

Crafting the
Ballets Russes
*The Robert Owen
Lehman Collection*

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Crafting the Ballets Russes: The Robert Owen Lehman Collection tells a story of the composers, choreographers, and stage designers who gathered in 1909 under the leadership of the twentieth century's greatest impresario, Serge Diaghilev. The ballets they brought to Paris built a modernist musical repertoire, shaped generations of stage artists, and launched the world of ballet we know today.

Robert Owen Lehman's extraordinary collection of music manuscripts has been an inspiration to scholars and visitors in the half century since it came to the Morgan on deposit. Amid Lehman's panoramic record of Western music lies a rich selection of early twentieth-century ballet manuscripts. This collection, shown here for the first time, is presented alongside the ballets' vivid stage designs and rarely seen choreographic notations, shining new light on these beloved works.

The exhibition highlights the rise of women in leading creative roles. Bronislava Nijinska, the Ballets Russes' only female choreographer, reenvisioned ballet in Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces* in 1923 and other important works. Ida Rubinstein's riveting stage presence in productions such as *Schéhérazade*, in 1910, helped establish the Ballets Russes' reputation, and she later rivaled Diaghilev as a patron of music, commissioning and starring in Maurice Ravel's *Bolero* in 1928.

The exhibition centers on the creative process that brought these ballets to life. Addressing the sketches, drafts, and working copies of the composers, choreographers, and designers, *Crafting the Ballets Russes* shows how they imagined, conceived, and collaborated to kindle works of astonishing originality and ongoing influence.

Crafting the Ballets Russes: The Robert Owen Lehman Collection is supported by the William Randolph Hearst Fund for Scholarly Research and Exhibitions, the Robert Lehman Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Clement C. Moore II, the Lucy Ricciardi Family Exhibition Fund, Elizabeth and Jean-Marie Eveillard, Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon Polsky, and the Franklin Jasper Walls Lecture Fund. Assistance is provided by the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation and Hubert and Mireille Goldschmidt.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), *Firebird*, autograph manuscript, piano, extensive revisions, [1910], inscribed 1918. The Morgan Library & Museum, Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit. Used by kind permission of European American Music Distributors Company, sole US and Canadian agent for Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, Mainz, Germany, publisher and copyright owner.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924), “Firebird and the Prince (Tsarevitch),” poster design for *Firebird*, 1915. Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D. Rothschild Collection.

These video excerpts show productions that restage or reference the ballets as Serge Diaghilev's and Ida Rubinstein's companies first presented them between 1910 and 1929.

Firebird

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Choreography: Michel Fokine

Scenery and costumes: Natalia Goncharova

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1910

Restaged by the Royal Ballet, 1960

Petrouchka

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Choreography: Michel Fokine

Scenery and costumes: Alexandre Benois

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1911

Restaged by the Joffrey Ballet, 1980

Afternoon of a Faun

Music: Claude Debussy

Choreography: Vaslav Nijinsky

Scenery and costumes: Léon Bakst

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1912

Restaged by the Berlin Ballet, 1998

The Rite of Spring

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Choreography: after Vaslav Nijinsky

Scenery and costumes: Nicholas Roerich

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1913

Restaged by the Joffrey Ballet, 1987

Les Noces

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Choreography: Bronislava Nijinska

Scenery and costumes: Natalia Goncharova

Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, 1923

Restaged by the Royal Ballet, 1978

La Valse

Music: Maurice Ravel

Choreography: Frederick Ashton

Scenery and costumes: Oliver Messel

Les Ballets de Madame Ida Rubinstein, 1929

Restaged by the Royal Ballet, 1963

XVIIe Saison de Serge de Diaghilew, Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo, 1924

Poster featuring ballets by Bronislava Nijinska, Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, and others, and mentioning the 1924 Olympics

Imprimeries Albert Picard

**Dance Collection of Mark and Tatiana Massine Weinbaum,
New York**

After Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

Detail of the backdrop for the final tableau of *Firebird*, 1926

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

ARTWORK: © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /

UPRAVIS, Moscow

IDA RUBINSTEIN

Ida Rubinstein (1883–1960), a Russian heiress with magnetic stage presence, performed the *Dance of the Seven Veils* from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* in St. Petersburg, with costume designs by Léon Bakst and choreography by Michel Fokine. In the audience was Serge Diaghilev, the Russian impresario who was about to take Paris by storm with his Ballets Russes. He invited Rubinstein to star in his inaugural season, and her performances in the ballets *Cléopâtre*, in June 1909, and *Schéhérazade*, in 1910 (alongside Vaslav Nijinsky), electrified Paris.

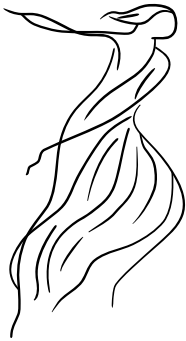
Howard Gardiner Cushing (1869–1916)

Ida Lvovna Rubinstein, ca. 1911

Oil on canvas

Private collection

DANCING FIGURES ON GALLERY WALLS



1. Isadora Duncan



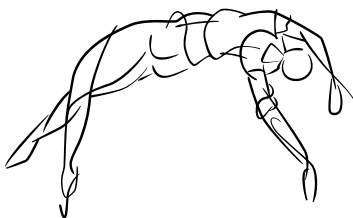
2. Tamara Karsavina as the Firebird



3. Vaslav Nijinsky as Petrouchka



4. Bronislava Nijinska as the Sixth Nymph in *Afternoon of a Faun*



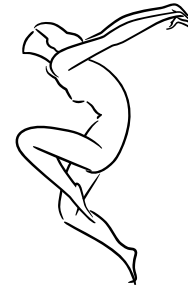
5. Nymph in *Afternoon of a Faun*



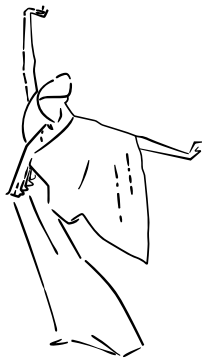
6. Vaslav Nijinsky as the Faun, carrying the veil



7. Chosen Maiden in
The Rite of Spring



8. Ida Rubinstein



9. Ida Rubinstein in
Helen of Sparta

Line renderings by Miko McGinty Inc., adapted from drawings by:

1. Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965)

2–7. Valentine Gross (1887–1968)

Victoria & Albert Museum, London. ARTWORKS: © 2024

Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

8–9. Georges Tribout (1884–1962)

8. Collection of Donald Flanell Friedman

9. from *Dessins sur les gestes de Mademoiselle Ida Rubinstein*
(Paris: A la Belle Édition”, n.d.)

If only the painter, the composer, and the choreographer would work together in harmony, what wonders would they not show the public!

Attributed to Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810), dancer and ballet master

HOW THE NEW BALLET TOOK PARIS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Serge Diaghilev brought his troupe of Russian dancers to Paris, ballet was on the decline in France because of an outworn repertory, low standards of stagecraft, and a prevailing belief in the primacy of opera. In St. Petersburg, however, a seed for ballet's modernist revival was planted with Alexandre Benois (1870–1960), a young artist from a family deeply rooted within the city's art world. Witnessing the 1890 premiere of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, Benois saw in its union of music and dance something fresh and as-yet-unrealized, a spark that could lead beyond the overburdened seriousness of late nineteenth-century Russian art. Benois gathered young aesthetes in St. Petersburg for passionate discussions of art, theater, and literature. The group included the artist Léon Bakst (1866–1924), whose stage designs would define the early years of the Ballets Russes, and Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929), who quickly became the group's leader. Like much of the Western European avant-garde, they were fervent devotees of Richard Wagner, fascinated by the German composer's dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a fusion of art forms on stage.



Konstantin Somov (1869–1939), *Alexandre Benois*, 1908.
Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection.



Léon Bakst (1866–1924), *Self-Portrait*, 1893. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photo: The History Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.



Serge Diaghilev, Lausanne, 1915. Photographer unknown.
Collection of Parmenia Migel Ekstrom.

BAKST, BENOIS, DIAGHILEV

Between 1898 and 1904, Serge Diaghilev's group published an influential journal called *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art). Edited by Diaghilev with articles by Alexandre Benois and others, the journal promoted Russian artists and sought to bring the country's art in line with Western European trends—particularly Symbolist ideals of the artist's autonomy and subjectivity. The logo Léon Bakst created for the group, which was used in its journal and on its letterhead, depicts an eagle against a starry sky, capturing World of Art's guiding idea that art must remain free. The group felt the works of nineteenth-century Russian artists, including the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy and the composer Modest Mussorgsky, were too encumbered by social, religious, philosophical, and ideological concerns.

Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929)

**Autograph letter to an unidentified recipient, St. Petersburg,
October 31, 1900**

**Written on *Mir iskusstva* letterhead with illustration by Léon
Bakst (1866–1924)**

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

BAKST, BENOIS, DIAGHILEV

After the journal *Mir iskusstva* folded in 1904, Diaghilev gathered the World of Art group and set his sights on Paris. There they staged a 1906 exhibition of Russian painting at the Salon d'Automne, concerts in 1907 showcasing leading Russian composers, and in 1908 a lavish production of Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*. Following these successes, in 1909 Diaghilev's Saison Russe included, for the first time, ballet alongside opera. To his surprise, the ballets were more successful than the operas. In 1910 he presented dance exclusively, including the new works *Firebird*, *Schéhérazade*, and *Les Orientales*.

Flyer for Serge Diaghilev's 1910 Saison Russe, featuring ballet "créations" (premieres) including *Schéhérazade* and *Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)*

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

FOKINE

Michel Fokine (1880–1942), a young dancer and choreographer at St. Petersburg’s Maryinsky Theater, shared with the World of Art a strong interest in the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal. He became a key creative force in the Ballets Russes when Serge Diaghilev made him the choreographer for the company’s first seasons in Paris. In a 1914 letter to the London *Times*, he described the principles that had, in his view, defined the troupe’s creative approach, including “the alliance of dancing with the other arts.” The new ballet, he wrote, would not be subjugated to the demands of the music or design but would hold the arts in a “condition of complete equality.”

Valentin Serov (1865–1911)

Michel Fokine, after 1909

Lithograph

Private collection, New York

DUNCAN

Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), an American dancer whose performances were popular in Europe from the turn of the twentieth century, played a key role in shaping the Ballets Russes. Her appearances in St. Petersburg beginning in 1904 inspired Serge Diaghilev and his World of Art colleagues. Her new style of dance abandoned formal techniques in favor of simple movement, performed in bare feet and Grecian-inspired tunics. Her dancing had an enormous impact on the choreographer Michel Fokine, shaping his choreography and artistic vision. His work with the Ballets Russes helped to project key aspects of Duncan's innovations on twentieth-century dance.

Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965)

***Isadora Duncan*, n.d.**

Pen and pencil on paper

Private collection, New York

SCHÉHÉRAZADE

BAKST

Schéhéraza, premiering in June 1910 at the Paris Opéra and starring Ida Rubinstein and Vaslav Nijinsky, was the first original ballet Serge Diaghilev and his colleagues created specifically for Paris. The ballet, which invoked an imagined Persia—in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's exoticized music, Michel Fokine's choreography full of violence and sexual debauchery, and Léon Bakst's mind-bending juxtapositions of color and line—seemed to fulfill the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal. Fusing sound, color, and movement into a single sensuous experience, the ballet offered a spectacle unlike any that Paris audiences had witnessed before.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

Set design for bedroom scene for *Schéhéraza*, [1910]

Gouache on paper

Boris Stavrovski Collection, New York

IDA RUBINSTEIN

Like Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky, Ida Rubinstein (1883–1960) was among Serge Diaghilev’s great discoveries. In St. Petersburg she had starred in productions of Sophocles’s *Antigone* in 1904 and the *Dance of the Seven Veils* from Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* in 1908, collaborating with the artist Léon Bakst and choreographer Michel Fokine before they came to Paris with Diaghilev. Her sensual, riveting lead performances with the Ballets Russes in *Cléopâtre* (1909) and *Schéhérazade* (1910) helped secure the company’s early reputation. Diaghilev sought to engage Rubinstein in subsequent seasons, offering her roles in *Thamar* and *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L’Après-midi d’un Faune*) (both 1912), but Rubinstein did not see her future as a mere member of Diaghilev’s troupe. In 1911 she left the company to produce and star in her own stage works.

