

The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess

Into the Labyrinth: from description to imagination

Transcript of recordings from <https://mansil.uk/snake-goddesses-labyrinth>



Replicas of the Snake Goddesses, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

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Introduction

This booklet introduces elements of 'The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess' project, which investigates and celebrates these iconic figurines from Minoan Crete. 'The Minoans' is the modern term for the culture and people who lived on Bronze Age Crete (third and second millennia BCE). Heralded as the first civilisation on modern European soil, they built palaces, developed writing, produced high quality crafts, and the elites even enjoyed flushing toilets.

The faience 'Snake Goddesses' were found in 1903 in the so-called Palace of Minos at Knossos, which, in Greek myth, was the location of the famous labyrinth of the minotaur. The originals are now housed in the Heraklion Museum. For this project, we handled the replica plaster casts from the Ashmolean Museum (as seen on cover), now themselves historic artefacts, as seen in the Museum's exhibition, *Labyrinth: Knossos, Myth and Reality*, 8th February to 30th July 2023. Dr Andrew Shapland of the Ashmolean Museum is a research partner for this project.

Our wider research considers how these striking figures have been reconstructed and reimagined since their discovery. In art, music, dance, opera, advertising, and literature, they have been inspirational and influential in a wide range of contexts, including leading the procession in the 2004 opening ceremony for the Olympic Games in Athens.

Here, we aim to compare different genres and styles of English, namely audio description (AD), mindfulness techniques, art appreciation from a blind writer's perspective, and poetry. This booklet provides the transcripts of the recordings that you may listen to (<https://mansil.uk/snake-goddesses-labyrinth>). We encourage readers (and listeners) to consider how these distinct styles of spoken/written language lead and enable you to 'see', notice, and engage with the figurines differently.

On the website, we start at the entrance of the labyrinth, with a short clip inviting people to look at the image for themselves as unguided viewing. The second part presents Karly Allen's audio description (AD) of the larger figurine. AD is the vivid, verbal depiction of the visual and wider sensory experience, used to provide access to art for blind and partially sighted people. We are curious to see how much more the AD enriches the appreciation of the figure for *all* viewers, included sighted people.

We then turn to a different approach by Lucia van der Drift, who specialises in applying mindfulness techniques to art perception. This reflects a turn towards 'slow looking' that some museums have adopted, and the growing recognition of the use of art for mental wellbeing. Does an engagement with art give us some needed time out from the hectic bustle of everyday life?

It was essential to us that we included the perspective of a blind or partially sighted writer as well. Following the RNIB's motto, 'See Differently', Tanvir Bush reminds us that the experience of blindness offers new views of art. Her creative texts lead us all to reconsider our fragmented view of history, and the need to fill in the missing pieces of both artefacts and their stories.

Finally, we have a series of 15 poems by Ruth Padel, an award-winning British poet with a special connection to Crete. She excavated on the island as a student and has published a novel set there (*Daughters of the Labyrinth*, 2021); furthermore, she has experience in (non-poisonous) snake handling in India as research for her novel *Where the Serpent Lives* (2010). Poetry offers a wider, more personally associative interpretation of these material artefacts, and suggests more paths to new meanings. Three of the poems (6, 8 and 13) have a visual element, so the words are formed to represent a slithering snake or Mycenaean kylix (drinking cup). All these poems have been translated into Greek, and two have inspired British Sign Language poems (poems 8 and 13).

These contrasting pieces promote very different genres of descriptive and creative writing, but some literary traditions link them. For example, the poetry of *ekphrasis* has much in common with AD. Juxtaposed, their contrasting aims and intentions invite us to rethink the questions: what do we want art to do for us? How can we reignite the power of antiquities for the modern age? And how can language be stretched to embrace and describe the range and depth of human experience?

We are also keen to explore how modes of communication developed by and for people with sensory impairments, such as AD, can benefit the experience for all, including sighted people. For this reason, we invite listeners to participate in a survey available on the online recordings of these readings, which are available here: <https://mansil.uk/snake-goddesses-labyrinth>.

Ellen Adams
Nicoletta Momigliano
Christine Morris



Replica of the larger Snake Goddess figurine, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

This figurine is the object relevant to the unguided looking, AD, and mindful approach.

Unguided looking (3 mins), by Karly Allen

Welcome to this part of the research project, The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess, which investigates how our appreciation of an image can be enhanced by audio description and mindful guidance, bringing us into closer connection.

Thank you for helping with this research by listening to the recordings and completing a short survey at the end.

There are three recordings in total, each one inviting you to venture deeper into the labyrinth of the Snake Goddess.

This is Recording 1 and lasts three minutes. It's an experiment in unguided, self-looking, as a sighted person might do in a museum.

If you are able to take part in this, you're invited to spend 27 seconds observing the image which will appear on your screen, in whatever way is possible and comfortable for you. Otherwise, please skip this recording and continue to Recording 2, which lasts fifteen minutes. It offers a detailed audio description of the image, designed to be accessible to all. Finally, Recording 3 lasts eight minutes and is a mindfulness-based audio which is also designed to be enjoyed by all.

