1 Introduction: *Le Génie de la danse*

This book has shared close quarters with a painting by Henri Matisse: *La Danse I* (Figure 1.1), a compositional study for a thirteen-foot mural commissioned by a Russian textile tycoon. The original is housed in the Museum of Modern Art, New York; a glossy poster print, slightly creased and torn at the edges, hangs in my office. Yet the closeness I describe is not only physical, a measure of distance between my MacBook and my Matisse. There is also a metaphorical – though no less palpable – intimacy. Throughout all stages of research and writing, the painting has captured my imagination, its five dancing nudes continuously and variously evocative. Admittedly, the pear-shaped dancer viewed from behind – the one about to fall flat – made the initial impression. Reaching out for the offered hand but not quite making contact, the dancer appeared to embody a scholarly pursuit with which I was all too familiar: an attempt to establish connections, to reconcile different arts and different disciplines, to get to grips with something – a line of argument, even a historical reality – that tended to remain out of reach. But then there were the other dancers, their boundless energy and exuberance, their elemental physical motion. It was not difficult to appreciate *La Danse* as a pictorial pick-me-up; it seemed to radiate all that long hours at the computer could eclipse. Indeed, many more qualified than I in matters of visual art have trumpeted similar descriptions, helping *La Danse* earn a place amongst the most popular paintings of the twentieth century – even, amongst 'Works of Art to See Before You Die'.[1]

As readers may well be aware, there is also a historical aspect to the closeness between the painting and this project. A leading figure within French artistic circles, Matisse created *La Danse I* in 1909, during the so-called belle époque, the historical period dating from roughly 1900 to 1914 – and the period under discussion in this book.[2] In an interview towards the

[1] I refer in particular to the list compiled by British journalist Jonathan Jones (*The Guardian*, 30 October 2006) and that generated by readers in response to Jones's article (posted on the newspaper's website, 5 December 2006). In both cases, it is the final (and larger) version of the painting – *La Danse II* – that is listed.

[2] Scholars have variously defined the boundary-dates of the belle époque, some preferring to backtrack to the 1880s. Here I adopt a shorter time frame, with a central focus on the decade or so before the outbreak of the First World War.