Jacques-Émile Blanche (1861–1942)

Ida Rubinstein as Zobéide in “Schéhérazade,” ca. 1910

Oil on canvas

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D. Rothschild Collection; pfMS Thr 414.4 (43)

FIREBIRD

Realizing that he needed a ballet on a Russian theme to satisfy the French craving for all things considered exotic—which included Russian culture—Serge Diaghilev set out to create a ballet on the folktale of the Firebird for his 1910 Paris season. The ballet's scenario is credited to Michel Fokine, the company's first choreographer: a daring prince battles an evil wizard, and with the Firebird's help and a magic egg, wins the beautiful princess. For Russians, the story was a silly hodgepodge. But *Firebird* was not meant for them. It was for Paris, designed expressly for export.

After attempting to commission a new work for 1910 from Claude Debussy and other leading French composers, then passing over three established Russian composers, Diaghilev finally took a risk on a young, little-known St. Petersburg student: Igor Stravinsky. For the first time, *Firebird* brought music up to the same level as the choreography and stage designs. Diaghilev and his World of Art colleagues felt they had achieved the Gesamtkunstwerk of their dreams, Richard Wagner's vision as they reimagined it: three art forms fused within a single, stunning experience.



Rehearsal at the Catherine Hall, St. Petersburg. Igor Stravinsky at the piano; Michel Fokine standing in white jacket, referencing notes; Tamara Karsavina at right. Photo: Lebrecht Music Arts / Bridgeman Images.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

Costume design for *Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)*, 1910

**Pencil, watercolor, and gouache, heightened with gold
on paper**

Private collection

BAKST, KARSAVINA

The details of Léon Bakst's 1910 and 1913 drawings for the Firebird costume match closely—the double braids, flying attachments to the headdress and skirt, and tear-shaped medallion. The same features appeared in the costume worn by Tamara Karsavina, the dancer in the original 1910 production.

Comparing drawings with photographs can reveal how stage designs are mediated by those who make the sets and costumes—just as the ideas of composers and choreographers are interpreted by musicians and dancers. Designs by Bakst and others often lacked much practical information—here, for example, depicting only the front—and costume makers took considerable freedom in interpreting them. At the same time, the movement on stage revealed bare flesh and fantastical shapes, perhaps coming closer, for the audience, to the impressions given in Bakst's drawings.

FOKINE

Although the Firebird was a familiar creature of Russian mythology, there was no single, ready-made folk tale about the Firebird to serve as the ballet's libretto. A new combination of existing stories was needed, and the task fell to a committee of composers, designers, and literary lights, as well as the choreographer Michel Fokine. He cited as one of his prime sources a popular collection of Russian folklore by Alexander Afanasyev, which had recently been reissued in this 1901 edition illustrated by Ivan Bilibin.

Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942)

Illustration from “Skazka ob Ivane-tsareviche, Zhar-ptitse i o serom volke” (Tale of Ivan-Tsarevich, the Firebird, and the gray wolf)

In Alexander Afanasyev (1826–1871), *Skazki* (Folk tales), pp. 2–3

St. Petersburg: Ekspeditsiya zagotovleniya gosudarstvennikh bumag, 1901

The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased on the Elisabeth Ball Fund, 1992; PML 86045

Igor Stravinsky, ca. 1902

Silver print postcard

Collection of Fabrice Herrault

STRAVINSKY

Igor Stravinsky labored furiously over the score for *Firebird*, working closely with the choreographer Michel Fokine, who was firmly in charge. The black and red markings of Stravinsky's piano manuscript offer a vivid record of their collaboration, showing how the composer followed the choreographer's creative lead, moving sections of music around to suit the requirements of the dance. But Stravinsky had opinions too. The ballerina Tamara Karsavina, who created the role of the Firebird, remembered the strong wills involved and Diaghilev's frequent role as arbiter in the creative process: "Stravinsky and Fokine . . . appealed to Diaghilev in every collision over the tempi"—tempo being an area in which the composer had particularly strong feelings.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

**“Adagio / Supplication of the Firebird” from *Firebird*
(*L'Oiseau de Feu*)**

**Autograph manuscript, piano, extensive revisions,
pp. 12–13, [1910], inscribed 1918**

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

**Tamara Karsavina and Michel Fokine in *Firebird*
(*L'Oiseau de Feu*), 1910**

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

Costume design for *Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)*, 1913

**Metallic paint, gouache, watercolor, and pencil on paper
on board**

**The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Joan and Lester
Avnet Collection; 4.1978**

Compared with the key role music notation plays in the creation and performance of a musical work, writing plays a lesser part in dance composition. Creation and transmission are ephemeral, flowing mainly through direct contact, in body and voice, as seen in this photograph of Tamara Karsavina, who danced as the original Firebird in 1910, at age seventy coaching the ballerina Margot Fonteyn in the title role for a 1954 production. (See a video of Fonteyn's 1960 performance outside this gallery in the Marble Hall.) Dance notation, if used at all, serves mainly as a memory aid, usually made after the fact to describe, rather than to prescribe, the performed result—as music notation is designed to do.

TOP:

Tamara Karsavina and Michel Fokine in *Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)*, 1910

In Collection des plus beaux numéros de “Comoedia illustré” et des programmes consacrés aux ballets et galas russes depuis le début à Paris, 1909–1921

The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection

BOTTOM:

Tamara Karsavina teaching the role of the Firebird to Margot Fonteyn, with Michael Somes, for a revival by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, Edinburgh, 1954

Reproduction

FOKINE

Although dance is conceived and taught primarily in person, rather than transmitted via writing as is common with music and literature, dance notation can nevertheless offer a meaningful view into a choreographer's creative ideas. Michel Fokine's writings for *Firebird* include cast lists, a rehearsal schedule for March 1910, and drawings for specific scenes. In these floor paths, showing the stage from above, he identifies each dancer with a number, using a sequence of boxes to show the dancers' movements across the stage. In the final box, numbered 27, Fokine zooms in with more detail, sketching stick figures to convey arm positions and poses.

Michel Fokine (1880–1942)

Choreographic notations for *Firebird* (*L'Oiseau de Feu*)

**Reproduction in *Against the Tide: Memoirs of a Ballet Master*
(Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1962), [pp. 260–61]**

Private collection, New York

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)

**Copyist manuscript, orchestral part, annotated by musicians,
ca. 1910–29**

From the library of Serge Diaghilev

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music
Collection**

BAKST

For *Firebird's* stage designs, Serge Diaghilev hired Alexander Golovin, whose scenery for the 1908 Paris production of *Boris Godunov* had been well received. The impresario was unhappy with Golovin's costumes for the Firebird and Tsarevna characters, however, and asked his trusted collaborator Léon Bakst to recast them. Bakst probably made this 1915 drawing not as a costume design but for a poster to advertise the Ballets Russes' 1916 North American tour.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

“Firebird and the Prince (Tsarevitch),” poster design for *Firebird (L'Oiseau de Feu)*, 1915

Watercolor and pencil on board

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D. Rothschild Collection; pfMS Thr 414.4 (13)

PETROUCHKA

Petrouchka, the feature of Serge Diaghilev's 1911 Paris Saison Russe, was a collaboration between Igor Stravinsky and the artist Alexandre Benois starring Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky. Diaghilev and his colleagues perceived this ballet to be their greatest creation yet. As with *Schéhérazade* and *Firebird*, audiences were struck by *Petrouchka*'s seamless fusion of music, dance, and design.

While Michel Fokine's choreography had guided Stravinsky's music in *Firebird*, in *Petrouchka* the music came first, leading the design and choreography. At the time, this was a radical aspect of the ballet and a key legacy of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes: music became the guiding art within the trinity of music, dance, and design, elevating the role of the composer.

Firebird made Stravinsky famous; *Petrouchka* made him *Stravinsky*, honing the fresh modernist musical voice that would define many of his works to come. His distinctive sound is heard particularly in *Petrouchka*'s vigorous rhythms and novel uses of Russian folk music.



Tamara Karsavina as the Ballerina in *Petrouchka*. Photo: Schneider. In Valerien Svetlov, *Thamar Karsavina* (London: C. W. Beaumont, 1922). The Morgan Library & Museum.

STRAVINSKY

Igor Stravinsky's full orchestral manuscript of 1911 showcases his elegant, calligraphic hand and is one of the few surviving early sources for the ballet. Musicologist Richard Taruskin recounts how Stravinsky went well beyond the popular nineteenth-century practice of borrowing from folk tunes: he studied sources with "precise ethnographic observation" and integrated traditional Russian music into a distinctive musical language, securing his status as a leading modernist.

Stravinsky's approach to rhythm became one of the defining aspects of his music: pounding beats, sudden disjunctures, frequent changes of meter, and extensive use of syncopation (playing on the offbeats).

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Petrouchka

Autograph manuscript, full score, pp. 30–31, May 26, 1911

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

NIJINSKY

Vaslav Nijinsky's portrayal of the doomed puppet in *Petrouchka* was one of his most striking and beloved roles. Igor Stravinsky wrote,

To call [Nijinsky] a dancer would only be half of the truth, because to an even greater degree he was a dramatic actor. His face, not classically beautiful but fine and expressive, could turn into a mask, a mask which impressed me more than any other actor's mask I have ever seen. In the part of *Petrouchka* he has created the most pathetic image that has ever appeared before me on the stage.

Vaslav Nijinsky as *Petrouchka*, [1911], no. 2054

Photograph by Dover Street Studios (London, active ca. 1906–12)

Library of Congress, Ida Rubinstein Collection

BENOIS

Alexandre Benois's contribution to *Petrouchka* was fundamental, and he is accurately credited as its coauthor alongside Igor Stravinsky. He merged the composer's initial inspiration, Petrushka, the stock character from Russian folk puppetry with a squawking voice and aggressive antics (or Punch, of Punch and Judy), with Pierrot, the sad clown with a painted face and pointed hat, from the Italian commedia dell'arte tradition—all reinterpreted through a Symbolist lens. The central character, the forlorn puppet in unrequited love with the Ballerina, becomes a Pierrot, remaining “Petrouchka” in name only.

The story evokes a place and time that Benois loved: St. Petersburg's old-fashioned “Butter Week Fair” in the 1830s, seen in this stage design for the first scene and his costume sketch for a fairgoer. Tamara Karsavina, who created the role of the Ballerina, wrote that Benois did not “merely [reconstitute] an epoch, but invested it with weird, irresistible power over one's imagination.”

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

**Set design for the “Butter Week Fair” for *Petrouchka*,
scenes 1 and 4, 1911**

**Graphite, tempera, and watercolor on paper
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; 1933.402.**

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

Costume design for a moujik (peasant) in *Petrouchka*, n.d.