In a moment, you'll be prompted by the sound of a chime to start looking for 27 seconds. Simply look freely, and notice what's in the image.

This short period of 27 seconds is found to be the average time that a museum visitor spends with an object in a museum.*

When it's time to stop, you'll hear three chimes. After looking, we invite you to note down a few words or draw a quick sketch, as a record of what you saw.

OK, here we go: [chime]
[three chimes]

Time to stop looking – and, if you like, you may briefly note down what you saw. When you're ready, please move onto Recording 2, which offers an audio description of the image.

Goodbye for now.

* Smith, Lisa, Jeffrey Smith and Pablo Tinio. 2017. 'Time spent viewing art and reading labels'. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and The Arts* 11: 77-85.

Audio description (15 mins), Karly Allen

Thanks for joining us for this audio description, which is designed to be enjoyed by all.

One of our research questions is whether audio description has benefits for sighted people in addition to blind and partially sighted people, for whom this practice was developed. Thank you for helping with this research by completing the short survey when you've finished.

I'm Karly Allen and over the next 15 minutes you'll hear me leading you through a sequenced description of the image on your screen.

The image shows a version of the Minoan Snake Goddess. The original Snake Goddess, as she's known, is an ancient Minoan figurine from the Greek Island of Crete and dates from around 1600 BCE. The Snake Goddess, the larger of a pair of figurines, has received a lot of attention since its discovery in 1903.

Its fragmented origins, reconstruction, and multiple copies and reinterpretations are all part of its story. The object on your screen is part of that story: it's a modern replica made soon after 1903 and it's in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, UK.

So, what are we really looking at? While we're describing this object, it's helpful to keep in mind these many lenses of reconstruction – the replica that is in front of us, and the original it refers to, which is itself a reconstruction of fragments, pieced together by an archaeologist who wanted us to understand it in a certain way.

We'll start this description with some headline information. Then, we'll move through the description in three parts: first focusing on shape, then material, and finally colour.

So, to start with the headlines:

This is a small figurine, modelled in three dimensions.

It depicts a standing woman who is resplendently dressed. Her long skirt reaches the ground and forms a stable base where it rests on a flat surface.

This is a moulded replica made of plaster, with a painted surface. It is the same size as the original Snake Goddess which it copies, and could be held comfortably in the hands.

It measures 34cm in height, and is 12cm across at the base, its widest width. So, in inches it stands just over a foot high, with a maximum width of four and a half inches.

At the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, this 20th century object is usually displayed alongside antiquities from Minoan Crete. This replica has a special place in the history of the Ashmolean Museum, as it is connected with a former keeper of the museum, the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans.

It was Evans who discovered the Minoan Snake Goddess on Crete, oversaw its reconstruction and commissioned this plaster copy. The artist who made it was Halvor Bagge, who was working closely with Evans at Knossos.

We will move now into a detailed description –
Firstly, how is the Snake Goddess shaped?

Disregarding the arms for a moment, the overall shape of the standing figure is a narrow, tapered cone, resting upright on its wider end.

Starting from the very top and moving down:

The first quarter of the height is a tall cylindrical hat with a flattened top, like a chimney. It is upright, yet very slightly tilted to the right.

In the next quarter, we find the head, the exposed bust and pinched-in waist.

And from this midpoint down to the base, is the long, stiff-looking skirt, as if it has been heavily starched. The skirt is without folds, and resembles a slender cow bell.

It is wider when seen from the front and narrower from the side, because the skirt is oval in cross-section.

The upper body is dressed in a very tight-fitting shirt with short sleeves. The neckline is open, and tied in laces under the full breasts, which are visible. The waist is pulled in tightly, giving her an hourglass shape.

Although it is from an entirely different time and culture, the silhouette of the dress from the front is reminiscent of corseted fashions of the late 19th century in Paris, which might be familiar from paintings by Renoir or Whistler.

To describe the position of the arms, you are invited to take up the pose in your own body, or to imagine doing so. I'll lead you through this now.

So, standing tall with a straight back and long neck, your weight distributed evenly through your feet, your face forwards. Let your arms fall by your sides, and turn your hands so your palms are facing forwards.

Gently curl your fingers towards your palms.

Keeping your arms completely straight, slowly raise your whole arms forwards, so that they come to an angle of about 45 degrees in front of your body.

The strength of the pose is created by its insistent symmetry and balance through its vertical centre line. The figure fixes us with a wide-eyed stare, which reinforces this assured attitude.

Hold the pose a bit longer, if you wish, then we'll move on with the description.

Seen from the front, it is as if the figure is presenting her outstretched arms to us, with fists raised to the sky, and approximately in line with her navel.

Twisting around these arms, upper body and waist, is the undulating shape of one or more snakes.