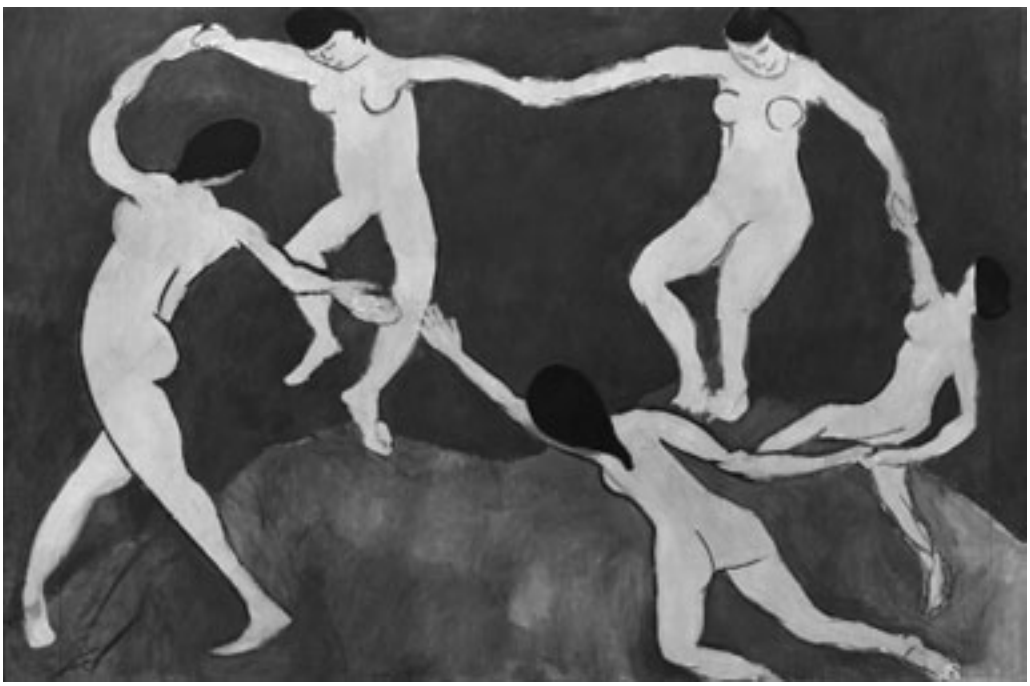

Figure 1.1 Matisse, *La Danse I* (1909).

end of his life, the painter claimed to have been influenced by some dancing he had witnessed at the Moulin de la Galette, an open-air dance-hall-cum-cabaret in Montmartre (depicted by Renoir in a painting of 1876, now an upmarket cafe). More specifically, Matisse recalled the Galette's famous farandole, a lively, follow-the-leader and specifically French dance in which men and women held hands, running and skipping along a meandering path.[3] Is this the dance captured in paint, super-size and mountain-top? It seems likely: the clasped hands and whirling spontaneity link mural with memory, as well as with the painter's recollections of the atmosphere in the dance-hall ('gaie') and the essence of dance itself ('vivante').[4] These recollections should give us pause. Dance, for Matisse, was a conceptual theme of significant cultural puissance, one that the painter returned to more than

[3] Georges Charbonnier, 'Entretien avec Henri Matisse', *Le Monologue du peintre*, vol. II (Paris: Éditions Julliard, 1960), pp. 7–16; for an English translation, see Jack Flam (ed.), *Matisse on Art* (1978; rev. edn Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 189–94.

[4] Flam suggests that Matisse may also have been influenced by a Catalan folk dance performed by fishermen and witnessed by the painter in the summer of 1905. According to Flam, this Catalan dance, 'grave and stately', contrasted with the spirited French farandole, and thus confuses the issue and identity of the painting's inspiration. See Flam, *Matisse: The Dance* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1993), pp. 23–4.

once during his career.[5] Associated with vitality, vigour and rejuvenation, dance offered Matisse an artistic subject that could be both pictorial and abstract, specific and universal. *La Danse I* embodies this expressive potential. The painting may depict the far-flung and frivolous bodies of the Galette, but it may also function metaphorically – as a visual incarnation of *le génie de la danse* (the spirit of dance) in the belle époque.[6]

Period pleasure

It has become a cliché to describe the period as dance's 'golden age', a time of unprecedented stylistic diversity, cultural prestige, commercial success and general popularity. As is well known, from the late nineteenth century dance featured on an increasing number and variety of Parisian stages, from the Académie Nationale de Musique et de Danse (otherwise known as the Opéra), the Opéra-Comique, the Théâtre du Châtelet, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and Théâtre des Arts, to the capital's many music-halls, cabarets, circuses, salons, *cafés-concerts* and museum galleries. Besides staged dance productions, there were dance schools and private classes, dance societies, competitions and tea-parties, and dance-inspired documentary and fiction films. These various phenomena helped dancers attain a new 'celebrity' status (made possible owing to the development of print technologies and the mass dissemination of the illustrated press), as well as an international fame and fan base.[7] This fan base itself was widespread in both geographical and cultural terms. The brightest lights of the contemporary dance scene inspired literary reflection, scientific study and copycat performers, as well as ranges of clothing, accessories and plant-pots.

Perhaps it was inevitable that dance was to thrive in an era in which the pursuit of pleasure supposedly eclipsed social, economic and political concerns. Inherited stories and images depict Parisians pedalling through the Bois de Boulogne or strolling through the Tuileries, evenings spent at the

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] The phrase owes something to a sculpture by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux that has adorned the façade of the Paris Opéra since 1869. Entitled *La Danse*, and featuring a winged *génie* with accompanying figures, the large *haut-relief* bears a striking resemblance to Matisse's painting of the same name.

