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The Performance of Art: Picasso, Léger, and Modern Dance, 1917-1925

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The Performance of Art:
Picasso, Léger, and Modern Dance 1917-1925

by

Amanda Holly Beresford

A thesis presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

August 2012
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“For me, painting a picture is to get involved in a dramatic action during which reality gets torn to bits. This drama sweeps it along over all other considerations. The three-dimensional act is only secondary as far as I’m concerned. What matters is the drama of the act itself, the moment where the universe escapes only to encounter its own destruction.”

Picasso

“We ought to be able to…pass onto a different plane where the star is absorbed into the plastic ranks, where a mechanical choreography closely connected to its own scenery and music attains a whole, planned unity; where the scenery that has been immobile until now begins to move; where the spectacle’s charm encompasses the entire stage.”

Léger
Chapter 1

Introduction: Art, Total Art, and Performance

In this thesis I examine the phenomenon of European avant-garde easel painters designing for modern dance productions in the years during and immediately following the First World War. Many of the leading artists of the school of Paris, as well as several prominent Russian modernists, designed sets and costumes for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes; several of these (mainly) French, and some Swedish artists did likewise for the Ballets Suédois of Rolfe de Maré and other, smaller dance enterprises in Paris during these years. In this study, I focus on the two most significant painters who worked for the two most prominent dance companies in Europe during this intensely creative period for collaborative dance theatre: Pablo Picasso for the Ballets Russes (and, in one instance, for the short-lived Soirées de Paris); and Fernand Léger for the Ballets Suédois. Picasso and Léger were not close colleagues, although they both worked in Paris and lived in Montparnasse (except for 1914-17, when Léger served in the French army in Argonne). They were stylistically affiliated through Cubism, which Picasso, with Georges Braque, had invented and of which Léger practiced his own personal version. Their projects for the ballet stage, all created between 1917 and 1925, were motivated by dissimilar interests, but their work in this mode intersected in a variety of ways that had important consequences both for each artist’s studio work, and for the relationship between modern art and performance—especially dance performance—in the early inter-war years.¹

¹ I use the words “dance” and “ballet” interchangeably in this thesis. In the period under discussion, “modern dance” barely existed as a recognized form separate from ballet, despite the influential experimental work of Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, and others. Ballet itself was in the process of being reinvented by the Ballets Russes, but it was still firmly based in the academic tradition of...
Picasso and Léger may have been the most significant, but they were by no means the only modern artists who chose to collaborate with dance companies in the early part of the twentieth century. Many other artists of note worked with the Ballets Russes, the Ballets Suédois, and other ensembles that had the desire and the means to engage them during the 1910s and 1920s, setting a precedent for collaboration by visual artists in a variety of media on productions of dance, opera and musical theatre that continues in the present day.

These two artists serve here to exemplify the phenomenon of artist-designers for ballet, for several reasons. They both broke new ground in the creation of theatrical spectacle, devising and executing visual stagings for ballets that were innovative as dance theatre, and (in Picasso’s case) unprecedented as intersections between live theatre and an artist’s signature painterly style. They each achieved notable initiatives: Picasso created what is usually regarded as the first modernist ballet, and the first to merge performers with their costumes, in Parade. He was also the first to animate the imagery of his paintings in four dimensions, using time as a structural element in the transformation of his art from the canvas to the stage. Léger was the first to reimagine the performer as a piece of moving the danse d’école. Performances by the more radical Ballets Suédois, although called ballet, often bore little resemblance to traditional choreography or technique. I also use the terms “dance theatre” and “ballet theatre,” to denote the performance of dance on stage within a theatrical environment. “Theatre” is used more generally to mean both the physical environment for theatrical performance, including dance, and the range of different performance-based artforms that occur within that space.

