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| La Création du Monde |
| Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, 25 October 1923 |
| A ballet inspired by a creation fable in Blaise Cendrars’ *Anthologie nègre* (1921), *La Création du Monde* (*The Creation of the World*) was produced by Rolf de Maré’s *Ballets Suédois* troupe, premiering on 25 October 1923 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris. Together with the painter Fernand Léger, Cendrars proposed a ‘*ballet nègre*’ in 1921 to de Maré and the troupe’s choreographer Jean Börlin. Börlin’s 1920 suite of solo dances *Sculpture Nègre* signalled his interest in African art and artefacts then on display at the Musée d’Ethnographie and in galleries and private collections – an influence also visible in the stylised body-masks that Léger designed for *La Création du Monde*. The ballet’s score was contributed by Darius Milhaud, a member of the group Les Six, known for infusing the European symphonic tradition with aspects of jazz and blues music. Freely mixing African and African-American cultural references, *La Création du Monde* grew out of European primitivism and typified the ‘negrophilia’ which pervaded high art and popular culture in the 1920s. The ballet’s narrative, which resembled the biblical story of Genesis, purportedly drew from myths of the Fang peoples of West Central Africa, then part of French Congo. This theme of creation linked the French colonial enterprise with the regeneration of the nation in the aftermath of the First World War. |
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Freely mixing African and African-American cultural references, *La Création du Monde* grew out of European primitivism and typified the ‘negrophilia’ which pervaded high art and popular culture in the 1920s. The ballet’s narrative, which resembled the biblical story of Genesis, purportedly drew from myths of the Fang peoples of West Central Africa, then part of French Congo. This theme of creation linked the French colonial enterprise with the regeneration of the nation in the aftermath of the First World War. Contribution to Modernism A compilation of tales attributed to various African peoples, Cendrars’ *Anthologie nègre* combined a rhetoric of ethnographic authenticity with a frank acknowledgment of the European stamp imposed on these tales – a paradox central to *La Création du Monde*. In the book’s introduction, Cendrars (who had never visited Africa himself) admits that these myths, told to the reader third-hand, are inexact renditions collected from writings of European missionaries and travellers. Each story in the anthology is said to come from a specific African community, yet the abstract label *nègre* applied to the entire volume, and the thematic grouping of the tales, promote the notion that a set of common beliefs unified all African societies. The first entry, the basis for the ballet’s scenario, centres on three gods, Nzamé, Mébère, and Nkwa, who create the sky, earth, animals, plants and human beings. The idea of an avant-garde reinterpretation of folk or ‘primitive’ ritual has numerous precedents, including the Ballets Russes’ *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913) and the ‘Fête nègre’ (*Black Fete*) held at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1919, in conjunction with the ‘Première Exposition d’Art Nègre et d’Art Océanien’ (‘First Exhibition of Negro and Oceanic Art’) at Paul Guillaume’s Galerie Devambez. Guillaume featured African art, with an emphasis on West African masks and sculptures, both in his gallery and in his journal *Les Arts à Pari*s, along with poems and artworks by members of the Parisian avant-garde.  Fig.1: [Leger, Fernand (1881-1955) © ARS, NY](javascript:Matrix3.mbClick=false;void(0);) *The Creation of the World*, design for the scenery, 1922. Pencil on paper, 8 1/4 x 10 5/8". Gift of John Pratt. (342.1949) Location: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY  Image Reference: ART309208  Léger’s initial sketches for *La Création du Monde* – his second project for the Ballets Suédois, following on the modern-life production *Skating Rink* (1922) – drew from Fang heads and figures in Guillaume’s collection as well as tracings from illustrations in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (1915) and Marius de Zayas’s *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916). In his designs, Léger used a palette of stark black and white with touches of bright primary colours to render the scene and characters in simplified shapes and geometric patterns that evoked both African artefacts and Cubist paintings. His approach to the production blurred the boundaries between set, costume and performer: for the ballet’s three gods he fabricated twenty-six-foot-tall movable cut-outs which served simultaneously as characters within the story and decorative elements framing the onstage action. The dancers playing these gods’ animal and human creations wore painted boards that occluded their bodies and interacted with the background to create abstract patterns of colour and line as they moved. In subsequently published manifestos, Léger described the ideal theatre as one that, like *La Création du Monde*, transformed human actors into objects, machines or mobile scenery, a spectacle capable of capturing the attention of distracted modern spectators. This concept of stage design not only imposed physical constraints upon Börlin and the troupe’s dancers, but also challenged the association of dance with expressive bodily movement. Börlin, a classically trained dancer, choreographed passages in which performers crawled on all fours, walked on stilts or simply served as glorified stagehands carrying Léger’s constructions – leading to claims that the production subordinated dance to the plastic unity of the stage design.  Milhaud’s score, which juxtaposed a classical fugue with avant-garde polytonality and jazz syncopation and percussion, would seem to complement both the fragmented quality of Léger’s designs and the latter’s cross-pollination of Cubism with ‘l’art nègre’. The score’s assimilation of jazz into a primitivist framework in fact extended the production’s profoundly ahistorical character and its essentialist vision of a ‘culture nègre’, uniting black people across geographic, national and chronological divides. In this tendency towards synthesis of disparate cultures and temporalities, *La Création du Monde* manifested one aspect of the return to classicism advocated by the Purist journal *L’Esprit nouveau*, which published Cendrars’ scenario for the ballet in 1924. The Purists called for a fusion of classical simplicity with a mechanised aesthetic to reconstruct post-war France, ideals which resonated personally with the veteran Léger and echoed in the ballet’s narrative and style. This theme of regeneration dovetailed with the colonial politics surrounding *La Création du Monde*. Following on the heels of the 1922 Colonial Exposition held in Marseille, the production took place at a moment of increasing awareness of the role which both the cultural and economic resources of France’s colonial holdings could play in rebuilding the country in the face of the massive physical, psychic and bodily destruction wrought by war. |
| Further reading:  (Cendrars)  (Archer-Shaw)  (Dorris)  (Rosenstock)  (Shanahan)  (Van Norman Baer) |