[7] For a historically informed discussion of the rise of celebrity culture, one that backtracks to the nineteenth century (rather than focusing, as is customary, on the post-war period), see Lenard R. Berlanstein, 'Historicizing and Gendering Celebrity Culture: Famous Women in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of Women's History*, 16/4 (2004), pp. 65–91; also see his *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Chat Noir, the Folies-Bergère or Maxim's. As legend has it, life during the belle époque was precisely that – a buoyant, hopeful and carefree quotidian reality centred on a burgeoning entertainment industry.[8] This industry, itself central to a new urban economy, was no longer the privilege of an upper class with time on its hands. A Republican-endorsed *nivellement des jouissances* (democratization of entertainment) made a number of activities accessible to a wider public; subsidized rail fares attracted people from the provinces to the city.[9] As a result, audiences increased in number and diversity, as did theatres and other performance venues; and the matinee performance became a regular feature, sparking an afternoon theatre-going trend amongst families, especially women and children. Archival sources suggest that by the dawn of the twentieth century, more than half a million Parisians went to a theatre once a week. This figure, equating to roughly 40 per cent of the recorded population, may even underestimate, for it accounts only for box-office sales at Paris's main theatres, and not for visitors to the variety venues of *café-concert*, cabaret and circus.[10]

Specifics notwithstanding, the commercial and cultural fortune invested in the entertainment scene was no doubt motivated in part by the French capital – 'the capital of pleasure', as it was known across the world.[11] Newly face-lifted by the urban renovations of Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, Paris was toasted by contemporaries as a modern metropolis, a quintessentially commercial (rather than industrial) city. What is more, the capital was known for its theatrical aura; its new topography endorsed the spirit and

[8] According to Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (1958; rev. edn London: Vintage, 1968), life was of 'surface aspect', a mix of 'pompous display, frivolity, hypocrisy, cultivated taste and relaxed morals' (p. 3). Also see Jean-Pierre Camard, Paul Ricard and Lynne Thornton, *L'Art et la vie en France à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Paul Ricard, 1971); Raymond Rudorff, *The Belle Époque: Paris in the Nineties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972); and Nigel Gosling, *Paris, 1900–1914: The Miraculous Years* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978).

[9] See Georges d'Avenel, *Le Nivellement des jouissances* (Paris: Flammarion, 1913). Charles Rearick describes this 'levelling' in his *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

[10] See Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 159; and Adna Ferrin Weber, *The Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century: A Study in Cities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 73. For a summary account of the Parisian theatre scene, its growth and diversity, see Catherine Hindson, *Female Performance Practice on the Fin-de-Siècle Popular Stages of London and Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 9–33. For a more nuanced perspective, one that conceptualizes the significance of art and entertainment in terms of national and political agendas, see Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third-Republic France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

[11] Hindson, *Female Performance Practice*, p. 9. As Hindson notes, an 1895 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* declared that 'Americans go to London for social triumph or to float railroad shares, to Rome for art's sake, and to Berlin to study music and economize'; yet they go to Paris only 'to enjoy themselves' (p. 13).

spectacle of staged entertainment. Haussmann had replaced Paris's winding medieval alleyways with wide, straight and tree-lined boulevards, ones that offered linear perspectives on famous monuments and buildings.[12] And not only on these. The boulevards afforded Parisians their own urban theatre; in the spectacle of the street, observers could look across the urban landscape and be looked at themselves.[13] These same observers were instructed how 'to act Parisian': pocket guides detailed what to wear (pearls during the day, diamonds at night), what to do (go to Bayreuth, or plan to go next year), what to like (grouse shooting in Scotland), what not to like (politics), and what to discuss in public (one's eventful social calendar).[14]

Paris dancing

If Paris was a metaphor for the stage – and if Parisians were actor-observers in the grand narrative of the belle époque – then dance was a symbol of the contemporary way of life.[15] In the words of André Mangeot, editor of the journal *Le Monde musical*:

On danse partout. On danse même tellement qu'on ne pense plus qu'à cela . . . tout n'est il pas danse dans notre existence? Danse du sang dans les artères. Danse des

[12] David Harvey offers a useful history of 'Haussmannization' in his *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003); Harvey draws attention to the ways in which social relations were shaped by the material and economic conditions of daily life, themselves shaped by Paris's spatial reorganization. For more, see Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the 19th-Century City* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), particularly pp. 115–51; and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 1–44. Incidentally, the conceptualization of the city as an active stimulus of modernity and modern art has been explored by Edward Timms and David Kelley (eds.), *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester University Press, 1988) and Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2000). It is also central to T. J. Clark's magisterial thesis, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

[13] See Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, pp. 1–44. Even theatre-going acquired a theatrical aspect. The foyer of the Folies-Bergère, for example, with its bar immortalized by Manet, was fixed with lights and mirrors so that spectators could see and be seen.

[14] See, for example, the unauthored guide *Paris-Parisien* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1898), pp. 398–403. Schwartz discusses the nature, construction and performativity of social roles in her *Spectacular Realities*; also see Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[15] According to the English publication *John Bull's Trip to Paris*, *c.*1900, '[t]he talent for acting comes more readily to a Frenchman than to an Englishman. Every Frenchman is more or less of a born actor.' See Hindson, *Female Performance Practice*, p. 14.

idées dans le cerveau bouillonnant de l'artiste, de l'inventeur et du banquier . . . Danse des ondes hertziennes. Danse des écus. Danse de la vie, devant la mort.[16]

(We dance everywhere. We dance so much that we only think about dancing . . . is not everything in our existence dance? Dance of blood in the arteries. Dance of ideas bubbling in the brain of the artist, the inventor, the banker . . . Dance of radio waves. Dance of coins. Dance of life, in face of death.)

Equally enthusiastic about dance and its metaphorical potential was Ricciotto Canudo, an Italian-born critic who made Paris his home in the early 1900s. In his 1907 study *Le Livre de l'évolution de l'homme*, Canudo described dance as 'le grand creuset orgiaque des individus' (the big, orgiastic melting pot of people), 'le symbole anthropologique du Feu' (the anthropological symbol of Fire) and 'un bain régénérateur' (a regenerating bath).[17] To Canudo, the essential meaning of dance was connected in metaphysical terms to 'toutes les compositions et les décompositions profondes de la vie, d'où toutes les formes de la vie jaillissent' (all the combinations and divisions of life elements, from which all forms of life spring forth).[18]

This enthusiasm for dance was no doubt stimulated by a cluster of concurrent phenomena: a burgeoning interest (across the visual arts, photography and early cinema, as well as the physical sciences and industry at large) in the concept of motion; a specifically theatrical anxiety about opera, vocal exegesis and dramatic impersonation; an intellectual loss of confidence in verbal culture (the so-called language crisis, symptomatic of early modernism); and a societal trend towards sport and recreation. (Many of these will be addressed in this book.) Yet also important was the physical presence in the French capital of foreign performers. Names will be familiar. First, before the turn of the century, came the 'modern' dancers from North America, the most notable being Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan.[19] Although these women worked independently, performing solo (or else with students they trained), they shared aesthetic objectives: to promote dance as an autonomous art; to expand the expressive potential of gesture; and to experiment with stage effects, decor and costume. As for technique, their aim was to liberate dance from the perceived restraints of both a dramatically superfluous virtuosity and a dramatically informed

[16] André Mangeot, 'On Danse', *Le Monde musical*, 30 January 1914, pp. 20–1 at p. 20. Mangeot went on to ponder the essential definition of dance as a physical activity, as opposed to less specific movement. There was, he implies, no clear distinction: 'La Danse, n'est-elle pas comme le Jour, dont on ne sait à quel moment précis il succède à la Nuit? Il y a du jour dans la nuit, et il y a de la nuit dans le jour.'

