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| **Fokine, Michel (1880-1942)** |
| Mikhail Mikhailovich Fokin |
| Michel Fokine’s seventeen works for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (1909-1929) revitalised ballet in the early twentieth century. In Fokine’s most successful works, the body became the wellspring of complex emotion; the corps evoked a democratic ideal and the male dancer took centre stage. Fokine developed from within the conservative traditions of Russia’s Imperial Theatres, but when the young dancer began to choreograph he emerged as a reformer and an innovator of ballet. Fokine expanded ballet vocabulary, decried technical virtuosity for its own sake and merged pure dancing and pantomime to heighten dramatic coherence. He also compressed multi-act ballet productions into one-act works and fashioned movement that developed the work’s theme. Fokine’s ballets owed a debt to symbolism (whose practitioners espoused individuality, liberty and intuition) and to naturalism, in which Russian painters depicted the everyday (including workers and peasants). While employing a symbolist-naturalist aesthetic, Fokine defined the modern role of a choreographer: one who creates dances instead of one who arranges codified steps, and whose works express a personal rather than institutional identity. |
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While employing a symbolist-naturalist aesthetic, Fokine defined the modern role of a choreographer: one who creates dances instead of one who arranges codified steps, and whose works express a personal rather than institutional identity.   Training and Artistic Influences Fokine studied at Saint Petersburg’s Imperial Ballet School from 1889 to 1898. He made his professional debut at age nine in Marius Petipa’s *The Talisman* (1889). While studying ballet and character dance (with Platon Karsavin, Nikolai Volkov, Alexander Shiriaev, Pavel Gerdt and Nikolai Legat), Fokine performed leading roles in Lev Ivanov’s *The Magic Flute* (1893) as well as his version of *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1885). Fokine graduated with first prize in his class and entered the Maryinsky Theatre as a soloist. There he regularly partnered fellow classmate Anna Pavlova. Before he was promoted to premier danseur (first dancer) in 1904, Fokine played the balalaika at factories with V.V. Andreiev’s folk orchestra; its musicians performed on native Russian instruments and embraced the music of the Russian people. Disgruntled with the Maryinsky’s hierarchical culture (which reflected the Tsar’s increasingly moribund regime), Fokine considered becoming a painter. His travels to the Caucasus, Crimea and Italy, where he made ethnographically detailed notes and drawings, informed his understanding of regional dances.  Though Fokine considered leaving ballet, he found inspiration in taking ballet master Christian Johansson’s invitation-only postgraduate ‘class of perfection’. Johansson provided information on the art form’s technical and historic development. When Fokine began teaching in the Imperial Ballet School’s girls division in 1902, and its boys department in 1908, he gave his students lectures on art and history, and demanded that they employ greater upper body expressivity. Both were unconventional practices in a technique class. Several of Fokine’s students, including Bronislava Nijinska, Lydia Lopokova and Olga Spessivtseva, went on to perform in his Ballets Russes works.  Fokine found the Imperial star system, cronyism and spectacle-driven productions anathema. In the wake of the massacre known as Bloody Sunday (1905), which was precipitated by a St. Petersburg workers’ strike, Fokine became radicalised. He joined a group of delegates who pressed for a reform of working conditions and internal policies affecting ballet dancers employed by the Imperial Theatres. At the same time, Fokine began to choreograph in earnest. His fellow dissidents—Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Lydia Kyasht and Vera Antonova (whom he married in 1905)—comprised the core group of female dancers Fokine employed to create his early works.  