who, having been introduced to Craxton’s work through a lunch with Watson, facilitated this long-held dream of travelling to Greece. In May 1946, Craxton arrived in Athens for the first time. As Ioanna Moraiti has recently written,

He felt as though he was returning home. It was not only the colour and the light of the Greek landscape which charmed him, but the temperament of the people suited his own philosophy of life. He could live on very little money, mix with simple people, enjoy moments of everyday life and set down a record of these in his works.¹²

From the temple at Sounion, he dashed off a postcard: “I’m off again in a day to an island where lemons grow & oranges melt in the mouth & goats snatch the last fig leaves off small trees”.¹³ On a recommendation from Patrick Leigh Fermor, Lady Norton sent Craxton off to the island of Poros, which remains, as Fani-Maria Tsigakou has pointed out, “a spot that suited both the traveler’s demands and the artist’s sketchbook”.¹⁴ There was an attractive and busy main harbour, peaceful coves just a short distance away, and attractively wooded hills, all in a compact

⁹ Clark and Dronfield 2015, chapters 14-15.

¹⁰ Worth 2015.

¹¹ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

¹² Arapoglou 2017, 38.

¹³ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

¹⁴ Tsigakou 1991, 94.

island located in comfortable proximity to Greece's capital city. Here, the goats begin to appear regularly in his paintings, along with beach scenes. Furthermore, as Ioanna Moraiti notes, "Craxton stopped depicting himself in imaginary compositions and began to produce actual portraits of the local people".¹⁵

When George Millar and his new wife Isabel sailed their ketch, *Truant*, from England to Greece in 1946, Craxton, together with Lucian Freud, appeared integral to the local colour of Poros:

We saw a lanky youth in a faded blue shirt, khaki drill trousers touched here and there with oil paint, Athenian sandals worn over white socks with yellow stripes. Brown hair grew on his small face like bushes that seek to encroach on and smother a herb garden, and this effect was underlined by a wispy moustache growing outwards from the division of his upper lip, as though the besiegers had managed to land a feeble air force.¹⁶

The sandals and facial hair suggest that Craxton had swiftly determined to go native, as he was indeed to confess in 1949: "I'm becoming rapidly Greek in my behaviour".¹⁷ Treating the impecunious artists to dinner at a local restaurant, the Millars found further evidence of this.

The sweet that they insisted I *must* eat, a small cake covered with ultra-white, powdery sugar, had so revolting a taste and so powerful a reek of rancid goat's milk that I only managed to swallow it out of politeness to Craxton and Freud, who had wolfed theirs with every appearance of great hunger and enjoyment.¹⁸

Leaving Freud behind in Poros, Craxton wanted to explore more of Greece. Whilst travelling in a small boat from Athens to the Dodecanese, he recorded the warmth of his reception: "I like being in Greece because here if I say I'm a painter people say 'fine thing' instead of that

¹⁵ Arapoglou 2017, 40.

¹⁶ Millar 1948, 356.

¹⁷ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

¹⁸ Millar 1948, 358, original emphasis.

suspicious look that one gets most times.”¹⁹ He was also welcomed to Hydra, the next island to Poros, as a guest of the Greek painter Nicos Ghika. Whilst Ghika proved to be an important influence on his art, Craxton’s experience of Hydra was ultimately tainted by disappointment and disaster. A family inheritance, Ghika’s house was a crumbling eighteenth century mansion which he had been restoring since the 1930s. However, it was later destroyed by fire, and Craxton returned in 1961 as Ghika’s official representative to view the blackened wreck.²⁰ The main suspect, a local man Foti, blamed faulty electricians whilst he was making coffee in the vacant house: “he woke up & his hair was alight his bed falling through the floor”. Craxton himself, having examined the burnt evidence, had his own theory: a lighted cigarette dropped on a mattress after a night of heavy drinking. Craxton was generally disillusioned with Hydrion attitudes, and had to refresh himself through a return to more unspoiled locales:

after two days in Poros I was able to reaffirm my love for Greek people (what is it one loves is it the wonderful human warmth?) aliveness? excess of generosity? anyway if I can’t put this feeling into exact words I can only say that these feelings are lacking in Hydra. I felt that I was going mad. Those grudging good evenings those bloody children throwing stones & kicking ladies that don’t fork out, those girls who try & let their rooms for the same price as a room in Athens that has a shower etc.

Hydra was stifling of his artistic output too. He contrasted the inspiration provided by his later home of Crete with what he had left behind: “It’s a painter’s island in that it has so many pictorial ideas & it inspires me to invent – Hydra nags me with its purity & great beauty I feel under pressure to conform to its rules & of course to on guard against seeing it as Nico paints it.”