The snake body is thin, about one third of the width of her arm. Each arm is about the width of an adult finger. The snake is modelled so that it is raised on the surface.

Starting at her hands, where she holds a snake head and tail:

One or more snakes form a wavy line up her arms –

They are seen on her shoulder like a wide collar... and follow the outer contour of her breasts and waist.

They loop over her belly in an indistinct knot, forming what looks like a twisted, low girdle.

Finally, they travel up her neck and the back of her tall hat, where a snake head appears on the very top, like an ornament.

Moving now into the next part of the description, how might we experience the materials and colours of this object?

This replica figurine is made of plaster. Wet plaster was poured into a mould and left to harden. The resulting surface is pale and smooth and similar to a fine, fired clay. It is similar to the touch experience of a painted tile, and neutral in temperature.

The plaster imitates the appearance of the ancient Minoan figurine, but is not the same. The Minoan original is made of faience – a paste which is made from crushing the hard mineral quartz, and then firing at high temperatures. This creates a surface with a lustrous sheen. Faience is cooler to the touch than plaster, and closer to the touch experience of mother of pearl or a polished stone.

The plaster surface of this object has been painted in a limited palette of colours. They can be described in three tones:

First, the palest tone of the base layer. This cream tint covers most of the figure, like a pale butter or light sea shell.

Second, an enriched colour is used on the shirt and snakes: a clear opal green and subtle yellow. Green is also used in a dotted line to indicate a beaded necklace.

And third, the darkest tones: a deep bitter brown. This is used in the following areas:

- The tall hat and hairline beneath it.
- On the face: the arched eyebrows and wide eyes - each one a simple leaf shape with a clear dot at the centre.
- On the shirt: a raised line around its edges, including the front fastenings, where laces are tied in looped knots under the breasts.
- And finally, on the front of the skirt: a wide decorative band of pattern forms the border of a short, curved apron.

In general, the colours of this replica are in a lighter key than the Minoan original: the colours are cooler and more distinct.

The surface decoration helps to draw our attention to the head and torso, whereas the wide skirt remains on the periphery of our gaze. It has paler, horizontal stripes, like ruled pencil lines.

This greater focus on the upper half corresponds to what we know about the original figurine in Greece –

It was excavated as a fragment, with one arm missing and very little surviving below the hips. The fragments were reconstructed and given a replacement skirt and right arm – an artist's drawing from the time shows how these old and new pieces were fitted together.

This plaster replica serves as a record of that reconstruction, and the interpretation of archaeologists in 1903. It brings up questions about authenticity and what can be considered original – and how this affects our experience of looking. The resulting figure here is therefore an image of the Snake Goddess and of the multiple ideas of what, or who, she might be.

To bring our description to a close, let's consider the object as a whole - what is the overall impact and impression of being with this figure?

Her facial expression and pose seem to demand our attention and express a desire to communicate.

She is small enough to hold, yet commands a powerful presence.

While this figure type has become famous under the title of the Snake Goddess, her true identity and meaning is still being questioned –

And this element of mystery might be considered a key part of the viewing experience.

She is close at hand and yet always distanced from us, through layers of time, reconstruction, and reproduction.

She is also rarely seen alone like this, but in the company of a second, smaller figurine, which was reconstructed with two snakes in its raised hands. The two were pieced together from the same archaeological find. Seen together as a pair, the figures raise even more questions.

We've come to the end of this description now.

To venture further into the labyrinth of the Snake Goddess, please continue on to Recording 3, a mindful exploration. Thank you for helping with this research project by completing the short survey – you can do this after listening to Recording 3, which is the final recording. Or, if you're stopping here, then please complete the survey now.

Goodbye for now.

Mindful looking (8 mins), Lucia van der Drift

This is an eight-minute mindful meditation with the Snake Goddess. The recording can be used by blind or partially sighted people, as well as sighted people. My name is Lucia van der Drift and I am your guide for this meditative exploration. I hope you will find some uninterrupted time to listen to this recording. The prompts are designed to gently focus the mind, possibly resulting in more calm and ease, and hopefully bringing you closer to the figure. Let's start.

I invite you to take a conscious pause for a moment and feel the weight of your body. Feel the contact of the body with the chair, the ground. Let's linger here for a short while before engaging with the goddess. Sensing into the body for a moment longer.

Now either resting your gaze on the image on the screen or recalling the description you may have listened to earlier. First being aware of the space around the figure and then pointing your attention to the outline of this figure. Meeting the whole of this figure without getting drawn into details.

Let's start by connecting to the colours used on this figure. Allowing the colours to come alive for you, in your own way: greens, browns, creams, yellows, turquoises. Moving in and out of lighter and darker shades.

Whenever the mind goes into thinking about the figure, just gently bring it back to engaging with the colours on this figurine. Exploring the sensations of colour and noticing how these colours may affect you.

Now let's turn to the shapes that are part of this figure.

