**De Maré, Rolf (b. 9 May 1888, Stockholm; d. 28 April 1964, Barcelona)**

**Summary**

Rolf de Maré was a Swedish-born impresario, art collector and philanthropist. Born into one of Sweden’s wealthiest families, he began collecting modern art at an early age, gaining entrée to the leading artists of the day through his relationship with the painter Nils Dardel. De Maré was the founder and sole patron of the Ballets Suédois or Swedish Ballet, created as a vehicle for the dancer and choreographer Jean Börlin. Although the company was in existence for only five years, it proved to be the most notable rival to Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, on which it was self-consciously modelled and which it in turn would influence. In addition to modern art and ballet, de Maré had a strong interest in Asian and African folk art and artefacts, amassing significant collections in these areas in the course of his many travels. De Maré’s collections constitute the core holdings of two major dance research centres, for which he provided institutional leadership and financial support: the Archives Internationales de la Danse (AID) in Paris and the Dansmuseet (Dance Museum) in Stockholm.

**Timeline of Life and Career:**

1888, born in Stockholm

1910, travels to India and Ceylon with his father

1912, meets painter Nils Dardel

1914, begins collecting modern art; travels to North Africa with Dardel

1918, meets the dancer Jean Börlin

1920, travels to Spain and North Africa with Börlin; founds the Ballets Suédois

1923, *La Création du Monde* presented by Ballets Suédois

1925, disbands Ballets Suédois

1931, founds Archives Internationales de la Danse (AID) in Paris

1938, undertakes a six-month trip to East Asia

1953, founds Dansmuseet (Dance Museum)­ in Stockholm

1964, dies in Barcelona

**Background**

Rolf de Maré was the grandson of the Countess Wilhelmina von Hallwyl, an heir to one of Sweden’s largest fortunes and the wife of the Swiss Count Walter von Hallwyl. His mother, Ellen, married Henrik de Maré, a prominent official at the royal court. The couple later separated and divorced amid great scandal when Ellen fell in love with her son’s private tutor. As a result, Ellen de Maré’s family severed all ties with her, and young Rolf was sent to live with his widowed grandmother in the family’s museum-like mansion in downtown Stockholm. Although the Countess allowed de Maré to take an active role in her extensive and ambitious art collecting—and would provide him with virtually unlimited funds for his own endeavours—he led an isolated and lonely existence, his activities further restricted by tuberculosis and asthma.

**Life and Work**

De Maré’s first independent forays into art collecting arose from his friendship with the painter Nils Dardel, who became his lover, artistic advisor, and lifelong friend. Dardel was a promising painter and student of Matisse, who had made Paris his home since 1910. The two met in Stockholm in 1912 and formed a close friendship that proved mutually beneficial: de Maré became Dardel’s most significant patron, and Dardel introduced de Maré to his extensive contacts among the artists and collectors of Paris. While still in his late twenties, de Maré had acquired an already noteworthy collection of modern paintings, by among others Georges Braque, Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon, Georges Seurat, Pierre Bonnard and Juan Gris.

Dardel’s most notable find, however, was not a painter, but the dancer Jean Börlin, whom he introduced to de Maré in 1918. Five years younger than de Maré and from much humbler beginnings, Börlin was born on the coast of northern Sweden and adopted by his uncle in Stockholm when his parents separated. Börlin’s uncle supported his artistic inclinations and enrolled him in the school affiliated with the Royal Swedish Ballet, which he joined as a teenager. Börlin had achieved only demi-soloist status, when in 1913 the Russian choreographer Michel Fokine arrived to stage works such as *Les Sylphides* and *Schéhérazade*, exemplifying his ‘New Ballet’. Fokine’s philosophy of casting was not based on nineteenth-century ballet hierarchies, but focused rather on choosing the best dancers for particular roles. Börlin’s career flourished as a result, and Fokine became his teacher and primary artistic influence. In 1918, Börlin left the Royal Swedish Ballet to pursue full-time study with Fokine and his own artistic ventures, made possible by de Maré’s generous patronage.

