

Theatre of Reason/Theatre of Desire
The Art of Alexandre Benois and Leon Bakst

Alexandre Benois and Leon Bakst were two of the many talented artists with whom Sergei Diaghilev created the legendary Ballets Russes. The Ballets Russes revolutionised the world of the ballet, and introduced the full-length ballet to the stages of Western Europe in 1909. Diaghilev saw the ballet as Wagner saw the opera - as the synthesis of all the arts, the high water mark of culture. The stage was the designer's canvas, which he painted with the moving bodies of the dancers. Both Benois and Bakst shaped the development of the modern ballet - Benois with his coolly intellectual historicism, Bakst with his thinly veiled erotic orientalism. Despite the fact that they both worked for the same company, in the same place, and at the same time, their art was as profoundly different as they were in character, played out on the stage - and in the soul.

"Bakst was a delightful person, full of imagination, often highly comical, sometimes without meaning it. His greatest fault was his excessive vanity and his love of publicity ... He was touchy and unbalanced too, so that it was not always possible to trust him completely."

Walter Nouvel 1879 - 1949

Friend and collaborator of Sergei Diaghilev

Elusive, decadent, vain - a dandy with a carefully waxed moustache and unusual accent - was how Leon Bakst was seen by his contemporaries. Born Lev Rozenberg in 1866, Bakst came from a Jewish family from Grodno, on the Russian-Polish border. Throughout his life Bakst was proud of his Jewishness, but deeply ashamed of his provincial roots. The family moved to the capital St. Petersburg, where Bakst entered the Academy of Arts in 1883. Among his fellow students was the gifted portraitist Valentin Serov, who introduced him to St. Petersburg's cultural and artistic elite. An unexceptional painter, Bakst was expelled from the Academy in 1887, allegedly for his provocative depiction of the Holy Family as poor Russian Jews. In 1890, Bakst was introduced to Alexandre Benois, leader of a group of young St. Petersburg artists and writers known as the Society for Self Education, or more whimsically, the Nevsky Pickwickians. Bakst found Benois intimidating, and was at first diffident and shy. Throughout the 80s, Bakst survived by doing book illustrations, but in 1890 received his first major commission - an enormous commemorative canvas in the style of Repin celebrating Admiral Avelan's arrival in Paris - a work which took him eight years to complete. When it was finished, in 1898, there was still little indication that Bakst's calling was the theatre.

[there are two quotes from Benois in Spencer, and another in Shouvaloff attesting to Bakst's accent - it makes a stronger introduction]

"He always wore his wands of magical office - his pencils - in his breast pocket of his coat ... 'signifying his immediate willingness to draw a bit of scenery or an architectural detail on any available piece of paper.'"

Richard Buckle

Editor of 'Ballet'

Alexandre Benois was in many ways the opposite of Bakst. Intellectual, self-centred, self-confident, he was profoundly rooted in the cultural world. Born in 1870 in St. Petersburg to a prominent middle-class family, Benois came from a long line of artists and architects, the family having fled France after the 1789 Revolution. The theatre was in his blood - his father was an architect, responsible for the Imperial Stables at Peterhof, his grandfather was responsible for the reconstruction of the Bolshoi theatre in Moscow, his great-grandfather composed ballets, and his great-great-grandfather was a theatre director in Venice*. His brother Albert studied at the Academy of Art, and introduced his classmate Bakst to the circle around Alexandre in 1890. Benois' first impression of Bakst was mixed. "his shy and ingratiating manner seemed to me, if not off-putting, at least unpleasing. Mr. Rosenberg smiled very often, and laughed too much." From his childhood, Benois was immersed in the culture of Tsarist Russia, and it was his passion for the theatre that made Benois' St. Petersburg gatherings a natural launching pad for Bakst, for the budding theatre impresario, Sergei Diaghilev, and ultimately, for the Ballets Russes.

* The Benois legacy continues to this day - Peter Ustinov is the son of Benois' niece, and his son Nikolai was a renowned designer at La Scala in Milan.

"[at first] Bakst had little interest in the theatre ... as for the ballet he had never seen it ... in fact he considered ballet rather absurd."

Alexandre Benois

When he was first introduced to the circle around Alexandre Benois in 1890, Bakst was a struggling illustrator. Although he later claimed later to have met Tchaikovsky backstage at the premiere of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, already sure of his calling to theatre, there is no evidence of Bakst having worked on a theatre production until 1901, when he prepared a set for Delibes *Sylvia* at the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, as part of the group of artists working for Diaghilev's magazine, the *World of Art*. In 1902, he was asked to prepare the decor for a production of *Le Coeur de la Marquise* and *Hippolytus*, and in 1903, he befriended the dancer Anna Pavlova, for whom he created the costume for her famous performance of *The Dying Swan* at the Maryinsky Theatre. Despite his growing theatre experience, Bakst had to wait until 1907 before he was given his first commission for an entire play, *Don Juan Rejected*

"Had it not been for my enthusiasm [for the ballet] and had I not infected my friends with it, there would have been no Ballets Russes..."