The principal artists who designed for the Ballets Russes were: Diaghilev’s Russian colleagues Leon Bakst, Alexander Benois, Nikolai Roerich, Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larionov between 1909 and 1914; and Giacomo Balla, Pablo Picasso, André Derain, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, Marie Laurencin, Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Georges Braque, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Naum Gabo, Anton Pevsner, Pavel Tchelitchev, Giorgio De Chirico, Maurice Utrillo and Georges Rouault between 1916 and Diaghilev’s death (and the company’s demise) in 1929. Goncharova and Larionov continued to work for Diaghilev after WWI. The Ballet’s Suédois engaged as designers Pierre Bonnard, Georges Mouveau, Théophile Steinlen, Nils Dardel, Pierre Laprade, Éinar Nerman, André Hellé, André Parr, Irène Lagut, Jean Hugo, Valentine Gross, Fernand Léger, Hélène Perdriat, Gunnar Hallström, Gerald and Sara Murphy, Alexander Alexeieff, Tsuguharu-Léonard Foujita, Giorgio de Chirico and Francis Picabia.
scenery: part of a stage that functioned as a mechanism incorporating performers and set into a unified spectacle, and that suppressed the performers’ humanity in favor of a theatrical experience celebrating the aesthetic power of objects. He was also the first to extend his stage experience to filmmaking. Both artists crucially demonstrate a productive exchange between their design work and their studio work that lasted beyond their relatively brief involvement with ballet, and both exemplify in the highest degree the tendency of their time for the visual element, when driven by an artist of strong vision, to dominate the stage.

More general art histories and those from the mid-twentieth century often ignore Picasso’s and Léger’s ballet work entirely, or treat it as at best a peripheral aberration, not to be taken seriously as part of the modernist canon; designing sets and costumes for dancers is too easily dismissed as a frivolous activity that does not fit some art historians’ ideal of the modern artist’s heroic quest. Likewise, the requirement that the artist-designer work collaboratively, and within the various constraints imposed by the conditions of theatre production, may seem difficult to reconcile with the autonomy and independence usually associated with modern artistic practice. Similarly, many dance historians pay scant attention to the artists’ roles in creating theatrical works that are

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regarded for a variety of reasons as seminal in the evolution of twentieth-century dance. Both approaches bespeak a narrow-minded snobbery that misses an essential point: these avant-garde dance performances were conceived by their several authors as integrated expressions of the arts of music, painting, choreography, dance and drama—total art—and this total art of the theatre was regarded by a great many practitioners and critics in its time as a new and vital form of avant-garde expression. Only since the 1990s (with the notable exception of Douglas Cooper, who published his pioneering study *Picasso Théâtre* in 1967) have many scholars adopted a synthetic approach that considers art and dance as equal, and equally important, partners in a previously neglected field of modernist endeavor.

In considering Picasso’s and Léger’s art for the dance stage, I will address several issues: the factors motivating these artists to work with dance companies, and what they hoped to achieve in doing so; the reciprocal relationship between their theatre work and their studio work, and how the former stimulated the latter; the ways in which their work changed the dynamic between live performance and visual art—set and costume design—in modern dance theatre, and in doing so helped to create a new artform that transgressed and sometimes collapsed traditional boundaries; and the ways in which their experiments furthered modernism’s agenda of pushing out the limits of art’s possibilities, making it more inclusive, synthetic, multi-disciplinary and engaged with contemporary culture, while enriching its range, flexibility and expressive capacity in the process.

I propose first to situate the topic of vanguard artists working in theatre in its larger contexts: theories of total art, emanating in the modern era from the writings of Richard Wagner (1813-1883); and changing ideas and practices regarding theatre design in the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, the question, “why dance?” must be addressed—why was dance a uniquely appropriate performance art form for modern artists who apparently aspired to animate their art, to create of it a more theatrical experience, or to expand their audience? The movement towards ever greater animation of décor and of performers’ costumes, begun before Picasso and Léger’s involvement and to which they contributed, transformed the visual elements of theatre from decorative but static accessories to “décor qui bouge” (“scenery that moves”), to quote Jean Cocteau—performers in their own right, with little or no human reference. This constituted one of the most striking, if short-lived, ruptures of convention on the early twentieth-century stage. This rupture is what I call “the performance of art,” and it was, I argue, the direct result of the involvement of easel painters in the design (and, increasingly, the conception) of dance works for the theatre.

