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(front cover) Alexandre Benois  Costume for a musician in
Le Pavillon d’Armide (detail) National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
© Alexandre Benois, 1909/ADAGP, Reproduced by permission
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(back cover) Michel Larionov  Costume design for the Chief Clown
in Chout Victoria and Albert Museum, London © Michel Larionov,
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(frontispiece) Count Jean de Strelecki  Portrait of Serge Diaghilev
St Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music
The Sexual Iconography of the Ballets Russes

The Ballets Russes transformed just about every aspect of ballet during the twenty years of its existence. From the art of ballet to its enterprise and audience, nothing was left untouched. In the wake of Serge Diaghilev there could be no question of returning to the past without acknowledging the profound changes wrought or set in motion by his company. This being the case, it is indeed curious that the company's influence on the iconographic representation of ballet has been largely ignored. Although certain images are invoked ad infinitum, they are seldom viewed within the larger context of dance iconography or as conveying certain ideas about gender. In fact, they are prima facie evidence of a newly forged link between ballet and the élite homosexual milieux that were attracted to the Ballets Russes.

Ballet before Diaghilev, especially in the West, was a largely female world. Most dancers were women, including those who partnered them pretending to be young men, and most ballets had heroines as their protagonists. In Paris as in London, female pulchritude was at a premium. 'Young and pretty dancers required immediately', advertised the Nouveau-Théâtre in 1897, the same year that Panorama Paris s'amuse — an album of photographs of the Opéra's leading dancers — displayed them, according to an announcement in Figaro, in a 'hundred delicious attitudes of coquetry, passion, or grace'. It was the great subject of Edgar Degas, this Opéra ballet world of the late nineteenth century, with its evanescent tulle and careless physicality, a ghetto of the feminine off-limits to men, except for the occasional voyeur. Degas was not alone in treating the Opéra this way. However, in the paintings of Georges Clairin (think of his portrait of Virginia Zucchi in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra) or the drawings of Paul Renouard, the erotic appeal is overt, as it is in posters of the period and the titillating dressing room photographs. The many postcards of dancers suggest the popularity and ambiguous appeal of such images.

The Ballets Russes did not bring an end to this trade in images. It did alter their content and the means by which they circulated. Rather than female, the subject nearly always was male and the image usually published in a limited-edition format. Male dancing was certainly one of the great revelations of Diaghilev's early ballet seasons. However, it was not the 'straitl' featured in those seasons — Mikhail Mordkin, Adolph Bolm, Michel Fokine, the two Koslov brothers — who inspired the new iconography, but rather the sexually ambiguous Vaslav Nijinsky. To be sure, Nijinsky was a magnificent dancer, the star around whom Diaghilev built virtually his entire pre-war repertory. But he was also Diaghilev's lover, the only dancer (with the partial exception of Tamara Karsavina and Ida Rubinstein) to enjoy entrée into the privileged circles in which Diaghilev travelled. Among these was the élite homosexual world of Jean Cocteau and Comte Robert de Montesquiou, Baron de Meyer and Princesse de Polignac, Marcel Proust and Romaine Brooks — the core, 'insider' audience for the albums by George Barbier, Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape, and Robert Montenegro that now borrowed the iconography of 'decadence' and Art Nouveau to 'homoeroticise' the body of the Ballets Russes star.

(left) George Barbier Nijinsky as the Golden Slave and Rubinstein as Zobeide in Scheherazade from Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky National Gallery of Australia Research Library, Canberra
(oopposite) Auguste Bert Nijinsky as the Golden Slave in Scheherazade from E.O. Hoppe, Studies from the Russian Ballet National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Beaumont goes on to contrast Nijinsky with Adolph Bolm, 'the true embodiment of manlike vigour and masculine virility'. He recalls Bolm, the company's principal character dancer, as he appeared in his most famous role, the Polovtsian chief in Danses polovtsiennes du Prince Igor (The Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor), a warrior 'mad with triumph and excited with the lust of war', leaping wildly, bow held high while amid arrows 'loosed in sheer frenzy'. 'Rôles such as [this]', concludes Beaumont, 'are impossible for Nijinsky.'

Although he had a riveting stage presence, Nijinsky was not especially good-looking. This was hardly the case of his successor, Léonide Massine, whom Diaghilev discovered at the Bolshoi, made the star of La Légende de Joseph (The Legend of Joseph), and marketed as a beautiful boy as well as his latest discovery. However Massine, although living with Diaghilev for nearly seven years, did not present himself as homosexual. Where Nijinsky had drawn attention to his body, Massine did just the opposite. Indeed, nearly all the roles he choreographed for himself during this period, from the Chinese Conjuror in Parade to the Can-Can Dancer in La Boutique fantastique (The Magical Toyshop), either masked his body or made it comic or grotesque in some way, more often than not effectively neutering it. In fact, Massine did nothing to capitalise on his good looks. He refused to be a pin-up, gay or straight.