Alexandre Benois

Through his family, Benois was profoundly immersed in the world of the theatre, and was an early admirer of Russian ballet. Unlike Bakst, Benois had long been a devotee of the theatre, and had performed in amateur theatrical experiments while at university. Converted to the ballet in 1885 by a visiting Italian dance troupe, Benois had attended the premiere of *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Maryinsky Theatre in 1890. The arrival of Savva Mamontov's Opera company to St. Petersburg in 1898 sparked a renewed desire to work for the theatre. When Prince Sergei Volkonsky, a friend of Diaghilev's, was appointed as Director of the Imperial Theatres, the world of the theatre opened to members of Benois' circle. Diaghilev was hired to edit the Theatre's Yearbook, As a contributor the *World of Art*, Benois too was involved in the design of the sets for *Sylvia*. However, Diaghilev's manner soon led to conflict, and he was summarily dismissed, the order countersigned by the Tsar. In retrospect, this misfortune had important consequences. As Benois wrote 'had Diaghilev remained ... the Russian Ballet would hardly have achieved its world renown.' Only eight years later, Diaghilev, Bakst, and Benois, were to introduce the West to the ballet - *à la Russe*.

"Bakst puts too much detail into all he does, too many colours and hardly husbands his resources. The general effect is often confused and unpleasant [but] ... he is a brilliant improviser and has the qualities of his defects. Nature had intended him for a book illustrator; opportunity, which is part of genius, has done the rest."

Charles Ricketts

English painter

The magic of the theatre is more than the sum of its disparate parts - the performance, the decor, the costumes, the music, the lighting. The theatre artist creates the setting in which the performer's talents are thrown into relief, or submerged. Bakst was the master of controlled excess - and used his control to manipulate the audience. "... in each colour of the prism there exists a gradation which sometimes expresses frankness and chastity, sometimes sensuality and even bestiality, sometimes despair. ... The painter who knows how to make use of this ... can draw from the spectator the exact emotion which he wants them to feel." Normally a designer's sketches are intended for the workroom, where seamstresses translate the artist's ideas into reality. Bakst was not unaware of the value of his sketches, however, and always carefully signed each one, even the most trivial. Unlike other theatre artists, he had copies made of his sketches to instruct the dressmakers responsible for cutting and fitting the costumes, in order to leave the original unsullied, intact, and saleable. "If you ever find a 'Bakst' with writing all over" said Benois "you may be fairly sure it is a copy by a pupil, although annotated by the artist himself."

"The colour of a braid, of a galloon on the dress of an extra which you couldn't even make out on stage through your binoculars - Benois gave much thought to these things and selected them after careful consideration. He wished the galloon to shine - but not too much. He didn't want 'cheap' flashiness."

Michel Fokine (1880 - 1942)

Principal Choreographer of the Ballets Russes

For a theatre artist, especially of Benois' stature, the sketch is not the end - it is the means to an end. Theatre sketches scrawled over with instructions, covered with details of stitching and assembly, and festooned with swatches of fabric crudely pinned onto the watercolour. Above all, the sketch is meant to communicate to the dressmaker - the artist's creation itself exists only on the stage. However successful the sketch as a work of art, its real worth can only be judged on stage, as an integral part of the performance. Benois worked carefully, annotating each sketch in his minute handwriting. He used colour precisely, with delicate gradations of tone meant to capture the exact nuance of the fabric he had in mind. In love with the world of the theatre, Benois knew that his costumes only came into their own when worn by a Nijinsky or a Fokine, under the hot blaze of the stage lights, in front of the expectant opening night audience at the Paris Opera.

"Firstly I am a great charlatan, though a rather brilliant one; secondly, a great charmer; thirdly a great lout; fourthly a man with a great amount of logic and very few scruples; fifthly I seem to have no real talent. Nonetheless it would seem I have found my vocation - to be a patron of the arts. I have everything necessary except money - but that will come."

