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THE CREATIVE GENIUS OF LEON BAKST: CHANGING THE IMAGE OF BALLET IN THE 20TH CENTURY

"It is goodbye to scenery designed by a painter blindly subjected to one part of the work, to costumes made by any old dressmaker who strikes a false and foreign note in the production; it is goodbye to the kind of acting, movements, false notes and that terrible, purely literary wealth of details which make modern theatrical production a collection of tiny impressions, without that unique simplicity which emanates from a true work of art."

Léon Bakst

In the early. 20th century Leon Bakst changed the public's image of ballet through his artistic alliance with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which resulted in the most brilliant work of Bakst's career and transformed the look of ballet.

Born in Russia in 1866, Léon Bakst belonged to a young generation of European artists who rebelled against 19th-century stage realism, sparking a revolution in theatre design. Bakst was interested in the visual arts as a child. At the age of 12, he won a drawing contest and decided to be a painter, later studying at the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, and working part time as a book illustrator. In the 1890s he travelled in Europe and became a member of the artistic circle formed by the artist and critic Alexandre Benois (1870-1960). Benois introduced Bakst to Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929), a promoter of Russian visual and performing arts. In the late 1890s Diaghilev organized a number of exhibitions in which Bakst showed his works. At the time there were no specially trained theatre designers, so Bakst was one of several painters (like Édouard Vuillard in France, and Edvard Munch in Scandinavia) who used their skills for theatre design. Bakst's first theatrical commission was for a French play presented as a ballet pantomime in 1902 at Russia's Hermitage Theater in St. Petersburg. Although he began to get more theatrical assignments, most were for the plays of Sophocles & Euripedes. His early venture into the ballet world included designing costumes for Anna Pavlova for *Giselle* (1903) and *Swan Lake* (1905). This work for the Imperial Ballet allowed Bakst to develop a distinct style.

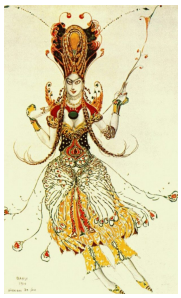
He began to design scenery in the early 1900s, and by 1909 he was designing sets and costumes for ballet and opera. In 1909 he went to Paris, where his real fame began as he designed the sets and costumes for Diaghilev's newly formed, legendary dance company, the Ballets Russes, and the spectacular pageants created for the dancer and patron of the performing arts, Ida Rubinstein (1883–1960). Bakst came to the ballet on the wave of a revolution instigated by the Russian choreographer and dancer Michel Fokine (1880-1942), who was invited by Diaghilev to be resident choreographer of the Ballets Russes' first Paris season. Fokine rejected the formal mime and virtuoso dances of classical ballets such as *Swan Lake*, in favor of more authentic movements.

Ballets Russes had its debut in May 1909 with Rubinstein dancing the title role of Fokine's Egyptian themed *Cleopatre.* Bakst's oriental-style decor and costumes for *Cleopatre* set Paris on fire and ensured his success. The ballet played to full houses, and audiences were dazzled by the dancing and the striking set designs, where the grandeur of the production created a wave in high fashion. Bakst's designs combined vivid color and daring and nearly scandalous eroticism, which helped to energize the exotic and fantastical subject matter and characters of the ballet. He envisioned dance productions as total works of art. He used bejeweled colors, swirling Art Nouveau elements, and a sense of the erotic. His remarkable theatre sets and costumes were richly decorated with various motifs and shapes. Dense surface textures combined appliqué with painting, dying, and embroidery and used flocking, beading, tassels, sequins, metal studs, braids, tucks and cascading folds, pearls, and other jewels. He viewed the stage as a three-dimensional landscape where dancers, choreography, sets, and costumes were all of equal importance.

Ballets Russes was known for its innovative approach to ballet – choreography, sets, and costumes – which brought together Russian talent and culture with collaborations across Europe, including with the artists Picasso, Benois, Bakst, Matisse, Miro and Coco Chanel and choreographers Michael Fokine, Vaslav Nijinski, Léonide Massine, Bronislava Nijinska, and George Balanchine. Innovative music by Claude Debussy, Manuel deFalla, Maurice Ravel, Sergey Prokofiev, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, and Igor Stravinsky magnified the impact of the ballets. This new, creative ballet form intoxicated Paris, whose audiences went wild for their energy, color, and exoticism, especially in the ballets designed by Bakst. His depth of knowledge and feeling about period and place allowed him to absorb the spirit of a culture and translate it into theatrical form. As part of Fokine's creative team, Bakst produced bold, sumptuous design concepts for subsequent ballets: Ancient Greece in *Daphnis and Chloë* and *Narcisse;* European Biedermeier style in *Carnaval* and *Le Spectre de la Rose;* and 18th-century style in *The Good-Humoured Ladies* and *Sleeping Princess.*

One strength of Diaghilev's programming for Ballets Russes was its use of stories that represented history and cultures from around the world. In the early years, the company sought to bring the East (or its version) to the West by presenting ballets that were situated in the Near East and Ancient Greece. These were highly popular because the locales lent themselves to exotic sets and decor, colorful costumes, and erotically charged choreography. The themes of romance and tragedy, presented in the ballets through exotic and fantasy subject matter, were intoxicating because they communicated central themes, such as how love prevails in spite of adversity.

In 1910 Fokine's complex but expressive choreography and Stravinsky's innovative music for *The Firebird* provided an opportunity for collaboration with Bakst on costumes with sets designed by Aleksandr Golovin. Critics praised the ballet for its unity of the decor, choreography, costumes, and music. *The Firebird*'s mortal and supernatural elements intrigued audiences as Prince Ivan battles the evil Koschei with the help of the magical Firebird. The ballet totally integrated art with music, theater, and



visual design that was fresh yet rooted in the soil of primeval Russia, showing the world that Russian art was at the cutting edge of sophistication.