Renting (and later buying) a house overlooking the western Cretan harbour of Chania, Craxton had finally found his Arcadia, “that timeless air that gives me a chance to breathe & the imagination to work.” Crete

¹⁹ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

²⁰ Arapoglou 2017, 51-2 and 74.

was the location for almost all of the portraits and landscapes that he subsequently produced during the rest of his long working life. Chania was a *real* place – “a town that has a *raison d’être*” – and the contrast with Hydra was obvious: “its wonderful not to have those endless acres of petty bourgeois ice cream eaters looking bored all along the sea front – instead little dives for fishermen with – snails, prawns – kelftedes etc.” Craxton’s view of Crete was part of a pattern of desire found in other travellers: *more* authentic, *more* rugged, *even closer* than the rest of Greece to the edge of Europe. He blended in, taking to the mountains on an early visit when he was still based in Poros:

the Embassy sent telegrams to Crete to find me dead or alive since I said I would be gone a few days & I was away three weeks all the police of Crete were ordered to find me, of course I didn’t help them much as I dressed as a Cretan with a handkerchief round my head & a turned up moustache!!²¹

Craxton maintained that he adopted a strict working routine: despite the tempting attractions, he did not take a break until lunchtime. “The cool breeze of the sea always seems to waft into my room what a blessed climate! Midday I can whiz around the point to the beach, put on my mask & enter the aquarium of the sea peering at the fish.” The evenings seem to have fallen into the perfect pattern too: “They had a bouzouki player & singer in the restaurant underneath me, the singer’s voice sounds like a sheep with a noose round its neck. The tourists clap politely after each song & go home to bed at 10.30 which suits me.” However, elsewhere in his extant letters he confessed that his working regime frequently fell victim to the perfectionism which also afflicted his correspondent Patrick Leigh Fermor, who had become notorious with his publisher for his endless corrections to his allegedly finished travel books: “I’ve spent months on a painting changing, altering, re-painting determined to trap an image that I want so I’m extra grateful to be reminded of how you work, it gives me encouragement, and some sort of hope.” Living in Greece with a sense of permanency helped his

²¹ Last quote in paragraph only: Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80. Otherwise: Acc. 13338/32, John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland.

state of mind too: “the wonderful calm everywhere & the nobility of the sea and landscape make me wonder if it was really me that bites his nails in traffic jams and breaths in all that dust & filth of London.” It hardly seems surprising that Craxton was always drawn back to Greece: “I can’t tell you how delicious this country is & the lovely hot sun all day and at night Taverna’s hot prawns in olive oil & greek wine & the soft sweet smell of greek pine trees. I shall never come home. How can I?”²²

But living in Crete was not without difficulties. Throughout his life Craxton chose to avoid political comment or campaigns. Uniformed military personnel were frequently the subjects of his work – a series of paintings of soldiers and sailors was produced in the 1980s, for example – but the only conflict which actually made it onto canvas was Bosnia in the 1990s. During the early 1970s, under the dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-74), Craxton continued to produce his trademark studies of animals, local people and dramatic landscapes, but these were in Africa and the Canary Islands, not Greece. He had been forced into exile, not returning until 1977.²³ He was distressed to find that he had come under Greek suspicion: “perfectly innocent acts were charged with ulterior motives”. These included an earlier application to visit the naval base at Suda to supervise the casting of a shield he had designed for the ship *Laskos*. To Joan he explained that this suggested to the Greek secret service that he was an enemy agent: “I’ve written a full explanation & though I’m just a small bit flattered at being thought intelligent enough I have a mounting anger at the incredible provincial gullibility of any serious person suspecting me especially in the evidence to hand.” He subsequently had interviews with military officials who turn out to be very affable, though initially appear intimidating: “he looked at me with very searching eyes through his thick glasses – so I’m pleased to see he found me fairly alright as a person.” Beforehand though, he admitted to being “shit scared”.

Craxton would occasionally experience professional traumas too, feeling that his work had been misrepresented or that he could not fulfil

²² Last quote in paragraph only: Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80. Otherwise: Acc. 13338/32, John Murray Archive, National Library of Scotland.

²³ Collins 2011, 132, 143, 148, 158.

what was required of him. Reaching his widest audience through his covers for the books of Patrick Leigh Fermor, he became enraged when these were not treated with due respect by the publishing house. With changes having been made to the colours of his design for *In Tearing Haste*, a 2008 book of Leigh Fermor's letters, this became "in reality a travesty of what I had in mind". He was least certain of himself when depicting countries he had no first-hand experience of: "my imagination only really works from experience". In an evident reference to the work of the Belgian cartoonist Hergé, he self-critiques his draft illustration for *Three Letters from the Andes* (1991) with the comment that "the llama is a bit too tintin"!

