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Photo: National Gallery of Art

When Art Danced at the Ballets Russes

by Jonathan Stein

*[Pictured on home page - portrait of Serge Diaghilev by Valentin Serov Photo: Scala Archives;
above - Pablo Picasso's curtain for Le Train Bleu]*

Advances in culture are often seen through the lens of individual artists, household names which many of us can rattle off. It is rarer to focus on the people off stage, creative entrepreneurs like Serge Diaghilev, a genius at nurturing the household names. Earning the celebrity crown of impresario, Diaghilev played a catalytic role in the 20th Century's reinvention of dance, music, theater and design as the current and just-extended exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington exuberantly documents.

Diaghilev and The Ballets Russes, 1909-1929: When Art Danced with Music builds upon the extensive holdings around Diaghilev's company at the Victoria & Albert Museum, which originated this show in London in 2010, and borrows additionally from 20 other museums and private collections. (The Philadelphia Museum of Art lent a striking Léon Bakst costume design in ochre, blue and red for the Pilgrim from *Le Dieu bleu*, c. 1911.) The National Gallery, the only U.S. venue to host the exhibition, produced a catalogue visually lush and intellectually riveting.

This extraordinary exhibition captivates the eye and prompts the viewer to consider how shocking and delightful it must have been to witness some of the most exciting artist collaborations of the century orchestrated by this Russian maestro. As an example, we see for the first time in a U.S. museum the stage front curtain, 38 x 34 feet, for the Jean Cocteau/Bronislava Nijinska ballet *Le Train bleu* (1924). Originally a small, gouache on plywood that Diaghilev spotted on a visit to Picasso's studio, it was then painted in its large scale format by Diaghilev's set designer, Prince Alexander Schervashidze. On it, two buoyant, monumental nymphs on a beach almost burst off the face of the cloth. These Amazons suggest ancient Iberian stone sculptures as well as embodying the spirit of Isadora Duncan's *danse plastique*,

which had been influencing many art forms including ballet.

The Picasso-designed curtain opened for a ballet set on the Riviera coast with Coco Chanel costumes (actually bathing and sports clothes from her collection), providing a stylistic stew representative of the Ballets Russes' fusing of divergent cultures and art styles. The front cloth became the signature image for the company after Picasso expressed his delight in its rendering to Diaghilev; the sculptor Henry Moore later remembered the image as a "landmark" in his youth, changing his life.

A Visionary Matchmaker

The Ballets Russes are seen through the artifacts of performance--costumes, set designs, photographs, sheet music, promotional and souvenir materials, ephemera (like the earrings worn by Nijinsky in *Scheherazade*), preparatory drawings and sketches and then art generated post-performance. Diaghilev's skill in marrying artists and designers with choreographers and dancers and composers led to the metamorphoses of art as each medium was indelibly altered by the influence of another. Thus in the dances of Vaslav Nijinsky, who became chief choreographer in 1912, we see the embodiment of modernism with the two-dimensional flattening and angularities of Cubism present in his *The Afternoon of a Faun* (1912). Nijinsky's use of what we might today call vernacular movement, such as walking and bending, bespoke a broader development finding a home at the Ballets Russes: the free dance explorations of Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller which helped liberate dance from 19th Century ballet conventions.



*Painting by Leon Bakst of Vaslav Nijinsky
in Afternoon of a Faun, Wadsworth Atheneum.*

Visual artists, pulled out of their private salons by Diaghilev onto public stages, had their own art changed by their association with choreographers and performance. Giorgio de Chirico's designs for *Le Bal* (1929) along with George Balanchine's choreography created--from stage and dancers-- classical ruins. One critic, André George, wrote, "one no longer knows...if walls are fossilized dancers, or if the characters are not animated stones."

The Ballets Russes arsenal embraced 40 major artists, the most prominent artists of Paris who represented the host of ground-breaking art movements: Decadence, Fauvism, Orphism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Constructivism. Diaghilev commissioned the leading composers: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Satie, Milhaud, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc. His choreographers who created a modern dance for a new century were Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Massine, Bronislava Nijinska and Balanchine.

‘An Incorrigible Sensualist’ and Venture Culturalist

The show continually brings us back to Diaghilev whose years prior to 1909, when he founded Ballets Russes in Paris, might not have anticipated this path. To raise the stature of Russian art in 1898 he founded the country's first art journal, *Mir isrusstva (World of Art)*, exhibited Russian historical portrait paintings, and brought Russian art and opera in the form of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* to Paris. Ever the venture culturalist, he saw the opportunities to take advantage of Paris's and the West's infatuation with Russian culture and its Orientalism. A confluence of factors, personal and societal, emerged to shape Diaghilev's future: his openness with his homosexual identity and cultivation of gay advisers and lovers; diminishing Imperial patronage and political upheavals in Russia; his self-awareness as "an incorrigible sensualist"; a recognition of the modernist cultural cauldron that Paris was at the turn of the century; and, writing in 1902 at the age of 30, his Futurist view that, "The culture of twenty centuries pressing down on our shoulders prevents us from creating...."

Diaghilev is the spirit and the plump, dandyish figure who fueled this twenty year frenzy of producing, presenting and touring (hitting Philadelphia in 1916)--and, with a company that had no permanent home and no government funding. He was described by his dancer Tamara Karsavina as being "rather like Napoleon who had a wonderful gift for detail"; every dancer was scrutinized before going on-stage and fined for any changes to costume or the wearing of inappropriate jewelry. His composer, Vladimar Dukelsky (Vernon Duke) recounts: "He sits down, screws his eyeglasses and exudes a beneficent cloud of inspiration." In the view of Stravinsky, whom Diaghilev described as his "first son," he had "an immense flair for recognizing the potentiality of success in a piece of music or work of art in general." Stravinsky also speculated that Diaghilev had thought about the likely scandal and publicity value emanating from *Sacre du printemps* when he had first played the piano score for Diaghilev months before the May 1913 performance.

Total Artworks and Museum Exhibitions

Admiring Wagner and his concept of *Gesamptkunstwerk* (total artwork), Diaghilev achieved a 20th Century attainment of this goal in many of his productions. But despite an extraordinary curatorial effort for this exhibition, the museum show lacks the total artwork experience in largely excluding the aural experience of the music that was integral to the Ballets Russes. This, although the catalogue includes a wonderful catalogue essay by Howard Goodall, "Music and the Ballets Russes," which makes the case for Diaghilev's historic role in the development of Western music.

There are virtually no archival films of the company as Diaghilev, out of a businessman's protectiveness, precluded any filming, going as far as to prohibit through contracts with his dancers any dancer performing in front of a camera. There are a number of video segments from reconstructions largely by the Joffrey Ballet, and especially thrilling performances by Baryshnikov, coached by Balanchine in *The Prodigal Son*, and Nureyev reprising Nijinsky's *Faun*. The only extant film footage of the Ballets Russes, surreptitiously filmed and only discovered after the 2010 London exhibition, offers a rare 33-second view of the company dancing a section of *Les Sylphides*.

Despite these notable absences in the exhibition, what we see and hear today, both on-stage and off, is so much a result of the passionate brilliance of this "incorrigible sensualist" that the National Gallery show is a reminder that the Diaghilev legacy will never leave us.

Diaghilev and The Ballets Russes, 1909-1929: When Art Danced with Music through Oct. 6 at the National Gallery of Art, Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC, (202) 7737-4215, www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/exhibitions/2013/Diaghilev

For a slide show of the exhibit, click [here](#).

By Jonathan Stein
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