Sergei Diaghilev

Sergei Diaghilev was born in 1872 in the ancient town of Novgorod, the son of an Army officer. He moved to St. Petersburg from Perm in 1890 to study law, and was soon introduced to the circle around Alexandre Benois. Compared to the refined 'Nevsky Pickwickians', Diaghilev was "a wild enthusiast without the faculty of discrimination." Nevertheless, as Benois himself wrote "How amazed we should have been to know we had just welcomed the one who was to become in so few years 'Captain' of our team, the man who would help us to realise all our dreams in the varied fields of art." By the end of the decade, Diaghilev had founded the magazine *The World of Art*, based on the model of the popular English magazine *Studio*, and invited the artists and writers of the Benois circle to work on it. At *The World of Art*, Diaghilev's skills as an impresario flourished. After a catastrophic episode at the Imperial Theatres, Diaghilev set about promoting Russian culture in Western Europe. After his successful exhibition of Russian art in 1906, and a series of acclaimed concerts of Russian music in 1907, Diaghilev looked to the ballet as the perfect expression of all the arts - dance, music, painting - a total theatre experience. Used to the timid one-act set pieces, the French public was completely unprepared for Diaghilev's vision of full-length extravaganzas of colour, light, music, and above all breathtaking Russian ballet artistry. With the financial backing of Gabriel Astruc, the *Ballets Russes* was launched. Diaghilev assembled his collaborators from *The World of Art*, notably Bakst and Benois, the choreographer Michel Fokine, the young composer Igor Stravinsky, as well as the best Russian dancers from the Imperial ballet - Tamara Karasavina, Vera Fokina, and the young Vaslav Nijinsky. In 1909, the first *Saison Russe* opened at the Paris Châtelet - and the world of the theatre changed forever.

"[Benois' design for the *Pavillon d'Armide*] is not the luxurious and capricious dream of the colourist ... it is, first and foremost, the recreation of the past. The searching curiosity of the artist-researcher who delights in every typical or unusual detail ... was able to create a very interesting and diverse picture, but inevitably, from a purely painterly standpoint, it lacked unity."

Andrei Levinson (1887 - 1933)

Author of several biographies of Bakst

For Benois the theatre was not only life - it was history. By the time he was asked to prepare the decor for the *Pavillon d'Armide* in 1907 for the Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Benois was already a renowned art historian. He had long been captivated by the world of the Enlightenment, and was a devoted follower of the French Romantic writers such as Theophile Gautier, on whose work *Omphale* the *Pavillon d'Armide* was based. The St. Petersburg production was choreographed by Fokine, and danced by Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karasavina, and Nijinsky, dancing in public for the first time - and met with critical acclaim. Counting on its ability to work the same magic in Paris, Diaghilev included the *Pavillon* in the Ballets Russes first season in 1909. Benois was also responsible for another performance in the Ballets Russes 1909 season - Fokine's medley *Chopiniana*, rebaptised *Les Sylphides* by Diaghilev. But it was *Cleopatra*, featuring Ida Rubinstein in Bakst's steamy costumes, that was the hit of the season, eclipsing both Benois' productions. The 1910 season was marked by a bitter feud with Bakst, whom he claimed had stolen his idea for *Scheherazade*. Benois' masterpiece, *Petrushka*, was created for the 1911 season, and featured the music of Igor Stravinsky. The piece remained a favourite of Benois' throughout his life, recalling his St. Petersburg childhood, and he made designs for eleven separate productions. It also marked his angry departure from the Ballets Russes, as Diaghilev had Bakst 'touch up' a portrait of the Magician on the wall for the third scene. Furious at Diaghilev and Bakst's betrayal, he stormed out of the theatre, did not attend its opening, and threatened to take Bakst to court. Although he collaborated with the Ballets Russes again in 1914 on *Le Rossignol*, he never forgave Diaghilev's treason - and in his pursuit of younger, avant-garde talent, Diaghilev turned his back on Benois' 'old-fashioned' historically accurate style.

[*Shouvaloff and Spencer both have Benois/Fokine on the 1907 Pavilion*]

"when the slight figure emerged, covered only by the wonderfully transparent garment invented by Bakst, one experienced a feeling of awe. Here was not a pretty artiste appearing in frank déshabillé, but a real, fatal enchantress in the tradition of the cruel and grasping Astarte..."