Becoming a well-known figure around Chania town, Craxton found himself distracted by tasks other than painting. Literary projects included corrections to the English edition of the programme for a Battle of Crete commemoration, for which he insisted on the spelling *Xania* – "Hania or Chania is so absurd". In the 1990s, he even served for a time as a British consular representative, meaning that he was "defender of British tourists in trouble – visiting police stations, courts and prisons when his busy social diary allowed and lending money to travellers in distress if he had some at the time".²⁴ A chance meeting on the waterfront with British photographer John Donat in November 1960, just six months after Craxton had himself arrived, led to a joint project to record the ancient icons and frescoes to be found in isolated churches and monasteries, which were vulnerable to theft and decay.²⁵ This was an early manifestation of Craxton's fears that modernity would encroach even onto this most traditional Greek island. During that same decade, he helped the film director Michael Cacoyannis find locations for *Zorba the Greek*, and offered tips to a visiting amateur artist – the actor Anthony Quinn. The filming led to an ongoing deluge of tourists, for which Craxton shouldered some blame. This is reflected in his design for a greetings card showing a pair of middle-aged tourists – bespectacled, backpacked, bum-bagged – and bemused by the exotic local delicacies

²⁴ Arapoglou 2017, 182.

²⁵ Vassilaki 2014.

offered on a board advertising a restaurant named *Zorba's*.²⁶ He was, in short, forced to recognise change, but was determined to make the best of it. On the occasions that he ventured back into the mountains, his biographer has found, “he was greeted like an old friend and treated to the old hospitality”.²⁷

As was inevitable for someone long-lived, the passage of time brought great personal change. Friends died, including the well-known local tour guide Tony Fennimore: “Tony was a GOLDEN MAN, a life enhancer. I’m not looking forward to Chania without his great company.”²⁸ In his later years, Craxton resembled, according to the first meeting experienced by his biographer, “an elderly Cretan chieftain, who even sported a shepherd’s stick and a woven rucksack”.²⁹ Craxton acknowledged the support offered in this phase of his life by his partner Richard Riley: “Richard needs a break as he toils on my behalf, a guardian angel, so rare these days.” His relationship with both Joan and Paddy Leigh Fermor remained warm until their deaths, in 2003 and 2011 respectively, and is expressed in the liveliness of his many surviving letters. In one, he sends her a recipe for a type of wax polish. In another, he asks Paddy if he can borrow £50 as he needs to get the roof fixed. Commiserating with the Leigh Fermors over a customs hold-up they had suffered at Brindisi gives him the opportunity to point out that “I have lots of clothes of paddys so you know where he can find them if he needs them.” Travel writer Tim Salmon, who first met Craxton in the early 1960s, recalls “a wonderful story-teller and a man of great charm”.³⁰ On a postcard with an illustration of an octopus, survives a typical example of Craxtonian humour: praising Greece as “very very unspoilt still”, he adds: “you really get your squids worth”.³¹ In Scotland, some dignitaries at a reception held for an exhibition of his work

²⁶ Illustrated in Collins, 2011, 171.

²⁷ Collins 2011, 171-2.

²⁸ Letter of condolence from John Craxton, accessed on 24/5/17 at *Fenny's Crete* website, <http://www.fennyscrete.com/emailTributes.php>

²⁹ Collins 2011, 7.

³⁰ Salmon 2010, 10.

³¹ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

simply didn't know what to make of him: "I was happy on vodka & some puns were not what they expected – one Scottish wife asked me what the colors of my latest painting were going to be I told her pink & green (the truth) ack Mr Craxton you shudna joke with me".

Full-scale retrospectives of John Craxton's work have only really come after his death: at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge in 2013-14, the Dorchester and Salisbury museums in 2015, and most recently the 2017-18 exhibition which toured Nicosia and Athens before arriving at the British Museum, London.³² David Attenborough has correctly noted that Craxton's earlier works set in England had been sombre, but that in Greece "his landscapes become positively joyous".³³ It was this very joyousness that, Ian Collins argues, caused Craxton's early promise alongside Freud to be then followed by a descent into relative obscurity: "Sour critics who found his mature work too sunny, decorative, playful and altogether too gay hinted at the envy of people left off the guest list for a life-long party."³⁴

Authenticity and primitiveness in Crete

Writing in 1992, John Craxton's friend and correspondent Paddy – formerly, Major Patrick Leigh Fermor – set out the reasons for the close bond he felt with an island people he had fought alongside in a clandestine war against Nazi occupation: "the emotions of gratitude, brotherhood-in-arms and unity of purpose played a part, and the Cretans' instincts of hospitality and their kindness".³⁵ John Lodwick, who as a Captain in the Special Boat Service carried out raids on a number of islands as a seaborne equivalent of Paddy's Special Operations Executive, wrote with similar warmth: "I think that there was none of us who did not love those Cretans."³⁶

³² Fitzwilliam Museum 2013; Collins 2015; Worth 2015; Arapoglou 2017.

³³ Collins 2011, 9.

³⁴ *John Craxton* 2011, 4

³⁵ Kokonas 2004, 18.

