**Diaghilev, Serge (Sergei Pavlovich Diagilev), b. 31 March [19 March 1872, Old Style], Sleshchev Barracks, Novogrod Province, Russia; d. 19 August 1929, Venice, Italy)**

**Summary**

Impresario, critic, curator and founder-director of the Ballets Russes (1909-1929), Serge Diaghilev was a towering figure and pioneer of early twentieth-century modernism. Through his various projects, Diaghilev offered a cosmopolitan, dynamic, and synthetic vision of art that revolutionised the multiple disciplines with which he came into contact. With the Ballets Russes in particular, the impresario created a significant space for experimentation by artists of the Russian and Western European avant-garde. Among the visual artists he commissioned were Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, André Derain, Juan Gris, Max Ernst, Joán Miró, Pavel Tchelitchev and Georges Rouault. Composers linked to the Ballets Russes include Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Richard Strauss, Erik Satie, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Henri Sauguet and Manuel de Falla. The company was also a major platform for the choreographers Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska and George Balanchine, innovative artists whose careers Diaghilev significantly advanced and developed. Through his commissions, Diaghilev brokered partnerships among artists that guided the avant-garde in new directions. A perfectionist with serious business acumen and immense resolve in the face of financial and artistic reverses, he played an active creative role in all his company’s productions. Although a proponent of modernism and internationalism in art, Diaghilev was also a romantic, remaining throughout his life a champion of Russia’s cultural riches, past as well as present. So closely was Diaghilev’s forceful, larger-than-life personality linked to the identity of the Ballets Russes that within months of his death in 1929 the company collapsed.

**Early Experience**

In Perm, where he spent most of his childhood and adolescence, Diaghilev’s early interest in the arts was sparked by his family. His father, Pavel Diaghilev, a military officer and member of the landed gentry, was a talented amateur singer. Diaghilev’s mother passed away shortly after he was born, and his father remarried in 1874. The sophisticated Elena Panaeva, who now became Diaghilev’s stepmother, was also a singer and a keen advocate of the arts. As one of the wealthiest families in Perm, the Diaghilevs had the time and resources for artistic pursuits: beginning in 1879, the family hosted weekly musical concerts that featured compositions by Mussogorsky, Tchaikovsky, Glinka and Gounod. These family influences and activities inculcated in the young Diaghilev a nascent love of art and music.

In Perm the young Diaghilev took lessons in piano and singing, performed in concerts at the local gymnasium and composed his first musical compositions. In 1890, after finishing his secondary studies, he set off on a grand tour of Europe with his cousin Dmitrii Filosofov. This was a formative experience for Diaghilev. In Vienna, he saw operas by Mozart, Rossini and Verdi, as well as his first ballet, Josef Bayer’s *Die Puppenfee* (1888). Diaghilev also attended Wagner’s *Lohengrin* (1850) and *Der fliegende Holländer* (1840): Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which theorized a fusion of the arts in a single, unified whole, would have a seminal impact on Diaghilev’s developing artistic vision. With Filosofov, Diaghilev also embarked on his first serious romantic relationship.

Back in Russia, Diaghilev matriculated at St. Petersburg University, where he studied law. He continued lessons in singing and music, working with professors at the conservatory. During his student years, Diaghilev became acquainted with Alexandre Benois, Walter Nouvel, Konstantin Somov and Léon Bakst, members of Filosofov’s circle who would become close future associates. He also took part in musical soirées that introduced him to the nationalist group of composers known as the Mighty Five that would help establish the musical identity of the early Ballets Russes.