Gouache and black ink with graphite on paper

The Morgan Library & Museum, Joseph F. McCrindle

Collection; 2009.23

DIAGHILEV, RUBINSTEIN, BAKST

Serge Diaghilev's and Ida Rubinstein's productions in the 1910s were celebrated alike in lavish souvenir programs published by the arts periodical *Comoedia illustré*. In a compilation for the years 1909–21, *Comoedia*'s editors gave equal billing to these “Saisons Russes”—both Diaghilev's ballets and Rubinstein's genre-defying “galas,” like 1911's *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, spectacles that combined spoken word, singing, and dancing. Many of the works that appeared in *Comoedia*, by both producers, featured Léon Bakst's designs. The souvenir programs were expensive, their lavish presentation mixing stage designs and photographs of Rubinstein, Nijinsky, Karsavina, Stravinsky, Bakst, and other key figures, alongside advertisements for perfume and other luxury products, as well as restaurants and steamships to New York.

***Comoedia illustré* souvenir program for the Ballets Russes'**

June 1911 season at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris

Left page: Insert for the *Petrouchka* premiere

Right page: Léon Bakst (1866–1924), Design for the ballet *Narcisse*

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

**Set design for the “Butter Week Fair” for *Petrouchka*,
scenes 1 and 4, 1911**

Graphite, tempera, and watercolor on paper

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; 1933.402

Costume design for a moujik (peasant) in *Petrouchka*, n.d.

Gouache and black ink with graphite on paper

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Joseph F. McCrindle
Collection; 2009.23**

BENOIS, FOKINE

Michel Fokine's choreography proved equally vital to *Petrouchka*. He kept to the first of the principles he published in a 1914 letter to the London *Times*—to “create in each case a new form corresponding to the subject, the most expressive form possible for the representation of the period and the character of the nation represented.” The ballet features a large crowd of characters, yet each is distinct and highly individualized, like those captured here in Alexandre Benois's designs, many of which date to later productions.

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

Costume design “No. 40” for *Petrouchka*, n.d.

Costume design for the Crow in *Petrouchka*, 1956

Watercolor and pen on paper

Private collection

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. SEBASTIAN

RUBINSTEIN, DEBUSSY, BAKST, D'ANNUNZIO

When the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio saw Ida Rubinstein in *Schéhérazade* in 1910, he invited her to collaborate on *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, a staging of the third-century Christian martyr's life. Starring in the title role as the male saint, she was also the ballet's patron—and the first Russian impresario to produce a new score by Claude Debussy, from whom Serge Diaghilev had attempted to commission music for the Ballets Russes in 1909. She borrowed two of Diaghilev's key talents: the designer Léon Bakst and the choreographer Michel Fokine. The first of many works Rubinstein would produce and star in over the next three decades, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* premiered in May 1911 at the Théâtre du Châtelet, the same Paris venue where Diaghilev would present *Petrouchka* just two weeks later.

***Comoedia illustré: numéro spécial*, vol. 3, no. 17, June 1, 1911**

Left page: Léon Bakst (1866–1924), Illustration for Ida Rubinstein as St. Sebastian in *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (*Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*)

Right page: The production's collaborators—composer Claude Debussy, poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, and artist Léon Bakst

The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection, purchased 2022; PMC 2818

DAPHNIS AND CHLOË

RAVEL, FOKINE, BAKST

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) is another figure, like Ida Rubinstein, whose work with the Ballets Russes was brief but intense. The 1912 season brought the long-awaited premiere of his only ballet produced by Serge Diaghilev, *Daphnis and Chloë*, with designs by Léon Bakst, like this drawing for Tamara Karsavina's costume as Chloë.

It was not a happy time for Michel Fokine, the choreographer. The more progressive members of Diaghilev's entourage, including Igor Stravinsky, felt that Fokine had failed to keep abreast of the modern movement. For his next choreographer, Diaghilev looked instead to Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950), the star dancer, to bring a fresh artistic agenda. At the end of the 1912 season, Fokine left the Ballets Russes.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

Costume design for Tamara Karsavina as Chloë in *Daphnis and Chloë*, 1912

Graphite and tempera on paper

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; 1933.392



Tamara Karsavina in *Daphnis and Chloë*. Photo: E. O. Hoppé
© E. O. Hoppé Estate Collection / Curatorial Inc. In Valerien
Svetlov, *Thamar Karsavina* (London: C. W. Beaumont, 1922).
The Morgan Library & Museum.

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

In late 1910 Vaslav Nijinsky began to choreograph a new ballet, his sister Bronislava Nijinska working closely beside him. Whereas Michel Fokine had set *Firebird* and *Petrouchka* to new music, Serge Diaghilev now followed the more common practice of selecting an existing score: Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*). Inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's famous Symbolist poem from 1876, Debussy's orchestral piece had become a defining modernist work since its 1894 premiere. In keeping with Symbolist ideals, which favored symbols and figurative language over literal representation, Debussy took an evocative approach to Mallarmé's poem. While many French composers of Debussy's generation remained under the Germanic-Wagnerian spell, he found new possibilities, inspired by sources ranging from the French composer Georges Bizet (1838–1875) to the Italian painter Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), Japanese art, and Javanese gamelan music, which he had heard at the 1889 World's Fair. An advocate for free experimentation, Debussy reportedly declared, when it comes to the creative act, "There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law!"



Léon Bakst (1866–1924), Costume illustration for Vaslav Nijinsky as the Faun in *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*), 1912. Reproduced in *Collection des plus beaux numéros de "Comoedia illustré," . . . 1909–1921*. The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection.

RODIN, NIJINSKY

On May 29, 1912, the sculptor Auguste Rodin attended the Paris premiere of Vaslav Nijinsky's first choreographed work for the Ballets Russes, *Afternoon of a Faun*. Nijinsky's unconventional dance divided critics, some praising his innovative modernist approach and others denouncing the work as obscene. Rodin recognized the groundbreaking nature of Nijinsky's choreography and publicly supported him, signing an article in the newspaper *Le Figaro*. Nijinsky posed for this sculpture a few days later; the work captures the Faun's muscular, animal grace.

Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)

***Vaslav Nijinsky in "Afternoon of a Faun" ("L'Après-midi d'un Faune")*, modeled 1912, cast 1959**

Bronze, marble base

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift in honor of B. Gerald Cantor; 1991.446

NIJINSKY

As the Ballets Russes' new choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky introduced a modernist approach to ballet composition in *Afternoon of a Faun*. Inspired by Greek urns, with their processions of dancing figures, he moved his dancers in two dimensions, heads and limbs twisted to the side. While Michel Fokine portrayed characters and emotions naturalistically, Nijinsky's choreography took an analytical approach to the mechanics of the body and explored geometric conceptions of space. His new approach opened the possibility to express abstract meaning through dance.

At the premiere, Claude Debussy was horrified, finding an "appalling dissonance" between his music and the choreography. Nijinsky himself noted that his choreography did not adhere tightly to the music, working instead in tension or counterpoint with it. Close analysis reveals a precise, if free, connection between music and dance in *Faun*.

Serge Diaghilev continued to program the ballet, which not only became a core part of the Ballets Russes' repertory but also defined an era in choreography and established a new independence for the art of dance.



Vaslav Nijinsky (crouching, center left) rehearsing *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*), with Bronislava Nijinska (seated left of the piano, in a black dress), Berlin, December 1912. Photo: Scherl.

MALLARMÉ, DEBUSSY

After hearing Claude Debussy's musical settings of the French poet Charles Baudelaire's work in 1890, Stéphane Mallarmé had suggested the composer adapt his poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*, the dreamlike monologue of a faun, a half-human, half-goat creature of Greek mythology, who awakes from a midday slumber and recalls his encounters with several nymphs. Published in this famous 1876 edition with illustrations by Édouard Manet, the poem is a defining expression of the French Symbolist movement.

Debussy's 1894 manuscript, here showing the languorous opening flute solo, is a key document for the work: his composing draft with notes for the subsequent creation of the full orchestral score. In just a few staves joined at the left side, he captures his ideas for the orchestra, indicating in red and green pencil the instruments that would play each passage. This manuscript is notably free of revisions; Debussy preferred to work out the music in his head and at the piano before committing his ideas to paper, though earlier sketches for the work likely existed.

Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898)

L'après-midi d'un faune (Afternoon of a Faun)

Illustrated by Édouard Manet (1832–1883)

Paris: Alphonse Derenne, 1876

**The Morgan Library & Museum, bequest of Gordon N. Ray,
1987; PML 140627**

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to the Afternoon
of a Faun)***

Autograph manuscript, short score (particell), p. 1, 1894

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

Marcel Baschet (1862–1941)

Claude Debussy as a student, 1884

Reproduction of a painting

**Musée d'Orsay, Paris, gift of Marina Charrin, through the
Société des Amis du Musée d'Orsay, 1996. PHOTO: © RMN-
Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York.**

DIAGHILEV, NIJINSKY

Vaslav Nijinsky was the first and greatest of Serge Diaghilev's male stars, later followed by Léonide Massine, Serge Lifar, and others: young dancers for whom Diaghilev was mentor, star-maker, and often lover. In contrast to the nineteenth-century tradition where the ballerina reigned supreme, women took leading roles less frequently in the Ballets Russes. The elevation of the male body to a central role in ballet was a defining innovation of Diaghilev's enterprise, seen in many works, from *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, 1912) to *Apollon Musagète* (renamed *Apollo*, 1928). Female stars like Anna Pavlova and Ida Rubinstein saw little future with the company and soon left to pursue independent careers.

Jean Cocteau (1889–1963)

Serge Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky, 1961 version of a 1913 original

Pen on paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Sentiment inscribed “Let us dance, let us pray, let us make love” and signed by Vaslav Nijinsky, n.d.

Postcard showing Vaslav Nijinsky as a young dancer, ca. 1908

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

DIAGHILEV

Serge Diaghilev kept this notebook in front of him at meetings while planning his early Ballets Russes seasons, his pince-nez glasses drawn on several pages, among other doodles. The notebook records the company's business affairs—lists of financial backers, estimated costs of productions, planned programming, and thoughts on how *Firebird* and other ballets might be improved in future productions. The left page lists dancers, including Tamara Karsavina (top) and Ida Rubinstein (bottom), and the ballets planned for them as Diaghilev turned his seasonal group into a year-round company in 1911: among them, *Petrouchka* (under the name of *Maslianitsa*; Russian for “carnival week”), *Le Dieu Bleu*, *Thamar*, and Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, for which Ida Rubinstein is proposed for the role of the Chief Nymph (which she turned down).

Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929)

“Black Exercise Book,” pp. 142–43, 1910

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

BAKST

Léon Bakst took a leading role in conceiving *Afternoon of a Faun*, working with Serge Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky. Like many in thrall to Symbolism, Bakst was fascinated with ancient Greece, evident especially in his designs for the Ballets Russes, such as Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloë* and Ida Rubinstein's *Hélène de Sparte* (both 1912). For *Faun*, Bakst drew on his close study of Greek art, including his visits as a student to the Louvre in Paris and his 1907 tour of Greece, where he sketched ideas. He also brought modern painting's vivid color and expressive brushwork to the theatrical domain. Demonstrating his fluency with stage design, he noted how he conceived the dancers, in the costumes he designed, as an integral part of his overall design idea, "like the last brushstrokes of a picture . . . I reserve for the principal characters the dominant note of my canvas."



Léon Bakst in Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary), 1910. Photo: Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972). Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection.

ON WALL:

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

**Costume design for a nymph in *Afternoon of a Faun*
(*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*), 1912**

Watercolor, pencil, and gold paint on paper

**Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D.
Rothschild Collection; pfMS Thr 414.4 (5)**

IN CASE:

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

**Sketchbook, likely from a visit to Greece and Crete, p. 10
with inserted leaf, 1907(?)**

Pencil and watercolor on paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

BRONISLAVA NIJINSKA

Vaslav Nijinsky did not accomplish his innovations alone. As he choreographed *Afternoon of a Faun*, his younger sister, Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972), was his confidant and creative partner. They played Claude Debussy’s score for each other at the piano, and Nijinsky molded the choreography on his sister’s body. She danced as a nymph in the 1912 premiere.