³⁶ Lodwick 1947, 126

British military officers such as Leigh Fermor and Lodwick had first-hand experience to support their view of the heroic simplicity and honesty of the Cretans and their rural lifestyle. But, as the anthropologist Seán Damer has shown, the nature of those from the mountainous Sphakia region, to the south of Craxton's urban Chania, had been scripted as backward and freedom-loving as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. It has proved enduring and attractive: "this image, this identity, is one that is seized upon with glee by tourists, for the reality of the EEC is that elsewhere in Europe, the 'noble savages' of the mountain peasantry have all but been wiped out by 'economic progress'."³⁷ An example of this longstanding representation can be found in Henry Miller's oft-cited 1930s travel writing, in which he compares Cretan men to other supposedly "primitive" people: "the Cretans come in garbed in handsome black raiment set off by elegant high boots, of red or white leather off-times. Next to Hindus and Berbers they are the most handsome, noble, dignified males I have ever seen."³⁸

Craxton had therefore not merely chosen a country – Greece – which has regularly been represented by foreign travellers as traditional and authentic; he had chosen the most backward island amongst so many others; and the most primitive region of that island was where he gained artistic inspiration from shepherds and wild places. According to his friend Tim Salmon, "The Greece that he loved was the vernacular Greece of sheepfold and harbour-side, the Greece of the people, who, dirt poor in those days, had only their traditions of heroic virtue to live by: physical courage, loyalty, family honour, the sacred duty of hospitality to guests."³⁹ Meanwhile, Craxton himself enjoyed the benefits of town living, including the sights of sailors drinking in lively tavernas, so that it was the human wild-life that came to him. As he explained, it proved to be the perfect inspiration for his work: "Crete is a country in its own right & the landscape full of new ideas, forms – shapes and colour. The people of Xania are incredibly kind & helpfull – I feel very happy here." Among the Cretans themselves, there was a perceived division between

³⁷ Damer 1989, 19.

³⁸ Miller 1950, 116.

³⁹ Salmon 2010, 11.

more sophisticated urbanites and the still-primitive countryside, as Michael Herzfeld found in the anonymised village which was the subject of his 1970s fieldwork: “To the townsfolk, the Glendiots and their immediate neighbors are still fearsome mountain people, admired for their preservation of idealized ancient virtues as much as they despised and feared for their supposed violence and lawlessness.”⁴⁰ This primitiveness could be negative, as Leigh Fermor found to his cost. When embedded in Crete during the Nazi occupation, he inadvertently shot and killed a colleague from the Greek resistance outside their remote hideout. This act demanded vengeance, Leigh Fermor’s remorseful apologies being rebuffed. On a post-war visit with Joan, a member of the dead man’s family lay in wait for him with a rifle.⁴¹

Finding ancient parallels or Classical survivals has long been a staple of the literary representation of Greece, and this continued for British travellers and residents of Crete for much of the twentieth century.⁴² For example, David MacNeil Doren maintained in the 1970s that a scene of women carrying water on their shoulders was “exactly like those depicted on ancient vase paintings: for life has changed little for the rural people of Crete in the forty-odd centuries since the Minoan civilisation flourished here”.⁴³ It was in Poros that Craxton first came across young Greek men dancing, “one picking up a chair in his teeth & lifting it above his head”.⁴⁴ Another of Craxton’s extant letters (now in the John Murray archive) includes a drawing of a man somersaulting over an overturned chair, to which he has added an annotation: “flk survival”. This “folk survival” was a reference to the frescoes of bull-leapers found at Knossos, Crete’s most celebrated ancient site, which Craxton had first visited in 1947. Of the musical accompaniment to this dancing, Craxton wrote from Poros of “the lyra a wonderful Cretan instrument as old as apollo”.⁴⁵ A few of Craxton’s works include figures clearly derived from classical

⁴⁰ Herzfeld 1985, 8.

⁴¹ Cooper 2012, 259.

⁴² Wills 2007.

⁴³ Doren 1974, 44.

⁴⁴ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

⁴⁵ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

sculptures. For example, a *Horse and Rider* of 1962⁴⁶ greatly resembles the young men and their mounts from the Parthenon frieze, which had reopened in their purpose-built British Museum gallery that same year. But despite the echoes of antiquity and the apparently unbroken primitive traditions, many British observers of the post-WW2 period also expressed anxiety about change. By 1980 Crete had become “Greece’s fastest-growing holiday destination”.⁴⁷ Lawrence Durrell, a friend of both Henry Miller and Patrick Leigh Fermor, warned that “tourism has swamped the island with summer sun-lovers – which has had an inevitable effect on prices, urbanization, and *morals*.”⁴⁸ Rather condescendingly, Durrell here suggests that the Cretans are childlike, unable to resist the lure of seductive incomers, their behaviour, lifestyle and wealth. In his book *Bitter Lemons* about events in 1950s Cyprus, Durrell likewise characterised the Greeks as lacking maturity and restraint: the supporters of political extremism are typically represented as alcoholics, children, or child-like.⁴⁹ In several of his letters, Craxton showed his dismay at the effects of visitors on Hydra, who themselves expressed their dissatisfaction with the holiday island: “you hear nothing but complaints from the trippers about urchins & rocks & no place to sit no shade etc”. Taking a swim in the sea, he found it “looked like a huge salty martini (full of bits of lemons)”. The decorations he found when he visited Athens at Christmas were a further uncomfortable indicator of global homogenisation:

