

John E. Bowlt

*Time and Motion*

At first glance, the collection of pictures assembled by Mikhail Baryshnikov over half a century would seem to be distinguished by plurality rather than by singularity and the innocent viewer might wonder wherein lies the thematic or esthetic connection, if any, between Alexandre Benois and Leonor Fini, Raoul Dufy and Serge Soudeikine, Christian Berard and Mikhail Larionov, Eugene Berman and Abraham Walkowitz. Scintillating in its diversity, the collection takes us in many directions, moving from the Realism of Ilya Repin (*Portrait of a Woman*) and the early Léon Bakst (*Horse*), through Impressionism (Konstantin Gorbatov's walled city), the avant-garde (Natalia Goncharova, Larionov, Alexander Khvostov-Khvostenko), Surrealism (Pavel Tchelitchev's interior landscapes), and the Soviet non-conformist movement (Alexander Arefiev, Michel Chemiakine, Oleg Tselkov, Anatoly Zverev) right up to contemporary stage and film design (Anton Clave, Valentin Dorrer, and David Salle). Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a common denominator, i.e. an esthetic and even emotional axis which has driven, and continues to drive, the collector and his creation -- and that is the art of motion, whether in Classical ballet (Benois's designs for *Nutcracker*), the *danse plastique* (Fini's fluent interpretations), social gesture (Arefiev's anonymous couples) or simply amicable encounters between geniuses of the dance (Merce

Cunningham's dedication to Baryshnikov). True, a few items such as Nikolai Lapshin's evocations of Leningrad and Novgorod or Joseph Brodsky's *Shore Leave* fall outside of this commitment, having entered the collection for nostalgic, sentimental, and patriotic, rather than for balletic, reasons.

Of course, the kinetic leit-motif is not surprising. After all, Baryshnikov's life and work are distinguished by a constant desire to resist the terrestrial pull and to fly – physically, if not, metaphysically – to other worlds. His carriage, corporeal motions, and momentous performances, whether in *Nutcracker* or *In Paris*, bear witness to an almost irresistible yearning to move from “here” to “there”. For Baryshnikov, the ballet, surely the most buoyant of the arts, grants him the power, thrust, and aerodynamism to rise and to provide us, the audience, with a glimpse of higher planes -- and his collection reflects this celestial dimension. Zverev, one of the most earnest and ecstatic of the dissidents, summarized this motor energy in his *Abstractions I and II*, at once gestural and choreographic, febrile and passionate.

The performance space is an organic part of Baryshnikov's existence and his career is unthinkable without the great theaters of St. Petersburg. Paris, London, New York. He excels in both traditional ballet and experimental dance, he is lionized by balletomanes and the radical chic alike, and he is a hero of the international stage which has molded his life – and which, in turn, his life has

molded. All the more logical, therefore, that Baryshnikov, as art collector, should concentrate on stage designs for sets and costumes, pictures of rehearsals and premieres, and portraits of theatrical luminaries such as Sergei Diaghilev and Vaslav Nijinsky (e.g. Jean Cocteau's interpretation of Diaghilev and Nijinsky discussing *Schéhérazade*). Some of the theater designs are masterful reconstructions of period pieces as in the case of Benois's costumes for *Nutcracker* or Berman's for *Romeo and Juliet*; others are retrospective fantasies such as Soudeikine's Biedermeier couples performing, as it were, miniature charades; yet others are mysterious and arresting visions outside of historical time such as Dorrer's backdrop for the *Firebird*.

Furthermore, the artistic media which attract Baryshnikov (watercolors, pencil drawings) are in themselves aerial and aetherial, fluid and translucent, and a long way from the staid 19<sup>th</sup> century salon portrait or the heavy multi-media installation of today. Baryshnikov's taste is for allusion rather than illusion, for grace rather than disgrace, one reason, surely, why Benois represent the keystone of the collection: his designs for *Giselle* and *Nutcracker*, like Dufy's study of a figure and hands, capture with their gentility and modesty and as such read as metaphors for the dance, light, harmonious, and purposeful, just like Baryshnikov's crafted, yet unearthly, steps in *Apollo* or *Prodigal Son*.

Benois, together with Diaghilev, was at the helm of the St. Petersburg World of Art group during the 1890s and early 1900s, a gathering of pictorial, musical, and literary talents which believed both in the aesthetic autonomy of art and in the rightfulness of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Many important painters of the time, not least, Bakst, Benois, Berman, Dobuzhinsky, Alexandre Jacvovleff, Philippe Maliavine, Nicholas Roerich, and Soudeikine (all represented in the Baryshnikov collection) were close allies of the World of Art, sharing its ideological platform, contributing to its exhibitions (1899-1906, 1910-24), and supporting the many cultural endeavors which Diaghilev initiated, especially the Ballets Russes (1909-29). Indeed, the Baryshnikov collection contains numerous references to Diaghilev's spectacular enterprise – Cocteau's portraits of Diaghilev and Nijinsky, Larionov's double portrait of Diaghilev and Apollinaire and drawings of rehearsals, Tchelitchew's cerebral and anatomical studies of *Spiral Head* and *Clown* informed, no doubt, by his work for *Ode* (1928), and Valentine Gross's representation of Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose*. To a considerable extent, Chemiakine's *fêtes galantes* (*Medieval Princess and Knight* is a case in point) also draw their inspiration from the highly stylized, linear filigrees of Benois's and Dobuzhinsky's theatrical visions.

However, as the collection also indicates, Diaghilev was not alone in the world of experimental performance in the 1910s and 1920s. Lithe and slender, Ida Rubinstein also left a deep imprint upon the concept of artistic movement, inviting Bakst, for example, to design her production of Gabriel D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien* in 1911 (in which she played the title role). Isadora Duncan and her disciples developed the principles of plastic dance, while retaining a formative link with the canons of antiquity, expressed so subtly in Walkowitz's drawings. Dufy's doodles, too, remind us of the importance of spontaneity and improvisation in attempts to express sentiment or emotion via bodily motion, while in their cheerful interiors Dobuzhinsky and André Beaurepair emphasize the condition of play and playfulness intrinsic to the medium of theater.

The art of performance is mercurial and fleeting and, for this reason, the full impact of a production can never be captured or registered, however sophisticated the recording mechanism. On the other hand, the sketches, studies, and cartoons in Baryshnikov's collection are all about transience, for, in conveying a gesture (Dorrer's standing figures), a gait (Fini's *Woman Dancing with Eyes Closed*), a pose (Berard's *Dancer with Moon on Head*), a step (Trishna Brown's study of feet), a facial expression (Jacovleff's Oriental portraits) or an episode (Dorrer's backdrop for *Police*), they remain as single links in a chain, a solitary sentence in a

complex narrative. It is fortunate, indeed, that the Baryshnikov collection contains sequences of works such as Benois's for *Nutcracker* and Soudeikine's for *Petrouchka*, because, like frames in a film, they amplify and reinforce the fabula, providing a fuller, more synthetic, impression which, of course, can never duplicate the original production, but which may bring us closer to the theatrical truth.

Just as Baryshnikov's dance repertoire is diverse and differentiated, so his collection mirrors a parallel versatility, drawing upon Russian, French, and American artists and upon the most varied styles and sentiments. But for all the centrifugal energy of the individual works in this exhibition, the Baryshnikov collection is centripetal, creating a lasting monument not only to pictorial expression and aesthetic licence, but also to the intense joy of movement and the absolute freedom of artistic gesture -- when motion vanquishes time.