

Bakst in Britain: Production – Reception – Impact

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Abstract—"Outsplendouring Splendour"! — commented the British press on the décor the Russian artist Léon Bakst created for the performance of the ballet *La Belle au Bois dormant*, revived under the title *The Sleeping Princess at the London Alhambra Theatre* in 1921. Indeed, Bakst's contribution was the deciding factor in the great success of this ballet. Its spectacular impact lasted for decades. The powerful Bakst reception in Britain is the topic of the article, in which the author will introduce Léon Bakst as a scenic artist, scrutinize British patterns of reception, and shed light on the enormously strong female response Bakst's décor evoked in Britain.

Keywords—Léon Bakst; Ballets Russes; *The Sleeping Princess*; decorative arts; British domestic interiors

I. INTRODUCTION

"Outsplendouring Splendour"! — commented the Daily Mail on the décor the Russian artist Léon Bakst created for the ballet *La Belle au Bois dormant*, revived under the title *The Sleeping Princess at the London Alhambra Theatre*, in November 1921: "All the colors of all jewels, of all sunsets, of all flames, are in these stage pictures ... such orange, saffron and moss-green of the Court ladies, such a glistening azure and ermine of the royal robe" [1].

Bakst's décor for this ballet was perhaps the most highly praised of his work. Indeed, his contribution was the deciding factor in the great success of *The Sleeping Princess*, ("Fig. 1") which marked his comeback to the Ballets Russes and a renewed collaboration with Diaghilev after a break of several years. It was also the grand finale of Bakst's work for Diaghilev's troupe. Yet, its spectacular impact lasted well into the 1930s.

The power of Bakst's reception in Britain is the topic of the present article, in which the author will introduce Léon Bakst as a Ballet Russes designer and creator of atmosphere, scrutinize British patterns of reception and contrast them to those across the channel, and shed light on the enormously strong female response Bakst's décor evoked in Britain.



Fig. 1. Costume designs for *The Sleeping Princess*.

II. LÉON BAKST — CREATOR OF ATMOSPHERE

"Last night's *Sleeping Beauty* ... descended trailing clouds of bygone regal glory", reported the Daily Mail. "The new ballet, which out-splendours splendour is more grand than vulgarly cheerful, conjuring up as it does before our dazzled eyes all the pomp of dead and done-with kings and emperors — Bourbons and Romanoffs. ... But the splendour of splendours is Bakst's. M. Bakst ... sets out to ravish, not to shock the eye. His Versailles of last night would have made Louis XIV himself look dim" [2]. London presses, cultural reviews and music magazines were equally lavish with their praise.

Who was Léon Bakst? Born in Grodno in 1866, he grew up in a lower-middle class Jewish family. He belonged to the [Miriskussniki] — the World of Art group — promoted by a circle of artist friends around himself and Diaghilev, who met regularly in the 1890s [3].

Bakst's connection with the stage began in Russia and continued in France. From the foundation of the Ballets Russes, he produced a series of theatrical settings, among them *Scheherazade*, *Thamar*, *Le Dieu Bleu*, *L'après midi d'un Faune* and *Daphnis and Chloe*. No other theatre designer has ever achieved the artistic renown that Bakst enjoyed during the years running up to the First World War. His sensuous, exotic art became synonymous with the style of the Russian ballets staged in Paris between 1909 and 1912. But his most prodigious undertaking was *The Sleeping Princess*, performed in London in 1921. ("Fig. 2")



Fig. 2. Alhambra Theatre in London.

It involved a special curtain, five scenes and almost three hundred costumes, with innumerable props and accessories – something Bakst had never attempted before [4]. What was the formula for his London success story?