In 1919, de Maré and Börlin, in consultation with Dardel and the French director Jacques Hébertot, began to organize a new ballet company of Swedish dancers based in Paris, eventually named the Ballets Suédois. De Maré signed a lease on the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, securing a well-known venue associated with modernism (*The Rite of Spring* had premiered there in 1913). He also purchased a number of magazines—including *Paris-Journal* and *Le Théâtre*—and founded *La Danse*, the only Parisian journal of the period devoted to dance, ensuring that the troupe would receive generous and flattering coverage in the press. From its inception through its five years of existence, the company was centred almost exclusively on Börlin, the company’s star and sole choreographer, with de Maré as the impresario providing guidance and funding for the artistic, musical and literary commissions that defined the company’s approach to modernism.

The Ballets Suédois was modelled upon Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in numerous ways, beginning with its name. Like its Russian counterparts, the company was committed to a totalizing approach to modernist performance, which combined dance, music, fashion and visual spectacle. De Maré’s connections as a collector allowed the company to commission prominent artists, including Pierre Bonnard, Fernand Léger and Francis Picabia. Several critics have posited that the company was at its core an effort by de Maré to give life to his art collection, that the performances were in effect *tableaux vivants* inspired by the paintings, with Börlin at the centre. The Suédois also benefited and were influenced by de Maré’s interest in non-Western art and artefacts, which he collected during his extensive travels, on several occasions accompanied by Dardel or Börlin. However one articulates its goal, the Suédois arguably managed during its five years of activity to outshine Diaghilev’s company in pursuit of the experimental and avant-garde.

The Suédois enjoyed many successes during its five-year run. The company’s 1921 season included *L’Homme et son désir* (*Man and his Desire*), a mystical exploration of man’s primitive desires, conceived by the poet Paul Claudel and the composer Darius Milhaud. That year also witnessed the production of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (*The Newlyweds of the Eiffel Tower*), a comic farce about a wedding party with Paris’s most famous landmark as its backdrop, created by Jean Cocteau and his circle—including the cadre of composers known as ‘Les Six’. The 1922 production of *Skating Rink* featured a score by Arthur Honegger and stage and costume designs by Léger; based on a prose poem by Riciotto Canudo, the work took the incessant circling of the rink as a metaphor for the way modern life both subsumes and brings to the surface people’s passions and frustrations. Léger and Milhaud would collaborate in 1923 on *La Création du Monde* (*The Creation of the World*), perhaps the most notable production mounted by the company. The ballet told the story of the creation of the world using African folk idioms, tapping into the modernist fascination with ‘primitive’ art, and drawing on de Maré’s own non-Western expertise and collections. Milhaud’s score incorporated African-American jazz, and Léger’s striking designs featured large-scale deities and dancers costumed as animals. The Suédois ended its run as a company with *Relâche*—that is, ‘cancelled’—a surrealist romp conceived by Francis Picabia. The two-act ballet featured music by Erik Satie and a filmed ‘cinematographic entr’acte’ directed by René Clair with cameos by Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and de Maré himself.

In 1931 de Maré founded the Archives Internationales de la Danse (AID) in Paris in memory of the Ballets Suédois and Jean Börlin. AID housed de Maré’s personal collection of over 6,000 books, pictures and other items relating to dance, including all material related to the Suédois. It was the world’s first major research centre and museum for dance, and had the goal of serving as a repository for all aspects of dance, from periodicals and photographs, to costumes and films. Under the directorship of Pierre Tugal, AID would pursue an ambitious agenda, mounting exhibitions, presenting performances and lectures and convening symposia for choreographers and dance instructors, all generously underwritten by de Maré. AID also sponsored occasional choreography competitions, the first of which was won by Kurt Jooss for his seminal work *The Green Table* in 1932.

