



The Art of Ballets Russes: The Serge Lifar Collection of Theater Designs, Costumes, and Paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum

By Alexander Schouvaloff

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The Serge Lifar Collection of Theater Designs, Costumes, and Paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum Serge Lifar, the last great protege dancer of famed Russian ballet producer Serge Diaghilev, collected paintings, set designs, and costume designs from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and from his own later productions at the Paris Opera. In 1933 Lifar's European dance company met financial disaster on tour in the United States, and Lifar was forced to sell his collection to pay for return fares for his troupe. The \$10,000 he received from the Wadsworth Atheneum's flamboyant and imaginative director A. Everett "Chick" Austin was considered extravagant at the time. This collection, recognized as invaluable evidence of the emergence of modernism in theater and in Western art, is today unrivaled as a comprehensive documentation of the Ballets Russes. This catalogue presents the 188 works of art and thirty-two costumes that compose the Serge Lifar Collection. It has been enlarged since 1933, most notably with the 1996 acquisition of original costumes. Most of the set and costume designs and all of the costumes were made for thirty-seven Ballet Russes productions, from the first in 1909 to the last in 1929. The Ballet Russes was one of the greatest artistic movements of the early twentieth century, which fused the efforts of composer, choreographer, dancer, and designer into total works of art. Diaghilev commissioned prominent Russian painters and artists from the School of Paris -- among them Bakst, Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and Miro -- to design sets and costumes. This book provides notes about each production and the corresponding items in the collection, as well as a new assessment of their immediate impact and lasting influence of the renowned Ballet Russes.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Serge Lifar, the last great protégé of the incomparable impresario Sergei Diaghilev, went broke touring America with his European dance company in 1933. He had one important asset: his extensive collection of paintings for set designs from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and from his own productions at the Paris Opera. He sold the lot, including paintings by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, to Hartford, Connecticut's Wadsworth Atheneum for \$10,000--an extravagant sum at the time--and paid for his dancers' fares home.

One look at this volume of drawings, paintings, and sketches by Georges Braque, Max Ernst, Naum Gabo, Juan Gris, Fernand Léger, Matisse, Joan Miró, Amedeo Modigliani, Picasso, Georges Rouault, and others shows what a coup acquiring the Lifar collection turned out to be. Augmented by photos of costumes from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, the book documents the remarkable collaborations among artists, composers, choreographers, and dancers that flourished at the dawn of modernism in European art and culture.

The delectable *Art of Ballets Russes* shows 188 works of art and 32 costumes from 1909 to 1929, mostly for the Ballets Russes productions, that remain a touchstone for the world's theater and dance designers. It also includes wonderful vintage photographs of Ballets Russes dancers on-stage, in front of mammoth sets designed by the greatest painters of Europe.

Alexander Schouvaloff, founder of the Theatre Museum branch of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, has written a thoroughly engaging, detailed essay on theater design that places the Lifar collection in historical context. His anecdotes are priceless. He relates tales of dancers who stood still while Matisse painted flowers on their skirts and of others who could barely execute their leaps in Giorgio de Chirico's weighty dresses encrusted with architectural motifs. This informative, erudite book evokes the beauty and excitement of the Paris in which Diaghilev worked his singular magic.

From Publishers Weekly

The World of Art formed in St. Petersburg in the early 1890s was a forum for artists impatient with academic formulas and the dominant Itinerant school. They sought a new aesthetic, incorporating traditional Russian forms and decorative elements from Western Art Nouveau. With Sergei Diaghilev a driving force behind The World of Art journal, the group's exhibitions gained prominence. Many artists from this diverse assemblage became extremely influential within Russia, but, excepting Leon Bakst, were hardly noticed then or since in the West. That is a mistake this book attempts to correct. In his introduction, curator and art historian Petrov establishes the historical context, then fills in useful details of the movement, its philosophy and its members. There follow 18 chapters comprising a short biography and plates on selected artists such as Alexander Benois, Konstantin Somov, Valentin Serov (formerly with the Itinerants), Yevgeny Lanceray and later Igor Grabar, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Boris Kustodiev, Zinaida Serebriakova and Ivan Bilibin. These biographies are sketchy, dry affairs, anti-climactic and stylistically at odds with the introduction, which itself suffers from awkward prose. While some problems may lie in the translation, the tendency for hyperbole does not. Pity that more care in the concept, translation and editing of this volume is not evident. These fascinating painters, whose collaboration survived until their final show in 1924, deserve more. For now, the uninitiated may at least enjoy the 330 plates (260 in color) for a tempting glimpse into this important period of Russian art. (Mar.) FYI: Also due out this month is *The Art of Ballets Russes: The Serge Lifar Collection of Theater Designs, Costumes and Paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum* by Alexander Schouvaloff. 260 illustrations; 215 in color. (Yale, \$65 352p ISBN 0-300-07484-0)

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