The young men who succeeded him in Diaghilev's affections could not have been more different. For one thing they were savvier: they knew the game and were happy to play it. For another, they had no qualms about flaunting their charms in public. There is a photograph of Anton Dolin as Beau Gosse in the 1924 beach ballet Le Train bleu (The Blue Train). He wears an old-fashioned bathing suit, with straps over the shoulders and cut low in front, revealing well-developed pectorals. His gaze is unabashedly direct, not a question, or an appeal, but a statement and a challenge: Here I am, take me. This gaze, strong, direct and seductive, also appears in the pictures of Serge Lifar taken by Man Ray and other photographers in the years that followed. Lifar was Diaghilev's last leading man, George Balanchine's first Apollo and Prodigal Son, a diamond in the rough remade as a Deco god. All swagger as the Officer in Barabau (in some pictures he is shown brandishing a sword), he mugs flirtatiously as the French sailor in Les Matelots (The Sailors); in Roméo et Juliette he gazes through a harlequin's mask, while in La Pastorale he wears a toothy grin and heavy lipstick.

With Dolin and especially Lifar reappear elements of Nijinsky's erotic packaging — the slim waist, the indiscreet nipple, the make-up, the artful pose and gesture. Except that now the image displays a new toughness, the angular, hard-edged look of modern design combined with an insistence on the body's physical musculature. Often the legs are naked, with thongs laced high up the calf; belts cinch the waist; the chest is hairless; the pectorals, abdominals and thighs have the sinewy hardness of an athlete's.
(opposite) Léon Bakst  Costumes for nymphs in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; (above top) Léon Bakst  Set design for *L'Après-midi d'un faune* Musée national d'art moderne — Centre de création industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

(above left) Baron Adolf de Meyer  Nijinsky as the Faun in *L'Après-midi d'un faune* 1912 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

(above right) Baron Adolf de Meyer  Scene from *L'Après-midi d'un faune* 1912 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Such toughness was not limited to the stage, but reflected — or, at least, paralleled — changes in the homosexual audience at large. Complaining about the ‘beautiful burgeoning boys’ who crowded London performances of the Ballets Russes in the late 1920s, Vogue critic Herbert Farjeon observed:

The velvet-voiced youth of twenty who has taken possession of the Russian Ballet is more formidable than his aesthetic predecessor of thirty or forty years ago. He is not so drooping, not so languishing, he does not court the interesting pallor of former days. On the contrary, he is surprisingly pink in the cheek, surprisingly fit, surprisingly unready to go down like a ninepin.16

Because photographs circulated to a broad audience — the ones in question, for instance, were published in magazines as well as company programs — the expression of homoeroticism was circumspect. However, in limited editions such as Eileen Mayo’s album of drawings of Lifar published in England in 1928, the homoerotic content is more explicit. This is particularly noticeable in the drawings based on photographs: in almost every instance they exaggerate the suggestiveness of the pose, the arch of the torso, the pout of the lips, the bulge of a calf, buttock or thigh. In playing up both the butch physicality and the narcissism of the originals, the artist makes Lifar an icon of gay desire.

Like earlier representations of Nijinsky, Mayo’s drawings typically depict Lifar alone. In a sense they are only marginally concerned with dance, using it as an excuse for displaying the attractions of a physically active body in motion, of minimising the wantonness of sexually provocative movements performed by men. In fact, they are closer to erotica than dance images, offering a limited number of spectators a source of private delectation. Only 500 copies of the Mayo book were printed, and relatively few of the images were reproduced elsewhere. Four hundred copies of Barbier’s book on Nijinsky were printed, and just over 900 of the Iribé–Cocteau volume. Such figures lend support to the argument that with the Ballets Russes the male dancer became a subject of homoeosexual erotica, just as images of the female dancer had previously figured in its heterosexual counterpart.