[17] Ricciotto Canudo, *Le Livre de l'évolution de l'homme: psychologie musicale des civilisations* (Paris: E. Sansot et Cie, 1907), p. 148.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[19] Fuller introduced Duncan (fifteen years her junior) to Parisian audiences, although the two soon parted company.

mime: in other words, from the choreographic mandate of 'classical' ballet. The dancers maintained a personal approach to their dancing, a desire to externalize feelings and emotions, or else to convey something of 'Beauty' or 'Nature' in the abstract. They danced barefoot, un-corseted and often in a draped or diaphanous costume.[20] Figure 1.2, a studio photograph of Duncan, shows the dancer in typically loose-fitting attire. The pose is equally typical. With arms outstretched, chest forward and neck tipped slightly back, Duncan appears as compelling and triumphant as the marble sculpture *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* – the famously headless (and armless) monument, dating from *c.*190 BC, that now stands at the top of the sweeping Daru staircase in the Louvre, Paris (Figure 1.3). This association between Duncan and the sculpted Greek goddess may be unsurprising: the dancer rhapsodized at length about classical Greece, its art, culture and ideal of the human body; she also promoted herself as the embodiment of Greek dance, at times appearing to bring to life specific poses from vases, bas-reliefs and other forms of sculpture.[21] Certainly, this seems the case in Figure 1.2. The photograph, with its soft focus yet intense chiaroscuro effect, adds to the Grecian illusion; it captures a radiance that illuminates – both literally and metaphorically – the dancer's majestic pose.

Figure 1.4, also a studio photograph, may be even more iconic. Taken by one L. Roosen, the shot depicts Vaslav Nijinsky in his role as the Golden Slave in the 1910 ballet *Schéhérazade*. Nijinsky, of course, was the star protégé of the Ballets Russes, the company that famously stormed onto the Paris circuit in 1909. Led by the Russian impresario Sergey Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes caused a sensation, their productions pored over in the daily and specialist presses, in memoirs, picture books and popular literature. Audiences and critics, enamoured by 'les incomparables danseurs russes', rushed to praise a specifically choreographic

[20] The dancers' memoirs offer useful accounts of their dancing and motivations: see Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (1928; repr. London: Gollancz, 1996); and Loie Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (1913; repr. New York: Dance Horizons, 1977). There is also an extensive secondary literature, including Richard Nelson Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997); Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2001); Giovanni Lista, *Loïe Fuller: danseuse de la belle époque* (Paris: Somogy, 1995); Lillian Lowenthal, *The Search for Isadora: The Legend and Legacy of Isadora Duncan* (Pennington, NJ: Dance Horizons, 1993); Sally Sommer, 'Loie Fuller', *Drama Review*, 19/1 (1975), pp. 53–67; Sewell Stokes, *Isadora Duncan: An Intimate Portrait* (London: Brentano, 1928); and Valérie Thomas and Jérôme Perrin (eds.), *Loïe Fuller, danseuse de l'art nouveau* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002).

[21] For more on Duncan's Grecian inspiration, see Ann Daly, 'The Natural Body', in Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (eds.), *Moving History/Dancing Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 288–99. Incidentally, *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, a resident of the Louvre since 1866 and one of Duncan's personal favourites, took on specifically nationalist associations in the early war years, appearing to allegorize an exalted and triumphant French spirit; see Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), pp. 96–106.

Figure 1.2 Duncan (1908); photographer unknown.

'renovation'.[22] Principal choreographer Michel (Mikhail) Fokine, himself influenced by Duncan, advocated an expressive, almost psychologically motivated choreography, one that liberated the body – particularly the torso and arms – from stilted balletic conventions. Nijinsky's pose in Figure 1.4 is exemplary. The dancer's arms do not frame his body in perfect symmetry; instead, they extend outward and behind, thrusting into the foreground a bejewelled torso and naked

[22] See, for example, Pierre Lalo, 'La Saison russe', *Le Temps*, 28 May 1912, p. 3.