Theatre by its nature is a cooperative enterprise, and visual and performance art have long been closely associated, certainly since the Renaissance, and probably in ancient times. Artists’ involvement with theatrical productions and staged entertainments of diverse kinds has a venerable tradition, encompassing courtly masques and ballets, ecclesiastical festivals, pantomimes, and opera. Before the modern era, there was no consistent structure for such involvement, and its conditions varied widely; for example, artists who enjoyed the patronage of a prince, such as Botticelli for Lorenzo de’ Medici in the fourteenth century, and Aristotile da Sangallo for the Medici, Strozzi and Farnese families in the fifteenth, might be expected to provide the décor for masques or other

Court festivities and entertainments as part of their duties. As settings became more elaborate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were often the work of architects, notably Inigo Jones (active 1605-40) in England, under James I and Charles I. The difference between modern artists’ theatrical activities and those that preceded them was in part that modern artists chose to design for theatre as part of a conscious program that extended their studio practice and presented them with opportunities to experiment in a new aesthetic genre. The avant-garde at the beginning of the modern era, as Günter Berghaus argues, “challenge[d] the criteria of what constitutes a scenic work of art and…create[d] performances that were not just interpretations of dramatic texts, but autonomous, transient events that attained power and impact from their temporal and physical immediacy.” An essential part of this immediacy was, often, the striking and innovative visual design quotient provided by painters who were not just scene-decorators, but artists in their own right. In addition, and crucially, avant-garde theatrical practitioners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were driven by a theoretical rationale for incorporating studio painters’ contributions as part of their enterprise, along with those of poets, composers, and choreographers. This rationale stemmed from Wagner’s formulation of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art”; it reimagined the nature and purpose of theatre and underpinned, in various forms, most if not all of the theatrical projects involving painters during the period under discussion, as well as for several years before and after it.

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Wagner’s ideas were extraordinarily influential for European culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; according to Raymond Furness, he “affected vast areas of the world’s mind.” His concept of total art is usually described as a synthesis of all the arts that make up the theatrical experience, music being the most elevated, supported—in his original formulation—by poetry and dance (later versions, by other writers, added drama and painting). The aim of such a union, which was to be realized on the operatic stage, was the creation of a transcendent aesthetic and spiritual experience in the soul of the spectator. Some scholars have pointed out that the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk was more complex and subtle than this account suggests, and that the concept evolved over Wagner’s lifetime and through his writings, so that a definitive formulation is hardly possible. Theatre was the locus of Wagner’s aesthetic synthesis, and total theatre, as E.T. Kirby emphasizes, means not just “an accumulation” but also a full integration of all its constituent artforms in order to create a completely new effect. In this process, each one of the arts would complete and complement the others, attaining through this interaction in the composite work its highest state of fulfillment, without losing its individual character. All aspects of the performance singly and reciprocally expressed the “soul” of the work, generating an intense experience of aesthetic unity in the spectator.

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This idea of a totality of the arts was believed by Renaissance humanists to have originated in ancient Egypt or in “the great unitarian artwork” of Greek tragedy, having emerged from religious mysteries that expressed the original unity of the cosmos. The Renaissance masque was an early attempt to reinstate this lost unity through theatrical performance that incorporated music, dance, poetry and art. Wagner took up the idea, present in western thought since the Renaissance, arguing that the advent of western rationalist thought had “shattered Grecian tragedy,” fragmenting the original totality of art, and that it could not be recreated but “must be born anew” through his project of total theatre. Wagner’s intentions regarding the Gesamtkunstwerk, however, are less important for our purposes here than how his ideas were interpreted by others.

Avant-garde theatre practitioners Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) and Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), both strongly committed to Wagnerian ideas and both anti-naturalists, were among the most influential heralds of the integration of art and performance on the modern stage. Appia was Swiss and Craig English, but both men were active throughout Europe, and their influence was widely disseminated. Appia, who believed that his work “completed Wagner,” advocated a unified theatre where stage space, actors and lighting would provide an “integrated, plastic and visual equivalent” to music, and where the boundaries between individual artforms were dissolved. Appia called for a theatre whose foundation was dance of an expressive, abstract kind that gave bodily form to the inner urges voiced by music. He rejected the attempt to create illusion on stage by means...