Fokine’s determination to make ballet artistically relevant and dramatically consistent and to develop wider audiences had precedents, particularly Jean-Georges Noverre’s*Lettres sur la danse et les ballets* (*Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, 1760). He outlined his proposal for a series of Noverre-like reforms in the libretto for *Daphnis and Chloe* submitted to the Imperial Theatres director Vladimir Teliakovsky in 1904. Fokine’s decision to title his reforms ‘The New Ballet’ corresponds to VsevolodMeyerhold’s decision in 1903 to name his St. Petersburg theatre company ‘The Fellowship of the New Drama’. Meyerhold and Fokine collaborated on projects between 1908 and 1913. Both believed that body movement expressed emotional truth; both worked in a symbolist vein. Judging from Fokine’s ballets, he was also influenced by Konstantin Stanislavsky’s acting method, which espoused artistic self-analysis, reflection and the physicalisation of emotion.  Fokine summarised his choreographic philosophy in an editorial letter, published in *The Times* of London in 1914. Titled ‘The Five Principles of Ballet’, the letter was an expansion of Fokine’s ideas about the ‘New Ballet’:   1. To invent of a new form of movement for each ballet, befitting its subject and corresponding to its subject’s historical period and geographic locale; 2. To always make dancing and gesture a vehicle for dramatic action; 3. To replace classic mime with movement which engages the whole body and makes it expressive from head to foot; 4. To employ the entire ensemble in advancing the meaning of the ballet as opposed to using the ensemble for ornamental purposes; 5. To create an equal alliance of the arts of dance, music and visual design, and to do away with specialist ballet music and conventional ballet costumes (tutus, pink tights and pointe shoes).   Fokine described his work as breaking with tradition. In practice, however, Fokine’s approach to choreography was that of a hybrid classicist; he drew on various traditions and was influenced by like-minded artists. For example, he found the work of Isadora Duncan, who made her first tour of Russia in 1904, of great use. The American modern dancer’s simple steps (running, skipping and jumping), her unfettered torso movement and flowing arms provided Fokine with ideas about how to loosen and soften ballet’s codified vocabulary. Like Fokine, Duncan was fascinated by Greek culture. Because Duncan embraced non-specialist ballet music, such as Chopin, and because Fokine set his *Chopiniana* (1907-8) to music by the Polish composer, Duncan’s impact on Fokine is incontestable. Duncan was not, however, the pivotal influence on Fokine’s choreographic development.  That role went to Serge Diaghilev and his *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) group. Fokine attended their salon in 1907. There, he heard Pyotr Mikhailov read a paper which called for the revitalisation of ballet through a union of artistic mediums. This *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) formulation became central to Fokine’s aesthetic. Its practice dates from Greek classical theatre.  **Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**  *The Dying Swan* (1907), to Camille Saint-Saëns’ ‘Le Cygne’ (‘The Swan’) from *Le Carnaval des Animaux* (*Carnival of the Animals*, 1886), was the first ballet which fully expressed Fokine’s reformist ideals and demonstrated his ability to bring out a dancer’s individuality. Fokine’s solo was made for Pavlova; it capitalised on her delicate expressivity. Through the *bourrée*, a series of tiny, quick gliding steps executed on the tips of the pointe shoe, Pavlova appeared like a swan skimming the water’s surface. By interpolating arm undulations and torso bends expressive of the creature’s attempt to fly in the face of impending death, Pavlova (and Fokine) created one of the most indelible twentieth-century dance images. While the four-minute work stems from Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov’s four-act *Swan Lake* (1895), it bears more in common with a symbolist poem’s capacity to capture a fleeting moment in time.  Between 1905 and 1909, Fokine created twenty-four ballets and dance pieces in St. Petersburg. Most of them were not for the Marinsky, but for charity performances. They included *Chopiniana*, *Le Pavillon d’Armide* (*Armida’s Pavilion,* 1907) and *Egyptian Nights* (1908). When Diaghilev hired Fokine to become the sole choreographer and a premier danseur of his first Paris dance venture in 1909, Fokine was able to test his choreographic ideas in Europe and on a grand scale.  Diaghilev’s 1909 Saison Russe (Russian Season) featured revised versions of *Le Pavillon d’Armide* and *Les Sylphides* (as *Chopiniana* was renamed)*.