The reasons were manifold. Firstly, the premier of *The Sleeping Princess* staged at the Mariinsky Theatre some thirty years before, marked the decisive point of Bakst's career; he recalled its dress rehearsal on a murky November day in St. Petersburg:

"Unforgettable matinée! I lived in a magic dream for three hours, intoxicated with fairies and princesses, splendid palaces, flowing with gold, in the enchantment of the old tale. My whole being was as if I swayed in a cadence to the rhythms, the radiant flow of refreshing and beautiful melodies, which were already friends. ... the Mariinsky theatre, all decorated in blue, velvet, filled with brightly clad officers of the Guard, with ladies in evening dress, bejewelled and radiant with a heterogeneous and perfumed crowd, in which a more solemn note was struck by the red coats and white stocking of the Court, so bedizened with Imperial eagles. That evening, I believe, my vocation was determined" [5].

Secondly, *The Sleeping Princess* marked Bakst's return to the Ballets Russes and a renewed collaboration with Diaghilev following a long break. Bakst himself had reinitiated their communication after they hadn't been on speaking terms for several years, suggesting they should resume their joint efforts and stage something "Russian" once the War was over. On 12 September 1918, he wrote to Diaghilev:

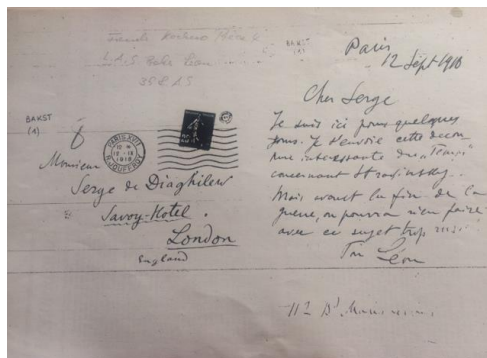


Fig. 3. Bakst's letter to Diaghilev.

"Chèr Serge, Je t'envoie cette déconne très intéressante du "Temps" concernant Stravinsky. Mais avant le fin de la guerre, on pourrait rien faire avec un sujet trop russe. Ton Léon" [6]. ("Fig. 3", "Fig. 4")

A short letter, still rather grumpy, but at least it re-established communication between the two former friends. From the marginal notes of the article that he attached to the letter and his allusion to a "sujet trop russe", it seems that Bakst had something more topical in mind.

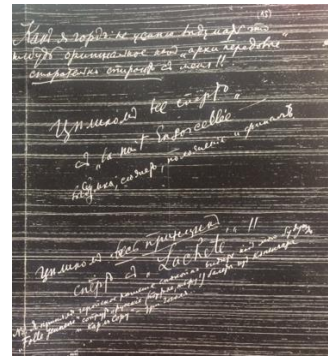


Fig. 4. Bakst's letter to Diaghilev; marginal notes.

But he came to realise it only six months after his spectacular success in London with his play *L'âcheté* a mimic drama, performed on a more modest scale in size and ambition, on a scanty stage of the Paris Femina Theatre on 24 May 1922, by Maria Kuznetsov and her company. Set in St. Petersburg, by now Petrograd, in 1916, *L'âcheté* forms a sharp contrast to the grandeur of Russia's abandoned Imperial past played out in *The Sleeping Princess*. The spectator would feel that the orphaned city radiates sadness. Set on the eve of the Russian Revolution, *L'âcheté* conjured an atmosphere of anguish and latent menace: "a dull ennui weights upon us heavily, like the low cloud before a storm we are on the eve of terrible happenings" [7], as the dance critic Andreï Levinson put it. This was "Russian History through the lens of the Ballet" [8], as he pointed out.

Creating an atmosphere for things to come turned out to be Bakst's special gift: to whet the appetite and enhance the delight of anticipation among his audiences using a stage setting to create a heightened level of tension and expectancy, whether it was a turning point in Russian history, as in *L'âcheté* or the conserved imperial glamour of Peter the Great and Versailles, as in *The Sleeping Princess* or, indeed the heavy and perfumed atmosphere of languor and luxury of the Harem, as in *Scheherazade* staged about a decade earlier in Paris. Even the producers of *L'âcheté* and *Sleeping Princess* perceived his set designs as a revelation: both pieces displayed a retrospective view on Russia, which filled the eyes of Russian émigrés with tears.

