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Diaghilev's Ballet Russes Revolution on Display

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By Ksenia Galouchko



Tretyakov Gallery

Tamara Karsavina appearing in "Firebird," on display at "Vision of Dance."

Alexandre Benois, the painter and leader of the art movement Mir Iskusstva, wrote to Sergei Diaghilev during the 1905 Russian Revolution. "At a time when Russian culture is undergoing a turmoil, when we've turned into a laughing stock in the eyes of the world, it is crucial that the Russian artistic idea display itself at the 'center of the world' in all its grandeur," he wrote.

By the end of 1906, Diaghilev, young and yearning for fame, had conquered Paris by bringing Russian art to the French capital at the "Salon d'Automne." Next came hugely successful concerts of Russian music by Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov and Scriabin, and a series of Russian operas at the Grand Opera and Theatre du Chatelet, such as "Boris Godunov," starring Fyodor Chaliapin, which Diaghilev directed.

But it was the revolutionary Ballets Russes, which in 1909 brought together the best of Russian and European artists, choreographers, dancers and composers, that won over the world and made Diaghilev truly famous.

"Diaghilev's 'Russian Seasons' wasn't just a new type and level of ballet performances that surpassed contemporary European ballet, but a unique artistic phenomenon in music, visual arts and choreography that shaped the development of Western European ballet in the 20th century," said Zelfira Tregulova, the co-curator of Tretyakov Gallery's new exhibition, "Vision of Dance," which celebrates the centenary of Ballets Russes with a vast display of costumes, set designs, reconstructions of ballet scenes, photographs and portraits of Diaghilev's lead performers.

"Vision of Dance" doesn't follow a specific chronological pattern. Instead, it emphasizes themes, which, according to Irina Shumanova, the exhibit's other co-curator, were selected by Diaghilev himself.

"As, by education, Diaghilev was a musician-composer, a passion for multiact symphony was in his blood, and he translated the four-act musical structure onto his ballets," Shumanova said. "For our show, we, following Diaghilev's lead, selected four themes — classical ballet, ballet-parade, Russian-themed ballet and the exotic ballet."

"We wanted our spectators to see the significant transition of the Ballets Russes from Russian folkloric themes to avant-garde, Futurist ballet," she said. "This exhibit traces the evolution of Diaghilev's ballet, which began with classical ballet and in the end turned toward neoclassical ballet, defining modern dance and its development in the 20th century."

Ballets Russes was born under the flag of Mir Iskusstva, with Benois, Leo Bakst, Alexander Golovin and Nikolai Roerich introducing symbolist aesthetics through costumes and set designs for such performances as "Armida's Pavillion," "Silfida," and "Cleopatra," starring Ida Rubinstein.

"Vision of Dance" reconstructs the style of Diaghilev's ballets not only through the display of Benois' and Bakst's elaborate costumes and stage decoration sketches, inspired by Oriental and Middle Eastern fabric patterns and architecture, but also through intricate miniature models of set their designs.

With ballets such as "Armida's Pavillion" and "Scheherazade," Ballets Russes was the first to introduce eroticism to the stage. One of the most legendary memories of Parisian spectators from that time was Rubinstein's appearance in "Cleopatra," in which eight male slaves carry the half-naked Egyptian queen, wrapped in sheets in a sarcophagus, onto the stage before female slaves unwrap her and place her onto a blue carpet covered with rose petals.

"The Mir Iskusstva period in Diaghilev ballets gave Paris what it was yearning for in the 1910s: a lavish and grandiose synthesis of music, color and movement," Tregulova said.

At the start of World War I, Diaghilev decided it was time to surprise his audience with new art forms. That is when the avant-garde artists — both Russian and European — replaced the artists of Mir Iskusstva as the creative force behind the Ballets Russes.

"The Russian audience should pay special attention to the works by Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Picasso, Derain, Matisse and de Chirico, since, having coincided with the revolution, this period of Ballets Russes is far less known to Russians," Tregulova said. "That is why I feel that the 'Vision of Dance' in Moscow is above all about discovering the new Diaghilev, not the Diaghilev of Mir Iskusstva, but the Diaghilev who always kept pushing forward, despite all obstacles."

The highlight and the grand finale of the Diaghilev show is Picasso's theater curtain for "Blue Express" (1924), the costumes for which were designed by Coco Chanel. The curtain shows two giant women running through the mountains in an ecstasy of liberation.

Diaghilev never returned to Russia after the revolution and the exhibit is a belated tribute.

"Diaghilev's work defined the evolution of 20th century Western European ballet and continues to influence it until this very day," Tregulova said. "The arrival of the 'Vision of Dance' in Moscow is our tribute to Diaghilev's legacy and a triumph of historical justice for the grand impresario, the memory of whom was erased in the Soviet Union."

"*Vision of Dance*" runs at the Tretyakov Gallery until Jan. 31. 10 Krymsky Val. Metro Park Kultury, Oktyabrskaya. Tel. 499 238 13 78, www.tretyakovgallery.ru

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