* Both ballets trafficked in nostalgia and projected a lost age of innocence. Fokine collaborated intensively with *Mir Iskusstva* painter Alexandre Benois, who shared Fokine’s historical interest in the Romantic period and who designed the ballets’ period costumes and décor. The re-titled *Chopiniana* paid homage to the Parisian ballet *La Sylphide* (1832), which made Marie Taglioni a celebrity and launched her reputation as the apotheosis of the Romantic ballerina. In Fokine’s one-act work, however, there is no prima ballerina. Three female soloists share the spotlight with one male dancer, the Romantic poet embodied by Vaslav Nijinsky, a recent graduate of the Imperial Ballet School and the season’s wunderkind. Through Fokine’s choreography for Nijinsky, the male ballet dancer’s subservient position to women disintegrated. No longer did the ballerina rule the stage.  Unlike almost all of Fokine’s other works, *Les Sylphides* lacked a narrative. In a series of vignettes, in which classical ballet steps correspond to Chopin’s waltzes, mazurkas, études and other pieces, Fokine created the first modern *ballet blanc.* (The *ballet blanc*, which originated in the Romantic era, is a pure dancing scene performed by women in white or pastel costumes.) Unlike the corps in Marius Petipa’s ‘Kingdom of the Shades’, his celebrated *ballet blanc* in *La Bayadère* (1877), Fokine’s dancers were not arranged in battalions. They appeared instead as a democratic sisterhood, forming bonds through daisy chains and clustered tableaux. The three solo dancers’ lack of virtuoso displays and the softness with whic­h they performed ballet’s codified steps evoked Taglioni’s dancing. *Les Sylphides* became Fokine’s most performed ensemble work. Returning to it throughout his career, Fokine’s final restaging in 1940 was for Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre). Neo-classical choreographer George Balanchine quotes phrases from *Les Sylphides* in *Serenade* (1934), his plotless *ballet blanc*.­­­  Fokine choreographed *Schéhérazade* (1910) for Diaghilev’s second Paris season. The work is regarded as the emerging company’s first fully collaborative venture. Based on the first tale of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the libretto by Léon Bakst and Fokine concerns a harem wife who defies her ruler-husband by engaging in carnal love with a slave. While Diaghilev rearranged Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s 1888 composition, Bakst created an orientalist atmosphere; his costumes were ground breaking for their vibrant use of colour, billowing fabric and exposure of midriffs. For Fokine, the work was a departure from his ethnographic historicizing style. A ballet of pure fantasy, *Schéhérazade* featured faux Persian choreography, which owed more to Art Nouveau, a decorative style that Diaghilev found fascinating. In Fokine’s hands, Art Nouveau’s curling and snaking lines were reflected in the dancers’ amplified use of their torsos and extended arms, as well as their deep back bends. *Schéhérazade* captured Paris by storm; Bakst’s costumes became a fashion trend, and Nijinsky’s eroticised dancing in his role as the slave became the talk of the town.  Diaghilev responded to *Schéhérazade*’s success (and to that of *Cléopâtre* – a reworking of *Egyptian Nights* – in 1909) by producing numerous works about an imagined East: a land of sensual pleasures, mysteries and dangers. In *Cléopâtre*, *The Polovtsian Dances* (1909)—from the opera *Prince Igor*—and *Le Dieu Bleu* (1912), Fokine created fictionalised versions of dancing done by Egyptians, Tartars and Hindus. The runaway success of these orientalist ballets arguably stunted Fokine’s creative development and sealed his reputation as a purveyor of fantasy. However in *Les Orientales* (1910) and *Thamar* (1912), Fokine returned to his ethnographic interests, drawing on his memory of Siamese court dance and Caucasian folk dance, respectively.  Along with the Middle East and South Asia, Diaghilev marketed Russia as a magical realm to his European audiences. For Fokine, however, it was central to his cultural identity; it fed his artistic imagination. Fokine’s most hailed Russian-themed ballets were *Firebird* (1910) and *Petrouchka* (1911). With *Firebird*, to Igor Stravinsky’s first ballet score, Fokine broke choreographic ground by challenging the traditional meaning of the *pas de deux* as a metaphor for courtly romance. In the central duet, Ivan Tsarevich (originally performed by Fokine) and Russia’s mythic Firebird (originally performed Tamara Karsavina) are not lovers but antagonists. Though the Tsarevich balances and supports the Firebird on *pointe* like a courtier, he also crosses and pins her arms like a prison warden. When he tips her body forward (so that he can look at her plumage), she executes an *arabesque penchée,* which is typical of the supported adagio’s lexicon. The Firebird disdains these ministrations, perceiving them as manipulations. Not only did the *Firebird* duet subvert the supported adagio’s connection to the courtly tradition, it illuminated the ballet’s fairy tale narrative and revealed an essential aspect of Russia: the longstanding political tension between the ‘primitive’ Russia (composed of many languages and cultures) and its Tsarist domination.  