Alexandre Benois of Ida Rubinstein in *Cleopatra*

The theatre of Leon Bakst evoked the steamy passions of the harem, the cruelty of Egypt, and the Dionysian excesses of ancient Greece. The themes that were laboured and pedestrian in his paintings became, according to Benois, "simple and free on stage." His visit to Greece with his friend the Russian artist Valentin Serov in 1907 infused Bakst with a passion for the classical world, and he returned a confirmed Hellenist. "Bakst is obsessed by Hellas, he swears by her, he thinks only of her" wrote a friend. *Cleopatra*, performed at the end of the first season of the Ballets Russes in 1909, was Bakst's first major success, and his first experiment with the twin themes of sex and violence that were to mark his later work. In *Cleopatra*, Bakst brought to the stage "the scent of the East, and a great many lovely women with beautiful bodies." Bakst's pre-eminence in the world of the ballet was confirmed by his production of *Scheherazade* the following year. The story of a harem of beautiful women indulging in an orgy with their black slaves ending in a bloodbath of vengeance was exactly the vehicle Bakst needed to indulge his theatrical fantasy. In the words of Anne de Noailles "everything dazzling, intoxicating, enchanting, seductive, had been assembled and put on stage." The costumes were daring and explicit, combining oriental excess with Hellenistic rigour. Above all, the production was a revolution in the use of colour on the stage. Although publicly supportive of Bakst's success, Benois privately attacked Diaghilev for crediting Bakst with the idea, which he claimed had been his own. The costumes, however, were undoubtedly Bakst's. From *Scheherazade* Bakst went from strength to strength. His costume for Nijinsky was a masterpiece, sketched directly onto the dancer's body and reassembled before each performance. His costumes for *L'après midi d'un Faune* were a triumph of erotic simplicity, just as Nijinsky's performance was a triumph of simple eroticism. But not even Bakst could satisfy Diaghilev's desire to satisfy the public's desire for novelty, and after the War Bakst too found himself forsaken for younger artists such as Picasso, Gontcharova, and Larionov.

"[Benois] had the courage, in an age when novelty was in demand, to follow the old masters, and at a time when scale was highly rated, to concentrate on refinement of detail."

Richard Buckle

Editor 'Ballet'

Throughout his life, Alexandre Benois was more than just a theatre artist. Long before Diaghilev created the famous Ballets Russes, Benois organised exhibitions, curated private collections, and wrote extensively on the history of art. Benois had deep roots in St. Petersburg, and memories of its architecture, its festivals, and its popular culture deeply influenced his later work. He was the author, in 1905, of an illustrated alphabet for children, which he designed as a tiny world, a kind of miniature theatre. He was equally at home as a book illustrator, an art historian, and a theatre artist. His productions of *Petrushka*, *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, and *Le Rossignol*, are among the most memorable of the pre-War Ballets Russes, before Diaghilev cast Bakst and Benois aside in favour of younger, more daring artists such as Pablo Picasso, Natalia Gontcharova, and Mikhail Larionov. From 1918, after his heyday at the Ballets Russes, until 1926, when he left Russia for Paris, he was the Director of the Hermitage. Until the end of his life in 1960, Benois remained deeply involved in the world of the theatre, working on productions for La Scala in Milan and the Staatsoper in Vienna. He stayed in constant touch with the younger generation of theatre artists, and often received them at his Paris apartment. For one of them, Richard Buckle, editor of the monthly magazine *Ballet*, "he always seemed to me the ideal fairy godfather."

"[Bakst is] jealous of everybody, loving nobody else and capable of anything to stop their being happy. Boasts a lot and never sleeps with anyone. He is not liked by the female dancers, which was a surprise to me, as I thought he would be popular in that field."

Jean Cocteau

Celebrated French poet

Bakst's best work for the stage is characterised by its intense eroticism, its voluptuous sensuality, and its open celebration of violence and sexuality. Bakst celebrated the unchained female body in an age made famous by free spirits such as Isadora Duncan, Eleanora Duse, and Ida Rubinstein. He revelled in "the freedom of the use of the whole body, the actual flesh seen through slashed silk trousers, the breasts bouncing under gold nets, the hair loose." This fascination for the exotic and oriental was often attributed to Bakst's own secretive and ambiguous sexuality - although he boasted of a heroic sexual appetite, his actual proclivities were not a matter of public record. Others attributed his taste for the erotic to a "violent resentment at the mother, a sense of loss." Whatever the inspiration, Bakst's designs for the Ballets Russes caused a revolution in the world of fashion - suddenly 'every woman wanted to look like a slave in an oriental harem.' The taste for orientalism has many precursors, not least of which was the fashion design of the Paul Poiret, but it was Bakst's extravagant spectacles at the Paris Opera which started the craze that was to continue until the eve of the War. More than even the oriental overtones of the costumes, it was the rich palette of colours that overwhelmed - in the words of contemporary critic Martin Battersby the "rich flowing colours so favoured by Bakst and Poiret, colours made familiar by the Ballets Russes ... canary yellow, bright blue, jade, cerise, cyclamen, henna and red." Bakst and the orientalist decors of the Ballets Russes changed the face of modern fashion. In late 1913, Issidora Paquin commissioned Bakst to design dresses for her fashion house in Paris and the gowns that he devised may represent the zenith of his experiments in fashion. The pre-War euphoria formed the perfect backdrop for these sensual exercises and from St. Petersburg to Paris, from Moscow to New York it became *de rigueur* to dress *à la Bakst*.