Connecting to rounded shapes, for instance in the face, the headgear, the chest, and the apron-like shape that covers the skirt. Rounded shoulders leading to straight yet slightly curved arms.

Now also including lines in your exploration: the slightly tilted hat, the curved lines leading from the waist to the base of the figure. And, of course, the snakes curved around the body and the arms.

I now invite you to widen out your attention and engage with the whole figurine again. Slowly move your attention from the bottom to the top, and then back again from the top to the bottom.

Being aware of the head, the left arm, the chest, the right arm, the waist, and the long skirt.

And for a moment sense back into your own body.

Feel into your own body, feeling its materiality. Its aliveness.

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From this awareness of your own body, let's turn again to the figure of this Snake Goddess. An image coming from the past. A meeting that goes beyond what can be seen, and perhaps understood. Yet a meeting that can feel significant, meaningful, and true.

Now sensing the space between yourself and the object, either on the screen in front of you or in your mind's eye.

Let's dwell here for a bit longer.

Perhaps acknowledging a connection that was made.

How do you feel now?

As the time approaches to bring this meditation to a close, let's disconnect from the image of the goddess.

And perhaps dissolve it in your mind's eye.

Taking a moment to feel the weight of your body.

The air on your face.

And sense the space around you.

Thank you for joining us for this mindful exploration.

If you would be happy to help with this research project, please complete the short survey following this recording.

‘See, I am in Pieces’ by Tanvir Bush

I began to lose my sight in my late teens. At first it was just nibbles, tiny nibbles taken from the edges of fingers and faces, the odd treetop lopped off on the horizon. What disintegrated faster was my ability to control light. Sunlight became painful, and low light became viscous and thick, like dark, sticky spider web. Colour leached away slowly too, until greens and blues merged, browns and blacks, greys and purples.

I have retinitis pigmentosa (RP). The cells in my retina, the rods and cones, forget their function, wither and die, knocking one another down like dominoes. We don't know why. Now, 30 years later, I see only in small fragments using a tiny tunnel of greasy vision to scan for clues. The useless pigment cells lie, flung about like used coffee grounds, across the back of my retinas.

I see in fragments, yes... but it is still the same world we are all living in, the same old ground the quizzical archaeologists carefully picked at with their small shovels before the World Wars, the same planet once inhabited by the craftsmen and women who made the original figures. My world and the statuettes are now in pieces, our lives a guessing game of memory and match. If I see your eye on the left, I will assume you have another eye on the right, a nose, and a mouth. If I see you raise your arm while shouting 'catch!', I will assume there is a missile flying through the air, although I might not see your entire arm throwing, or the ball flying. An arm, a head, a partial torso. How do the pieces fit back together?

The scatterings of that Knossos cist, opened by Arthur Evans at the very beginning of the 20th Century, must have resembled my retinas at first: fragments and shards of pottery, bones, shells, seeds, and clots of burnt earth - each piece casting its odd-shaped shadow in the flickering torch beams. The history of that place, the truth of that palace, could never be reconstructed, not fully. As my brain does with the gaps in my vision, the archaeologists guessed. They guessed with the fragments that constituted their versions of history and culture. We are still guessing.

And when we guess wrong? Sometimes my brain fills in the gaps with the oddest things. I once saw two polar bears in a supermarket aisle. It wasn't even the freezer section. In that moment, those two bears truly existed – yet I wasn't frightened. In a way, I was waiting for my brain to catch up. Occasionally, I see cats which, on a second squinted, focused stare, have evaporated. Very occasionally, and slightly chillingly, are the faces pressed up against car windows that are only reflections and bounced light.

These 'guesses' are relatively common amongst those with degenerative sight conditions or certain brain conditions, and this magical mayhem of hallucinations is known as Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS). Charles Bonnet, an 18th century Swiss naturalist and philosopher, was the first to explore this phenomenon. He was partially deaf and, in later years, lost much of his eyesight. Perhaps because of this, he took a different view of the world around him.

According to current research, mostly from within the Western population of people with macular degeneration, CBS hallucinations can be simple unformed flashes of light, colours, or shapes. However, many people see more elaborate forms, such as geometrical grids and lattices, or landscapes. I see polar bears in supermarkets.

I asked an ophthalmologist about CBS once, and he said the hallucinations were intriguing, especially the particularly vivid ones involving people dressed in old-fashioned clothing. He had several patients who saw children decked out in the ruffles, bonnets, and sailor suits of Victorian England! When I asked if these Victorian apparitions were experienced mostly by his English patients, and what about those from other countries, other cultures – he couldn't answer.

What if the hallucinations were not just glitches, not just the brain desperately trying to translate the fragmented world it is experiencing. What if the polar bears and the Victorian children were glimpses of the multi-verse or, perhaps, signals from the spirit world? 'Eddies in the space-time continuum', to quote the novelist Douglas Adams, who described sofas and whales popping out of the ether in his marvellous *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* series.

