



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE THE MANDARIN'S GOWN, DESIGNED BY MATISSE, FROM 'LE CHANT DU ROSSIGNOL', 1920; A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE LONDON PERFORMANCE OF 'LE TRAIN BLEU', WITH COSTUMES BY CHANEL; THREE BRIGANDS' OUTFITS BY LEON BAKST FROM 'DAPHNIS ET CHLOE', 1912; A SNOW MAIDEN'S COSTUME FROM 'SOLEIL DE NUIT', 1918; A PROGRAMME FROM 1914; NIJINSKY'S COSTUME FROM 'L'OISEAU ET LE PRINCE', 1914



Sergei Diaghilev's legendary Ballets Russes revolutionised dance and, indeed, fashion. Now some of the exquisite costumes the company wore are in town – possibly for the last time ever. **Kate Salter** gets a sneak preview

## RUSSES IN URBE

One hundred years ago the great and the good of Paris flocked to the grand marble foyer of the Paris Opéra for the première of *Schéhérazade*, a ballet being performed by an exciting new company. As the curtain went up, the audience caught their first glimpse of the exotic sets and costumes designed by Léon Bakst, and the even more exotic Russian dancers Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky. It was the Ballets Russes' second season in Paris, and rumours in the smart salons around town had suggested that the audience was going to see something special. *Schéhérazade* caused a sensation, and confirmed the Ballets Russes' reputation as the most sensual, daring and fashionable dance company in the world.

When the Ballets Russes had burst on to the scene a year earlier in 1909 ballet in the West had become a rather staid, predictable form of popular entertainment. The Ballets Russes, founded by the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev, transformed ballet into an avant-garde art form in its own right. Diaghilev gave audiences incredible virtuoso male dancers such as Vaslav Nijinsky who bristled with sexuality, sumptuous sets, lavish costumes and daring new musical scores. He brought together the most talented artists, composers, designers, choreographers and dancers to create a modern company in which the dancing, scenery, costumes and music came together to create a living work of art.

The Ballets Russes' performances were full of vivid colours, staggeringly





intricate costumes and designs from some of the world's most famous artists. From the first performances in 1909 until his death in 1929, Diaghilev worked with Léon Bakst, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Giorgio de' Chirico, Joan Miró, Georges Braque and Coco Chanel. These artists and designers contributed to such a strong aesthetic that the 'look' of the Ballets Russes has influenced fashion designers from Yves Saint Laurent to the current fashion darling of the moment, Erdem.

Many of the unique costumes can now be seen first hand at an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes', which opens next week. Looking at the costumes, it is clear this is a world away from simple tights and tutus. The costumes are astonishing not only for their beauty but for their sheer variety. As well as the bright, flowing silks from *Schéhrazade*, a kind of Arabian Nights fantasy that created something of a style revolution in Paris when it was first performed, there is traditional Russian folk dress, next to the more outré designs of Picasso, Matisse and de' Chirico. There is a rococo, velvet-trimmed frock-coat designed by Bakst that is straight out of a Fragonard painting, alongside the sleek, modern lines of Chanel's costumes of the 1920s.

The exhibition is also a chance to see the original costumes from perhaps one of the most famous dance performances ever. When *Rite of Spring* was performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1913, the combination of the violent, jabbing rhythms of Stravinsky's score and the strange, flat-footed ferocity of Nijinsky's choreography allegedly caused a riot in the stalls. Nicholas Roerich's costumes would have added to the powerful effect the performance had on its audience. Even today the bold patterns and colours of the long tunics would look at home on stage during a performance of experimental dance



**'On one point he was firm – it was all to be embroidered or appliquéd. I left the theatre in a stupor of fright'**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
A LEON BAKST DESIGN FROM  
'THE GOOD-HUMOURED  
LADIES', 1917; THE COMPANY  
ARRIVES IN LIVERPOOL, 1928;  
PAUL POIRET DOES 'LE STYLE  
BALLETTS RUSSES', c 1911



at Sadler's Wells. In 1914, a year after *Rite of Spring* was performed, an article in *Tatler* said that the Ballets Russes' 'extraordinary scenery, the even more extraordinary dresses, the most extraordinary colour schemes... upset all our preconceived ideas concerning ballet dancing and pantomime'.

The company's founder and artistic director, Sergei Diaghilev, was a well-documented perfectionist. His demands of perfection from everyone he worked with meant there were frequent rows and dismissals, and for most of its life the company teetered on the brink of

financial ruin. Diaghilev oversaw every aspect of a production. Before dress rehearsals he would ask the dancers to parade in front of him wearing their costumes, and each costume would be compared with the original sketch made by the designer. If a costume was not as he had envisaged it, he would demand immediate changes, often leaving an exhausted costumier in tears. One English costumier, Grace Lovat Fraser, who worked on costumes for *The Sleeping Princess* for the company's London season in 1921, described the huge demands placed on her. After



every experienced costumier in London had told Diaghilev that making all the costumes a mere three weeks before opening night was impossible, Lovat Fraser was summoned to the theatre to meet Diaghilev. 'I was immediately introduced to the designer, Léon Bakst, and handed what to my frightened eyes looked like a thousand gorgeous sketches. Bakst told me firmly that he trusted me completely. I was to interpret his work rather than copy it. But on one point he was firm – on no account were any of the patterns on the dresses to be painted or stencilled but *all* were to be embroidered or appliquéd. I left the theatre in a stupor of fright.'