Like her brother, Nijinska had studied at St. Petersburg’s Imperial Ballet School and came to Paris in 1909 with Serge Diaghilev’s troupe—he as a star dancer and she as a member of the corps de ballet. She appeared as one of the princesses in *Firebird* in 1910 and danced one of her first solo roles in *Petrouchka* in 1911. Critics praised her skill as a dancer, and Igor Stravinsky called her “extremely talented . . . fully the equal of her brother.”

Vaslav Nijinsky and Bronislava Nijinska in *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L’Après-midi d’un Faune*), Paris, May 1912

Photograph by Waléry (1866–1935), reproduction

Collection Boris Kochno, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

NIJINSKY

In 1913, the year after *Afternoon of a Faun's* premiere, Vaslav Nijinsky began writing down his choreographic ideas for the ballet, using a dance notation he developed from Stepanov notation, which he had studied at the Imperial Ballet School. Both Stepanov's and Nijinsky's systems use a modified form of music notation—the notes on the staff indicate parts and movements of the body, rather than musical pitches. In his 1915 dance score for the ballet (shown above), he developed these early sketches into a complete system of choreographic notation.

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950)

Afternoon of a Faun (L'Après-midi d'un Faune)

Choreographic notation, ca. 1913–15

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKY

Afternoon of a Faun is a single short scene. The Faun reclines on a rock, watching a group of nymphs as the tallest of them bathes. He approaches her but she runs away, dropping her veil. He picks it up, carries it tenderly back to the rock, and lowers his body over it. These photographs capture seven key moments in the ballet narrative. Notation examples, from Claude Debussy's music manuscript and Vaslav Nijinsky's dance manuscript, correspond to each moment.

Nijinsky's 1915 complete dance score for the ballet further develops the innovative approach he had begun in his 1913 sketches (in case). His notation conveys precise postures which, when performed in succession, yield continuous movement. While duration signs (quarter notes, rests, and so on) retain their musical meaning, showing the timing (ties for pauses, rests for dancers' exit points), other elements take on new meaning: three staves, joined at the left side, indicate three areas of the body—head/torso (top staff), arms (middle), and legs (lower). The notes on the staff bear an entirely new meaning, showing not musical pitch (how high or low a note is) but rather the direction and level of moving parts of the body.

Adolf de Meyer (1868–1946)

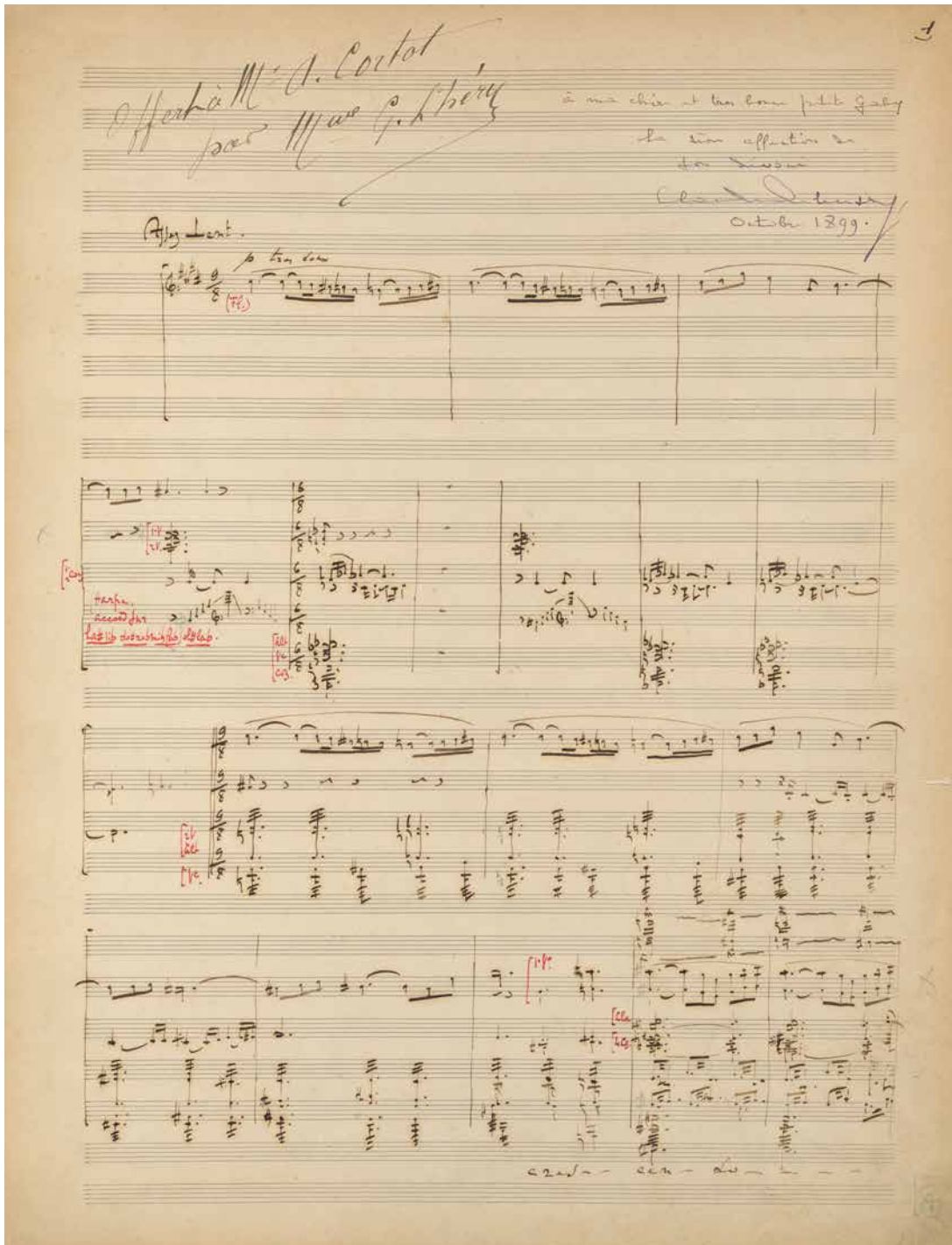
Afternoon of a Faun (L'Après-midi d'un Faune), 1912

**Hand-enhanced photographs, nos. 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005,
2006, 2007, 2014**

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

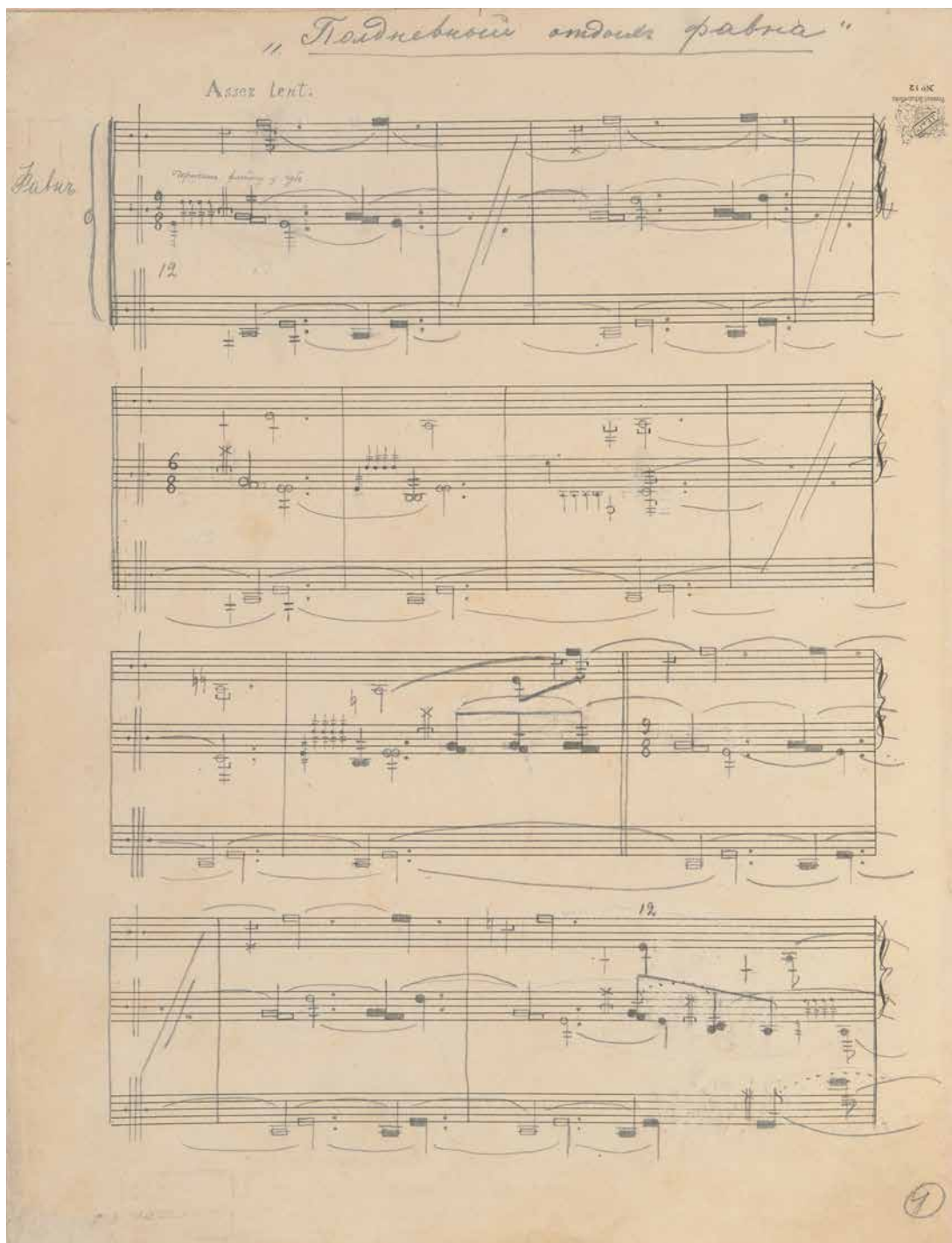
**Special thanks to Claudia Jeschke, dance scholar and
specialist in Nijinsky's notation, for her indispensable help
presenting this material.**

The Faun lounges on a rock, playing his flute (measure 1).



Debussy's manuscript

All images from this Debussy manuscript courtesy the Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit at the Morgan Library & Museum.



