

# Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in the Context of Symbolism

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## ABSTRACT

The present article focuses on the artistic culture of the Silver Age and the remarkable creative atmosphere of Russia at the turn of the 20th century characterized by the synthesis of arts: drama, opera, ballet, and scenography. A key figure of the period was Sergei Diaghilev, the editor and publisher of the magazines *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) and *The Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres*, the founder of the famous Ballets Russes in Paris, the organizer of exhibitions of Russian artists of different schools and movements. The article studies the features of Symbolism as an artistic movement and philosophy of art of the Silver Age, a spiritual quest of artistic people of the time, and related and divergent interests of representatives of different schools and trends. The Silver Age is considered the most sophisticated and creative period of Russian culture, the time of efflorescence, human spirit, creativity, the rise of social forces, general renewal, in other words, Russian spiritual and cultural renaissance.

**Keywords:** *The Silver Age, synthesis of arts, Sergei Diaghilev's activity, The Ballets Russes in Paris, Magazines Mir Iskusstva and The Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres, Symbolism as a philosophy of life.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: SYMBOLISM AS A CULTURAL MOVEMENT AND A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

The high intensity of the spiritual life of Russian society at the turn of the 20th century and in the first decade of the new century resulted in the rise in various fields of art: literature (A. Blok, A. Bely, V. Ivanov, M. Voloshin, etc.), music (A. Scriabin, N. Rimsky-Korsakov, S. Rachmaninoff, A. Glazunov, I. Stravinsky), theatre (opera - F. Chaliapin, L. Sobinov; ballet - A. Pavlova, T. Karsavina, M. Fokine, V. Nijinsky; drama - V. Komissarzhevskaya, K. Stanislavski, V. Nemirovich-Danchenko, V. Meyerhold, etc.). Brought into life by the great era of the Silver Age, different trends and schools coexisted within the same artistic space.

Particular attention should be given to Symbolism, the movement that emerged and clearly displayed new philosophical and socio-psychological aesthetic tendencies originated at the turn of the century. The culture of Russian Symbolism was developing at the intersection of seemingly opposing, but closely related lines of a philosophical and aesthetic attitude to reality. As rightly pointed out by the poet Vladislav Khodasevich, "symbolism was not content to be merely an artistic school, a literary movement. It was constantly striving to become a means of life creation, and therein lay its deepest and possibly most unmanifestable truth. <...> This history consisted of a series of attempts – at times, truly heroic ones – to discover the proper alloy of life and art: a philosopher's stone of art" [2].

Symbolism in Russia reached its height by 1910, and was developing in two directions often

intersected and intertwined with one another in works of many prominent Symbolists:

- Symbolism as an art and culture movement;
- Symbolism as a worldview and philosophy of life.

The interweaving of these directions was most complex and sophisticated in the creative art of Andrei Bely. He represented a new theurgic writer type, and in his creative work Russian Symbolism most vividly demonstrated its "unique face" [3]. The writer's artistic work was interconnected to his philosophical quests and theoretical justification of Symbolism. In his writings, he was developing a theory of Symbolism as holistic understanding of the world, a coherent system and a universal programme of the "art of living".

The ultimate goal of Symbolism is the creation of a new man to transform the old world; it was prompted by the influence of philosophical ideas relevant for the time on Symbolists. Andrei Bely, for instance, developed his philosophy on the research and rethinking of various philosophical systems ranging from Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism to Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. "People of Symbolism", as Vladislav Khodasevich called the Symbolist artists, left the legacy of soulful, timeless and independent "created legends". They were breathing "the air of Symbolism" (V. Khodasevich), and therefore were special.

Symbolism is considered to have emerged in 1884, and the artists of the movement initially called themselves "new poets". The people to stand at the origins of Symbolism were Nikolai Minsky and Ieronim Yasinsky, who in 1884, founded the New Romantics Society in Kiev. Later, the subject of Symbolism as a new movement in literature was brought by Dmitry Merezhkovsky (On the Causes of the Decline and on the New Trends in Contemporary Russian Literature, 1892). The first book of poems "Russian Symbolists" was published in 1894 and by 1895 was followed by two more ones collected by Valery Bryusov.

Since initially Symbolism was not homogeneous, literary scholars tried to identify grades and group Symbolists either ideologically (for example, those following Vladimir Solovyov's idea of unitotality, and those proclaiming dissolution of the personality in God), chronologically (as traditionally in literature studies: "senior" and "junior" Symbolists), or

geographically (Moscow and St. Petersburg schools). These principles, however, are so heterogeneous and far from being comprehensive that they can be applied to an artist's work only to a limited extent.

Already at the dawn of the century, theorists of Symbolism tried to outline the major elements of this new movement in art. Dmitry Merezhkovsky mentioned the following ones: *mystical content, symbols, and the expansion of artistic impressionability*.

## **2. ARTISTIC CULTURE OF THE SILVER AGE AS A UNIQUE PHENOMENON**

The artistic culture of the Silver Age is a unique phenomenon. The turn of the 20th century was one of the brightest and most sophisticated periods of Russian culture, the time of efflorescence, spiritual awakening, creativity, and energy, or in other words, Russian spiritual and cultural renaissance. The life of Russia at the turn of the 20th century was very tense. It was the turning point when new aesthetic principles were establishing. Traditions and innovations, the search for the new, rises and falls, gains and losses, pursuit of synthesis - all of these are the characteristic features of the Silver Age art. Drama, ballet, opera, scenography, or fashion - the innovative spirit penetrated everywhere.

Numerous literary trends and schools in one way or another gravitated towards the ideas of contemporary philosophers, so the atmosphere of strenuous spiritual quest was ubiquitous. Aiming for the aesthetic updating of the teachings of Christianity, Symbolists were weaving art into the context of world history. They defended the idea of moral and spiritual improvement and unleashing one's creative potential through serving God as the eternal truth, justice, goodness, and beauty. They considered creative work as manifestation of God, and found the source of art in deciphering the hidden meaning of reality. The religious and ethical doctrine of the "Eternal Feminine" (Sophia) was at the centre of Symbolists' attention. An attempt to reach a new religious consciousness and the very idea of renewal of religion significantly contributed to the emergence of the idea of God-Building.

The interaction of the philosophical and aesthetic thought testifies to the philosophers and artists' fellow feeling about perennial problems of life, their close connection with time, and

recognition of its complex and contradictory nature, and the urge to predict the country's future.

### **3. SERGEY DIAGHILEV AND THE BALLETS RUSSES**

One of the key, iconic figures of the culture of the Silver Age, Russian and world art of the early 20th century was Sergei Diaghilev. He worked in cooperation with representatives of Russian and Western creative intelligentsia; their discussions centred on the debate about traditions and innovations, ethics and aesthetics, the national and the global in art. Diaghilev was a genius impresario, inspirer and organizer of the outstanding Ballets Russes (1906–1929), head of the renowned ballet and opera company. Additionally, he was a journalist, art critic, and editor of *Mir Iskusstva* and *The Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres*, regularly published his reviews of art exhibitions, critical essays and articles on the visual arts and theatre in various magazines. Since 1906, Diaghilev organized full-scale art exhibitions, published articles and gave interviews on issues of art, theatrical art in particular. In other words, he was engaged in both publishing and educational activity, which was significant for his time and has remained so up to the present day. Diaghilev's remarkable activity was also recognized by his contemporaries: Alexandre Benois, for instance, placed him on a par with the famous Russian philanthropist Savva Mamontov and was convinced that they both were the key figures "to whom the young Russian art primarily owes its advancement." [4].

Since 1906, Diaghilev's activity was primarily focused on Western Europe to the audience of which he introduced Russian ballet, opera, and masterpieces of scenography. Already his contemporaries said that his Ballets Russes were timeless; indeed, they set artistic trends and fashion in Europe up to the 1930s. [5] Diaghilev's creative activity met the requirements of the new aesthetic approach to culture and history. He made a significant contribution to the establishment of the *Mir Iskusstva* magazine and promotion of ideas of the *miriskusniki* (members of the movement).

Diaghilev was called the herald of modern art of the early 20th century, since within a relatively short time, he changed the world of ballet, theatre, music and visual arts working both in Russia and Europe simultaneously. As mentioned before, since 1896, he was a critic, exhibition organizer, editor and art historian. At private expense, he created the

travelling Russian ballet company in Europe no one in the world could compete with. Before the outbreak of World War I, Diaghilev started transforming the company into a creative laboratory, within the activity of which he emphasized the role of avant-garde art and collaborated with Russian avant-garde artists Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, and French artists Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. He did not have any permanent sponsors; as an impresario, he himself was directly in charge of performances, advertising, contracts with performers, and most importantly, the creative and inventive solutions for performances. Although he was welcomed everywhere, even by monarchs and aristocracy, he was not given money and had to invest and risk his personal finance. For 15 years, Diaghilev resided in Western Europe, but he passionately yearned for his motherland, and therefore, Russianness was particularly noticeable in his creative work. The most important objective of his was to promote the great Russian art in Europe so that Russia would be perceived as a European nation in the West.

It was Diaghilev who inspired and organized such ballets as *The Rite of Spring*, *Parade*, and *Les Noces*. Though he taught his colleagues to remember the past and the remarkable achievements of Russian art of the 19th century, he was always striving for experiments and innovations. His major goal was to serve the beauty and live in the name of art. One of Diaghilev's projects was related to Russian music, opera in particular. Diaghilev tried to introduce many opera arias into the concert program: from Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor*, Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Mikhail Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden* and *Sadko*. The concert program was not elaborate, but despite that, Diaghilev invited such outstanding performers as Fyodor Chaliapin and Dmitry Smirnov. Diaghilev made a considerable contribution to publication of compositions by Mikhail Glinka, Alexander Dargomyzhsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Scriabin in Paris, which also was also a way to introduce Europeans to Russian musical art.

A grand event in the cultural life of Paris was Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* (1908). In order to create stage design for this performance, Diaghilev brought a group of artists in: Konstantin Korovin, Ivan Bilibin, Aleksandr Golovin, and Alexandre Benois. Fabrics, headwear, and accessories for the performance were purchased in

the North of Russia, namely in the provinces of Arkhangelsk and Vologda. Diaghilev incorporated a lot in the performance, which as a result appeared to be a patchwork or "eclectic exotic". Moreover, he himself took part in putting the sets up. The performance received a warm welcome from the audience and like all Diaghilev's productions achieved spectacular success.

In 1908, in addition to opera, Diaghilev decided to stage ballet. *Mir Iskusstva* demonstrated a keen interest in ballet, and it was through ballet that the miriskusniki tried to promote their aesthetic programme. Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois worked as stage designers in *The Puppet Fairy* ballet for the Imperial Theatres. Diaghilev also had a conception of Alexander Glazunov's ballet *Raymonda* and Nikolai Tcherepnin's ballet *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, the latter having developed into a programmatic ballet. This ballet premiered in 1907 in St. Petersburg, with Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky as the leads. This ballet solidified the alliance between the miriskusniki and the promising dancers and choreographers. A great contributor to this alliance was Michel Fokine, who distinguished himself as a prominent ballet master participating in all productions of the Ballets Russes.

Ballet was appreciated in Russia more than in any other European country, and Russian ballet schools were considered the best in the world. The flowering of the Russian ballet school is associated with the creative activity of Marius Petipa, who since 1870 was the Premier maître de ballet (First Ballet Master) of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres. It was classic, but Diaghilev was striving for innovation. For this reason, he became genuinely interested in the famous American dancer Isadora Duncan. Her performances were attended by Anna Pavlova, Sergei Diaghilev, Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois and Michel Fokine. All of these productions were given reviews by Diaghilev in *Mir Iskusstva*. Diaghilev frequently had conflicts with management over budget overrun and his self-activity. The person to play a prominent role in these conflicts was the Prima Ballerina Assoluta Mathilde Kschessinska: she refused to perform the lead role in *Le Pavillon d'Armide* ballet and was replaced by the young Anna Pavlova.

It was this particular ballet that Diaghilev presented to the audience of Paris in 1909, as well as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Maid of Pskov*. A committee or an activist group was created, which brought together both professionals

and ballet devotees from among people close to art. For the 1908/09 Ballet Russe season, eight performances were chosen to be shown; singers, the orchestra and ballet dancers came to Paris. Diaghilev did everything himself, looked for premises to rent, including rehearsal rooms and workshops for building sets, organized a costume design studio, etc. For financial support, he applied to wealthy patrons and the Tsar. In addition to *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, Diaghilev decided to show *Giselle*, *Chopiniana* and *The Sylph*. Before Paris, these ballets had been rehearsed in St. Petersburg; there the two great ballerinas Mathilde Kschessinska and Anna Pavlova had encountered each other. Not having negotiated her decision with Diaghilev, Anna Pavlova formed her own company to tour European cities. By this time, Diaghilev had ordered playbills with her portrait, but she did not cancel the tour and arrived in Paris two weeks after the opening night.

On May 19, *Le Pavillon d'Armide* and *Prince Igor* premiered. The productions were considered phenomenal. As Léon Bakst said, "Russian ballet is the perfect synthesis of all the existing arts". Diaghilev gave every detail of the production careful and serious consideration, and ultimately reached a new level of dramatic expression. After Paris, he intended to stage Russian ballet in other European cities. Diaghilev made incredible efforts to enhance Russian culture in Europe. At a time of the rising Western modernism, he turned into "a frantic collector of the Russian past, antiquities, books ... his leisure was occupied in studying antique catalogues". The 1909 Ballet Russe season in Paris proved a spectacular success and was said to have marked the beginning of a new era in French and Western theatre art in general.

Since 1900 and up to the end of the 1920s, Russian artists and painters had a significant impact on fashion development in Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century in Russia there was an increased interest in the country's national medieval culture, and the art of Japan, which could not but affect the new style brought by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes to the West. Diaghilev and artists set world trends concerning fashion, colours on trend, dance, reading, and interior design. There were two directions: the first - Russian, Slavic; the second - oriental, brought by Russian artists who created scenery and costumes for Diaghilev's performances. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes greatly contributed to the spread of the Art Nouveau style, the Russian form of which, the neo-Russian modern, influenced European fashion.

#### **4. THE BALLETS RUSSES AS THE FOUNDATION FOR MODERN BALLET**

The Silver Age brought to the light the richness and diversity of Russian art: literature, architecture, painting, theatrical art, music and ballet. The new paths and quests were emerging which soon led to the creation of great treasures of art.

In the 1930s-1950s, the art of the Silver Age was considered decadent and alien to the Soviet art, but since the mid-1950s, the thaw period, the interest in it has been increasing. One of the most appealing ideas is the synthesis of arts, which was promoted by Diaghilev through his Ballets Russes in Paris. It is great artistic heritage relevant not only for the time of the Ballets Russes, but also for the periods of art development that followed.

The aesthetic programme that Diaghilev implemented originated with the creative association of *Mir Iskusstva* established by him in 1898. It focused on visual, theatrical arts, and ballet. The *miriskusniki* were romantics; they idealized the Middle Ages and folk art, and tried to introduce aestheticism and dreams into the contemporary materialistic world. The synthesis of arts was clearly displayed in the innovative activity of the first choreographer of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Michel Fokine, and in the work of Vaslav Nijinsky. They altered the choreographic language of classical dance that had developed in the era of romanticism. Dramatic pantomime developed, as well as those dance moves extracted from folklore. What later became known as "free plastique" or modern-dance appeared (performances by Nijinsky: *The Afternoon of a Faun*, *The Rite of Spring*, *Jeux*).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Art Nouveau style influenced arts: literature, theatre, architecture, scenography, fine arts, and ballet. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes indicated the consistent trend towards modernization of classical dance, its development and enhancement by means of its internal capacity and the introduction of elements of pantomime, folk and ethnographic choreography, modern-dance, later followed by the development of ballet, jazz dance, historical and ballroom dance, labour and acrobatic movements. The further innovations in ballet are associated with the names of Yury Grigorovich, and Boris Eifman, but it was Diaghilev's Ballets Russes where innovations started emerging. The repertoire was based not on multiple-act performances, but on choreographic miniatures and so-called non-narrative ballets

staged to "non-ballet" music (Michel Fokine's performances *Carnaval*, *Les Papillons*). The composer Igor Stravinsky created ballets *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring* which combined music and the new dance language.

Scenography, theatricism, and symbolism – all emerged in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Ballet performances, scenery, and costumes were differently designed and followed the director's concept of a performance; a new choreographic genre of dance symphony appeared. When designing ballet performances, many artists of the 20th century were guided by the achievements of the Ballets Russes (ballet performances designed by Simon Virsaladze, Boris Messerer and other artists). Artists worked in cooperation with the choreographers and by means of costume design contributed to the entire stage image. As costume sketches conveyed dance moves, critics emphasized that the artists created costume design not so much for the characters of the play as for the dance itself.

Diaghilev had a significant impact on the world of choreography. After his death, when the ballet company disbanded, many ballet dancers founded their own schools worldwide. Michel Fokine, Léonide Massine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Serge Lifar, ballerinas Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and others continued the traditions of Diaghilev's ballet. Thus, the Ballets Russes have established the foundation for modern ballet, which would not have taken its present form otherwise.

Diaghilev and his colleagues changed the paradigm of Russian culture: aestheticism replaced literature-centrism. In numerous articles by Diaghilev, poetry became the metric of perfection of art, so when reviewing paintings, he often wrote about poetry. Moreover, Diaghilev was engaged in organizing exhibitions and in his articles highlighted that "an ideal exhibition should be related to a literary genre". As he stated in his article entitled Exhibitions (1900), "in every work of art, all parts should be united by the inner meaning. An exhibition should not be seen as an outrageous bazaar taking place in premises resembling railway stations, but as a work of art, a poem - clear, distinctive, and, most importantly, integral. Only in this case it may be regarded as an exhibition as such".[6] Diaghilev highly appreciated literature, and even wrote a critical article about literature entitled "Illustrations to Pushkin", which was prepared for a special Pushkin issue of *Mir Iskusstva*. According to Diaghilev, illustrations should not dissolve in a literary work,

but should contribute to the poet's work with their originality and express the artist's personality.

*Mir Iskusstva* reflected Diaghilev's views on aestheticism and brought Symbolist poets and critics to public attention. Within six years, the magazine published the poems by Konstantin Balmont, Nikolai Minsky, Zinaida Gippius, and Fyodor Sologub. The literary department of *Mir Iskusstva* was interested in the literature of realism (Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Afanasy Fet, Anton Chekhov), Symbolism (Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Konstantin Balmont), and foreign literature (William Shakespeare, Pedro Calderón, Henrik Ibsen). Even in its early times, Diaghilev's magazine paid attention to the synthesis of arts, and behind that was Diaghilev, his personality and many-sided creative activity. This demonstrated, among other things, a special Symbolist aspect: "in which the boundaries were blurred between reality and dreams, between a waking dream and a dream that has become a reality, and the question about the very existence of the boundary arose" (for example, Michel Fokine's choreographic piece *The Spirit of the Rose*) [7].

## 5. CONCLUSION

Sergei Diaghilev who is considered one of the key figures in the culture at the turn of the century and his associates changed the paradigm of the Russian culture: literature centrism gave way to aestheticism, and poesy became the measure of artistic phenomena. Such is the conclusion from numerous Diaghilev's articles. In the Silver Age, the synthesis of different art types took place and symbolism in artistic culture was revealed; but at the same time, this period was characterized by reliance on tradition in a constant pursuit of the new

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Based on the analysis of the artistic culture of the Silver Age, Professor Andrey Konovalov accentuated the key idea of the spiritual synthesis of arts: poetry, painting, dance, music, and theatre, and the blurring distinction between them. Professor Liudmila Mikheeva summarized the fundamental ideas of Russian and foreign authors concerning the creation of new life-building forms that allow revealing Symbolist features and the uniqueness of the artistic culture of the Silver Age. Postgraduate student Yulia Gushchina described the creative activity of Sergei Diaghilev, the iconic figure in the history and culture of the Silver Age

and the founder of Ballets Russes, and discussed his role in the development of Russian art and its promotion in Europe.

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