Although Diaghilev had set his sights on becoming a composer, his dreams were dashed when Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov rejected his work in 1894. Disillusioned, Diaghilev shifted his focus to the visual arts. Thanks to an inheritance, he began purchasing art for his home. He set out again for Western Europe, this time to broaden his knowledge of painting, and he began to acquire works for a future patron, Princess Maria Tenisheva. By 1896 he had published his first art criticism, and in 1897 he mounted an exhibition of over two hundred English and German watercolours at St. Petersburg’s Stieglitz Museum. In 1898, he curated another show, this one highlighting Russian and Finnish art. Later that year he launched *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art), a journal that would occupy a central position in Russia’s art world until it folded in 1904. Wide-ranging, with high-quality reproductions of old and new art from Russia and Western Europe, the journal was edited by Diaghilev, assisted by Benois, Filosofov, Nouvel and Bakst. At once chic, progressive, polemical, and nostalgic, *Mir iskusstva* rejuvenated the Russian art scene. Diaghilev’s own articles and the exhibitions he and his collaborators organized under the aegis of the journal further established Diaghilev as a cultural authority.

In 1899 Prince Serge Volkonsky, the newly appointed Director of the Imperial Theatres, offered Diaghilev the position of an assistant. With Volkonsky’s backing, he edited the 1900 edition of the *Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres*, transforming this into a striking example of graphic design, delaying publication by several months. Diaghilev also pitched ideas for music concerts and, most famously, began planning this first ballet project, an ambitious new production of Leo Delibes’ *Sylvia* (1876). Among other factors, the hostility aroused by this project, which Diaghilev envisioned as an artistically ambitious and costly one involving several of his World of Art colleagues, led to his dismissal from the Imperial Theatres in 1901.

Diaghilev then set to work on a monograph about the eighteenth-century painter Dmitrii Levitsky, for which he won the 1901 Uvarovsky Prize. His waning interest in *Mir iskusstva* around this time coincided with the end of his relationship with Filosofov as well as the withdrawal of some of the journal’s key financial backers, including Tsar Nicholas II. In 1905, Diaghilev curated a mammoth exhibition of historic Russian portraits at the Tauride Palace in St. Petersburg. A salute to past and present Russian grandeur, the exhibit displayed approximately four thousand works produced from 1705 to 1905: for Diaghilev and for the Russian art world, it was a landmark achievement, memorializing a culture that the Revolution of 1905 threatened to destroy.

The Revolution briefly raised Diaghilev’s hopes for an appointment in a new ministry of fine arts that many thought would materialise. When this failed to happen, Diaghilev, disillusioned and itching for new opportunities, decided it was his mission to promote Russian art abroad. In October 1906 Diaghilev opened a comprehensive exhibition of Russian works at the Paris Salon d’Automne: the show, which subsequently travelled in a modified form to Berlin and Venice, featured the work of young, contemporary artists as well as eighteenth-century paintings and an extraordinary collection of fifteenth-century icons. In 1907 he presented a series of “Russian Historical Concerts,” his first venture at the Paris Opéra and one that celebrated the Mighty Five. The following year, at the same venue, he produced *Boris Godunov* (1874), giving Mussorgsky’s opera, probably the most celebrated work of the Russian lyric repertoire, its first airing outside of Russia and inciting great enthusiasm among an elite public clearly seduced by the production’s exoticism.

**Contributions to the Field of Modernism**

In 1909 Diaghilev organized another Paris season, this one featuring ballet as well as opera. He presented *Le Pavillon d’Armide* (1907) and *Les Sylphides* (1909). With choreography by Michel Fokine and designs by Benois, these ballets tapped into Diaghilev’s simultaneous appreciation of the romantic past and a more radical present (although today the innovative aspects of *Les Sylphides*, or *Chopiniana*, as it is called in Russia, seem mild). Other ballets, including *Cléopâtre* (1909) and the ‘Polovtsian Dances’ from *Prince Igor* (1909), offered more thrilling displays of exoticism, heightened by the uncorseted freedom of Fokine’s exuberant dancers. This season also introduced a host Russia’s star dancers to the French public, including Tamara Karsavina, Ida Rubinstein, Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky. The season’s sensational reception encouraged Diaghilev to abandon opera (although he occasionally returned to it) and become a ballet producer: ballet, he realised, was the best platform for his vision of artistic synthesis, synaesthesia, and spectacle.