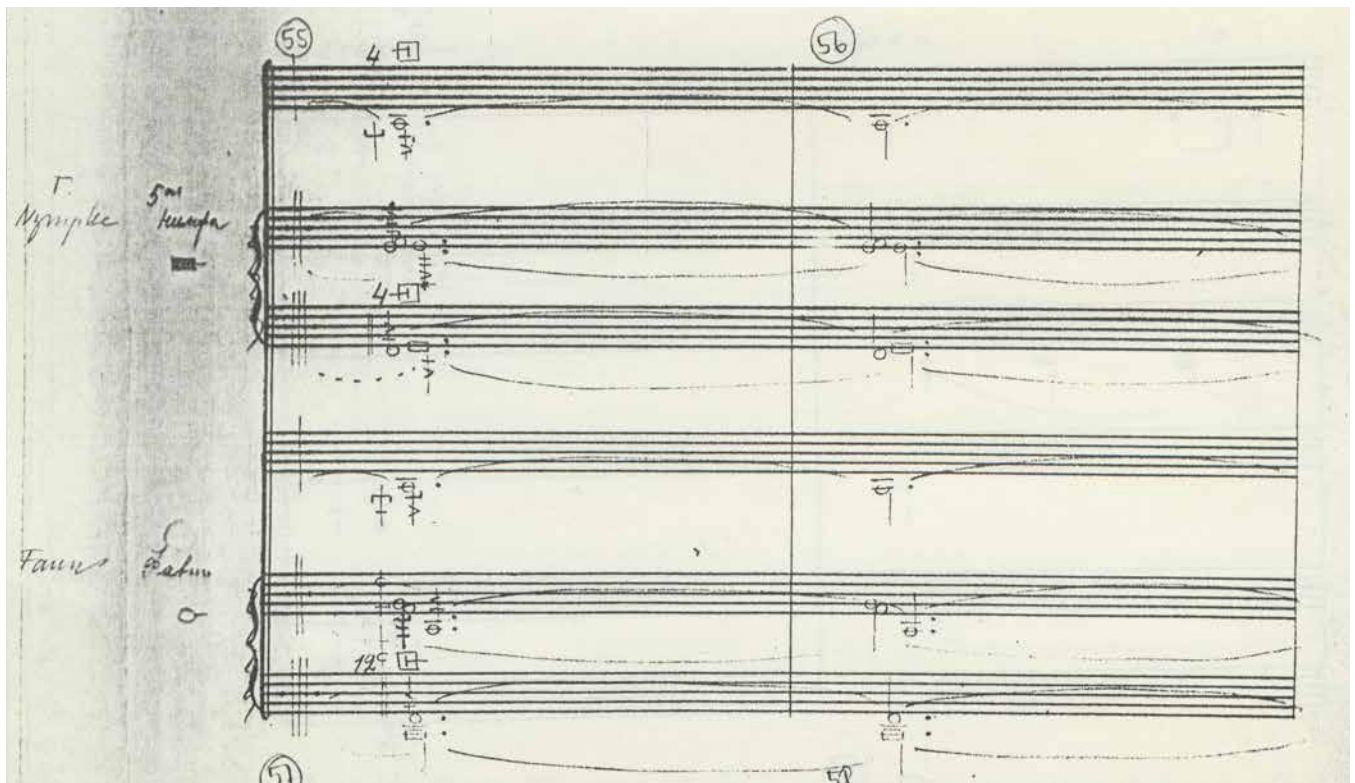
Nijinsky's manuscript

All images from this Nijinsky manuscript © Nijinsky Estate Collection / Curatorial Inc.

The Faun and Chief Nymph pause, encountering each other (around measure 55).



Debussy's manuscript



Nijinsky's manuscript

The Faun and Chief Nymph link arms (around measure 73).



Debussy's manuscript

The Nymphs leave the scene (around measure 78).

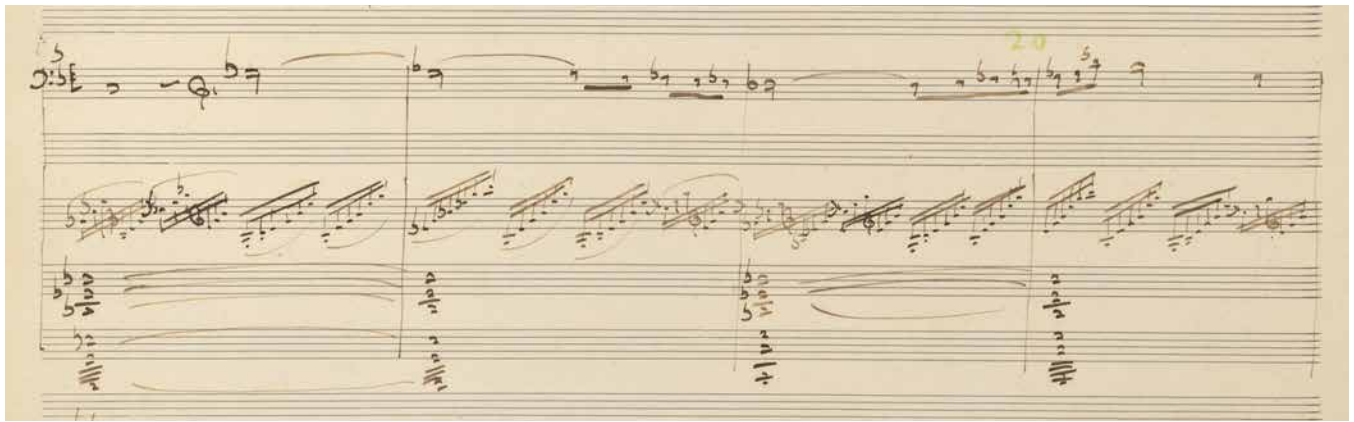


Debussy's manuscript

The image shows a handwritten musical manuscript on aged paper. It features two systems of music, each consisting of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The top system is labeled '7. Symphonie' and '2. tempo'. The bottom system is labeled '8. Symphonie' and '3. tempo'. Both systems are in 4/4 time, as indicated by the '4' and a square symbol at the top of each system. The piano accompaniment includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'mf'. There are also some handwritten annotations in the bottom system, including 'die 7.', 'Nijinsky', 'ab. die', and 'Lieder habting'.

Nijinsky's manuscript

The Faun is captivated by the veil the Chief Nymph has dropped (around measure 87).



Debussy's manuscript



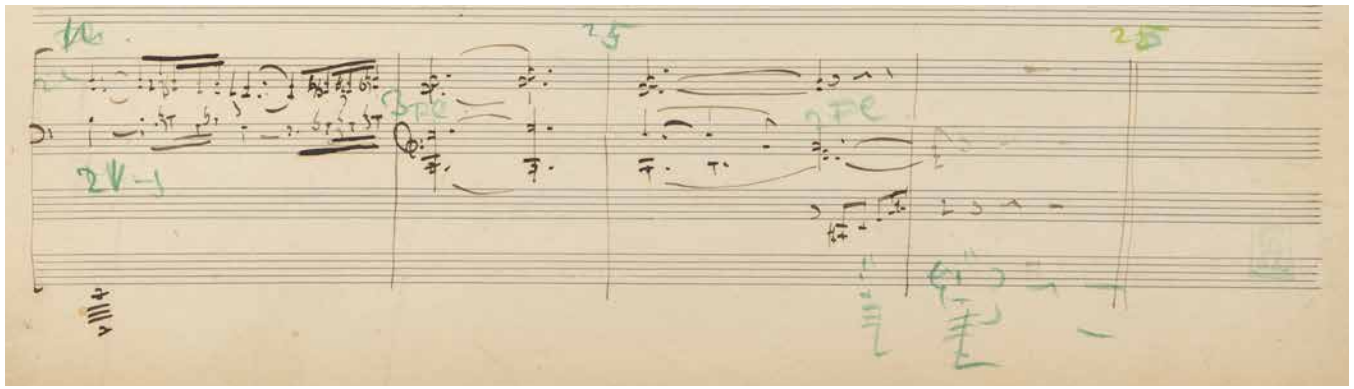
Nijinsky's manuscript

Carrying the Nymph's veil, the Faun throws his head back, laughing like an animal (around measure 91).



Debussy's manuscript

The Faun's final motion of the ballet, as Nijinsky's choreographic notation conveys it, was to relax, settling his forehead and right arm on the floor (around measure 106 to end). But whether the motion he made in the 1912 premiere matched his notation, written three years later, is an open question. His gesture in the performance, which the audience interpreted as masturbatory, provoked a *succès de scandale*, a scandalous success that distracted attention from the rest of the ballet.



Debussy's manuscript



Nijinsky's manuscript

JEUX

NIJINSKY, DEBUSSY

Though Claude Debussy had abandoned his commission for the Ballets Russes' 1910 season, Serge Diaghilev remained intent on hiring him to write an original ballet. Debussy, needing money, succumbed over lunch to the “terrifying but charming man” and agreed to compose *Jeux (Games)* for the 1913 season, working with Léon Bakst and Nijinsky, who devised the scenario—an amorous trio flirting on a tennis court. However, as the season approached, the project was sidelined by preparations for the monumental *Rite of Spring*. When Igor Stravinsky's ballet premiered a few weeks later, *Jeux*, Debussy's only ballet written for the Ballets Russes, was overshadowed.

With just four completed ballets to his name—*Afternoon of a Faun* (1912), *Jeux* (1913), *The Rite of Spring* (1913), and *Till Eulenspiegel* (1916)—Vaslav Nijinsky is regarded as a revolutionary choreographer. Of his four ballets, *Faun* is the only one he wrote down, using a choreographic notation system he developed (see the opposite wall). For the others, his choreography is lost, though there have been reconstructions.

ON WALL:

Valentine Gross (1887–1968)

Drawings of Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography for *Jeux*, 1913

Reproduced in *Comoedia illustré*, June 15, 1913

Fabrice Herrault Collection

IN CASE:

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Jeux

Autograph manuscript, “préparation orchestrale”

(pre-orchestral draft), p. 1, April 1913

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

DEBUSSY

The single measure of music on this page of Claude Debussy's sketchbook may contain the only traces he ever put to paper for his first commission for Serge Diaghilev—a project intended for the 1910 season titled *Masques et Bergamasques*. The composer abandoned the project after completing only the libretto. Instead, Debussy's first commission for a Russian impresario was *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* for Ida Rubinstein and the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, which premiered in 1911.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Sketchbook with the composer's pencil, used ca. 1908–10

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

THE RITE OF SPRING

STRAVINSKY, ROERICH

After *Firebird's* success in 1910, Serge Diaghilev approached Igor Stravinsky to compose a ballet on Edgar Allan Poe's 1842 short story "The Masque of the Red Death." But Stravinsky had already begun work on his next ballet, collaborating with the Russian designer, archaeologist, and philosopher Nicholas Roerich. The new work, which would become *The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du Printemps*), has remained Stravinsky's most famous score since its notorious 1913 premiere.

Stravinsky and Roerich, who shared an interest in Russia's archaic past, imagined a pagan ritual in which a young girl dances herself to death as a sacrifice to the god of spring. The Paris premiere in May 1913 famously caused an uproar in the theater—a response to the music, the choreography, or both.

Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947)

Illustration of costumes from *The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps)*, n.d.

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D.

Rothschild Collection, bequest, 1989; pf MS Thr 414.4 (119)

Dancers on stage in Vaslav Nijinsky's original production of *The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps)*, [1913]

Photographer unknown

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

STRAVINSKY, NIJINSKY

Vaslav Nijinsky's original 1913 choreography for *The Rite of Spring* was replaced by a version by the company's next choreographer, Léonide Massine, in 1920. Nijinsky was hospitalized in 1919 for mental illness, and his choreography for the ballet was forgotten.

In 1969, two years before Igor Stravinsky's death, the facsimile of his 1912 sketches for the *Rite* was published. The publication included an appendix, at right, with choreographic notes that Stravinsky now claimed he had given to Nijinsky decades before, in 1913, citing markings that he believed he had made at the time in an early edition of the printed score. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that Stravinsky misremembered the facts: his decades-old markings appear instead to reflect Massine's choreography for the 1920 production.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

The Rite of Spring / Le Sacre du Printemps: Sketches, 1911–1913; Facsimile Reproductions from the Autographs, pp. 96–97

London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969

The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection; PMC 2820

NIJINSKA

For the 1913 Ballets Russes season, Vaslav Nijinsky cast his sister, Bronislava Nijinska, in lead roles in *Jeux* and *The Rite of Spring*. As with *Afternoon of a Faun*, she worked closely with him on both ballets. In a note attached to this sketch written years later, she wrote that the choreography for the lead role of the sacrificial maiden “was modeled on me.” But before the season opened, Nijinsky learned that his sister was pregnant with her first child and dropped her from both productions.