"Bakst represents emotion, Benois erudition"

Arnold Haskell in *Balletomania*

A painting often masks the work that went into it, and the artist's personal style, approach to the subject, and character can be masked by the polished perfection of a finished work of art. Often the hasty scribble, the preparatory design, the chalked underdrawing, or the pencil study - worked over twenty times, erasures everywhere, full of second thoughts and doubts - are a surer guide to the artist's true character than final piece. Especially in the world of the theatre, where the sketch is merely a means to arrive at a costume or a painted backdrop, the discarded sketch can be the mirror of the artist's soul.

The books, catalogs, photographs and manuscripts in this section constitute part of the intellectual and cultural laboratory in which Benois and Bakst concocted their heady confections of reason and desire. Just as the Ballets Russes were, according to Serge Lifar, the organic extension of the esthetic program of the *World of Art*, so Benois and Bakst both experienced the enduring influence of the cultural ambience of *fin de siècle* St. Petersburg. Some of the items illustrate the early collaboration of Benois and Bakst. Both artists created illustrations for Nikolai Kutepov's survey of the Imperial hunt, and both participated as author and designer in the *World of Art*. Subsequently, Benois and Bakst contributed to many other journals of Russia's Silver Age, including Nikolai Riabushinsky's *Golden Fleece* and Sergei Makovsky's *Apollo*, as well as to books of poetry, literary anthologies, and historical miscellanies. The breadth of Benois' scholarship is not always apparent, for in some cases he served as the inspiration or even as the "ghost writer" of important works. For example, Benois was Diaghilev's chief consultant for the "Exhibition of Historic Portraits" at the Tauride Palace in 1905, he supervised the catalog of the Russian section of the 1906 "Salon d'Automne" and he was a vital force in the establishment of the journals *Artistic Treasures of Russia* and *Bygone Years*.

If Bakst, on the other hand, wrote comparatively little, he designed much - from the light Rococo of his cover for Diaghilev's 1902 catalog of Dmitrii Levitsky's portraits (HHH) to his green and gold *Jugendstil* binding for the Imperial copy of Vasiliï Vereshchagin's survey of ex-libris designs, from his salacious whimsies for Alexei Remizov's *Tsar Dodon* to his Neo-Classical silk cover for Valerian Svetlov's *Contemporary Ballet*. If Benois was the academic whose critical assessments in leading Russian newspapers informed the taste of an entire generation, Bakst was the innovator whose shifting hemlines and bold slashes both appealed to an international jet set commuting between St. Petersburg and Paris.

"One day, in extreme age and very frail, he was going round his beloved Louvre supported on the arm of a young friend. As he came to one of his favourite paintings he stopped, doffed the cloth cap he always wore, and bowed. 'What are you doing?' his friend inquired. 'A Master, you must always take your hat off to a Master.'"

Alexandre Shouvaloff

"Bakst was equally at home in ancient Greece, a Persian harem, or on a tennis court"

Peter Lieven

Bakst and Benois knew each other from their youth - Bakst was 24, and Benois just 20 when they met in Benois' salon in 1890. During the course of their lives, Bakst and Benois were best friends, hard-working colleagues, loyal allies, and jealous rivals. Yet whatever their relationship, Bakst and Benois remained different until the end. Bakst, ever complaining of ill health and growing increasingly irrational and irritable, collapsed in 1924, and died alone in Paris after a short and mysterious illness at the age of 58. Benois lived until the age of 90, and died in Paris in 1960, having completed the design for the decor of Il Trovatore at La Scala only months before.

EPILOGUE

"those who did not live in those wonderful days before the First World War can have little idea of the immense influence exerted by Bakst, whose name was on everybody's lips."

Cyril de Beaumont

Bakst, Benois, and other members of the Ballets Russes entourage were familiar faces in Lugano during the summer months. The dramatic landscapes, the jewel-like presence of the lake, the cosmopolitan company exerted a magnetic attraction on the Russians. Here they painted, wandered, spent time with their children, and spoke of the changes - at home in Russia, and in the West. But for a moment, time stood still, frozen in the mountain air, and all that mattered was life, and theatre.

COPYRIGHT © 2005 DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHOR'S PERMISSION