In 1910 Bakst provided provocative designs for *Scheherazade,* performed at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra, which dazzled Parisians with an explosion of color and beauty. The ballet proved a particular sensation, creating a sense of rich, fevered claustrophobia and mystery; a living canvas of sensuality and decadence, it provoked exoticism by showing a masculine Golden Slave, danced by Vaslav Nijinski, seducing Zobeide, one of the many wives of the Shah, danced by Ida Rubinstein. The exotic setting and colorful, often quite revealing costumes provided a feast for the eye and were described as "a perfect tornado of color." This earned Bakst the title of "erotomaniac." His use of clashing colors created a revolution. The jeweler Cartier was so awed that he set emeralds and sapphires together for the first time. Bakst believed that color gradations could express frankness and chastity, pride or despair, which could be portrayed to an audience by various shadings. For *Scheherazade* Bakst said he put “a lugubrious green against a blue full of despair, paradoxical as it may seem. There are reds that are triumphal and there are reds which assassinate. There is a blue which can be the color of Saint Madeleine, and there is a blue of Messalina.” Bakst gained international fame for his celebrated designs and was regarded as the artistic director of the Ballets Russes from1909 to 1914. The success of the ballet inspired a *Scheherazade* cult in Paris, spawning women’s fashions, themed parties, and a nightclub where Bakst’s oriental motifs and rich colors were prominent.

After the first two years of oriental flavored sets and costumes, the next phase had Bakst embracing archaic Greek motifs for *Daphnis & Chloe* (1910), *Narcisse* (1911*)*, and *Afternoon of a Faun* (1912) – transforming ballet from the traditional, staid costumes to idiosyncratic, creative designs. The sets, choreography, and costumes for *Afternoon of a Faun* created a public outcry. Nijinski’s innovative choreography appeared like a moving Greek frieze of angular, 2-dimensional movement of alarming sensuality and eroticism. The opening night audience responded with a mixture of applause and booing, so the performance was repeated.

Bakst was remarkable for his brilliant control of color, line, and decoration. One shade could be used to express both sensuality and chastity, another to express pride and despair. The changing mood of a scene could introduce colors gradually or suddenly by using a violently opposing color, for example in the flash of brilliant skirt lining. For *Daphnis and Chloe* Bakst clothed the shepherds and shepherdesses in calm yellows, browns, greens, and whites, decorated with geometric shapes, soft waves, and antique motifs, such as stylized rams' heads. The invading brigands, however, came into this calm scene with the more violent purples, dark blues, and jarring ochres with heavier fabrics and more unstable patterns, such as checkerboards and zigzags.

Bakst seemed to care more about how his drawings looked than how the costumes appeared on the dancers since some of them were a performer's nightmare – bulky, stiff, hot, and a hindrance to movement. Nijinsky had to be sewn into his costume of silk rose petals before each performance of *Le Spectre de la Rose*. Sadly, few of Bakst's costumes have survived. Nijinsky's original rose petal tunic was picked to shreds by a ravenous public that accosted him post-performance.

After the start of World War I, Bakst decreased his work with theater design but continued designing costumes with individual artists as well as clothing for wealthy women. The literary and theatrical world was filled with creative artists, including Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau, and Edith Wharton; and Vernon and Irene Castle were all the rage on the dancefloor. In 1919 an exhibit of 82 Bakst watercolors opened at The Hague in Amsterdam.


Costumes from "The Sleeping Princess," so named, the story goes, because Diaghilev saw no beauties in his corp

In 1922 Bakst designed 300 costumes and five sets for the Ballets Russes's *Sleeping Princess* (aka *Sleeping Beauty*), his final collaboration with Diaghilev. The strain of the task, quarrels with Diaghilev, and a clash of egos ended their relationship. The ballet fulfilled Diaghilev's desire to spread the glory of his native land and ignited international interest in the Russian classics, which has remained to this day.

Bakst was invited to visit John and Alice Garrett, Americans he met in Paris during the war, who became patrons for his art exhibitions. For a year at their home Evergreen House in Baltimore, Maryland, he designed and oversaw the conversion of a gymnasium to a theatre. As an amateur singer, Alice gave many personal performances in her theatre, and Bakst designed costumes, décor, and stage sets. Embracing his new interest in folk art, Evergreen House was decorated with patterns associated with Russian folk designs, such as wooden cookie molds and lace borders of bed curtains taken from a book of Russian peasant art. The bold, kaleidoscope colors of magenta, blues, and yellow-greens on the ceilings, walls, and columns, formed a well-integrated harmony that would not detract the viewer from the play or concert.

While in America, Bakst had a number of exhibitions, gave lectures, taught at what is now Maryland Institute College of Art, and designed patterns for textiles incorporating Native American Indian designs, which created yet a new Bakst craze.


A Leon Bakst textile design, featuring birds and deer with a heartline design.

The designs and colors used in Ballets Russes productions forged a new aesthetic in the 20th century. The company's revolutionary ballets and Bakst's extraordinary designs revolutionized ballet into a art form for avant-garde experimentation. Bakst died in 1924, but his influence was far-reaching, even beyond the world of ballet. Bakst's inspirations filtered through theatre and spilled over to fashion and daily life, including interior design, introducing looser-fitting clothing styles and sweeping away drab colors.

The lavish productions of the Ballets Russes with Leon Bakst's innovative costumes and set designs changed the face of ballet and moved it into the modern age. Careers were launched, the cultural landscape was enriched, and dance grew in stature as an art form equal to music, painting, sculpture, and literature.

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