every shop window was dotted with fake frost & snow with mangas dressed as Father Christmas selling trees made of greengrocer raffia, balloons hundreds of them, made of every possible obscene shape huge mammoth grape bunches everywhere & every pavement packed like Oxford St. Who said they don’t celebrate Christmas here.

⁴⁶ Illustrated in Arapoglou 2017, 132.

⁴⁷ Mead 1980, 13.

⁴⁸ Durrell 1978, 59, my emphasis.

⁴⁹ Durrell 1957, 133; Roessel 2000, 237.

Landscapes

The South had advantages for Craxton as an artist: “of course everything looks incredible after London’s ambiguous haze the sun has the power of a huge continuous flash light blinging [blinding?] and seeming to come from two or three directions throwing black shadows at different angles”. The Cretan landscape, at least inland, was rugged and angular. During his post-war retracing through the mountains of his journeys behind the Nazi lines, Xan Fielding, another of Leigh Fermor’s war-time colleagues, experienced the “constant visual shock of precipices and jagged skyline”. The gorges were “like parallel cracks in the grain-ing of a block of wood”; above, the sky became merely a “narrow belt of blue which followed the parallel edges of the crags [and] sparkled distantly above us, like tubular lighting in the roof of a lofty tunnel”.⁵⁰ Crete is here portrayed as physically extreme Greece. As Lawrence Durrell explained, the landscapes were “quite different from those of the romantic Ionian islands”, because “the Aegean is pure, vertical, and dramatic”.⁵¹

In his seminal study of the human interpretation of landscapes, Simon Schama pointed out that “There have always been two kinds of arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic.”⁵² As with Craxton, who escaped to his arcadia from the stifling intellectual and literal atmosphere of London, only to base himself in the town of Chania, “both kinds of arcadia, the idyllic as well as the wild, are landscapes of the urban imagination”.⁵³ Mountains can be awe-inspiring or even menacing places: the contemplation of immense structures which have existed for immeasurable time serves to dwarf the size and achievements of the human figure, a sense which can sometimes be found in Craxton’s work. *A Cretan Gorge* from 1966, for example, has the same long vertical shapes and colours which found their way onto his design for the cover of Leigh Fermor’s book *Rou-*

⁵⁰ Fielding 1953, loc 5226, 1393, 1669.

⁵¹ Durrell 1978. 58.

⁵² Schama 1996, 517.

⁵³ Schama 1996, 525, original emphasis.

meli, published the same year. Rocks and foliage alike are twisted into steep curves or right-angles. The only gentle roundness is to be found in the few surviving leaves. On *Roumeli*, two of Craxton's signature goats manage to steal onto the canvas, but, as with the man chasing them, they are dwarfed by their forbidding surroundings. Arcadia is here nature in extreme: the naked and clear vertical lines of the rock, the sparseness and weird shapes of the vegetation, and the slight presence of humanity is merely present in order to highlight its insignificance.⁵⁴

In his artistic style, Craxton was certainly influenced by his friend Ghika's "Cubist compositions, with the jagged lines of hills and the dazzling light".⁵⁵ Neither of them can be said to have followed the tradition of most nineteenth century artists, who "depicted the Greek scenery in a Claudian diffused light that tended to blur forms".⁵⁶ But Craxton did come to recognise and appreciate the gentler, more domesticated region of arcadia which was to be found on the abundant Cretan coastline. "I really enjoy the sea now ... I find association with water help one to feel the land with more understanding & stimulation."⁵⁷ Although he expressed dislike for the invasion of tourism, the crowds of sun seekers did provide some advantages: "I have always planned to paint a beach scene maybe now with models to spare I will pluck up courage." With a few exceptions such as 1940s Dunkirk and Normandy, or the Mediterranean migrant tragedies of recent years, the beach has long been associated with leisure and pleasure, as Lencek and Bosker have set out in detail. The Impressionist painters, for example, focused on "the hedonistic physicality of the seashore".⁵⁸ Later, for post-war "hippies", the Mediterranean offered "pristine beaches where conditions were right for regressing to their preindustrial ideal of life".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Both illustrated Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 38-9.

⁵⁵ Arapoglou 2017, 78.

⁵⁶ Tsigakou 1981, 28.

⁵⁷ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

⁵⁸ Lencek and Bosker 1998, 128.