In 1910 Diaghilev produced a second ballet season in Paris. With Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Schéhérzade* (1910) and Stravinsky’s *Firebird* (1910), which featured magnificent designs by Bakst and Alexander Golovin, respectively, and choreography by Fokine, the season again emphasized primitivism, sensuality, and a Russian sensibility that seemed to infuse even ballets set in ancient realms of the exotic ‘East’. *Firebird* also introduced Stravinsky to Paris, establishing Diaghilev’s enterprise as a harbinger not only of innovative dance but also of modern music.

Initially a summer enterprise, the Ballets Russes was officially established as a year-round company in 1911. That year, Nijinsky – by that time Diaghilev’s lover – was fired from the Mariinsky Theatre. Nijinsky’s departure prompted a wave of resignations by significant company dancers such as Bronislava Nijinska and Adolph Bolm, who now joined Diaghilev on a full-time basis. For Diaghilev, this well-timed series of events made his year-round touring company a real possibility, further enhancing its prestige and legitimacy.

In every way, the Ballets Russes was Diaghilev’s brainchild. Throughout the company’s existence, the impresario commissioned choreographers, composers, visual artists and librettists to create works that adhered to his own visions. From cutting and making alterations to musical scores to dictating stage lighting and closely guiding emerging choreographers, Diaghilev was directly involved in every aspect of the creative process. Shaped according to his tastes, the Ballets Russes was truly a labour of love, drawing funds from Diaghilev’s pocket and depending on financial arrangements that brought him on numerous occasions to the brink of bankruptcy. The company’s artistic trajectory was also deeply intertwined with Diaghilev’s personal relationships with his choreographers and leading men, from Nijinsky to Léonide Massine, Anton Dolin and Serge Lifar.

In this pre-War period, the company, headquartered in Monte Carlo, toured all of the major capitals in Western Europe and, in 1913, visited Buenos Aires. Whilst its hallmark continued to be Russian and exotic ballets, Diaghilev diversified the repertoire by arranging for musical contributions by Debussy, Ravel, and Strauss. Increasingly experimental works included *Petrouchka* (1911), a commedia dell’arte-style ballet set in St. Petersburg of the 1830s with music by Stravinsky, choreography by Fokine, and a libretto by Benois, who also designed the scenery and costumes. Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un faune* (1912), to music by Debussy, was slow-moving and dreamy, a young man’s sexual awakening that climaxed in a masturbatory gesture and led to a scandal that Diaghilev may well have abetted. The following year witnessed the greatest of Diaghilev’s pre-War productions, *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), with Stravinsky’s violent, primitivist, and pulsating score and a choreography by Nijinsky whose violent rhythms and heavy, weighted movements seemed to cut all of ballet’s moorings in the nineteenth century. With these works, as well as an innovative production of Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera-ballet *Le Coq d’or* (1914), in which singers flanked the dancers on a stage brilliant with Goncharova’s reds and yellows, Diaghilev and his company continued to make a splash amongst artistically progressive audiences.

Although the Ballets Russes temporarily disbanded at the start of the First World War, Diaghilev forged ahead. He settled in neutral Switzerland and with Léonide Massine, a young lover and choreographer in the making, started planning new works, several with a Futurist inspiration. Gradually, he assembled a troupe; it was younger and rawer, and to whip it into shape Diaghilev instituted a more rigorous training schedule. In 1916, the company embarked on its first tour of the United States (whose democratic ways Diaghilev hated but whose skyscrapers he admired). The company later visited Spain, where Diaghilev and Massine were galvanized by the country’s dance and music traditions, including flamenco. The following year saw the premiere of *Parade* (1917), a work that engaged the talents of Satie, Picasso, Massine, and Cocteau (as librettist) and revealed Diaghilev’s growing engagement with the Paris-based avant-garde, his acceptance of the revolution of cubism (which his former *Mir iskusstva* colleagues largely disdained), and his increasingly international orientation. Other new works, such as *The Good-Humoured Ladies* (1917), inspired by Goldoni and set to music by Antonio Vivaldi, an eighteenth-century baroque composer all but rediscovered by Diaghilev, who cut, pasted, and selected the various excerpts. Here was evidence of his continued interest in mixing past and present. Many ballets of the postwar period, including the enormously popular *La Boutique Fantasque* (1919), choreographed by Massine to music by Gioacchino Rossini, reflected this ‘time-travelling’ method.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, which transformed him from a Russian who mostly lived abroad to an exile who couldn’t go home, Diaghilev turned increasingly to what he felt was a lost Russian past. There were many instances of this, but the most lavish was his production of *The Sleeping Princess* (1921), a revival of Marius Petipa’s classic masterpiece *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), which premiered at London’s Alhambra Theatre and brought the company to near financial ruin. Having fallen out with Massine, Diaghilev called upon Nijinska, the company’s new in-house choreographer, to supplement the original Petipa choreography: several of her additions, including the divertissement number ‘The Three Ivans’, remained a part of Western productions of the ballet for the next several decades. Indeed, it was thanks to Diaghilev that *The Sleeping Beauty* entered the repertoire of ballet companies outside Russia. Because the sets and costumes of *The Sleeping Princess* were impounded, Diaghilev had Nijinska choreograph a one-act work, *Aurora’s Wedding* (1922), which combined choreographic elements of the evening-length ballet in a one-act touring format. This, too, remained in repertoire for decades.