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11 Wagner (n.d.), quoted in ibid., xvi.
12 Wagner (n.d.), quoted in ibid., xvii.
13 Ibid., xxii, 13.
of décor; instead, Appia wrote, “the spectacle of the human body in all its plasticity and mobility” utilized artistically, should form the essence of scenic art. He felt that the scenery should not dominate the stage, but be an equal partner with all other elements of the performance in expressing the deep mood and feeling that constituted (as for Wagner) “the soul of the drama.” Appia differed from Craig in basing his aesthetic on the human performer, whereas Craig notoriously developed the concept of the “übermarionette” as a solution to the problem of “debased stage realism” that, he felt, limited the expressive power of theatre. With this vision he proposed for the first time a depersonalized performance, to prevent the actor’s human contingency getting in the way of the deeper, symbolic aesthetic of the production. Craig rejected theatrical realism, finding it banal and antithetical to aesthetic expression: “This tendency towards the natural has nothing to do with art…” As an ego-less instrument, according to Craig, the actor would function as an equal element with lighting, design and music in the unified artwork of the theatre. Craig’s theories have a powerful echo in Léger’s formulation of the “object-spectacle” which he realized in La Création du Monde twenty years later. Like Craig, Léger was fascinated by puppets and masks, both men using them as strategies to depersonalize the performers and to distance them from a realistic effect. Craig believed that stage

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15 Kernodle, in Kirby, Total Theatre, 14.


17 E.T. Kirby, “Abstract Man: the Essence of Total Theatre,” in Kirby, 29-30. Kirby argues that the übermarionette was a metaphor for “an aesthetic of abstraction.” Craig made it clear in On the Art of the Theatre (1924) that he did not intend that the actor be replaced, literally, by a puppet; he parses the übermarionette as a metaphor for the ego-less, perfectly disciplined actor.

naturalism conflicted with the artificial space of the theatre, and that truth was better conveyed by suggestion than by imitation; similarly, Léger insisted that the stage should be “a space of total invention,” as different as possible from the audience’s own space, in order to create “the state of astonishment” he desired. Both followed a program of resistance to audience identification with the human elements of the performance, believing that a visual continuity between audience and stage was contrary to the achievement of maximum aesthetic effect.

Another theorist whose writing deserves particular mention in the context of the spread of Wagnerian philosophy is Wassily Kandinsky. In parallel with his development of abstract painting, Kandinsky developed an abstract, Symbolist concept of theatre based on his belief in synaesthesia, the correspondence of sensory impressions and sensations. Kandinsky believed that an inner, spiritual essence “behind the material world” united both sensory and aesthetic phenomena, thus enabling both synaesthetic sensations and a response to the Gesamtkunstwerk in the spectator. The individual’s predisposition to particular artistic stimuli determines his response to the “great synthesis” of the arts; so the spectator is complicit in, and completes, the creation of the Gesamtkunstwerk. As Berghaus explains: “When the recipient is sensitive to the vibrations of the Gesamtkunstwerk, several of his senses will be touched and influence each other synaesthetically. Such a simultaneous, multifaceted response will create a heightened

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20 Interestingly, Kandinsky had his first experience of synaesthesia in Moscow in the 1890s after attending a performance of Wagner’s Lohengrin, following an exhibition of French Impressionist painting.
enjoyment and a more profound experience of the performance.” Kandinsky’s “stage-composition” Der Gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound), first published in 1912, but not performed until 1972, was a highly abstract and symbolic distillation of his ideas, in which sound, color, and movement interwove in an abstruse but mesmeric fashion. His writings on theatrical and theoretical topics in the Blue Rider Almanac achieved a wide European currency and proved to be extremely influential on avant-garde practice in art and the theatre.