III. THE BAKST RECEPTION IN BRITAIN AND ITS IMPACT ON DOMESTIC INTERIORS

Thirdly, *The Sleeping Princess* was the first full-length Russian ballet presented in the West in the twentieth century. In a letter to Diaghilev, Stravinsky commented on the ballet's musical aesthetics:

"My dear friend. It gives me great happiness to know that, you are producing that masterpiece, by our great and beloved Tchaikovsky. ... It is a personal joy, for this work appears to me as the most authentic expression of that period of our Russian life, which we call the "Petersburg Period". Tchaikovsky ... was a creator of melody, which is an extremely rare and precious gift. ... I have just read again the score of this ballet. I have spent some days of intense pleasure in finding therein again and again the same feeling of freshness, inventiveness, ingenuity and vigour. And I warmly desire that your audience of all countries may feel this work as it is felt by me, a Russian musician. Yours ever Igor Stravinsky" [9].

When Stravinsky referred to *The Sleeping Princess* as the most authentic expression of the "Petersburg Period" he might have had in mind its contrast to the so-called "Oriental Ballets" staged in Paris and London a decade earlier. What had happened a decade earlier? A small group of exceedingly clever and progressive Russians had arrived in the West to challenge conventional art forms: Ballets Russes impresario Sergei Diaghilev whose troupe revolutionized the nature of the ballet, scenic artist Léon Bakst whose décor changed French theatre art and Paris haute couture, and the young Igor Stravinsky whose music was referred to as "the most iconic moment of European Modernism". No other group established the Russian presence in Western Europe so emphatically. ("Fig. 5")



Fig. 5. Stravinsky, Roujána Khvochinskaia, Diaghilev and Bakst in Lausanne, 1915.

Yet, those Oriental ballets, and even *The Firebird*, originally aimed at representing a Russian neo-nationalist work of art [10], made theatre critics gush with wonder "how Russian that was!" [11]. ("Fig. 6")



Fig. 6. Oriental costume design for *The Firebird* created by Bakst.

Focusing on the fact that the greater part of Russia lay in Asia rather than Europe, the Oriental ballets fed into the Western audiences' fascination with the sultry, exotic Orient of popular fantasy, in which a fabulous world of Russian fairy tales alternated with the portrayal of languor, eccentricity and violent instincts ascribed to the Otherness of the Orient. Those images of oriental ease, sensuality and despotism in a barbaric East [12] had captured Western imaginations, in which the boundaries between historic-geographical facts and exotic fantasies became increasingly blurred [13]. They would take hold particularly among audiences in France and Britain who turned out to be the keenest recipients of Ballets Russes productions: the two nations who had been dominating the Eastern Mediterranean since the end of the 17th century, with spheres of interest stretching to India, and with a fund of knowledge about the Orient gleaned as the two greatest colonial networks in pre-twentieth century history [14].

There was a considerable contrast to what Stravinsky called "the authentic expression of Russian life" displayed in *The Sleeping Princess*. Yet, Stravinsky's wish that Londoners may feel the same intense pleasure when listening to Tchaikovsky's melodies, remained a pious hope. The deciding factor in the ballet's overwhelming success was not Tchaikovsky's music, but Bakst's mastery of colour, light [15] and scenic space, besides his graceful architectural setting. It was the greatest design success Bakst ever achieved, traceable, according to Levinson, to three things: a buoyant, grandiose organization of space, an expert orchestration of colours and an inexhaustible wealth of decorative invention [16]. ("Fig. 7")



Fig. 7. Bakst's stage décor for *The Sleeping Princess*.

Once again, Bakst had stood out as the creator of atmosphere. Apparently, he was well aware of it, since he pointed out to his London audience: "While I am to some extent responsible, as the English say, for the letting loose of modern staging, which is nearing hysterical exasperation, it is also I who, at present, begin to call out: Now then! Gentlemen, let us not commit excesses!" [17]. But Bakst was not able to stop the gentlemen, and even less so, the ladies, from committing excesses when they pilfered from his décor. ("Fig. 8")

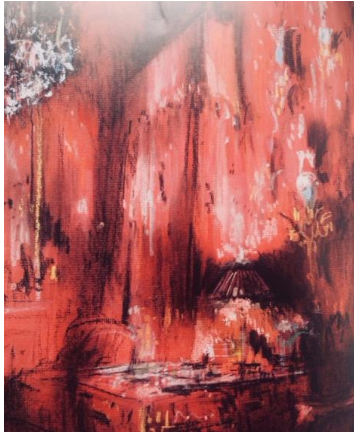


Fig. 8. Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Chalmers Wood. The entire drawing room—walls, ceiling, upholstery, carpet, curtains and lampshades—was decorated in various shades of vermilion. Water colour Jeremiah Goodman.

"Every chair cover, every lampshade, every cushion, was a reflection of the Russian Ballet", as the British writer Osbert Sitwell remarked with regard to upper middle-class British domestic interiors [18]. Already in 1919, the London magazine Outlook had pointed to the "enormous aesthetic importance of the Russian Ballet" [19]; and the British art critic and stage designer Osbert Lancaster confirmed that "the various examples of exoticism displayed by the Ballets Russes productions had a huge impact on domestic interiors of upper middle-class London and were later claimed by 1920s Art Deco." He observed that "the pale pastel shaded drawing-rooms, which had reigned supreme on the walls of Mayfair for almost two decades were replaced by a riot of barbaric hues – jade, green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet, and above all, orange" [20].

Had British interiors so far been dominated by the muted opalescent tones of moonstones, mother of pearl, ivory and sycamore, they were henceforth characterized by a richness of pure color and unconventional harmonies derived from Oriental sources. Overnight the intense blue of turquoises, lapis-lazuli and sapphire, the reds of vermilion lacquer, rubies and coral, the shades of orange to be found in fire-opals, zinnias and marigolds, greens taken from emeralds, malachite or verdigris, sharp intense yellows, purples and violets evoking amethysts, grapes and eggplant were now used singly or combined in dazzling juxtaposition with liberal additions of gold or silver [21]. ("Fig. 9")

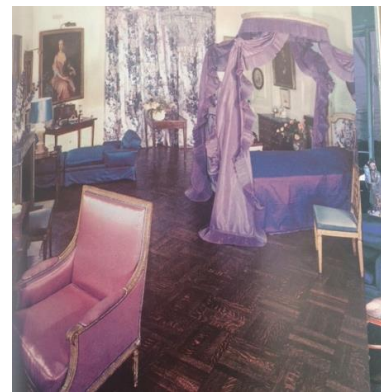


Fig. 9. Bedroom at Haseley Court near Oxford.

So far it had been considered impossible to juxtapose two shades of the same color, for instance crimson and vermilion. Bakst ignored such conventions and used rich color applied in totally new and daring combinations. ("Fig. 10")



Fig. 10. Unconventional colour combinations in the décor of *The Sleeping Princess*.

It was referred to as an "Asiatic barbarism of colours" [22], which takes us back to the commodities traded along the ancient Silk Road, such as the Seven Treasures namely gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, pearls, red coral, emeralds and other greenish stones [23]. ("Fig. 11")



Fig. 11. Décor for *The Sleeping Princess* based on the "Seven Treasures".

It turns out that the unconventional combinations of their colors, e.g. coral red with emerald green, or emerald green with lapis lazuli blue unusual for western eyes, formed the basis of Bakst's color rhythms, with the addition of purple symbolizing the highest prestige in the Byzantine Empire – the western end of the Silk Road. ("Fig. 12")

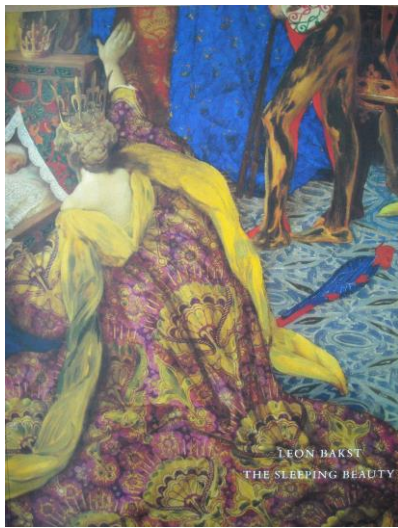


Fig. 12. Lapis lazuli blue, purples and violets combined with intense yellows.

The revival of unorthodox color schemes was, however, only part of the strategy behind the impact. The technique of dramatic lightening was another device Bakst employed. Rather than conventional illumination techniques, he applied accent (or feature) lighting alternating with diffuse light. Dimmed light and accent light reached a subject from a number of sources and directions, making gradual changes from light to dark parts of the stage thereby creating a sense of drama.

This lighting scheme also contributed to a changed perception, first among British stage designers who, under the spell of Bakst, transformed the vulgarity and bad taste of the Victorian theatre [24]. They were followed by the upper middle-class who started to abandon the shadowy interiors of Victorian Britain and to embrace the more diffuse light of the Orient, with the beauty of its semi-shade. Lighting specialists indeed maintain that the lack of light in the Occident has triggered the invention of petroleum, gas and electricity while the Orientals indulge in the beauty of semi-shade.

Bakst's architectural settings on stage had a further effect. John E. Bowlt notes that Bakst used the scenic space as a three-dimensional unit, as a relief, and not as a simple pictorial plane [25]. This asymmetric dynamism prompted an unbalanced interior with adaptable functions of space, which is, in fact, typical for oriental design principles. ("Fig. 13")



Fig. 13. Scenic space as a three-dimensional unit prompting an interior with adaptable functions of space.

These principles contrast with the occidental tradition that favours a balanced and symmetrical space management, realized e.g. by a pair of identical elements on each side of a room axis establishing a visual order. ("Fig. 14")



Fig. 14. Drawing room with symmetric arrangement of space.

The combination of saturated contrasting colors lying opposite to each other in the color wheel, the semi-shade lighting and the asymmetric arrangement of space that Bakst applied in his set designs are, as it turns out, the key features of oriental design, besides fabrics.

Indeed, if we compare Bakst's work with that of other Russian decorators and illustrators of his generation, we realize that he did not look for inspiration in the Russian popular tradition; the sources of his art are, according to the French art historian Louis R éau, to be found in Greece and in the East [26]. R éau speculates that "the real cause of this predilection resides in the fact that the art of Mycene and of Crete is still entirely impregnated with Oriental influences. Bakst inhaled with delight all the emanations of the Oriental spirit, and it seems that Crete was but a step-stone on his way to Egypt and to Persia" [27].

Réau's interpretation may not stand up as a complete explanation. It is more likely, that the Bakst reception reflects the spirit of the time: Following a period of Colonialism, the Oriental ballets iconised Russia's Asiatic periphery — an oriental space today generally referred to as 'Levantine', that even included India, with boundaries eventually encompassing Russia's own Orient such as the Caucasus, Central Asia and the middle Volga region [28]. Those ballets had acknowledged Russia's membership in the western fraternity and endorsed an ideological position according to which Russia, like France or England, could be divided into two major components: a homeland or metropolis that belonged within European civilization, and a vast, but foreign, extra European oriental periphery whose chaos legitimized imperial authority and colonialism on par with that of the Western powers. This idea was supported by the basic dichotomy in Russia's physical corpus which seemed to reproduce that of the western empires, except that in contrast to the maritime powers, Russian expansion was overland. In keeping with Western presumptions, it also insinuated that the Orient, left to its own devices, is nothing but chaos, murder and barbarism.

The *Sleeping Princess* on the other hand, iconised the orientation of Peter the Great towards European values and an imperial tradition that for Russia had ceased to exist. The fact that it was produced by Russians who had come to Western Europe as voluntary work migrants during the early 1910s and, following War and Revolution found themselves in exile, unable to return, held an additional attraction for London audiences during a time when the world's full attention was directed towards political developments in Russia.

IV. A STRONG FEMALE RESPONSE

In terms of the atmosphere Bakst created around the human bodies in motion, *The Sleeping Princess* became a playground for Bakst to re-rehearse his earlier set designs created for the Oriental ballets using similar ingredients: contrasting colours, dramatic lighting, and an asymmetric arrangement of space, all merging into a perfect whole. The Oriental ballets had played on a European perception that essentially saw the ethnically, geographically, and intellectually varied Oriental world as monolithic and easy to define, specifically with sexual connotations that gendered the East as feminine and the West as masculine [29]. ("Fig. 15")



Fig. 15. Female Oriental Other — Bakst's costume design for the Red Sultan.

While *The Sleeping Princess* built on similar effects, it also helped to transform the sexualized art displayed in the previous Oriental ballets, into a neutral space, which implied a translation of the Female Oriental Other — at least in an attenuated form — into everyday Western life.

It was perhaps one of the elements that contributed to the strong female response to Bakst's work in Britain, where people allegedly "had forgotten how to use their eyes for anything except reading" [30]. The earlier decorations Bakst created for London stages left here and there lingering notes on dress, fabrics, wallpapers and cushions, claimed the journal *The Studio* in 1914 [31]. But by 1925, their influence radiated far beyond theatrical designs and fashion well into book art and domestic interiors. Women began to purge the gloomy Victorian houses of their stuffiness and clutter, rid them of bad pictures and taste, and introduced the cult of oriental ease, and with it the provision for comfort and movement [32]. ("Fig. 16")



Fig. 16. 1920s British Interior.

Moreover, it was the time of the suffragette¹ movement campaigning for the right of British women to vote, which

¹ The word "suffragette" was first used to describe women campaigning for the right to vote in 1906. In February 1918, the government passed an act giving women the vote if they were over 30 and owned property, or were the wife of someone who did. As a result, 8.5

was achieved in Britain for well-to-do women in 1918. Bakst's inspiration thus came at the right time for many women on their search for socially acceptable positions and new job opportunities that went beyond dressmaking or governing. ("Fig. 17")



Fig. 17. The Suffragette Movement in Britain.

It encouraged women to earn money and thus paved the way for the professionalization of interior design as a female domain. The prerequisites for such professionalization were favorable in Britain, where leading promoters from the US had championed the advancement of women in the decorative arts since the late nineteenth century, and the great lady decorators, among them Candice Wheeler and Elsie de Wolfe, were on their way to Britain. Wheeler's manifesto *Interior Design as a Profession for Women* [33] had been a milestone in this development. Women had an amazing imagination, she argued; they knew how to entertain and understood the practical side of running a house. "They have knowledge of textiles and color, which men do not have, an instinct for arrangement and an intimate knowledge of the conveniences of domestic life. ... Here was the natural field of the woman decorator" [34].

V. CONCLUSION

Whereas, the Oriental ballets performed in Paris before the First World War, had iconised Russia's Asiatic periphery with a focus on Colonialism on par with that of the Western powers, *The Sleeping Beauty* performed in London after the War, iconised an imperial tradition that for Russia had ceased to exist. Whereas in France, the Bakst effect heralded an escape from obsolescent forms of theatre art [35] and a strong impact on Paris haute couture [36], its influence in Britain spread far beyond theatrical designs and fashion well into book art and domestic interiors, leading to the professionalization of interior design as a female domain. Driven by female protagonists, British households started to radiate a stronger sense of femininity and an enhanced

million women became entitled to vote in the General Election of 1918. On 2 July 1928, a law was passed allowing all women over the age of 21 to vote. Website Tracy Chevalier [Electronic resource]. Access mode: URL: www.tchevalier.com/fallingangels/bckgrnd/suffrage/ (data of the resource: 1.09.2019).

delight for what at the time was perceived as "oriental ease", traceable to three things: an expert orchestration of complementary color contrast, a light effect that simulated semi-shade, and an asymmetric organization of space allowing for flexibility and buoyancy. It was the same formula Bakst had used on stage when creating an atmosphere for things to come.

In summary, Bakst stood for a revolution of taste. There was design before Bakst, and design after Bakst and no one could confuse the two [37].

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