Far more important for Nijinska were two of her later ballets for Diaghilev. The first, *Les Noces* (1923), was probably his finest achievement of the 1920s. Stravinsky’s score was years in the making, and although it had undergone numerous changes since its genesis in the wake of *Le Sacre du printemps*, it retained the rhythmic brilliance and Russian subject matter of the composer’s pre-War style. To this extraordinary score, Nijinska choreographed a work that bled with loss and gender tragedy, a work whose abstract architecture recalled the Soviet avant-garde of which she had been a part before emigrating. *Les Biches* (1924), her second major work for Diaghilev, to a score by Poulenc and designs by the French painter Marie Laurencin, was both chic and mysterious, with ‘Bright Young Things’ who inhabit a gender-ambiguous universe in which nothing is quite what it seems. A third ballet, *Le Train Bleu* (1924), which had a music-hall inspired score by Milhaud, costumes by Gabrielle Chanel, cubist-style cabanas by the sculptor Henri Laurens and a libretto by Cocteau, juxtaposed once again fashionable corporeal styles (in this case, beach games and calisthenics coupled with Anton Dolin’s acrobatics) with classical technique. With Nijinska, the pointe shoe, which Ballets Russes choreographers since Fokine had used sparingly if at all, returned to the stage, an early sign of the emergence of neo-classicism.

As the 1920s progressed, the Ballets Russes, now permanently housed in Monte Carlo, became even more firmly rooted in the French avant-garde, as Diaghilev commissioned numerous works from the French group of composers known as Les Six. Nonetheless, Diaghilev continued to seek out Russians, both progressive émigré and even Soviet artists. In 1927 the company premiered *La Chatte* (1927), a constructivist work featuring choreography by Diaghilev’s latest Russian discovery, George Balanchine, and designs by Naum Gabo. That same season the company premiered a ‘Soviet’ ballet, Prokofiev’s *Le Pas d’acier* (1927), which was not only set in Soviet Russia but also featured a striking factory scene, realized choreographically by Massine and visually by the constructivist artist Georgy Yakulov. The following year, the company performed *Ode* (1928), a thinly veiled allegory in praise of Russia’s Empress Elizabeth, which had music by Nicolas Nabokov, choreography by Massine, designs by Tchelitchev, and film by Pierre Charbonnier. Stravinsky’s last collaboration with the Ballets Russes was *Apollon Musagète* (1928), in which Diaghilev paired his ‘first son’ (Prokoviev was his ‘second’) with Balanchine, resulting in the pivotal neoclassical work, *Apollon Musagete* (1928), better known today as *Apollo*, although the Pierre Bauchant designs have long gone.

Although the vigorous artistic experimentation of this period suggests otherwise, Diaghilev’s interest in the company was diminishing in the late 1920s. Suffering from untreated diabetes, Diaghilev struggled with ill health. He took to collecting Russian manuscripts and books, including an important collection of Pushkin’s letters, which he intended to be the core of a Russian literary and cultural centre in what a later generation would call ‘Russia abroad’. When Diaghilev passed away in August 1929, the Ballets Russes, lacking his singular vision and resolve, collapsed as well.