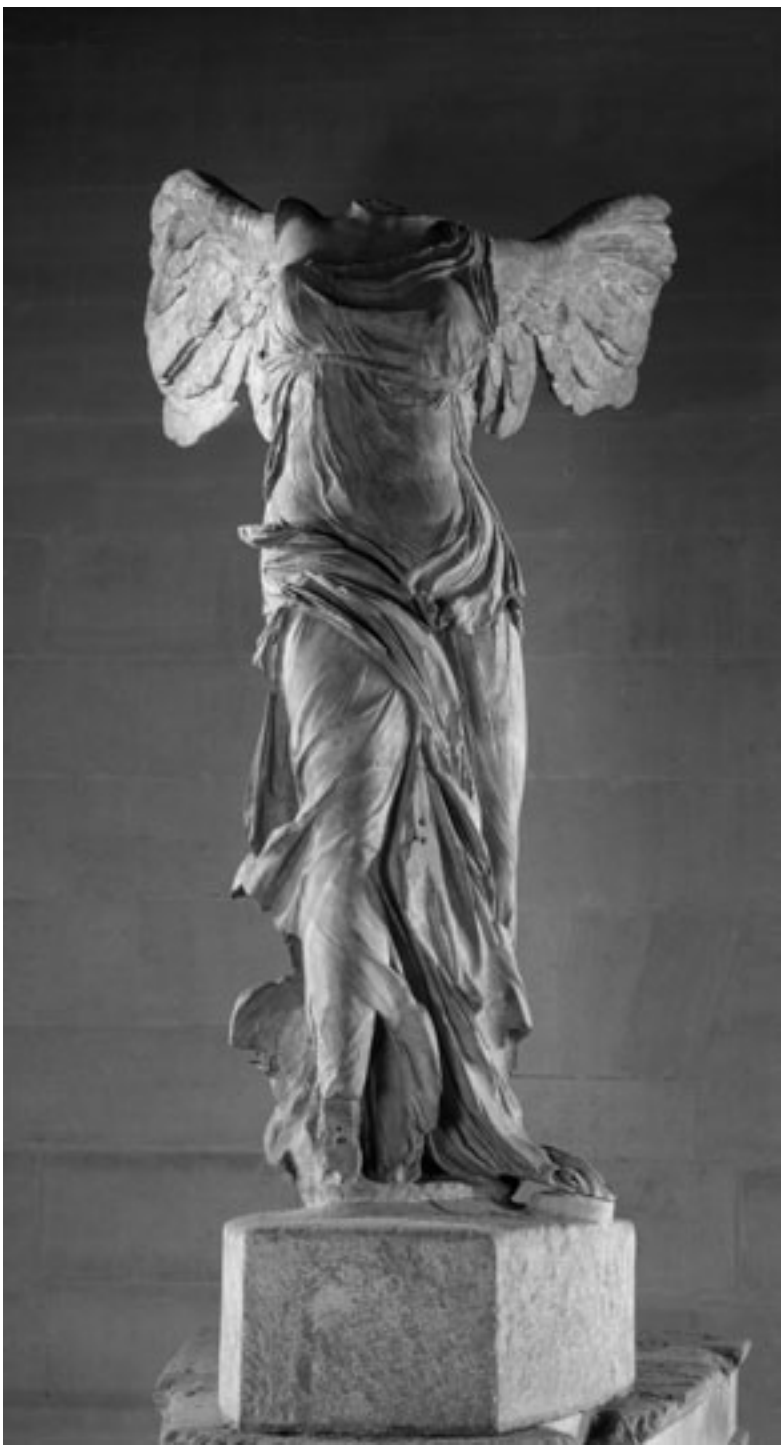

Figure 1.3 *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* (*c.*190 BC).

Figure 1.4 Nijinsky as the Golden Slave, *Schéhérazade* (1910–11); photographer, L. Roosen.