Yet Nijinska remained fiercely loyal to her brother. During a South American tour the following September, Nijinsky married Romola de Pulszky, ending his romantic relationship with Serge Diaghilev. When the enraged impresario fired Nijinsky from the Ballets Russes, Nijinska stayed by her brother’s side, leaving the company as well.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

***The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps)*, drawing and
description of collaboration between Igor Stravinsky,
Nicholas Roerich, and Vaslav Nijinsky, 1960s**

Pencil on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKY AND NIJINSKA

Vaslav Nijinsky and Bronislava Nijinska's relationship is a moving study in creative partnership and the ties of siblings. He was famous from a young age; she lived and danced in her older brother's shadow. After collaborating on *Afternoon of a Faun* (*L'Après-midi d'un Faune*), *Jeux*, and *The Rite of Spring*, the two left the Ballets Russes. They formed a new ballet company for a 1914 Saison Nijinsky at London's Palace Theatre. Nijinska did a little of everything, hiring the dancers, directing rehearsals, and dancing lead roles. Among other projects, they approached Maurice Ravel for a new score.

Weeks before World War I began in summer 1914, brother and sister went separate ways: he to Vienna, she to St. Petersburg and later to Kyiv. They would not see each other again until 1921, when Nijinska returned to Western Europe to find her brother in the grips of the mental illness that would permanently remove him from public life. The same year, she became the only female choreographer of the Ballets Russes, launching a long career.



Maurice Ravel (left), with Vaslav Nijinsky and Bronislava Nijinska in Paris, 1914. Photo: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo.

**“The famous premier danseur / supported by Mlle. Nijinska,”
poster for 1914 Saison Nijinsky, London
Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection**

VASLAV NIJINSKY

In his notebooks of the late 1910s, Vaslav Nijinsky continued the dance notation project he had begun in 1913 for *Afternoon of a Faun*. Now using a staff with three lines rather than five, he distilled movement to its essential elements, using principles of the circle. Nijinsky sought a comprehensive system for dance notation, intending to do for dance what Guido of Arezzo—the eleventh-century monk credited with inventing the system of staff lines and notes still used today—had done for music: to create the basis for a written tradition, which could be used to build a repertory of dance scores and known, repeatable dance works. Nijinsky's ambitious project never came to fruition and was not taken seriously until the 1980s, when scholars Ann Hutchinson Guest and Claudia Jeschke began to decipher it.

Upside down, in black pen, Nijinsky takes up a different project, the literary work he titled *Chuvstvo (Feeling)*, which would become famous as his *Diary*.

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950)

**Notebook containing dance notation (pencil) and draft for
Diary (pen), pp. 122–23, 1918–19**

Pen and pencil on paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

NIJINSKY

Vaslav Nijinsky gave his last public performance in 1917 as signs of his mental illness began to appear. From January 1919 until he was institutionalized that March, he worked on a manuscript he titled *Chuvstvo (Feeling)*, a mixture of letters, verse, and prose. The first 1936 and 1937 editions, retitled *Diary*, were edited by his wife, Romola, who substantially cut and revised her husband's work, deleting sexually explicit references to Serge Diaghilev and unflattering ones to herself. In 1999 Joan Acocella edited the unexpurgated version.

In 1917–19, the last years before his hospitalization, Nijinsky also created a haunting series of drawings, several of which illustrate the first editions of his *Diary*. Many appear to depict the human eye; deeply affected by the war, Nijinsky reportedly said that they were the faces of soldiers. Like his dance notations of the same period, circles and curves dominate his artwork.

ON WALL:

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950)

***Mask of God*, ca. 1919**

Ink and gouache on paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

IN CASE:

Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950)

Diary

London: Victor Gollancz, 1937; first edition

Illustrated with drawings by Nijinsky, 1917–19 (here showing his 1919 portrait of Serge Diaghilev)

The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection, purchased 2022; PMC 2822

BRONISLAVA NIJINSKA

In 1914 Bronislava Nijinska returned to St. Petersburg, where she choreographed her first solo dances, then moved to Kyiv, where in 1919 she founded the School of Movement just as the Bolsheviks took over the city. Allying herself with the new Soviet arts bureaucracy, she choreographed her first modern solo and group works. Her colleague in Kyiv, Vadym Meller, made a striking costume illustration evoking Nijinska dancing in *Mephisto Waltz*, a ballet she created on the music of Franz Liszt. Like Léon Bakst's costume drawings for *Firebird* and other ballets, Meller's drawing captures an idea, an effect, rather than serving as a precise blueprint for a costume. Nijinska looked to visual art as a conceptual analog, finding resonance with her ideas for dance in contemporary abstract painting. "Pictorial art," she wrote, "must cast aside the naturalism that enchains it. . . . I want to approach a picture and see only a symphony of colors."

Vadym Meller (1884–1962)

Costume illustration for Bronislava Nijinska in *Mephisto Waltz*, Kyiv, 1919

**Opaque water-based media (likely gouache) on paper
Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection**

NIJINSKA

It was in Kyiv, cut off from her brother Vaslav Nijinsky, from Serge Diaghilev, and from the ballet world that had nurtured her in St. Petersburg and Paris, that Bronislava Nijinska came into her own as a choreographer. She created her first plotless ballets, in which she freshly repurposed classical technique, rather than reject it, as Isadora Duncan and other “free dancers” of the period had done. Echoing her brother’s approach in *Afternoon of a Faun*, Nijinska recognized that choreography could function independently from the music.

In these striking geometric choreographic drawings, Nijinska noted, for example, beneath the lower-right panel, “Combinations: Circular movements.” Her interest in spatiality and circles as principles for movement anticipate Constructivist methods and recall her brother’s circle-based designs of the same period (facing wall)—a synergy particularly notable since the siblings had almost no contact with each other during this period.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Choreographic drawings, Kyiv, 1919

Pen on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA, NIJINSKY

In April 1920 Bronislava Nijinska was devastated to learn of her brother Nijinsky's deteriorating mental health. Initially reluctant to abandon her work in Kyiv, she smuggled herself and her family over the border to Poland, at great risk, in March 1921. Her diary entry for June 2 is stark:

I'm in Vienna. Vatsa [Nijinsky] is very ill. . . . He recognizes neither me nor our mother. . . . He lost himself in his visions and forgot the way back. I will finish all his work and expand whatever I can. I will return to "my own" work as the continuation of Vaslav's art. . . . Now there will be more, and it will be better.

On the back of a self-portrait she drew in 1921, after returning to Western Europe, she wrote,

I'll bury myself into [work] so as not to fear my own life and pain, to obliterate everything. [I wish] God [would help] me to go to Sergei Pavlovich [Diaghilev]. My yearning for truth would create the Big Truth [in ballet?]

Bronislava Nijinska after leaving Kyiv, 1921

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

***Self-Portrait*, 1921**

Pencil on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA, DIAGHILEV

Serge Diaghilev—always one to connect creative souls with their destiny—invited Bronislava Nijinska to dance again for the Ballets Russes and to choreograph for him for the first time. Her initial project was to rechoreograph several dances for his lavish revival of Tchaikovsky’s 1890 ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* (retitled *The Sleeping Princess*). Diaghilev hired her as the first and only female choreographer of the Ballets Russes. Her first original project as “La Nijinska,” as she began to call herself, was to stage Stravinsky’s ballet about a fox, *Le Renard*, for the 1922 season. Her next major project would be her masterpiece: *Les Noces*, with music by Stravinsky, which premiered in 1923.

“Les Ballets Russes à Mogador” program, [Paris], June 1922

Left page: “La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Ballets Russes,” shown in costume for Serge Diaghilev’s production of Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovksy’s *The Sleeping Princess*, 1921

Right page: Tamara Karsavina in the ballet *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur*, 1917

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

LES NOCES

The trend toward modernist experiment found expression in *Les Noces* (*The Wedding*), the work Igor Stravinsky intended to become his next great Russian ballet to follow *Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. As with the others, he turned to Russian culture, this time a traditional peasant wedding. Like the *Rite*, Stravinsky conceived *Les Noces* as a solemn ritual centered on a young woman, the story of an arranged marriage in a traditional Russian village, a “depiction of a sacrament . . . a work of dignity and reserve, and finally of exaltation.”

Drawing from wedding music he found in popular Russian literature and song compilations, Stravinsky created a text for the sung parts, rich in prayer and folklore, evoking peasant marriage rituals. The scenario in four tableaux (scenes) is simple. Two plots proceed in parallel, the Bride’s preparations and the Groom’s, with a touching farewell between the Bride and her mother.



Ph. J. Enrietty

NOCES

Groupes composés par LA NIJINSKA

La Fiancée : F. DAUBROVSKA

Rehearsals for *Les Noces* in Monte Carlo, 1923. Program, *Ballets Russes . . . juin 1923*. The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Katharine J. Rayner, 2024.

PICASSO, SATIE, STRAVINSKY

World War I forced the Ballets Russes to suspend performances in Paris and most of continental Europe. After a three-year hiatus, the company returned to Paris in 1917 with something fresh. *Parade*, on a concept by Jean Cocteau with music by Erik Satie, featured choreography by Léonide Massine and was Pablo Picasso's first commission to create stage designs. (Satie's manuscript, in the Morgan's collection, is on display in the McKim Library until September 8.)

Over the next decade Picasso was one of Serge Diaghilev's most important collaborators, designing the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla's *Tricorne* (1919) and other key ballets, as well as various works related to the company and its key figures. His portraits of Stravinsky are iconic representations of the composer, widely reproduced in books and programs.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)

LEFT: *Igor Stravinsky*, December 31, 1920

Pencil on paper

RIGHT: *Igor Stravinsky*, Rome, 1917

Graphite on cream wove paper

Private collections

STRAVINSKY

Igor Stravinsky took three years to compose *Les Noces* and another five experimenting with different ways to orchestrate it, producing over a thousand pages of drafts and sketches, including these key early drafts, created in 1914–15. He researched Russian folk music, as he had done for *Petrouchka* and other works, finding new ways to integrate it into a fresh, modernist style. Like *The Rite of Spring*, *Les Noces* is a deeply Russian work, reflected in the design Stravinsky painted on the cover of this manuscript in a Neo-Primitivist folkloric style, with the Russian title of the ballet, *Svadebka*.

By 1915 he had drafted much of the third tableau, seen in this page of full-score sketches. *Les Noces*'s premiere was announced for the Ballets Russes' 1916 season, but it was delayed until 1923 by the war and other things. In the intervening years, the music went through radical changes. His initial idea for an enormous orchestra, like that of *The Rite of Spring*, by 1923 had become a spare ensemble of four pianos, percussion, and voices. Its percussion-dominated instrumentation, unusual at the time, would be widely imitated and adapted by composers in the twentieth century.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Les Noces

ON WALL: Autograph manuscript, full-score instrumental sketches for the third tableau, [1914–15]

IN CASE: Autograph manuscript, first draft in condensed score of the first tableau (to rehearsal [16] in the published score), versions 1–3, [1914–15], with vellum cover hand-painted by Stravinsky

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

STRAVINSKY

In 1919 Igor Stravinsky sketched a version of *Les Noces* that included pianola, the mechanized player-less piano popular at the time. He hoped the instrument would allow him to exert more control over the sound of the music, particularly its rhythm. He contracted with the Pleyel Company to create a series of illustrated piano rolls for *Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky likely requested a pianola for use in rehearsals for *Les Noces*, wanting assurance of the consistency of the tempo, which proved elusive because the technology did not work well alongside human performers.

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Les Noces

**Autograph manuscript, drafts for pianola arrangement,
ca. 1919**

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music
Collection, purchased with the special assistance of the
Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation; Cary 567**



Igor Stravinsky at the pianola, August 1923. Photo: Vera Sudeikina (1889–1982). Paul Sacher Stiftung, Sammlung Igor Stravinsky, Basel.

