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| Ballets Russes |
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| Founded by the Russian impressario Sergei Diaghilev in 1909, the *Ballets Russes* played a role of fundamental importance in the development of early 20th-century modernism. In the course of its twenty year history, Diaghilev employed the most exciting and forward thinking artists, composers and choregraphers of the time to create over 100 ballets which not only revolutionized the language of dance and reformulated the role of the performing arts by bring modernism onto the stage but also charted a new step forward in inter-disciplinary creation, using the medium of ballet to bring to fruition Richard Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total art work’). |
| Founded by the Russian impressario Sergei Diaghilev in 1909, the *Ballets Russes* played a role of fundamental importance in the development of early 20th-century modernism. In the course of its twenty year history, Diaghilev employed the most exciting and forward thinking artists, composers and choregraphers of the time to create over 100 ballets which not only revolutionized the language of dance and reformulated the role of the performing arts by bring modernism onto the stage but also charted a new step forward in inter-disciplinary creation, using the medium of ballet to bring to fruition Richard Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total art work’). Despite the emergence of rival enterprises in the 1920s, such as Rolf de Maré’s *Ballets Suédois*, the *Ballets Russes* remained the pre-eminent exponent of stage modernism until Diaghilev’s death in Venice in 1929, when the company broke up. Subsequently, in the early 1930s, the company was, to some extent, reassembled under the *aegis* of Colonel de Basil but the productions of this period never completely matched the artistic innovation achieved by Diaghilev and his collaborators in former years.  Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) was not himself an artist, choreographer, or composer but rather an intellectual who had a gift for identifying and promoting the very latest artistic talent wherever and in whatever form he found it. He came to the world of ballet with an established reputation as one of the leading members of the St. Petersburg intelligentsia. In 1898 he had been the leader of *Mir iskusstva* (*The World of Art*), a group of young intellectuals comprising artists, writers and philosophers. For six year he had published the journal of the group and had organised exhibitions of its artist members. In 1906 he curated an enormous exhibition of Russian art in the context of the Salon d’Automne in Paris and in 1907 and 1908 tried his hand at staging Russian opera season in the French capital. A year later he founded the *Ballets Russes* with the aim of promoting Russian art and culture abroad, hence the *Ballets Russes* never performed in Russia but only in Western Europe and the Americas (De Basil’s *Ballets Russes* toured to Australia). Central to Diaghilev’s aesthetic ideology was the idea of using the ballet as a serious means of artistic expression and of fusing the arts to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For this reason, he demanded the closest cooperation between his collaborators, with himself as final arbiter, in order to achieve the most powerful, multi-sensory expression of the ‘idea’ that lay behind each ballet. The success of his enterprise was immediate. The *Ballets Russes* charmed its audiences from the start but also, on occasion, scandalized them with its novelty (a riot took place at the first performance of *Le sacre du printemps* in 1913)*.*  The development of the *Ballets Russes* may be divided into three distinct phases. In the early period from 1909-13, Diaghilev worked almost entirely with Russian collaborators: Mikhail Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky were employed as the choreographers ; old friends from the *Mir iskusstva* group, such as Lev Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Alexander Golovin and Nikolai Riurikh (Roerich), were commissioned as designers and, other than the use of Claude Debussy’s score for *L’après-midi d’un faune* and Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloe*, the ballets were set to existing musical texts by Russian composers such as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin and Petr Tchaikovsky. In 1910, however, Diaghilev began to work closely with Igor Stravinsky, who became the ‘house composer’ and introduced a new strain of musical modernism into the *Ballets Russes* with his *L’oiseau de feu*. This period marked a transition from ‘classical’ ballets familiar to the audience, such as *Les Sylphides* (1909) and *Lac des Cygnes* (1911), to sumptuous new creations, such as *Schéhérezade* (1910) and *L’après-midi d’un faune* (1911), both designed by Bakst. These ballets gave way to more exploratory work, such as *Le sacre du printemps* (1913), which shocked the audience through the ‘primitive’ modernism of Stravinsky’s score and the revolutionary choreography designed by Nijinsky.  