

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Ballets Russes: The Art of Costume. Edited by Robert Bell. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2011. 254 pp.; illustrated. \$49.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-64254-157-4.

Much has been written about the Ballets Russes of Sergei Diaghilev, especially in connection with the centenary celebration of his momentous Saison Russe in Paris in 1909, and due attention has been paid to the brave experiments in choreography, music, and stage design, which his company conducted and promoted. However, one of the most fascinating, but least familiar, assets of the legacy of the Ballets Russes and of the balletic tradition in general, is the repertoire of physical costumes, sets, curtains, and props, which were used for the productions of *Cléopâtre*, *Schéhérazade*, *L'Oiseau de Feu*, *Parade*, *Pas d'Acier*, and other innovative spectacles. The National Gallery of Australia possesses one of the finest collections of Diaghilev costumes: acquired in the 1970s, since then it has been preserved and curated with precision and foresight, witness to which is this magnificent catalog of the exhibition based on the Gallery's holdings.

Introduced by Ronald Radford, director of the Gallery, *Ballets Russes. The Art of Costume* traces the development of Diaghilev's company between 1909 and 1929, describing and evaluating both the more exotic, more decorative phase before World War I (marked by such lavish productions as *Schéhérazade* and *Soleil de Nuit*), and the more industrial or "modern" phase of the later years characterized by ballets such as *La Chatte* and *Le Train Bleu*. What is of particular interest here is the relationship between the actual costumes and accoutrements for such performances and the preliminary sketches in pencil and watercolor by the designers Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Sonia Delaunay, Juan Gris, and so many other artists, which preceded them as well as the physical making of the costumes by dressmakers such as Barbara Karinska; also of interest are the wider contexts of choreographic functionality and audience response, and the reasons (ethnographic, ornamental, symbolic, narrative) for the particular style, cut, choice of material, and decoration of this or that costume. If Bakst's costumes for *Schéhérazade*, for example, evoke a sensual, spicy Orient, Benois' for *Le Pavillon d'Armide* evoke the elegance and finery of Versailles; if Natal'ia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov pay homage to Diaghilev's "Russianness" with their references to Slavic folklore (as in *Contes Russes* and *Noces*), then Pablo Picasso (*Parade*) and Matisse (*Chant du Rossignol*) emphasize the streamlined, international denominator of the Ballets Russes.

The reader is guided through the rich evolution of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and their legacy via fundamental essays on various facets of the endeavor, especially in the context of costume design. In two essays, Robert

Bell describes the history of the Canberra collection, while commenting on the unfading magnetism of the Ballets Russes; Helena Hammond describes the debt of the Ballets Russes to the canon of classical ballet; Christina Dixon places the stage designs in the context of modern European and Russian studio painting; Michael Porter revisits the tours of Diaghilev's successor company, Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo, in Australia in the late 1930s; and Debbie Ward discusses how the costumes were worn, the resilience or fragility of the materials, and the tell-tale marks – the stains, tears, and creases – left behind by the dancers. Supplemented by excellent color reproductions, useful synopses of the Diaghilev and de Basil productions, a timeline, a guide to further reading, and, of course, a list of the exhibits with full curatorial details, *Ballets Russes: The Art of Costume* is not only a refreshingly new assessment of the Diaghilev company, but also a history of sartorial style, artistic taste, and the decorative arts. Robert Bell and his colleagues are to be congratulated on creating such a noble monument to the Ballets Russes, one of the most luminous expressions of twentieth-century European culture.

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