GONCHAROVA

For the ballet's designs, Serge Diaghilev turned to Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), a celebrated avant-garde Russian artist. Her vivid Neo-Primitivist evocations of Russian folk art, with its “bright colors, crude forms, ‘wrong proportions,’ and a wonderful joviality and optimism” (as described by John Bowl), were informed by her deep study of Russian handcrafts and rituals. With her partner (in life and art), Mikhail Larionov, she had entered Diaghilev's circle on the eve of the First World War, the two replacing Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois as his main designers. In Goncharova's work, Diaghilev saw the perfect match for Igor Stravinsky's new ballet, and she set to work on *Les Noces* in 1915, creating this festive drawing of the bride (at left) and groom (at right) escorted by two firebirds.

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

***Self-Portrait*, ca. 1907**

Oil on canvas, mounted on board

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, gift of Thomas P.

Whitney; AC 2001.11

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

Curtain design for *Les Noces*, 1915

Opaque watercolor over graphite on paper

Philadelphia Museum of Art; 1941-79-96

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

***Self-Portrait*, ca. 1907**

Oil on canvas, mounted on board

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, gift of Thomas P.

Whitney; AC 2001.11

FAR RIGHT:

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

Curtain design for *Les Noces*, 1915

Opaque watercolor over graphite on paper

Philadelphia Museum of Art; 1941-79-96

GONCHAROVA, NIJINSKA

Like Igor Stravinsky, Natalia Goncharova took her concept for the ballet through several stages over eight years, from her brightly colored drawings of 1915 (at left) to a set of designs in 1921 in cooler colors. When Bronislava Nijinska joined the project in 1922 and saw the designs, they did not suit her idea of the ballet's story of the arranged marriage. She later wrote, "their sheer exuberance and unalloyed joy would serve to defeat the inherent tragedy." When Nijinska shared her objections with Serge Diaghilev, he dropped her from the project. But when he returned to *Les Noces* in 1923, he agreed to stage the ballet as Nijinska envisioned it. After Goncharova sat in on rehearsals, she understood Nijinska's vision for the ballet and created the stark visual concept seen here in her final stage and costume designs, even modeling some drawings after Nijinska's choreographic formations, as in the drawing at right.

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

Sketch for the stage design for *Les Noces*, 1923

Pen, brush, and ink on tracing paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Dancers on stage in *Les Noces*, 1923

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)

Drawing of women in Bronislava Nijinska's choreographic braid motif for *Les Noces*, 1923

Pen and ink on tracing paper, mounted on paper

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D. Rothschild Collection; pfMS Thr 414.4 (61)

NIJINSKA

Like her brother Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska was concerned with preserving the legacy of modernist choreography. In 1924 she wrote, “when . . . the masterpieces of choreographic composition disappear with their creator, how to save everything that has been done in our time? . . . We have nothing real except legends of remarkable male and female dancers; no recorded scores of compositions.” Nijinska saw the solution not in developing a comprehensive system of dance notation, as her brother had sought to do, but in the founding of a conservatory, like the one she had created in Kyiv. Like most choreographers, her primary creation took place in person, working directly with dancers, as in this rehearsal for the 1923 *Les Noces* premiere.

Bronislava Nijinska (center) rehearsing *Les Noces* in Monte Carlo, 1923

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA

Though her primary creation took place in rehearsal, Bronislava Nijinska's engagement with the written page was intense and extensive. The Library of Congress now holds her large archive, which preserves her diverse approaches to conceiving and communicating dance on paper, including hundreds of pages of drawings, geometric designs, numbering systems, floor patterns, music notation, and annotated musical scores, demonstrating her skills as an artist, musician, and dancer. In this set of 1923 elevation views for *Les Noces* showing body positions and group formations, she describes her drawing in the lower-right corner: "Another grouping is in profile, they are stretched out on top of each other"—one of the ballet's iconic formations at the end of the first tableau and the opening of the third, at the Bride's home.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

**Choreographic drawings for the first tableau of *Les Noces*,
frontal elevation views of dancers, 1923**

Pen on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA

In this sketch of the ballet's fourth and final scene, Bronislava Nijinska drew upon her fluency with music notation. Using brackets above the staff, she marked what she called "choreographic measures, which correspond neither to the rhythm of the musical measures nor to the sonority of the music." Here she overlaid 3/4 time (three beats per measure) for the dancers to follow instead of Igor Stravinsky's musical measures of 5/8, 2/4, and 3/4 time. In other sketches Nijinska employed plan views of the stage seen from above, like those of Michel Fokine for *Firebird*, indicating the position of each dancer with a small circle.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

**Choreographic notes for the fourth tableau of *Les Noces*,
1923**

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA

A photograph shows Bronislava Nijinska directing a rehearsal for her revival of *Les Noces* at the Royal Ballet, organized by Frederick Ashton in 1966. The group formation matches the one seen in the drawing she made for the same moment in the original 1923 production, which she labeled “The final grouping the 4th tableau”—showing one of the ballet’s most memorable moments, as the lights go down after the couple retreats to the bedchamber.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Choreographic drawings for *Les Noces*, frontal elevation views of dancers for the fourth tableau, ca. 1923

Pen on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Bronislava Nijinska rehearsing the fourth tableau of *Les Noces* for the 1966 Royal Ballet production

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA, STRAVINSKY

Working with Igor Stravinsky in the final weeks before the June 1923 premiere of *Les Noces*, Bronislava Nijinska took in stride the composer's sometimes demanding collaborative style. In one letter to her, he wrote,

Dear Bronia, Sergei [Diaghilev] said to me that you and he are not clear on the reprise at the beginning of [*Les Noces*]. Now listen carefully! At the lower end of the first page under No. 1, where it says 'curtain,' the music is [musical example] . . . ending [musical example].

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Letter to Bronislava Nijinska, March 27, 1923

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA

Like Vaslav Nijinsky and Michel Fokine, Bronislava Nijinska was musically skilled and read scores fluently. This page from her heavily annotated score for *Les Noces* shows her verbal descriptions, elevation views, and brackets above the staff indicating her “choreographic measures.” Her inscriptions in pen in the middle of page 5, typical of those throughout the score, begin, “with the right leg below on the arm[;] the second arm joins with the first arm.” As a student at the Imperial Ballet School, Nijinska, like her brother, mastered Stepanov dance notation, a system of precise bodily movements based on music notation. She occasionally adapted Stepanov elements, as seen in her later work for *The Fairy’s Kiss* (*Le Baiser de la Fée*, 1928).

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Annotations in a printed edition of *Les Noces*

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

You listen to music through your ears—yes? I listen to music through my eyes. I want my ballets to be music for the eyes, so if you would close your ears you could still hear the music—you could see the music. A paradox! But a paradox close to the center of my idea of ballet.

Bronislava Nijinska

LES BICHES

NIJINSKA, POULENC, LAURENCIN

In 1924 Bronislava Nijinska followed her triumph in *Les Noces* with another masterpiece, *Les Biches (The Does)*, with music by Francis Poulenc and designs by Marie Laurencin. The epitome of chic modernism, the ballet deployed neoclassical forms while exploring themes of sexual ambiguity. By 1924 Nijinska's relationship with Serge Diaghilev and his all-male inner circle had become increasingly rocky. Once more she moved on, joining all those—Alexandre Benois, Léon Bakst, Ida Rubinstein, Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky—whose tenure with the Ballets Russes had been formative but relatively brief. Few women during this era choreographed for prestigious institutions or were credited as authors of lasting dance works. Nijinska's time as choreographer of the Ballets Russes secured her a place in the modernist tradition.

By 1928, after spending two long seasons working in Buenos Aires far from her family, Nijinska was ready to accept an invitation from Ida Rubinstein, the Paris theater celebrity and early star of the Ballets Russes, to choreograph for her new ballet company, Les Ballets de Madame Ida Rubinstein.

Bronislava Nijinska as the Hostess in *Les Biches*, 1924

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Dancers on stage in *Les Biches*, showing the backcloth by the ballet's designer, Marie Laurencin (1883–1956)

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Les Biches

Autograph manuscript, choral score, title page and p. 2, 1923

The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music

Collection, purchased 2020; Cary 721.2

LARIONOV, PICASSO, PROKOFIEV

Mikhail Larionov and Pablo Picasso were among the many visual artists Serge Diaghilev drew to his enterprise. Larionov, Natalia Goncharova's partner, designed Igor Stravinsky and Bronislava Nijinska's ballet *Le Renard* (1922), and Picasso designed key works including Erik Satie's *Parade* (1917) and Manuel de Falla's *Le Tricorne* (1919) (the manuscripts for which are on display in the McKim Library until September 8). Both artists documented the daily working life of the Ballets Russes and its key figures, as in Larionov's drawing of Diaghilev and Stravinsky with the Russian composer Sergey Prokofiev. Prokofiev wrote his first ballets for Diaghilev, who called him his "second son," Stravinsky being his "first son."

Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964)

Serge Diaghilev, Igor Stravinsky, and Sergey Prokofiev, 1921

Pencil on paper

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Howard D. Rothschild Collection; pfMS Thr 414.4 (85)

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)

Deux Danseurs (Two Dancers), 1925

Pen and black ink on tan wove paper

The Morgan Library & Museum, gift of Richard and Mary L. Gray; 2023.78

For her inaugural 1928 season, Ida Rubinstein asked the French composer Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) for a new ballet on a Spanish theme. He wrote *Bolero* in haste between July and October 1928, and it premiered on the company's opening night, November 22. The ballet had choreography by Bronislava Nijinska and designs by Alexandre Benois, and Rubinstein, as in all her productions, danced the lead role. Ravel's score supports the simple scenario: a woman dances on a table, surrounded by men, gradually whipping them into a frenzy.

Ravel's lifelong affinity for Spanish culture, rooted in his mother's Basque heritage, expresses itself in the distinctive rhythm that runs through the work. Just as important to the composer's conception was his interest in machines—inherited from his father, whose career was in the developing automobile industry. During a concert tour in the United States shortly before composing *Bolero*, Ravel visited the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, later writing that the ballet “owed its inception to a factory.” For some listeners, the ballet, with its extended, repeated theme and sudden, explosive finale, suggests sexual tension and release.

LES BALLETS DE MADAME IDA RUBINSTEIN

Despite producing important stage works, commissioning scores from major composers, and rivaling Serge Diaghilev as a patron of new music, Ida Rubinstein has been neglected as a seminal artistic force. In 1928 she founded a new company, Les Ballets de Madame Ida Rubinstein, hiring an all-star team of fellow Ballets Russes alumni. Her first call was to Alexandre Benois, Diaghilev's early collaborator who had left the Ballets Russes in 1911 and spent years away in Russia. For Rubinstein's new company, Benois served as her designer and artistic confidant, reprising the role he had played at Diaghilev's side years before. He created the stage designs and libretti, worked with the choreographers and composers, and ensured the elements of each production fused harmoniously—reviving the Wagnerian ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “complete artwork,” that had guided the early years of the Ballets Russes.

Rubinstein hired Bronislava Nijinska to form the new company and choreograph most of the ballets for its first 1928–29 season. Whereas Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was notably male dominated, Rubinstein's company featured central roles for women in creative and administrative positions.