**Legacy**

Immediately following Diaghilev’s death, numerous spin-off companies appeared in the West. Many capitalized on its name; others laid claim to some aspect of its aesthetic; most performed a selection of its works. Commissioning many of the same choreographers, artists and musicians who had worked with Diaghilev, these post-Diaghilev groups included the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo directed by Colonel Vasily de Basil and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo directed by Serge Denham, Balanchine’s short-lived Les Ballets 1933 and Nijinska’s Théâtre de la Danse, among others. Dislocated, the company’s choreographers and dancers scattered across Europe and America, founding schools as well as their own companies. Most notably, in New York, Balanchine went on to establish the New York City Ballet, while in Paris, Serge Lifar became the artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet. In London, former company dancer Ninette de Valois founded the Royal Ballet. Massine, Nijinska and Balanchine, whose choreographic talents Diaghilev had done so much to foster, remained at the forefront of ballet for much of the twentieth century, while the numerous dancers who passed through the ranks of the Ballets Russes founded schools and companies around the globe. Last but not least, Diaghilev brought male dancing to new, virtuosic heights, while seeding a new group of choreographers who dramatically expanded the variety of male roles. Relatively open about his homosexuality and emotional attachments, Diaghilev made ballet a safe haven for gay men.

In music and the visual arts, Diaghilev also made his mark. The impresario had provided avant-garde painters and designers with a theatrical platform that brought their work to a vastly expanded public. His passionate and knowledgeable support for some of the most radical scores of the twentieth century altered the course of modern music. By introducing artists across fields, he arranged numerous working partnerships (such as that of Stravinsky and Balanchine) that transformed the performing arts more generally.

In addition to influencing the artists, Diaghilev also created new audiences for ballet. In London, the artists and intellectuals associated with the Bloomsbury group flocked to the Ballets Russes above all in the years following the First World War and as collaborators and financial supporters were instrumental in transforming the movement known as ‘British ballet’ into a national enterprise. In Paris, which Diaghilev always considered his artistic ‘home’ (even though the Ballets Russes performed far more often in London and Monte Carlo), the company attracted sophisticates as well as arts’ patrons and collectors, many from abroad. During the 1920's it was said that French could hardly be heard during intermissions at company performances, indicating to what extent the Ballets Russes had become a magnet for tourists, expatriates and Russian émigrés, who saw the Ballets Russes as both a sign and a source of the vitality of Russian culture abroad.

Today, the artworks belonging to Diaghilev’s personal collection furnish Western art museums, as do the designs for his many ballets. The works created under his aegis still constitute the core, albeit a diminishing one, of the international, modern ballet repertoire. Ironically, if Diaghilev’s legacy has been downplayed anywhere, it is in Russia itself. The Ballets Russes never toured Diaghilev’s native country, where the impresario remained a contentious figure throughout the Soviet period. Beginning in the late 1980's and accelerating during the post-Soviet period, a number of Ballets Russes works have been staged, although apart from Balanchine’s *Apollo* and Millicent Hodson’s reconstruction of Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, none have found a permanent place in the repertoire of Russia’s major companies. Still, Diaghilev’s family home in Perm has become a museum, and the city itself has become the site of conferences celebrating his legacy, while adding to the scholarly literature about him. Slowly, Diaghilev’s homeland is embracing the legacy of its prodigal son.

**Laura Quinton**

**Archives**

Archives Nationales, Paris, France

Bibliothèque de l’Opéra, Paris, France

Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, MA

Institut Russkoy Literatury (IRLi), St Petersburg, Russia.

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Rossiysky gosudarstvenny arkhiv Literatura I Iskusstvo (RGALi), Moscow, Russia

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**Paratextual Material**

Two images have been sent in separate files:

The first is *Portrait of Diaghilev*, 1916.

The second is Léon Bakst, *Portrait of Diaghilev and His Nanny*, 1906.