

Leon Bakst:  
The True Forefront of the Ballet Russes Designs

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Ballet is defined as the choreographed synchronized artistic dance with precise cues and gestures dating back to the Italian Renaissance in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While this brand of performing arts is respectable in its own regard, the introduction of the Ballet Russes, founded by none other than the Russian arts connoisseur of his time, Sergei Diaghilev, alongside his fellow close friends, Alexandre Benois and Leon Bakst, created a revolution within the art form. From the traditional uniformed and rigidness of regular ballet, the Ballet Russes introduces the world with a type of ballet that combined visual, auditory and physical art across multiple disciplines. But how would a group collectively decide the what to present to such a large audience? Quoting the critic Annie Nathan Meyer from *The Art of Leon Bakst*, “every production staged by Bakst shows how fully he is an interpreter, entering anew at each venture into its very heart and spirit.”<sup>1</sup> This tells us that whilst the performances may be accredited to Diaghilev for the organization of the company, the art of Leon Bakst should be appreciated as the forefront of the innovative concepts, design and aesthetic behind the performances.

Leon Bakst, born Leyb-Khaim Izrailevich Rosenberg, began first and foremost as a traditional painter, with an art style that leaned more towards that of artists within the realist movement. He received a formal artistic education at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts from 1883 to 1886, later continuing to study under the apprenticeship of Jean-Lion Gerome and Albert Edelfelt at the Academie Julian in Paris. His portfolio mostly included illustration and portraiture, up until he met Sergei Diaghilev and Alexandre Benois in St. Petersburg, where the three of them founded *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) together in 1898, a movement with an influential magazine sponsored by Savva Mamontov, in which Bakst was put in charge of the visuals. Bakst dabbled in creating theatrical set designs for Diaghilev multiple times throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Nathan Meyer, “The Art of Leon Bakst” *Art and Progress*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Mar., 1914): 161-165.

their friendship, but it was later in the 1890s did Bakst, along with Diaghilev and Benois, create the influential Ballet Russes.

The designs that Bakst created for the Ballet Russes were revolutionary in many ways. Majority of the credit goes to the fact that his treatment and approach to costume design that was unlike many other designers before him. While traditional ballet costumes were constrained to the lack of variety in leotards and tutus, Bakst takes a more direct initiative to bring the characters of the narrative into the physical world. Bakst's designs disregard the necessity of traditions and opened the doors of theater fashion to the influence of other cultures. These designs are then presented in a way that makes it seem like every sketch is made for illustrative purposes, rather than frameworks. He uses his skills and prior knowledge of academic art to combine vivid colors and intricate designs that seemed like they truly belong on the dancers' skin yet have an individuality of their own. This can be seen in his prioritization of the human anatomy, and the freedom in which the body is able to move with his garments.<sup>2</sup> Every fragment of clothing is treated as its own character, and as such is given the finesse and detailing with upmost intricacy. This requires an intimate knowledge of the narrative, its characters, and the choreography. The designs he created, when brought to life, look as if they were made to be performed in. As a result, the performers in the Ballet Russes look less like typical dancers, and more like the characters they represent, providing an immersive experience for both the spectators and those involved within the production.

A primary example of Bakst's exceptional concept art for costumes are his designs for the Faun in *The Afternoon of A Faun* (1912), depicted by the famous dancer Vaslav Nijinsky

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Johnson. "Bakst on Classicism: 'The Paths of Classicism in Art.'" *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 13, no. 2, (1990): 172.