**ACADEMIE NATIONALE
DE MUSIQUE ET DE DANSE**



LES BALLETS DE MADAME IDA RUBINSTEIN

PRO F 85 (2)

Program for *Bolero* premiere, November 1928. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Léon Bakst (1866–1924)

Mme Ida Rubinstein, 1917

**Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, mounted
on canvas**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Chester
Dale Collection, 1962; 64.97.1**

RUBINSTEIN, BENOIS

Planning the new company's first 1928 season, Ida Rubinstein and Alexandre Benois spent evenings together dreaming up ideas for the ballets they would produce, listening to J. S. Bach, Franz Schubert, Franz Liszt, and Claude Debussy, as well as Maurice Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, which had been adapted as a ballet. Benois revived scenarios he had proposed for Serge Diaghilev's company years before that had never come to fruition, including a ballet on the music of Bach which became *The Marriage of Psyche and Cupid*, and a ballet on the music of Schubert and Liszt, orchestrated by Darius Milhaud, for *The Beloved*. Both ballets, choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska with designs by Benois, premiered on the new company's opening night, November 22, 1928, with Ravel's *Bolero*.

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

Costume design for Minerva in *Les Noces de Psyché et de l'Amour (The Marriage of Psyche and Cupid)*, [1928]

Costume design for the Poet in *La Bien-Aimée (The Beloved)*, [1928]

Watercolor and pen on paper

Private collection

BOLERO



Maurice Ravel with the cast of *Bolero* on stage and Ida Rubinstein reclining in the foreground, 1928. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

RAVEL

Maurice Ravel saw *Bolero* as a musical experiment in extreme simplicity. In a letter, written in September 1928 while secluded at home frantically working to complete this manuscript, he described his concept: “no music, no composition, only orchestral effects.” He employed none of the methods a classical composer typically used to vary and develop their material. Instead, his early pencil sketches and this orchestral score (which he dedicated to Ida Rubinstein, the ballet’s commissioner, producer, and lead dancer) show his plan to repeat the spare, beguiling melody a predetermined number of times. The only changing element would be the orchestration, gradually growing bigger and louder as more instruments joined in. His piece sets in motion a mechanical process and leaves it to unfold, like a factory production line.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Bolero

Autograph manuscript, full score, p. 1, 1928

Dedication “to Ida Rubinstein”

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

***Bolero* in rehearsal, with Anatole Viltzak, Ida Rubinstein's partner, at center, Studio des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1928**

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Portrait of Maurice Ravel

Photograph by Elliott & Fry (London, active 1863–1962)

**Inscribed by Ravel to Louise Alvar, October 23, 1928, shortly
after completing *Bolero***

**The Morgan Library & Museum, bequest of Charles Alvar
Harding, 2001; M100.2**

NIJINSKA

Bronislava Nijinska linked her choreography for *Bolero* to her earlier modernist innovations in *Les Noces* and other ballets. An observer noted how she consulted “annotations, sketches, and diagrams . . . before giving the least direction to her dancers.” This notebook offers a sense of the detail in which she captured her ideas on paper, showing a sequence of numbered steps at the beginning of the ballet. In the middle of the page, at box 9, Nijinska drew a figure with arm raised, noting “pas de Basque steps, walk a demi-tour (back to audience)[,] with left arm raised, throw the upper body back[,] the left foot forward and in demi-pointe.” On another page she draws a floor path: “Three times (6) Walk slowly between the daggers[,] For each time a dagger remains behind your back.”

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Notebook containing choreographic notes and drawings for *Bolero*, p. 1, [1928]

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

BENOIS, NIJINSKA, RUBINSTEIN

The artist Alexandre Benois, who had left the Ballets Russes in 1911 soon after designing *Petrouchka*, left the Soviet Union in 1923 and settled in Paris, where he designed minor productions for the Ballets Russes and major ones for the Paris Opera. He renewed his relationship with Ida Rubinstein, designing most of her productions before she launched her ballet company in 1928.

His designs for the original production of *Bolero* evoke an imagined Spanish tavern, referencing the Romantic-era artist Francisco Goya. Praised as one of his greatest achievements, Benois's *Bolero* designs reflected his love and deep knowledge of eighteenth-century art. As in all her productions, Rubinstein took the lead role, seen in this photograph. The large table was probably Bronislava Nijinska's idea, perhaps inspired by this postcard she kept in her archive. Benois made the table central to his visual concept for the ballet.

ON WALL:

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

Stage design for *Bolero*

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Nina Youshkevitch, courtesy of Robert Johnson

IN CASE:

“Costumbres Andaluzas” postcard, n.d.

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Ida Rubinstein (center) with cast on stage in *Bolero*, 1928

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Ida Rubinstein in costume for *Bolero* (with black cat), 1928

Photographer unknown

Library of Congress, Ida Rubinstein Collection

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

Costume design for the Matador in *Bolero*, 1928

Watercolor, pen, and pencil on paper

The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division

LA VALSE

RAVEL, DIAGHILEV, RUBINSTEIN

Ida Rubinstein's approach in her new ballet company echoed Serge Diaghilev's in some ways. She emphasized short, one-act works and sumptuous productions, and she brought together great talents to kindle fresh artistic fusions. Her ballets embraced a new romanticism, moving away from modernist irony and highlighting fairy tales and mythology.

Her performances to full houses at the Paris Opera, where she had won her early fame dancing in *Schéhérazade* in 1910, drew the envy of Diaghilev, who saw her as a rival.

One ballet brought the tensions to a point: Maurice Ravel's *La Valse*. He had composed it in 1919 for Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, even adding doodles of dancing figures on his 1920 piano score. But when Ravel played the score for Diaghilev, the impresario dismissed it as "a masterpiece" but "not a ballet," offending the composer and ending their relationship. Rubinstein may have taken some pleasure in giving Ravel's score its first major ballet production in 1929, with designs by Alexandre Benois and choreography by Bronislava Nijinska.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

La Valse

Autograph manuscript, solo piano, pp. 14–15, 1920

**The Morgan Library & Museum, Mary Flagler Cary Music
Collection, gift of Robert Owen Lehman; Cary 512**

RAVEL

Maurice Ravel cast *La Valse* as an homage to the Austrian composer Johann Strauss II, known during his heyday in the nineteenth century as “The Waltz King.” In this 1920 manuscript, Ravel wrote out the often-quoted scenario:

Through breaks in the swirling clouds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd can be made out (A).

The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo (B).

An Imperial Court, about 1855.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

La Valse

**Autograph manuscript, two pianos, cover page inscription,
[1920]**

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

NIJINSKA

In this sketch for *La Valse*, Bronislava Nijinska mapped out her choreography using a floor path view, which shows the stage and positions of dancers from above. After positive reviews of the Monte Carlo premiere in January 1929 and of the short tour that followed, Nijinska's choreography met with a chilly reception at its Paris premiere in May. French critics found its modernist aesthetic out of step with the ballet's Romantic aura. In 1931 Nijinska rechoreographed *La Valse*, with new designs by Alexandre Benois, and staged successful productions in Paris and London.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Sketch for *La Valse* showing the stage with dancers' positions, 1929

Pen on paper

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

Alexandre Benois (1870–1960)

**Set design for *La Valse* with conductor and dancing couples,
1930**

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library; HTC 25,515

Designs

THE FAIRY'S KISS

STRAVINSKY, BENOIS, NIJINSKA

Ida Rubinstein cemented her stance as a rival to Serge Diaghilev when she commissioned Igor Stravinsky, who had remained close to the Ballets Russes ever since *Firebird* (1910), to compose a new score for her company. The ballet, *The Fairy's Kiss* (*Le Baiser de la Fée*), premiered with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska in November 1928. Alexandre Benois, drawing on his lifelong love of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's music, proposed a set of the nineteenth-century composer's melodies, which Stravinsky reimagined as a new work based on a story by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen. Their collaboration was a reunion of sorts, almost two decades after the two had created *Petrouchka* for the Ballets Russes in 1911.

**Program for Les Ballets de Madame Ida Rubinstein
Académie Nationale de Musique et de Danse, May 1929
Library of Congress, Ida Rubinstein Collection**

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

The Fairy's Kiss (Le Baiser de la Fée)

Autograph manuscript, piano, title page showing changed title, and p. 1, 1928

The Morgan Library & Museum

Robert Owen Lehman Collection, on deposit

NIJINSKA

Bronislava Nijinska's archive at the Library of Congress preserves her written work for ballets throughout her long career, revealing her deep use and knowledge of notation. In this example, unusual within her work, she employed her own modified version of Stepanov notation, the system based on music notation that she and Vaslav Nijinsky, her brother, had studied at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg. Her notation suggests her familiarity with her brother's system, which he employed for *Afternoon of a Faun (L'Après-midi d'un Faune)*, while also demonstrating her unique innovations.

Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972)

Choreographic notations for *The Fairy's Kiss (Le Baiser de la Fée)*, [1928]

Library of Congress, Bronislava Nijinska Collection

NIJINSKA, ASHTON

Bronislava Nijinska's work had a tremendous impact on one of the young dancers she hired for Ida Rubinstein's ballet company, Frederick Ashton (1904–1988), who would become a leading British choreographer. Nijinska's method of grouping dancers into architectonic shapes influenced his choreography for the 1935 London production of *The Fairy's Kiss* (*Le Baiser de la Fée*) starring Margot Fonteyn; his elongated, asymmetrical group formation in the fourth tableau is strongly reminiscent of Nijinska's formations in *Les Noces*. When Ashton later became artistic director of the Royal Ballet, he invited her to restage two of her masterpieces: *Les Biches* in 1964, and *Les Noces* in 1966. The revivals were revelatory, rekindling both ballets as well as Nijinska's international reputation near the end of her life.

**Frederick Ashton's 1935 choreography for the fourth tableau
of Igor Stravinsky's *The Fairy's Kiss (Le Baiser de la Fée)*
Photograph by J. W. Debenham, reproduction from David
Vaughan, *Frederick Ashton and His Ballets* (London: Adam and
Charles Black, 1997)
Photo: © J. W. Debenham / Victoria and Albert Museum,
London**

NEO-ROMANTIC LEGACIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Ballet in the late 1920s and early 1930s, exemplified in these works created by Ida Rubinstein, Alexandre Benois, Bronislava Nijinska, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky, reclaimed and reframed Romanticism and the sensual delight of classical ballet. Their productions were modern and fresh but also in many respects traditional.

Nijinska later settled in Hollywood, California (where Stravinsky also lived), maintaining a busy career until her death in 1972—while receiving far less recognition than Serge Diaghilev’s other choreographic protégés. Ida Rubinstein spent her last decade in seclusion, her celebrity fading to obscurity before her death in 1960. An obituary was titled “Une inconnue jadis célèbre”: A woman unknown, once celebrated.

The most far-reaching legacy of these ballets remains the music, alive in the manuscripts of the Robert Owen Lehman Collection. The scores Diaghilev and Rubinstein commissioned from Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, and other leading composers of the time continue to inspire new ballet productions and remain staples of the concert hall, filled with tunes instantly recognizable even to many casual music lovers.

IDA RUBINSTEIN

In this 1934 letter, Ida Rubinstein discusses a new project.

“Dear Madam and Friend, I was so touched yesterday to feel your emotion when I told you about this great work that was being born.” Though the recipient and project are unknown, the letter captures her ever-forward-looking attitude as an artist and producer.

Ida Rubinstein (1883–1960)

Autograph letter to an unidentified friend, [Paris],

December 6, 1934

The Morgan Library & Museum, James Fuld Collection

IDA RUBINSTEIN

This flyer advertises Ida Rubinstein's 1934 season, which included *Bolero*, *La Valse*, and *Perséphone*. A collaboration she commissioned between Igor Stravinsky and the French writer André Gide, *Perséphone* was inspired by the Greek myth of the goddess of the underworld. (Stravinsky's manuscript of the work, in the Morgan's collection, is on display in the McKim Library until September 8.)

**Flyer for Les Ballets de Madame Ida Rubinstein, 1934
Library of Congress, Ida Rubinstein Collection**