In *Petrouchka*, Fokine, Benois and Stravinsky created a ballet that was both a tragedy and a light-hearted homage to old Russia. In the ballet’s opening and closing scenes, a Shrovetide fair crowd joyously circulates. Fokine’s freewheeling choreographic approach was far different from the organised movement typical of the Imperial Ballet’s ensemble choreography. Fokine choreographed his dancers to move individually and to behave in ways that befitted their station in life—such as coachmen, gypsies, street-hawkers, wet nurses, organ grinders and jesters. When Petrouchka (a puppet with a human soul danced by Nijinsky) dies violently in the ballet’s final scene, the crowd’s fascination is all too modern: they leer and gape. Meanwhile Petrouchka’s duality can be perceived as modernist in its intended ambiguity. Pronounced by one critic as a non-ballet, *Petrouchka* featured almost no conventional ballet movement (except when it was satirised). Fokine made *Petrouchka* look improvised and random.  During and after Fokine’s years with the Ballets Russes (1908-12, 1914), he became an internationally sought-after choreographer. Fokine created *Les Préludes* (1913), a quasi-abstract work for Anna Pavlova’s company, and *Jota Aragonesa* (1916), set on the Marinsky and inspired by dances he had seen in Andalusia. Both works received critical praise. Unfortunately, war, revolution and peripatetic working conditions stymied Fokine’s choreographic development. A year after the 1917 Russian Revolution, Fokine, his wife Vera and son Vitale left their homeland never to return. The husband-wife team toured Scandinavia as a performing duo; Fokine staged *Moonlight Sonata* (1918), among other ballets, in Stockholm. In Copenhagen, Fokine worked with Jean Borlïn who went on to choreograph for the Ballets Suédois, a highly experimental theatrical enterprise. At the end of 1919, the Fokines arrived in New York. Producer Morris Gest engaged Fokine to choreograph for the musical *Aphrodite* (1919) and the oriental pageant *Mecca* (1920). Both were fantasy spectacles, which garnered the choreographer big fees and little artistic satisfaction.  Between 1922 and 1927, Fokine made prologue dances for movie palaces, contributed to musicals and revues and witnessed, with increasing horror, America’s love for vernacular dances like the foxtrot. He founded the Fokine American Ballet in 1924, but the company never developed for lack of funding. Just as the Depression hit, Fokine’s attempt to make ballets in Hollywood failed. Fokine’s most stinging career blow occurred in the 1930s when the independently wealthy Lincoln Kirstein (who published a book about him in 1934), passed him over for the younger George Balanchine to direct the American Ballet Company (which later became the New York City Ballet).  The most productive part of Fokine’s early years in the United States occurred at his Manhattan studio (founded 1921). In a grand brownstone on Riverside Drive and 72nd Street, he taught a generation of American dancers, many of whom went on to become professionals, including Patricia Bowman, Paul Haakon, Betty Bruce, Nora Kaye, Annabelle Lyon and Helen Tamiris. Though Fokine believed that dancers must have a technical basis in ballet, all of his classes emphasised style, particularly how the torso and head should be involved in every movement.  Fokine’s career renaissance occurred in 1936, when René Blum engaged him as chief choreographer for his Ballet de Monte Carlo. When the company’s mantle passed to Colonel Wassily de Basil, Fokine created *Paganini* (1939), a psychological portrait of the legendary violinist. Fokine’s Faustian tale was made in collaboration with the romantic composer Sergei Rachmaninoff. Between 1936 and 1939, Fokine restaged his most lauded Diaghilev-era works, which had fallen into disrepair after two decades of performance without his presence. When Fokine toured these restaged works to Australia with de Basil’s company, the impact of them on audiences helped to plant the seed for the development of ballet in Australia.  