(Fig. 1). The very evident understanding of the human anatomy allows him to draw each curve of the contour to complement Nijinsky's figure as it should fit into the costume. Bakst's depiction of the Faun as an organic figure in contrast to the Nymphs within the same stage, who are designed to be 2-dimensional and flat, much like the Greek origins of the narrative. He uses his experience of being able to see archaic Greek Kore figures during his travels to Greece as inspiration<sup>3</sup>. While their movements and choreography are made to be similar, the Faun still was made to stand out as the titular protagonist. The colors of his skin are melded and fade into a gradient that goes down his body, making it look as if the suit and the skin are one. Bakst also littered spots not only on Nijinsky's legs but also his arms, showing only a hint of a seam at his fingertips to mislead the audience into entertaining that very idea. Bakst's illustration of the designs, making them form-fitting but also free-ing for the dancer's movements exemplifies the appeal of their physical fitness. The Faun's beast-like quality is also exemplified by the hair that is stylized as horns. In this depiction of the costume that is also used as promotional art, we get to see a glimpse of the costume in action. With the Faun is the cloth belonging to the Nymph of his desire. This was a mindful choice, as it foreshadows that the other main character in this story is not the Nymph, but the garment depicted. It is drawn to be engulfing the Faun in nearly every direction, taking control of his senses and sensuality. Its colors are bright and vivid, in contrast to the subdued neutral tones and hues used on the Faun. As mentioned before, Bakst managed to bring life into even this piece of garment, which could possibly be the reason why the play became a controversy as the cloth is almost literally wrapped in debauchery by the end of the performance, as if an actual sexual act took place between two characters.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Mayer. "The Influence of Leon Bakst on Choreography." *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1977): 133.

Aside from his costume designs, Bakst is also the artist responsible for the sets behind the Ballet Russes performances. The designs he created using watercolor and various traditional media provide the blueprint for the engineers and architects of the theater to decipher. Once again, instead of laying out the measurements and relative positions of props and landmarks, Bakst astounds and inspires his fellow creatives with images that look like actual sceneries within the story. His designs made full use of every single artist within their arsenal and their skill, and as such, utilized not only the skill of painters, but also craftsman, carpenters, and many other applied arts. He barely reserves himself with his strong use of color and contrast, making careful plans to make the background of the play believable and livable for the characters he designed to exist in. Bakst shoulders the responsibility to essentially re-create the narratives as we know it, whether in the form of poetry, fable or epic, into a feast for the eyes. Critics have found Bakst's approach to designing sets as a painter an "exciting one because his sets and costumes relied on the total interaction of decoration and the human figure."<sup>4</sup> The challenge in doing both the character design and set design include finding the correct balance between the two, which requires much care and deliberation to ensure that one aspect of the ballet does not overshadow the other, and that every design choice made will result in all the visual components co-existing in harmony.

The set that Bakst designed for *Scheherazade* (1910) remains the most iconic Bakst work in terms of interior design (fig 2). This performance specifically required Bakst to dig deep into a more Orientalist style, nearly the opposite of his other Greek-inspired works. The colors are complementary, which should be jarring, and displeasing had not for his control and knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Bowlt. "Stage Design and the Ballets Russes." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. 5 (July 1, 1987): 28.

of color theory and relationships. The story of Scheherazade is that of conflict, drama and murder of 1000 women before the with of the titular main character manages to stop the massacre. With a narrative this intense, Bakst's choice of colors and contrast would seem intentional, and thoughtfully done. The details within the set tell the spectators where they are transported to exactly and gives them a view of a world that, even without the characters, could tell the stories on their own. Bakst mixes not only color, but also shapes and values to heighten the intensity of the set. The drapery lining the ceiling is covered in circular patterns, mimicking the stars while the carpets on the ground are littered with squares and edges. Even so, the viewers eyes are led through the entirety of the scene, revealing characters lounging underneath that sky, making each detail worth paying attention to and remembering. In the words of Annie Nathan Meyer:

I declare there are in his wonderful evocations, blues that never were in the heavens above nor the waters under the heavens, and yet scintillate even as they; and again blues dull with the faded tenderness of old tapestries, yet vibrant with enduring life; yellows that are green, and greens that are yellow; hyacinths that before your very eyes dissolve into blue not by means of stage lighting, but on the printed page; and blacks that look blue or crimson according to the color with which they perform in duo.<sup>5</sup>

Meyer describes the visual impact of Bakst's work on interior and set designs, commenting on his choice of vivid colors that aid in the audience's escapism when indulging within the performance. Her words suggest that his colors, despite contrasting one another, blend together well and create what seems like a mesmerizing optical illusion. The colors described are never

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<sup>5</sup> Annie Nathan Meyer, "The Art of Leon Bakst" *Art and Progress*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Mar., 1914): 161-165.

restricted into the mold of what they are identified as, but were described with the ability to “perform,” much like actors themselves. She credits this not towards the stage lighting, but towards the design choice that was inexplicably the responsibility of Leon Bakst as the art director.

