Backcloth

Date: ca. 1926 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Natalia Goncharova, born 1881 - died 1962 (designer)

Museum number: S.455-1980

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

The Firebird (L'Oiseau de feu) was an archetypal 'Diaghilev' ballet, and one of the most successful of the early works of the Diaghilev Ballets Russes. Premiered in Paris in 1910, it was distinguished not only by Mikhail Fokine's imaginative and magical choreography and production, but by being Serge Diaghilev's first commissioned score from Igor Stravinsky. It was the beginning of a distinguished collaboration between Stravinsky and Diaghilev's company.

The ballet was designed by Alexander Golovine except for the leading dancers' costumes, which were by Leon Bakst. By the mid-1920s, when Diaghilev wished to revive the ballet, the original designs were seen as old-fashioned. Diaghilev therefore commissioned new sets and costumes from Natalia Goncharova, whose style, deriving from icons and Russian folklore, with bold colours and simplified shapes, was admirably suited to the folk tale elements in the ballet.

The backcloth for Scene II evokes a traditional Russian city skyline of towers and minerets: the colours are bold reds, blues and ochres with gleaming golden onion domes. The set, combined with Stravinsky's sublime music and the grave procession paying homage to the Tsarevitch and his beautiful Tsarevna, creates an overwhelming sense of joy, majesty and celebration that movingly evokes a primitive yet essential Russia. It is one of the great moments of the Diaghilev Ballet.

The first performance of the redesigned production was seen at the Lyceum Theatre, London, on 25 November 1926. The ballet remained in the repertory until Diaghilev's death and in the 1930s was acquired, along with the remaining Diaghilev repertory, by the De Basil Ballets Russes and was performed by them in London and internationally during the 1930s and 1940s.

Descriptive line

Backcloth designed by Natalia Goncharova for scene ii of the ballet, The Firebird, revived by Diaghilev Ballets Russes, Lyceum Theatre, 1926

Physical description

Backcloth showing a stylized Russian city of towers and minerets painted in bold reds, blues and ochres with gleaming golden onion domes rising above a blue-grey castillated wall

Dimensions

Height: 1024 cm, Width: 1571 cm

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Object history note

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Goncharova’s design for the backcloth (E.2137-1932) was given to the V&A by W.A. Propert and is now in PDP. The Theatre Museum holds the squared-up drawing (S.) from which the backcloth was painted. The only discrepancy is that the backcloth has additional side pieces which have been added to allow it to be used in larger theatres.

The Theatre Museum also owns Goncharova's drawing for the final scene backcloth and the costume design for the Beautiful Tsarevna, made for the 1954 revival by Sadler's Wells Ballet.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129761/backcloth-natalia-goncharova/