After Australia, Fokine lived for only three more years. Fokine became Ballet Theatre’s first contracted choreographer and found in the newly established company the artistic home he had been searching for. In 1940 Ballet Theatre opened its first season (and the next fifteen ones) with Fokine’s *Les Sylphides*. Between 1940 and 1942, Fokine restaged for the new company *Le Carnaval, Le Spectre de la Rose* and *Petrouchka* (coaching, among others, the young Jerome Robbins in the title role); he also created *Bluebird*, *The Russian Soldier* and part of *Helen of Troy*. During rehearsals in Mexico City for the latter ballet, Fokine fell ill with blood poisoning. He died days later in New York.    **Legacy**  Fokine’s works were instrumental in the popularisation of ballet in the twentieth century. He choreographed or restaged his works for the Ballets Russes, the post-Diaghilev companies (helmed by René Blum and Colonel de Basil), the Royal Swedish Ballet; Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, Ida Rubinstein’s company; La Scala and Ballet Theatre, among many others. He also choreographed for plays, musicals, revues, movie houses and outdoor venues. Because his famous ballets were consistently staged without his permission, Fokine tried to use legal channels to protect them from piracy and misuse, thus paving the way for the copyright of dance. Throughout his career, Fokine demanded from performers that his ballets be performed without choreographic changes. This was a far cry from the Imperial Theatre tradition in which ballet masters allowed principal dancers to perform their favourite steps and wear their personal jewellery, regardless of the subject of the ballet.  With the development of ballet modernism—which championed abstraction, emotional detachment, satire and the use of modernist composers—Fokine’s character-driven works, which were often set to Romantic music, fell out of favour. After Fokine’s death, many critics deemed his orientalist ballets kitsch; his neo-romantic works were construed as falsely innocent. His sparing use of the pointe shoe did not interest a future generation of ballet neo-classicists led by George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton, thus widening the divide between women and men’s type of dancing.  Fokine’s large narrative ballets, like *Petrouchka* and *Firebird*, are performed infrequently in the United States because they are expensive and require knowledgeable stagers. More complex is the issue in these ballets of Fokine’s non-codified movements; they are often the most expressive aspect of the choreography and require dancers who are willing to spend time working in a non-virtuosic vein. As a consequence of this complexity, Fokine’s ballets based on codified ballet technique and that require fewer dancers (such *The Dying Swan, Les Sylphides* and *Le Spectre de la Rose*) have become the works most skilfully performed.  Fokine’s argument that choreography be treated as an art object, equivalent in stature to a painting or musical composition, was his greatest contribution to the development of ballet. Throughout his career, Fokine demonstrated that a ballet was not a series of steps to be manipulated at will. As a young risk taker, Fokine worked in political and philosophical resistance to the Imperial Theatre traditions and policies. He demanded reform and pushed through innovations. By making dances that illuminated his aesthetic and philosophical point of view, Fokine paved the way not only for ballet modernism but also for the art of choreography.  **Selected List of Works**  *Chopiniana* (1907)  *Le Pavillon d’Armide* (1907)  *The Dying Swan* (1907)  *The Polovtsian Dances* from *Prince Igor* (1909)  *Les Sylphides* (1909)  *Cléopâtre* (1909)  *Carnaval* (1910)  *Schéhérazade* (1910)  *Firebird* (1910)  *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911)  *Petrouchka* (1911)  *Le Dieu Bleu* (1912)  *Thamar* (1912)  *Daphnis and Chloë* (1912)  *Les Préludes* (1913)  *Legend of Joseph* (1914)  *Le Coq d’Or* (*The Golden Cockerel*, 1914)  *Stenka Razin* (1915)  *Eros* (1915)  *Jota Aragonesa* (1916)  *Mecca* (1920)  *Paganini* (1939)  *Le Coq D’Or* (1939, restaged version)  *Bluebeard* (1941)  *The Russian Soldier* (1942) |
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