In 1913, however, Diaghilev undertook a significant change in direction when he employed Natalia Goncharova, a Russian modernist painter, to make the designs for his producion of *Le coq d’or* (1914). Her novel and brightly coloured designs, executed in the style of NEO-PRIMITIVISM, excited the French audience and convinced Diaghilev that he should now priviledge the work of modernist painters. During the war years both Fokine and Nijinsky were lost to the company and a new choreographer, Leonid Massine, was appointed. Massine worked closely with the artistic avant-garde whom Diaghilev now increasingly employed, so much so that the independence of the choreography was threatened by the novelty of the staging that the artists proposed. Mikhail Larionov’s cumbersome costumes for *Soleil de nuit* (1915) and Picasso’s Cubist style costumes for *Parade* (1917) both significantly impacted upon and restricted the choreographic expression of the ballets. Most radical of all, however, was Giacomo Balla’s designs for Stravinsky’s *Feu d’Artifice* (1917), in which the dancer was banished from the stage alltogether and the action was interpreted by the play of light over painted canvas shapes dispersed on the stage. This represented the most experimental period for the *Ballets Russes* and only really came to an end in 1921 with the staging of *Chout*, a ballet-pantomime with outlandish costumes by Larionov and a cacophanous score by Prokofiev, which proved a critical disaster and nearly ruined the company.  The introduction of Bronislava Nijinska as ‘house choreographer’, who was followed by George Balanchine and, finally, Serge Lifar, did much to restablish a more correct balance of parts and the 1920s witnessed a golden period for the *Ballets Russes*. The post-war trend for Neo-classicism found expression in Picasso’s and Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* (1920) and in Goncharova’s and Stravinsky’s *Les noces* (1923) whilst even Surrealism was given an airing in Max Ernst’s and Joan Miró’s design for *Romeo and Juliette* (1926) and De Chirico’s *Le bal* (1929). Diaghilev’s success, however, was to maintain a balance between the high-brow and the popular and many a contemporary theme or issue found itself addressed, celebrated or mocked on stage. Marie Laurencin’s designs for Francis Poulenc’s *Les biches* (1924), a satyrical ballet about a ‘house-party’, Picasso designs and Chanel’s costumes for Darius Milhaud’s *Le train bleu* (1924) and Yakulov’s designs for Prokofiev’s musical reflection on the Soviet Union *Le pas d’acier* (1927) are typical.  On his death in 1929 the Diaghilev ‘Revolution’ was complete: he had transformed the medium of ballet into a serious form of artistic expression and in so doing had demonstrated the viability of modernism as a significant force in the peforming arts. Under his guidance his collaborators had revolutionised the role of music and the visual arts in the theatrical context and had re-written the language of dance. When Colonel de Basil revived the *Ballets Russes* in the 1930s there was really very little else to achieve and other than to entrench the modernist tradition in the theatre as Diaghilev had envisioned it ever more firmly until new developments could take place after the Second World War. Ballets Russes Revivals of Key Ballets on Youtube: Europa Danse, *Picasso et la Danse: Parade, Pulcinella, Mercure, Cuadro Flamenco* at  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov5x6TYXeV8>  Hodson, M. & Archer, K. & The Ballets de Monte-Carlo (1999), *Le chant du Rossignol* at  <http://vimeo.com/14292064>  Joffrey Ballet (1988), *Le sacre du printemps* in 3 parts at  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF1OQkHybEQ>  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH1t0pCchxM>  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_7ndqgwxcM>  Paris Opera Workshops, *Le Train Bleu* at  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8J1RRiKek4k>  Maryinsky Ballet, *Les noces* in 2 parts at  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDGl6bcVqSM&feature=relmfu>  <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK1AnbMHQeY> |
| Further reading:  (Bell)  (Bowlt and Tregulova)  (Bowlt, Stage Design and the Ballets Russes)  (Buckle)  (Davis)  (Garafola)  (Grigoriev)  (Theatre)  (Ballet)  (Parton)  (Pozharskaia and Volodina)  (Pritchard)  (Pritchard and Marsh, Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929)  (Propert)  (Propert, The Russian Ballet 1919-1929)  (Purvis, Rand and Winestein)  (R. Ballet)  (Scheijen)  (Schouvaloff)  (Sorley-Walker) |