⁵⁹ Lencek and Bosker 1998, 251.

For many visitors, then, right through to today, the beach is about forgetting work and money. Craxton's *Beach Scene* from 1949⁶⁰ is an illustration of the pure exuberance of life on Poros. Local boys with tanned skin strip off their shirts and wade in, or just sunbathe. Two young women throw a ball to each other across the gentle waves of the bay. Another sits in her bathing costume on the shore, clutching the shirt of the child she is watching as his pale body hovers in the shallows. For a girl by the sea painted in 1957,⁶¹ a figure Craxton returned to for a number of different works, the seashore similarly represents pleasure and fun. Wearing a yellow semi-transparent dress, which reveals the lines of her legs and torso against the backdrop of the water, she is simply engaged in gaily waving a red scarf above her head.

Shepherds, sailors, and other portraits

People who dwell in the mountains can be thought of not merely as possessors of a primitive lifestyle, but also as having retained their ancient virtues. Simon Schama has set out, for example, how the eighteenth century myth of mountain utopia was pedalled, particularly with reference to the pastoralists of the Swiss Alps:

Protected from lowland greed, fashion, and luxury by the blessed barrier of the mountains, he drank the cold, clear water that gushed from mountain brooks, inhaled the pure Alpine air untainted by the stinking miasma of metropolitan life. His food was given to him by his habitat: the milk of goats and cows, the fruits and herbs of the upland orchards. His dwelling was a rustic timber chalet, his clothes made from the skins of mountain animals. His wants were simple, his speech candid and economical.⁶²

Nineteenth century painters of Greek themes had been attracted to the figure of the dignified mountaineer, particularly during the War of Independence, "whose nobility and heroism are worthy of the principles

⁶⁰ Illustrated Souliotis 2012, 31.

⁶¹ Illustrated *John Craxton* 2011, 17.

⁶² Schama 1996, 479.

of his legendary ancestors”.⁶³ In WW2 Crete, the British recognised in their official military report that “the shepherd is the true King of the mountains” and was invaluable in the struggle against the Germans: “Their excellent sight and swift feet, their knowledge of paths and caves and hiding places, their endurance of fatigue, cold and hunger, and, not least, their old fashioned hospitality, were at our disposal and made the shepherd the mainstay of our life in Crete.”⁶⁴ In works such as *Shepherds at Night* and *Homage to Alones* (both 1949)⁶⁵ John Craxton, in the immediate post-war period, tried to reproduce the spartan nobility of life in the mountains. In these scenes, set at night amidst stark rocks, nestling into a hooded cloak and warming the hands on an open fire are the only comforts. Craxton’s more detailed portraits of his Greek neighbours, from around the same period, are similarly direct and unflinching. The sitter often stares uncompromisingly forward, offering a challenge to the viewer, much as the Greeks famously ask direct personal questions of foreign travellers they have only just met.⁶⁶ The *Head of an Aged Cretan* (1948),⁶⁷ for example, has a dramatic white beard set off by a black costume that is intended to be traditional dress. As late as the 1970s, the traveller David MacNeil Doren found such flamboyant rural costume sported casually: “Through this wonderland of light and colour strode the country people at their daily tasks: men in knee-high boots and baggy blue breeches, with yellow-fringed black bandannas wound around their heads.”⁶⁸ In Craxton’s portrait, however, whilst the wrinkled skin, wavy beard and piercing blue eyes are detailed, the coat and headdress are left comparatively unspecified and formless. Craxton recognised the importance of the man himself, not the folk curiosity that a more obsessive focus on the costume would have invited.

The anthropologist Michael Herzfeld recorded feuds among Cretan villagers – admittedly exceptional but nonetheless potentially deadly –

⁶³ Tsigakou 1991, 80.

⁶⁴ Kokonas 2004, 121-2.

⁶⁵ Illustrated Collins 2011, 92-3.

⁶⁶ For the alleged Greek trait of the curious questioning of travellers, see Wills 2007, 82.

⁶⁷ Illustrated Collins 2011, 14.

⁶⁸ Doren 1974, 44.

over such issues as stolen sheep, plots of land, or goats' destruction of olive shoots.⁶⁹ Such disharmony is not overtly reflected in Craxton's work, where the men are shown joyfully linking arms in tavernas, and goats cheerfully strip trees without sanction. MacNeil Doren described "smoky little *tavernas* patronized by fishermen or sailors – places with sawdust on the stone floors, raucous with the voices of bronzed and mustachioed men in high-necked, dark blue wool sweaters."⁷⁰ *Still Life with Three Sailors* (1980-85)⁷¹ has a typical scene at a table packed with mezes and bread, the small tumblers of wine being knocked back. The smart naval dress, hats neatly stacked on a vacant chair, and the glint of a watch on a wrist, shows Craxton to be giving these men due respect: they aspire to be worldly sophisticates, not peasants sealed in the past.