By 1950, de Maré found that AID was too big for him to support and manage of his own accord, and he decided to relocate the collection to Stockholm, with the assistance of his fellow Swede and AID director Bengt Häger. The French government objected that the collections were the property of the state, and in an effort to avoid a lengthy legal dispute, de Maré allowed the library and European collections to remain in Paris, where they became part of the library-museum of the Paris Opéra. The Ballets Suédois materials and collections of Asian and African folk art and artefacts assembled by de Maré during his travels—most notably materials from Indonesia—were transferred to Stockholm, where they became the core collection of the Dansmuseet (Dance Museum), which opened in 1953.

De Maré died unexpectedly during a trip to Spain in 1964. He had earlier expressed his desire to be buried next to Jean Börlin in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, but was ultimately buried in Stockholm. Upon his death, de Maré’s collection of modern art was donated to the Modern Art Museum in Stockholm. The Dansmuseet was made the sole beneficiary of the remainder of his estate, affording the institution resources to continue to build on its collections.

**Legacy**

The Ballets Suédois had only a modest impact on ballet and dance in the decades that followed its demise. Little effort was made to keep the company’s works in repertoire, with any attempts at preservation forestalled by Jean Börlin’s untimely death in 1930. The Suédois did leave behind a significant artistic and visual legacy, however, and if the company did not achieve the international renown of the Ballets Russes, it did significantly influence the character of Diaghilev’s later undertakings. Many composers commissioned by de Maré—including Milhaud, George Auric, and Francis Poulenc—were subsequently recruited for Ballets Russes productions; and de Maré’s interest in surrealists and Dadaists such as Man Ray, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst also helped give these artists entrée to Diaghilev, who had previously regarded their work with scepticism. On a more general level, several scores commissioned by the Suédois were subsequently utilised by choreographers, perhaps most notably *La Création du Monde*.

**References and Further Reading:**

Baer, N. Van Norman, (ed.) (1996) *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920–1925*, San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. (Catalogue of exhibition of Ballet Suédois sets, costumes, artefacts and memorabilia)

Banes, S. (1994) ‘An Introduction to the Ballets Suédois’ in S. Banes (1994) *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England. (A brief overview of the company’s inception and history, including its Swedish-themed productions, with substantial quotes from Paul Claudel on *L’Homme et son désir* and Jean Cocteau on *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*)

De Maré, R. (1931) *Les ballets suédois dans le art contemporain,* Paris: Editions du Trianon. (Retrospective volume on the company including essays, catalogues of repertory and performances and colour plates of productions)

Dorris, G. (ed.) (1999) *The Royal Swedish Ballet, 1773–1998*, London: Dance Books. (A history of the Royal Swedish Ballet with one chapter focusing on the Ballets Suédois, de Maré and Jean Börlin)

Garafola, L. (2005) “Rivals for the New: The Ballets Suédois and the Ballets Russes” in Lynn Garafola (2005) *Legacies of Twentieth-Century Dance*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. (A concise account of the history and most notable performances of the Ballets Suédois, with a particular focus on its relationship to Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes)

Häger, B. (1990) *The Swedish Ballet*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (An indispensible source for the visual legacy of the Suédois, with large-scale reproductions of photographs, posters and set designs; also includes short biographical essays on Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin and a year-by-year history of the company’s activities)

Näslund, E. (2009) *Rolf de Maré:* *Art Collector, Ballet Director, Museum Creator*, trans. Roger Tanner, Alton: Dance Books. (Comprehensive biography of Rolf de Maré, including extensive reproductions of photographs, documents, art works and memorabilia)

Robinson, J. (1997) *Modern Dance in France, An Adventure, 1920–1970*, Trans. Catherine Dale, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers. (Discusses the Ballets Suédois and Rolf de Maré in the context of the history of French modern dance, with special attention to the founding and activities of AID)

**Website**

Dansmusset (Dance Museum, Stockholm). (Includes a brief biography and photographs of Rolf de Maré as well a history of the museum)

<http://www.dansmuseet.se/>

**Photographs**

Please see the image that accompanies this entry. It is sent in a separate file.

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