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Sure, I am being flippant, but I do sometimes wonder if the clues are in those gaps, the spaces between the end of the out-breath and the in-take of oxygen, the fleeting sensation of hope, of faith, the pause before the wave breaks, the seconds between the lightning and the thunder...although clues to what exactly?

If the Snake Goddess and her Votary are, in part, hallucinations of a blinkered, white, male British archaeologist and his peers, then perhaps it is possible that it is in the gaps, the in-between, the unseen, that our real goddess resides.

'Holding the Gaze' by Tanvir Bush

Middle class, middle child, female and fretful, I was raised with a mouthful of apologies. Even before I began to lose my sight, I worried I took up too much space in the world. My incipient blindness makes me meeker – I flinch at loud noise, avoid crowded spaces. I am afraid of the dark.

The two Snake Goddess figurines came out of the darkness of the Knossian Labyrinth's cist in glazed and painted fragments. Even though they were broken, in bits, and blinded by age, their torsos emerged unashamedly female: luscious, pert, firm breasts, full spot-light centre. Hard not to imagine the old archaeologist blinking, his cheeks flaming, as he gently dusted off the dirt to reveal them. Did blood rush to other parts, a prickle of lust perhaps rippling through the excited men crowded around?

How often we women have felt the drag of eyes on our bodies, unwanted. Felt the snag of eyes drifting to our breasts when we are trying to communicate with our voices. These two figures seemed designed as an antidote to that drain of the male stare. All eyes, gender be damned, are forced to gaze on those breasts that rise from those slim, strong, chests. Only then, too late, do we note the snakes.

Such power in these little statuettes. Their breasts the very embodiment of lust, yet their full-length, heavy skirts, and rivulets of snakes say, in no uncertain terms: NO ENTRY. There are no dainty ankles here, no splits in their gowns revealing a thigh and a promise.

We know so little about these female figurines, although the men did their best, trying to recreate them, guessing which arm went with which body, which head on which neck. The Votary's head is modern – her eyes might once have been bored or alluring, possibly defiant, baleful, tyrannical. Now her new eyes are kohl rimmed and wide open.

The replica I handled was the one with arms down, snakes sliding up from her closed fists like arteries. Her black eyes made me uneasy, but at the same time she couldn't hold my gaze as perhaps the original eyes might have. Instead, my focus drifted back down her body, drawn again to her breasts. Perhaps this figurine's shamanic power is in her shamelessness – the erotic juxtaposition of the scaled snakes moving over bare, tender, exposed skin.

I can still feel the heft of the museum replica that I was able to handle, the slide of my fingers over the wreaths of snakes on her stomach, breasts, the pinched-in waist, the long slender arms with the small, closed, upturned fists. The other figure is a multiple mystery to me; even her reproduction, only seen by me in two-dimensional photographs, is vague and filmy due to my damaged eyes. I have no sense of her as an actual 'thing', just an idea. I am told she is holding up snakes up to the sky, although it could be something else, maybe a weapon, like a bow. She has a cat-hat! Although that too may not have been from her original, personal wardrobe, but plonked on in the hope it might fit. How wonderful touch is! I know the first figurine, feel her in my body, through my skin, and the memory of the encounter still takes up three-dimensional space in my psyche. Her companion is only the sensation of fingers on photographic paper.

And I feel, thinking of the Snake Goddess that I held, that maybe I too could take courage, could be fully in my own body, for once. I imagine her, taller than any man, stepping out from between the worlds, and all the previously meek women straightening up and, warrior-like, gazing out from behind her.

‘Welcome to your Touch Tour’ by Tanvir Bush

‘Welcome.’ The curator’s voice is low, almost a whisper, although there is almost no one else in reception but you two. An elbow is proffered, and you take it, allowing her to guide you through an interior doorway and further into the inner recess of the museum library. There is carpet beneath your feet, soaking up your footsteps, and you can smell the aged, inky breath of hundreds of books in the stacked shelves around you.

The curator stops, and describes the table and chair set up in the middle of the space. She stretches out the arm you are holding, allowing you to slide your fingers down and along her arm to her hand which lies on the back of a wooden chair. You pull it toward you, feel for the seat, and sit, your legs slipping comfortably under the table in front of you, your heart fluttering, tip taps against your sternum. Far off there is a siren and the muted thrum of cars but here, inside, there is a deep cushioned quiet.

You hear the curator sigh contentedly as she settles into the chair next to you, and you catch a faint scent of citrus soap. ‘Go ahead,’ she says. ‘It’s all yours.’ Carefully, you slide your fingers forward across the cool wood of the tabletop. Your fingers are outstretched, gently feeling ahead, not wanting to knock the figurine over. There! Your hands come together, fingers ever so tentatively feeling around the base. You have been told about it. You have been waiting for a chance to hold it, and now here it is.