To witness the synchronization of aesthetics between the set design and the costumes that occupy it, the designs for the characters in *Scheherazade* (1910) should be given a look as well (fig. 3). Bakst’s designs retain their importance in showcasing the human anatomy in an almost erotic way but are laid with the choreography and culture in thought. The amount of skin shown as well as the low placement of the hipline accentuates the orientalist style the performance calls for, and at the same time gives the dancers flowy and puffy garments to move and breathe in, who have recorded to have enjoyed wearing them.<sup>6</sup> Functionality (despite of the possible weight that each embroidery might incur) is one of the many appeals in Bakst’s designs. He also paid no expense in ensuring that the dancers remain the stars of the show, even in the midst of a set as stunning as the one he planned for them. In those designs, we are able to see that Bakst never favors one aspect of theatre to another, and treats every single part of the Ballet Russes performance with undivided attention and care.

Despite not being the only designer in the team for the Ballet Russes, Bakst’s contributions to the world of performing arts has nevertheless paved way for theater and dance as we see it today. He is the proof of creativity being the major factor in breathing innovation into a pre-existing format. As discussed earlier, he was in no way educated in performing arts nor was he trained to design fashion and clothing for the stage, but enabled by chance and risk, Bakst

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<sup>6</sup> Michelle Potter. "Designed for Dance: The Costumes of Leon Bakst and the Art of Isadora Duncan." *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1990): 155.

managed to show the world what a ballet could really look like, despite the Ballet Russes only existing for a short amount of time. He made use of all his resources and connections to envision the best version of a ballet performance that he can muster and trusted his friends to be able to execute those ideas to the best of their abilities. Bakst is an inspiration for those who aspire to be more than what they are restrained and limited to do at this current point of time. As someone who is adeptly involved in the pre-production in the field of animation, I find his approach to costume design and set design resembles that of visual development within the industry I am delving into, which piqued my interest. The interpretation of existing stories is a struggle to find a good amount of originality that, at the same time, pays an equal amount of respect to its origins. I believe Bakst managed to achieve that and more, introducing people from all over the world the culture and taste of Russian art.



Illustrations

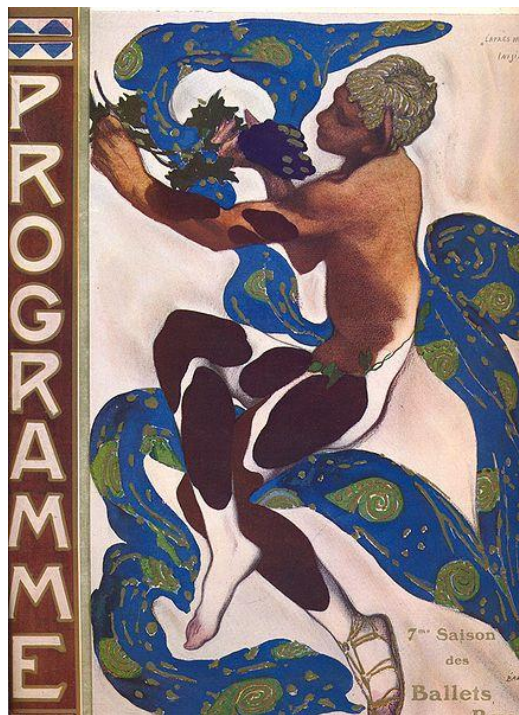


Figure 1, Leon Bakst, *Afternoon of a Faun*, c.1912, watercolor, 15 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches, location unknown. (Image Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d4/Bakst\\_Nizhinsky.jpg/1200px-Bakst\\_Nizhinsky.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d4/Bakst_Nizhinsky.jpg/1200px-Bakst_Nizhinsky.jpg))



Figure 2, Leon Bakst, *Scheherazade Set Design*, c.1910, watercolor, metallic paint, and graphite on paper, 29 1/16 x 40 3/4 inches, location unknown. (Source: [https://0-library.artstor.org.library.scad.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003764964](https://0-library.artstor.org.library.scad.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003764964))



Figure 3. Leon Bakst, *Scheherazade Costume Design*, watercolor and graphite on paper, c.1910, location unknown. (Source: [https://0-library.artstor.org.library.scad.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003764956](https://0-library.artstor.org.library.scad.edu/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003764956))

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