In any number of ways the Mayo album harked back to the earlier tradition associated with Nijinsky. The link is evident not only in the format and graphic style but also in the iconography — the feathers, fabrics and props that serve as fetishes, the exposed nipples, the artifice of the surrounding scene, even some of the poses. Indeed, it is hard to believe that Mayo was unaware of Barbier’s Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky. Both books were published by Beaumont, and each contained an essay by him. Here was the beginning of a gay tradition that Carl Van Vechten and George Platt Lynes would pick up and elaborate upon in photography.18

To be sure, not all images of Lifar highlighted his virility. Indeed, in 1929 The Sketch, a popular London illustrated magazine, published a ‘decoration’ by Félix de Gray19 that barely distinguished between Lifar in the title role of Apollon musagètes (Apollo) and two of the Muses that served him: all wore pleated, thigh-skimming tunics, looked to the side in profile, had generous hips and limply extended arms. Whereas the Muses gambolled in the background on demi-pointe, Apollo stood on full pointe, a pose that only underscored his effeminacy, pointe work being traditionally the domain of women. In a certain sense, the image neutralised the homoeroticism of Lifar’s image by overtly feminising it.

Eileen Mayo  Lifar as Boreas in Zéphire et Flore from Serge Lifar  National Gallery of Australia Research Library, Canberra, Feint Collection
While the 1930s witnessed a return to more conventional representations of gender in ballet, the homoerotic tradition associated with the Ballets Russes did not vanish. It simply went underground, becoming a part of the era's burgeoning gay literary and visual culture. Although ballet remains pre-eminently an art practised and consumed by women, it has come to be regarded as a gay art, inherently so in the view of some scholars. Yet, as the sea change in early twentieth-century iconography clearly demonstrates, there is nothing intrinsically gay about ballet any more than there is anything intrinsically straight about baseball. Ballet became a magnet for gay men because of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which was not only a showcase for gay male talent and gay male themes, but also a meeting ground where gay men could socialise relatively free of the constraints of the closet. Although for millions of little girls, ballet remains a vision of tutus and Sugar Plums, for gay men it represents — at least in part and largely thanks to Diaghilev — a homoerotic nirvana, where the display of male beauty and desire for the male body can be experienced within the safe haven of high art.

Lynn Garafola

1. 'Petites Nouvelles', Figaro, 23 March 1897, p.5; 'Courrier des Théâtres', Figaro, 7 March 1897, p.3.
3. See Natalia Metelitsa's essay 'From St Petersburg to Paris', in this publication pp.24–39, for a discussion of Mir iskusstva.
4. 'Lochمه vaprocy; Nash minimy upadok!' (Complicated Questions: Our supposed decline), Mir iskusstva, 1 : 1–2, 1899, p.3.
5. I am grateful to Simon Karlin for this information.
6. The Yellow Book was a British illustrated quarterly that appeared from 1894 to 1897. Closely associated with the Aesthetic Movement and Art Nouveau, it published the work of many distinguished artists and writers, including Aubrey Beardsley (who was the art editor), Max Beerbohm, Henry James, Edmund Gosse, and Walter Sickert.
7. The image appeared in 'Osnovy kudozhvestvennoi osenki' (Principles of Art Criticism), Mir iskusstva, 1 : 3–4, 1899, p.54. Illustrations by and articles about Beardsley appeared in a number of issues, underscoring John Bowlit's contention that the journal revealed a 'distinct predilection for the graphics of Beardsley' (John E. Bowlit, The Silver Age: Russian art of the early twentieth century and the 'World of Art' group, Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1979, p.63).
9. This is especially clear in Barbier's various treatments of Schéhérazade. See, for instance, the two unnumbered plates in Nijinsky, Mlle Rubinstein, sous les traits de Zobeide', Le Théâtre, December 1911, 2, n.p.; 'Ida Rubinstein and Nijinsky in Schéhérazade', Bollettino di Ballo e Theatre Material, London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, 25 May 1977, lot 35.
12. Ibid.
13. Anton Dolin wrote in Last Words: A final autobiography, London: Century Publishing, 1985, pp.31–2, which was published posthumously: 'When I went to Paris to audition for Diaghilev in September 1923, I think I realised, though not in a worldly-wise way, what was in store for me there. Diaghilev had made his interest in me apparent, although not overt, during the London season, when I had been a shy youth of seventeen. Now here I was at the age of nineteen, having grown up a little and learned a lot, well developed, and a good enough dancer, I was confident, to join his company as a principal. Somewhere in my mind I knew that this would prove my relationship with him on a different footing.'
15. Most of these photographs are reproduced in the company's souvenir programs. Otherwise, the best collection is to be found in André Levinson, Serge Lifar: Destin d'un danseur, Paris: Grasset, 1934.
19. 'A de Gray Decoration on a Russian Ballet Theme', The Sketch, 3 July 1929, p.22.

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