Ever so gently, fingers like tendrils, like whiskers, like tentacles, you feel your way up, around, and over the object. Your fingers take in the height, the depth, not settling yet, just moth-like fluttering. It’s taller and thicker than you imagined. You had thought it would be delicate, but somehow this shape has a heaviness, a solidity. Instinctively, you wrap your hands around the widest part – a solid flattened cone shape, the base. This has heft, feels good and substantial, fitting into your hands easily, cool to the touch. This you know is the facsimile of the figurine, made from plaster of Paris, and not the original fabulously decadent ancient faience. You wonder if the glittering glaze of the original would have felt warmer. Plaster seems a pudgy replacement.

The base, you are told, is the skirt: a thick, weighted oblong, flared out at the bottom and tapering – your fingers feeling upwards – to a slender waist. Delicately caressing the lines of the figurine’s body, your fingers round over the whorls of intestine-shaped raised humps on the skirted lower body, they wander up what feels like the edge of a corset, and bump into two round, pert breasts, nipples poking your finger pads. You almost flush with the shock of them – they seem so ‘loud’, so unflinchingly female: an oversized, oversexed, barbie-doll pertness.

Your fingers skitter upwards, you have your bearings now, fingertips tingling on the indent of the throat, to a nose and, above that, the small hollows, which you know hold those unseeing eyes that must be looking back at you. Are they looking at you with curiosity, or with dullness, defiance maybe? Even fury? After all, the figurine cannot give her permission to touch. She is just plaster, after all. No power in this little goddess. She cannot strike you dead, even if she wanted to.

Cautiously, you feel around the slim shoulders and down the arms that are held low and slightly out to her sides. A raised, rounded ridge runs all the way across her shoulders and flows down those arms, sliding under your touch to merge with her small, upward-facing fists. A lithe twisting thing, you follow that snaking, raised ridge back up to the neck, to that tiny fearsome or blank-eyed face, and then to the conical shaped head-dress. Lost in translation, your touch cannot tell you any detail of this strange topknot. Are those snakes climbing here too? She is a Snake Goddess, after all... ‘Maybe,’ says the curator. ‘Probably. We may never really know what she was or what she was used for.’

You wait, in the quiet, holding that sturdy base again. You are finger-brain tired now, tapped out. Yet, somehow, even that plaster replica may ignite some spark within. You wait.

The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess

Poems by Ruth Padel

- 1 Sometimes a Goddess is a Second Thought
- 2 Discovery
- 3 She Comes to You Broken
- 4 Evening in the Garden of the Villa Ariadne
- 5 Like Taking in Your Hand the Mysteries of Egyptian Faience under the Earth
- 6 Imagining the Sign for Snake in Linear A*
- 7 When a Man Looks at a Woman Wrapped in Snakes
- 8 How Snake Wrangling Feels in the Wild**
- 9 The Votary
- 10 The Enchantment
- 11 Looking at Cranach's Eve I Think of My Medusa Christmas Tree Ornament
- 12 What You Do with the Palace of Yourself
- 13 The World, in the Shape of My Trainer Lee Newman, Picks its Own Snake Goddess***
- 14 Serpent Queen on the 88 Bus
- 15 Snake Goddess at 3 a.m.

* The words in this poem are positioned to represent a large, inward-moving spiral.

** The lines of this poem curve down the page like a slithering snake.

*** The lines in this poem are placed to represent a Mycenaean kylix, or drinking cup, narrowing to the stem and then out for the base.

1 Sometimes a Goddess is a Second Thought

Some things you only find beyond the light.
You have cleared corridors,
given the world a new world
to think with, new script
alongside the dawn, dug out the entire
western wing. You think you are done

but something turning in your blood
calls you to check
under the gypsum paving
beside steps to the Hall
of the Jewel Fresco.
The spot you intend to call the Pillar Crypt.

2 *Discovery*

Lift the lid
and you find soft sift of burnt earth.

Brush it away. The Cretan sun
touches shells, lots of shells
carefully arranged. It is all
very careful. Separate layers
like a trousseau. Red soil
trickles through your hands.

Fifty vases. Carbonized corn. Splinters
of ivory, gold foil, rock crystal.
Small clay plaques like cut-out biscuits
shaped as women's dresses, flying fish,
an ibex suckling a kid.
Below - *slowly now* -

you see glazed
fragments of luxury faience

enough to make two, maybe three,
female statuettes. Full skirts
like long important bells.
Bare breasts, very bare, tightly
bound by a bodice
of snakes.

A bodice of snakes?
The new century blinks.

The Goddess waits
like a taproot
in the deepest layer
of the Cretan earth
or - you dare say -
of the psyche.

3 She Comes to You Broken

You have been expecting her.
Under the royal
throne and double axes - divinity.

Earth Mother, Mistress of Animals,
Great Goddess. Small
but primeval.

When you fit the pieces together
chipped
flaky as a chapped lip

there is a hole where her waist
should be. Waking
from millennia under the ground

her form is incomplete
as it should be at first.
We remake her, each

our own way.
But her face is calm
and a snake

messenger of renewal
crawls
up her moon-coloured arm.