It was not always easy for a costumier to interpret the costume designs, especially when the designer was Henri Matisse. Tamara Karsavina, one of the Ballets Russes' most famous dancers, remembered '...the bewilderment of the costumier, who could not understand the intention of Matisse's sketch, and the half-finished

costume pinned in places, feathers moulting off me on the first night’.

The costumes were often so intricate and complicated that making one was, according to the exhibition’s curator Jane Pritchard, ‘not unlike couture’. One of the show’s prize exhibits, and one that Jane Pritchard says demonstrates how unusual the Ballets Russes costumes were, is the original costume worn by Vaslav Nijinsky in the 1914 production of *L’Oiseau et le Prince*. Léon Bakst’s designs often required a costumer to master several complicated techniques at once. The level of detailing on the tunic, embroidered in shades of gold and beaded with faux pearls and semi-precious stones, is beautiful, but Pritchard says that ‘no modern dancer would want to wear a costume as heavy as this’.

Indeed, for all their technical artistry, the costumes were not always admired by the dancers themselves. Costumes were often too heavy, too restrictive, or just plain dangerous. Lydia Sokolova said of Mikhail Larionov’s costumes for *Chout*, ‘Although the costumes were vivid in colour and wonderful to look at, they were appallingly uncomfortable.’ Coco Chanel’s costumes for *Le train bleu* may have looked

incredibly chic and modern, but the knitted woollen bathing suits were potentially disastrous. Chanel had dressed the cast from her 1924 collection, but the loose fit of the swimsuits meant it was difficult for the male lead to get a firm grip on his partner during the complicated turns and throws. In the same production Lydia

Sokolova was given fake-pearl stud earrings, which may have looked fashionable, but meant she could hardly hear the music.

Despite the collaborations with famous names such as Matisse, Picasso and Chanel, it is Léon Bakst, the company’s original designer, who has had the most lasting influence. A Russian painter from

St Petersburg, Bakst worked on costumes and set design for the Ballets Russes from its opening season in Paris in 1909 until his death in 1924. Bakst is most famous for his use of colour, and the way he grouped these colours in order to create dramatic effect. In *Schéhérazade* Bakst explained that ‘against a lugubrious green I put a blue full of despair, paradoxical as it may seem’. The French couturier Paul Poiret, who was using vivid colours in his designs around the time Bakst’s Oriental fantasy *Schéhérazade* premièred in Paris, was said to be encouraged by the popular reaction to *le style ballets russes* and



**‘It was an idea of Russia broken down as a digestible thing for a Western audience’**

ABOVE COSTUMES FROM ‘THE RITE OF SPRING’, 1913  
LEFT VASLAV NIJINSKY AS THE NEGRO SLAVE FROM ‘SCHEHERAZADE’, 1910

introduced harem trousers, turbans and silks in bold colours into his collections. The fashion historian Judith Watt says that it is undoubtedly Bakst’s use of colour that has influenced designers today. ‘In terms of fashion influence you are looking at the period from when Bakst was with the company, from 1909 to 1924, when he died.’ Erdem,

who has designed a scarf inspired by a Bakst design, says that ‘the designs of Bakst are so surreal and vivid. I think it’s the exoticism and escapism of Bakst’s work that is so inspiring and what makes it quite timeless’.

The Ballets Russes’ use of traditional ethnic Russian designs and fabrics was something that Yves Saint Laurent used as his inspiration in his famous Russian Collection of autumn/winter 1976/1977. This collection, often referred to as one of his best, was full of peasant-style skirts, Cossack boots, and the same rich, bold colours seen in Ballets Russes productions. Oriole Cullen, curator of modern textiles and fashion at the V&A, says that the Ballets Russes’ interpretation of traditional Russian dress was revolutionary. ‘It was an idea of Russia broken down as a digestible thing for a Western audience,’ she says. ‘The Ballets Russes translated the idea of traditional Russian costume into something that was understandable. In *Rite of Spring* the tunics and headaddresses are channelling traditional embroidery but they’re done in slightly brighter, stronger patterns so the audience could see them clearly.’ Since Yves Saint Laurent’s tribute to the Ballets Russes style, Cullen says designers as diverse as John Galliano and Alice Temperley have referenced the Russian ballet.

In a large room somewhere in the depths of the V&A, the Ballets Russes costumes stand, protected by tissue paper, ready to be unveiled again. Many of them show the stress and strain from repeat performances, and from the fact that some of them are nearly 100 years old. But the idea of having the ghosts of Nijinsky, Lopokova and Karsavina together in one room is thrilling for Jane Pritchard. The chance to see the costumes is important not only from a historical point of view, she says, but because many of them cannot survive another exhibition or restoration. ‘This is really a moment to savour,’ Pritchard says, ‘because these costumes won’t be around forever.’ ●

*‘Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes’ opens on Saturday at the V&A, London SW7 (vam.ac.uk)*