In such establishments, Herzfeld observed that drinking was "an affirmation of manliness."⁷² Craxton attempted in several of his works to evoke both the joy and the intensity of the taverna patrons who, no doubt under the influence of alcohol, expressed themselves in dancing, as described by Xan Fielding:

two or three stealthy steps forward, and the dancer was then launched into the long series of complicated movements, flicking his ankles, stamping his feet, slapping his heels. Then came the sinister swoops and dips, the drunken, off-balance lurches and miraculous recoveries – all executed as though in a trance, with the performer's head thrown back and smiling at the ceiling or else bent forward in dreamy contemplation of his own shoes; and all the time his fingers would be snapping.⁷³

Craxton's *Three Dancers – Poros*,⁷⁴ of the same year as Fielding's account, are a male trio dressed in everyday trousers and shirts, who are united by their exuberance, a handkerchief held aloft between them, and the alcohol evident from the tumblers they have temporarily aban-

⁶⁹ Herzfeld 1985, 77 and 79.

⁷⁰ Doren 1974, 26.

⁷¹ Illustrated Collins, 2011, 152-3.

⁷² Herzfeld 1985, 126.

⁷³ Fielding 1953, loc 2825.

⁷⁴ Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 33.

done on the table alongside. Outside of the bars, Craxton would spy men working on the harbour side. From such observations in Samos he produced, also in 1953, *Mending the Nets*,⁷⁵ a portrait not of the man's face, whose eyes only are visible as he is bowed over his task, but of the rugged hard work itself. The fisherman's unclad forearms and calves are thickly substantial, whilst the nets he mends with such concentration, the tools of his work and survival, appear delicate. *Two Figures and Setting Sun*, which Craxton worked on a number of times between 1952 and 1967,⁷⁶ features two men, both naked to the waist, one almost appearing to dance as he industriously tenderises an octopus by smashing it down onto the quay, the other much more relaxed as he lies on his back, sunbathing.

The twentieth century history of the male-on-male gaze of foreigners in Greece has been outlined by scholars such as Robert Aldrich and Dimitris Papanikolaou. The association of Greece with homosexuality had originated from a knowledge of antiquity: the pairs of men integral to the military system of ancient Sparta, the required nudity of athletes during the Olympic Games, the celebration of male anatomy through statuary. "The South was thus Arcadia, a state of nature and still-throbbing heart of classical culture all at once – a place to fantasise and, also, to live out fantasies."⁷⁷ The male-gazing in Greece did not of course derive exclusively from an interest in Classics: "They made a pilgrimage southwards to find culture; they also wanted to find boys: they usually found both."⁷⁸ For John Craxton, as the catalogue for the recent *Queer British Art* exhibition at Tate Britain has argued, "the handsome, tanned Aegean sailor was inscribed not only by the democratic and athletic legacies valued by the ancient Greeks, but also embodied a compelling homoeroticism."⁷⁹ In December 1948, Craxton records his activities as being far from artistic or intellectual: "Just before Christmas I spent several days & nights wandering around Piraeus to the brothels & in the

⁷⁵ Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 32.

⁷⁶ Collins 2011, 155.

⁷⁷ Aldrich 1993, 167.

⁷⁸ Aldrich 1993, 12.

⁷⁹ Stephenson 2017, 133.

bars full of American sailors ending up sharing a bed with a Greek sailor for warmth!!”⁸⁰

Papanikolaou has argued that for Western intellectuals of this period, “the ideal Greek lover had thus to be a working-class young man (variations on a shepherd, a fisherman’s son, a rural worker, a boy on a donkey), a figure who was essentially speechless. The silent working-class youth was seen as part of the landscape, sharing its stillness and muteness.”⁸¹ This was a common homoerotic motif in cultural products by Greeks as well. One of C.P. Cavafy’s poems has as its subject the “the pornographic photograph of a young man, sold clandestinely on the street”.⁸² Eleni Papargyriou has noted that it is not the homosexual content of the photograph which attracts the disquiet of the poem’s narrator, but rather, “Cavafy seems to be more disconcerted by the social circumstances that lead young (most likely working class) men to this kind of occupation.”⁸³ The male subjects of portraits by Craxton were likewise not of high-status but were working men, captured at work or leisure, and usually without their names attached. In the case of a *Soldier by the Sea* of 1985,⁸⁴ unlike some of Craxton’s earlier work from the 1940s, the sitter becomes a mere khaki-uniformed model, hand on hip and one foot up on a low wall – reduced to a pose more than a person.

Animals – goats and cats

Goats are integral to almost every landscape painting by Craxton. A vital animal for many Cretan livelihoods, goats were encountered by Xan Fielding as they waited to pass

through the narrower gap of the milkman’s legs, which straddled each animal as it came along and held it in position over the pail. The pen was tightly packed: a ruffled pool of horns and beards and am-

⁸⁰ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

⁸¹ Papanikolaou 2006, 217-8.