4 Evening in the Garden of the Villa Ariadne

Luminous fret of pink cloud.
Lemon glow behind black pines.
He has found her missing waist
as if he dreamed it up

as if his imagination
not pickaxe, spade and little trowel
lifted this magical
civilisation into the light.

He pictures black flames
zig-zagging over exquisite cloth
where she lay in burnt soil.
Surely a shrine

surely destroyed in a fire.
Not where her image
shimmered, an open lily
welcoming devotees

but a treasury.
Things kept because they were holy.

5 Like Taking in your Hand the Mysteries of Egyptian Faience Below the Earth

Take, it, touch it, I'm giving it to you.
I heard the voice
as I went out softly into the night garden
of the dig-house. The white cat
that ate a snake the day I arrived
lay curled on a chair
outside the screen door
like Thoth guarding the entrance to a tomb.

At the empty trestle tables, ghosts.
Lovers, dancers, passionate scholars,
resistance fighters, seekers after truth.
When I stepped into the circle of light
they moved away. The full moon
above the pine trees
was flaky iridescence
music captured in a mirror

all the shot silk mysteries
of faience
crushed quartz-paste
fired to vitreous lustre
like the translucent blue-green
shards of the goddess.
Little pieces of fire-work
seen from shadows of the earth.

6 *Imagining the Sign for Snake in Linear A*

centre
the of the
at coil
to go is the
a man beyond drop
leads the of
which safety point wisdom
libido of the serpent
expresses shows us
things the way to
hidden

7 When a Man Looks at a Woman Wrapped in Snakes

The first snake lifts its head from her crown
like the top jewel of a tiara
slithers down cheek and breast

to a knotted fist above her belly
where the second snake joins in
looping down in a parabola

turning above her vulva
to follow the intimate shaping
uterus vagina fallopian tubes

as if whoever is manufacturing her knows
that everything female,
outside and in, is ripple and flow,

and curves on upwards
cupping her breast like the edge-trim
of a bolero, folding its tail over her ear.

The third snake, the longest, hangs
down her back like a lariat, in the rough shape
of Africa. She is holding its head,

folding her thumb, no fear of a bite,
over the neck behind the skull.
The dappled body flows along her arms

like the twisted horn handle of a knife.
The tail coils round her wrist, she bends
her fingers, it cannot escape, she's an expert

in control, holding out her arms
as if in display. There is a lot of *as if*.
He strokes the iridescent glaze

like touching a peeled fleck of sky
dulled by the crusting of earth. Here she is,
reaching out to offer the miraculous

revelation. His faith in a single
Great Mother Goddess is a cry
he has kept inside him all his life.

8 How Snake Wrangling Feels in the Wild

Let it flow
said my guide
from the Irula
People of the Dark
let it ribbon and stream
through your
hands
don't clutch
it will turn
and bite
its reptile
brain
wants to keep
moving
never mind
that it never
gets anywhere
he scooped
a slim bronze-
checkered snake
from the roots
of a banyan tree
rippled it
through his hands
as if it were raw silk
he smiled
he loved it
he poured it
like a sleeve
of gold
into my hands
it felt
heavier than I
expected
a smooth
thread
of almost warm steel
flowing
searching
like the memory of a lost
relationship
with the
earth
but
so
calm

9 *The Votary*

Why did I behave as if that serpent were my soul? Only, it seems, because my soul was a serpent.

Carl Jung

He weighs the small figure in his hands.
No head, no left arm, just the lux and curve
of swelling hips, corsetry, blurt
of bare breasts, a body of honey
unfurling in seven flounces.

Provocative. Not maternal, not
the Goddess Herself. He imagines
her clicking, rustling as she moves
like a ballerina revolving on a musical box,
little shimmers pearling her skirt.

Men see what they want. He sees a girl
holding a striped wavy stick. A ribbon,
a garland, an ibex horn, Ariadne's thread
proclaiming a safe route
through the maze of sexuality...

Enough! He is sure it is a snake.
He is in love
with powers of the goddess.
Fertility, danger. Poison and cure.
This is her votary. He will re-make her

give her the face of a wild queen bee,
a mad coronet, a fascinator
that doesn't belong, guarded
by a leopard. And another snake,
identical. She is brandishing two now.

Two whips of ink, delicate as icicles,
banded and barred
as the deadliest Indian krait.
In her reconstructed gaze
he reads the music of dead stars.

10 *The Enchantment*

'Fascinate' derives from the divine phallus, fascinum, a magic charm to ward off evil (from boys and conquering generals) and the verb fascinare, 'To bewitch, to use the power of the fascinum'

English Etymological Dictionary

Sex and physic and poison.

Kiss of the Lamia.

Entice and repel.

In Vienna the Goddess of Health

or maybe Death

in her red-gold shawl

with her golden snake

has offered - or is she with-holding -

a chalice.