Despite the widespread interest in artistic synthesis among the European avant-garde before the War, enthusiasm for Wagner’s ideas was not universal. Conservative dance critic André Levinson, for example, regarded the Wagnerian fusion of the arts as a retrograde notion. In his opinion, it reversed the progress of art history, which was characterized not by fusion but by the evolutionary distinction of the arts into their individual natures. His was a minority view, however. The theatre was an important site of artistic experimentation, not all of it directly descended from Wagnerism, but most of it geared toward an increasingly interventionist role for visual art onstage.

The Futurists, led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Enrico Prampolini, devised some of the most radical formulations of stage modernism in Italy before the War. Futurist performance was an essential precursor to the ballet experimentalism of which Picasso and Léger became leading exponents after 1917. Marinetti believed that theatre enabled the “brutal entry of life into art,” and used it as a platform for his extremist political

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21 Berghaus, 52-53.

agendas, which were enmeshed with his artistic ones. Futurist performance sought to overthrow all possible aesthetic and theatrical conventions in its quest to revolutionize not only Italy’s arts but its whole society; performative media were seen as the optimal means of reaching and influencing the widest possible audience, and theatrical programs were driven by a “political aesthetics.” Futurism adapted ideas of the kind first proposed by Appia and Craig to its own ends, and took an extreme interest in Kandinsky’s theories on sensory correspondence, disseminated in the Blue Rider Almanac. Its principal strategies were the integration of the performer with the setting, and the mechanization of the performer. According to Prampolini: “All elements of music, of painting, and of gesture must harmonize with each other without losing their independence…[they] must create a psychological synchronism in the soul of the spectator.” Both strategies were taken up by Léger in his work with the Ballets Suédois, but with the difference that “mechanization” for the Futurists referred to a form of stylized pantomimic dance developed by Prampolini, and not to the concept Léger would advance in 1924 of the human as equivalent to the machine. Marinetti discussed this idea of “mechanical personification” in his Manifesto of Futurist Dance in 1917, in which, perhaps surprisingly, he admired the Ballets Russes as “very interesting artistically.”

Diaghilev reciprocated Marinetti’s interest, becoming briefly involved with Futurism and adopting some of the movement’s more experimental performance strategies, notably in Giacomo Balla’s Feu d’Artifice (Fireworks) for the Ballets Russes in 1917, where the

24 Ibid., 96.
26 Marinetti, Manifesto of Futurist Dance (1917), quoted in ibid., 104.
effects were achieved by a fusion of music, sound effects, geometrical stage architecture and dynamic lighting. Fortunato Depero’s *Balli Plastici (Plastic Dances)* in 1918 followed a similar aesthetic; from integrating and mechanizing the human performer, it was a short step to eliminating him altogether, as these performances did. The idea closely resembled Craig’s concept of the übermarionette, but the Futurists took it literally.

An alternative to banishing the performer from the stage was to disguise or transform him by means of costuming, including masks and prostheses, allowing him, when performing the appropriate movements, to present the appearance of a mechanism. Hugo Ball employed such a strategy in Dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, in Zurich in 1916. Cabaret Voltaire was the birthplace of Dada, but it was also a clearing-house for avant-garde ideas from many aesthetic sources, including Futurism, Cubism, and Symbolism. Ball was himself strongly influenced by Appia, Craig and Kandinsky; in 1914 he aspired to the creation of a “totally new form of the whole dramatic-scenic and theatrical art…which…expresses itself simultaneously through dance, color, mime, music and speech.”

27 Ball (1914), quoted in Berghaus, 139.

Ball and the Dadaists Tristan Tzara and Richard Huelsenbeck, performances of scenes from Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, “African” dances by Rudolf Laban’s students, Futurist performances, noise music, and exhibits of Cubist and Dadaist art—penetrated more mainstream theatre practice to varying degrees, and left an indelible mark on much that followed. Most importantly for the subject of this thesis, all the aforementioned practitioners, theories and movements contributed significantly to the advancement of visual art, in the form of décor, costume and lighting, as part of the composite experience of theatrical spectacle; they also made possible and perhaps inevitable its temporary dominance over the human performer as an essential element in the proceedings. They prepared the ground, as well, for the ascendancy of easel painters as scenic designers after the First World War.