⁸² Papargyriou 2011, 80.

⁸³ Papargyriou 2011, 81.

⁸⁴ Collins 2011, 148.

ber-coloured eyes, an ocean of goat, in which no one goat could be distinguished from another.⁸⁵

This is well illustrated in a large painting now in Bristol City Art Gallery, *Four Figures in a Mountain Landscape* of 1950-51.⁸⁶ The two animals in the foreground, one being hauled to milking and the other currently being milked, immediately stand out, being as white as the liquid being squeezed into the bowl. It only becomes apparent upon more prolonged inspection that the whole of the darker background of the painting is alive with faces, their eyes slowly giving them away as they await their turn in a packed mass. A 1958 *Landscape with Derelict Windmill*,⁸⁷ despite the clear presence of the redundant sails on the horizon and farmhands prominently concentrated on their work, is dominated by an enormous goat fully outstretched to strip the last greenery from an already skeletal tree.

The anthropologist Garry Marvin has demonstrated that “the representation of animals is perhaps always an expression of human concerns, desires, and imaginings”.⁸⁸ Craxton’s goats were, at least in part, a symbol: “Goats are essential domestic animals in the Mediterranean and yet they destroy the landscape, nibbling away at the trees and devouring every green shoot. My paintings comment on life but it is all implicit.”⁸⁹ Patrick Leigh Fermor, in an introduction to Craxton’s work, ventured the explanation that “they represent independence and escape”.⁹⁰ Ian Collins argues that there was also divine symbolism from ancient myth: Zeus had been brought up in the mountains by a wild goat, and the horned and furry Pan was a mischievous presence lurking in the wildest of the Greek countryside.⁹¹ Goats flank Pan, his arms outstretched in triumph, as acolytes in one of Craxton’s set designs for the 1964 ballet

⁸⁵ Fielding 1953, loc 4705.

⁸⁶ Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 26.

⁸⁷ Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 35.

⁸⁸ Marvin 2001, 273.

⁸⁹ Collins 2011, 88.

⁹⁰ Arapoglou 2017, 129.

⁹¹ Collins 2011, 91.

Daphnis and Chloë.⁹² In Craxton's diploma work from 1984-5, submitted as was required upon his election as a Royal Academician, a single file of goats is dwarfed by the extraordinarily conical mountains which form the backdrop.⁹³ More commonly, however, it is the goats which have the upper hand in their surroundings – over the vegetation they are consuming or over the shepherds attempting to control them. *Voskos I* of 1984⁹⁴ consists of a single shepherd who appears to be doing an elaborate dance; but the tune is evidently being piped by the frisky and uncooperative goat which he straddles. Essential to Craxton's vision of Crete, the goats in his landscapes suggest that life is a constant tussle for supremacy.

Cats were another of Craxton's favourite themes. Exuberant and mischievous, they were, like the goats and the dancers, virtually untameable and full of life. "I have a cat called aphrodite because she was fished out of the sea having been thrown in as an unwanted kitten. She is very clever & alas has eaten up all of my pet mice – ones that I had taken a fancy to, that lived in the walls."⁹⁵ In 1959's *Still Life with Cat and Child*,⁹⁶ a girl is catching the lean feline in the act as it stretches out its paws towards the irresistible array of seafood on the table: black sea urchins, whole octopus and squid, and, its extraordinarily long feelers dominating the whole scene, a lobster. At the Chania quayside restaurants, Craxton used to order such eccentric displays of seafood that even the famous naturalist David Attenborough was left perplexed.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The era during which John Craxton knew Greece, and more particularly resided in Crete, coincided with the growth of the country as a mass tourist destination. From the 1950s, and increasingly from the 1970s,

⁹² Collins 2011, 104.

⁹³ Collins 2011, 147.

⁹⁴ Fitzwilliam Museum 2013, 44.

⁹⁵ Tate Archive, London, TGA 977/1/1/80.

⁹⁶ Collins 2011, 125.

⁹⁷ Collins 2011, 10.

Greece was imagined, dreamed about and encountered as a welcoming and comfortable place, ripe for sunbathing and relaxation. Craxton's apparently playful paintings were often similarly full of fun. Ironically, however, his hideaway on a Greek island, far from the prominent galleries of London or even Athens, meant that his work made little contribution to the popular imagining of Greece during his lifetime. Yet his paintings also offer a challenge to the image of the Greeks and their country as open-book welcoming. Craxton's style – the jaggedness of the lines which made up the natural landscape, the wild exoticism of the seafood, the grudging domestication of the goats and cats – was a signal that visitors, whether tourists or more permanent residents, should not feel *too* comfortable. As Patrick Leigh Fermor found through the vendetta against him in Crete, Greece, although apparently placid and picturesque to the casual eye, could be anything but safe.

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