In Paris Jane Avril

so supple

she can bend back touching the floor

with her shoulders

raises her arms, afraid

or in playful surrender

to a serpent coiled

up her slender

black dress.

In Crete

he wakes

to a red-gold dawn.

He loves boys

but is in thrall

to the spell of woman and snake.

11 Looking at Cranach's Eve, I Think of My New Medusa Christmas Tree Ornament

The daimon of sexuality approaches our soul as a serpent

Carl Jung

The apples are glowing rose gold
as perfectly round as her head.
She is gazing down
at the one she has plucked

to offer a naked man.
They hold it together, it is already
in his palm and the two top tines
of a roe-buck's antlers, the first stag in Eden

looking at its own reflection in a pool,
frame thick leaves
hiding the join of his thighs.
The world rears its glory.

She holds a low branch as if she is a part
of all this nature, the tree, rooted
between them, whose apples
are round as her white breasts

or the little black grapes
dangling in V-shaped
bunches from the vine
throwing tendrils across her thighs.

Those apples are radioactive! Ripe orange
as the belly of the lion crouching beside her.
Blonde as her hair
close to her scalp. But out of sight

behind her head
those corn-colour locks escape
and go wild behind her
spraying out in all directions,

not gold at all, just pure ripple
like the dappled snake
coiling down from a high branch
pointing its dark head at hers.

12 *What You Do with the Palace of Yourself*

It is true that I never leave my house, but it is also true that its doors (whose numbers are infinite) are open day and night. Anyone may enter.

Jorge Luis Borges, *The House of Asterion*

Where has she led us, why are we suddenly
in the realm of the Minotaur? Brother Shame
who spends his days alone

in the darkness of time, tangled corridors
of the brain, of the monstrous, an ore
no light will touch. He has forgotten

bull-noon in the palace, ash-silver sky,
spiced fruit from the gardens of Minos
where light throbs and blooms

beady seeds of the watermelon, blue monkeys
gathering saffron, sparkling machinery
of a mazy dance, until a green-silver sunset

covers courtyards and colonnades
with the soft rug of night. And we have forgotten
the serpentine coils of the story, the snake-lock

princess, the sister who forged
a rope of knotted light, a way in
and way out for the man with a sword.

13 The World, in the Shape of My Trainer Lee Newman, Picks its Own Snake Goddess

Men's fears of women are hidden in plain sight
Psychology Today

I said, which is more powerful? That tall figure covered in snakes, arms out in front like a sleepwalker? Or this smaller one weight-lifting a pair of live snakes, arms out to the side and over her head like the shoulder press exercise you make me do?

No question, he said. The first is offering something. Giving.

The other spells danger and menace.

Threatening. Showing off

her power over

me.

*

The serpent leads into

the shadows into

the depths

connects

above

and

below

the gaze

of the basilisk

14 Serpent Queen on the 88 Bus

Rock Shop. Lillywhites. In Piccadilly
Eros kicks his slim bare ankle in the air
at the heart of my city, and I catch
the Serpent Queen, fixing me
with her basilisk look from a TV ad

on the side of a bus I have just got off
and I remember a small circus
in a field outside Skopje
and a trapeze artiste with two lardy
engorged yellow pythons

squeezing her breasts, neck, bare thighs.
It took four girls
in sparkling swimsuits
to lift each one. Why do men want
to see naked women fooling with snakes?

Venom and muscle, female and male -
who's winning? All I know
is the Snake Goddess telling her tale
straight to camera in jewelled black-green
brocade embroidered in stiff gold.

*Having died, she tells me, all the way back
to the root, I grow again. The serpent
of the unconscious
has a wisdom of its own
and I am the treasure it guards.*

Wings of her black ruff
rise up behind her. Touch her
and you'd crackle, you'd shiver
as if the weight of the earth
and the power which men

in some darkroom of their souls
impute to women
mean the same thing - Hades, fast cars,
undrinkable rivers
and a woman's body at the centre of the world.

15 Snake Goddess at 3 a.m.

Tonight I am riddled by the lady of the labyrinth
holding herself like a wine glass
wrangling the serpents of memory
telling how we slipped

in the dark through vineyards of the Knossos valley
below the palace. How we danced
in the old Ariadne nightclub
till the stars closed their eyes.

We were young, burnt
by working in sun, we laughed
at dangers of the body, dangers of the earth,
her *what are you doing with your life?*

You can't get rid of her by closing the tab
with a swipe-up. She rules the maze
you find only in dreams
the chaos and glisten and squirm

of what lies beneath, inner monologues
you can't keep down as you climb up through
those memories to see an autumn rose after rain,
silver drops trembling, nodding its head

like someone keeping a tally
and we are back with the labyrinth of her gaze
threading down to the long-buried taste
of the sacred. Honey cakes,

cries of the Cretan night, whirr of frogs
and cicadas, the new-released scent
of dry grass. Whatever it takes
to get back to her, I'll give.

The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess



Replica of the Snake Goddesses, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford