



Sumptuous Indulgence: Diaghilev and Juan Gris

Description



Bergère (The Temptations of the Shepherdess), 1923

Spanish painter Juan Gris is best known as a pioneer of early 20th century art, spearheading a bright, playful strand of Cubism in France. But for a brief spell, his career took another path, travelling down the route of theatre design for Ballets Russes director Sergei Diaghilev. Under Diaghilev's guidance Gris produced a series of daring, spirited and adventurous designs for the Ballets Russes, taking the vivid cut-and-paste language of his art off the flat page and out into the awe-inducing arena of theatre.



Les Tentations de la Bergere (The Temptations of the Shepherdess), 1923, National Library of Congress

Gris first met Diaghilev in 1922 on the southeastern coast of France while convalescing from a severe chest infection, and the pair immediately hit it off. Gris had already watched Picasso's *Parade* with the Ballets Russes in 1917 so the notion of exploring theatre design must have already piqued his interest. But it was this chance encounter with Diaghilev that set the ball in motion – by 1923 Gris had agreed to work on costumes and sets for the Monte Carlo production of *Les Tentations de la Bergère (The Temptation of the Shepherdess)*, 1924. The storyline was set in rural 18th century France, where a beautiful shepherdess is courted by a lord, although she rejects his advances and instead falls in love with a local shepherd. As the story closes the heartbroken lord blesses their union.



LÉON WOIZIKOVSKY DANS LES TENTATIONS DE LA BERGÈRE

PHOTO NUMA BLANC

(The Temptations of the Shepherdess), 1923

Romantic storylines set in the 17th and 18th centuries were becoming increasingly popular in post-World War I France, particularly idealistic versions of the past as an escape from present-day trauma. Diaghilev was particularly interested in Neoclassical and Renaissance music during this time and the music of 18th century composer Michel Pignolet de Montéclair was the starting point for this ballet. Renowned ballerina Bronislava Nijinska was chosen to choreograph movement to accompany the music, and Gris worked closely alongside her to envision his costumes and sets.



MAQUETTE DU DÉCOR



LA COLOMBE

HORACE

JUAN GRIS

Juan Gris La Colombe stage design and costume design

In contrast with Picasso, whose designs for the theatre leaned towards avant-garde Cubist experimentation, Gris took a more traditional approach, responding intuitively to the historical setting of the storyline with 17th century corsets, ruffles and bows in sumptuous, indulgent fabrics and vivid, eye-catching colours. But the lively textures and patterns of his art can also be seen clearly in Gris's costumes, which juxtaposed high-sheen, silky fabric with stiffened bodices and intricate areas of embroidery to convey a more vivid and colourful sense of character. Gris staged Louis XIV as the blazing sun god by adorning his costume with embroidered flaming sunbursts, while the Countess wore a striking gown with an appliquéd regal fleur-de-lys design and glistening train that spilled out onto the floor like water; Diaghilev adored the Countess costume so much he selected it for one of his famous *Fêtes Merveilleuses* held in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles later the same year. The Marquis, Barons and Shepherdess costumes Gris designed were equally as elaborate, featuring tight, corseted waists, puffy sleeves and intricate adornments of frills, ruffles and feathers.



1924

Gris must have thoroughly enjoyed his first foray into the ballet for he returned again the following year to create costumes, sets and curtains for the comic opera *La Colombe (The Dove)*, 1924, and the one-act operetta *Une Education Manqué (An Incomplete Education)*, 1924, both of which were staged in Monte Carlo. In May 1924 Gris also created costumes for Diaghilev's Red Cross Gala held at Les Grands Magasins du Printemps in Paris. Although Gris returned to painting full-time later in 1924, his experiences with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes would stay with him for life. Like so many of Diaghilev's artists, Gris's work for the ballet came to colour much of his later art, which was filled with dramatic layers of glossy ruffled fabric in enclosed stage-like settings, and the stark, melodramatic lighting of the stage.

CATEGORY

1. DIAGHILEV
2. TEXTILES

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