In order to appreciate how revolutionary post-Wagnerian scenic design was, we should be aware of the conventions against which it reacted. Avant-garde theatre and dance were by no means exclusively Russian phenomena, but they received much of their impetus in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century; at this time, in Russia as elsewhere, stage design as an art did not exist. Instead of a unified vision unique to a particular production, set construction was a low-ranking craft executed by artisans who specialized in particular genres of scenery, such as forests, marine settings, castle interiors, and so forth. Set pieces were interchangeable, generic backdrops, intended for continual recycling in equally generic ballets and dramas. Scene painters, who were not regarded as artists, practiced a highly stylized naturalism for which they were paid by the square
meter. Costumes, similarly, consisted of stock pieces owned by actors and dancers and recycled according to the requirements of different roles.

A pioneering theatrical reformer was Georg II, Duke of Meiningen, whose Ensemble toured Europe in the 1870s and 1880s presenting historical dramas with scrupulously researched period sets and costumes that strove for historical authenticity as well as stage naturalism. The Meiningen Ensemble’s visits to Moscow influenced Russian industrialist and arts entrepreneur Savva Mamontov, who established an artists’ colony at his private estate, Abramtsevo, near Moscow, in 1870. Here he gathered many of Russia’s leading artists, composers and writers, including Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the painters Valentin Serov and Konstantin Korovin, and the bass singer Fedor Chaliapin, with the intention of harnessing their combined talents in the creation of artistically distinguished stage spectacles, founded on Wagnerian synthetic principles, for his Moscow Private Opera company. Mamontov was probably the first director of the modern era to commission easel painters to design stage décor; he aimed to produce a theatre that was a perfect fusion of music, drama and visual art. His enterprise attracted some of the emerging luminaries of Russian avant-garde theatre, including his cousin Konstantin Stanislavsky, and the young Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev.

In 1898 Stanislavsky, who had been profoundly impressed by the Meiningen Ensemble, co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre, which matched psychological realism in acting with scenic realism on stage. He had no interest in the more abstract and symbolic currents of

European avant-garde stage design, although he did invite Gordon Craig to produce *Hamlet* for the Moscow Art Theatre in 1911-12. An influential artist-designer who worked for both Mamontov and Stanislavsky was Nikolai Sapunov. He collaborated on a production of Wagner’s *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1902, but his most significant avant-garde work was with the playwright-director Vsevolod Meyerhold, for whom he designed the sets and costumes for Alexander Blok’s symbolist drama *The Puppet Show* at the actress Vera Komissarshevskaya’s experimental St. Petersburg theatre in 1906. The production synthesized the ideas of artist, director and playwright, and prefigured Picasso’s *Mercure* (1924) in its use of cardboard cutouts through which only the actors’ heads and hands appeared. Sapunov also translated his fantastical, vividly colored still-life paintings into theatrical language for Alexander Tairov’s experimental, anti-realist Chamber Theatre, before his premature death in 1912.

Sapunov was one of numerous artists who exhibited their paintings with *Mir Iskusstva* (the World of Art), a society led by Diaghilev of aesthetically minded St. Petersburg artists, poets, writers, and intellectuals seeking to modernize and internationalize Russian attitudes to all forms of art. These miriskussniki published a progressive journal (also called *Mir Iskusstva*) under Diaghilev’s editorship and Mamontov’s sponsorship that was an important force in the advent of Russian modernism. The group’s mission to create a form of artistic expression that fused and transformed all the arts was a legacy of Wagnerism, and of Mamontov himself. Olga Haldey argues that Diaghilev imitated Mamontov’s collaborative methodology, which later became a hallmark of the Ballets Russes; he also copied the older impresario’s autocratic style of direction and
management. Mir Iskusstva’s attempt to craft a Russianized Gesamtkunstwerk was dedicated at first to renovating Russian culture; its ultimate realization was the founding of the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev’s circle had decided that ballet was the perfect vehicle for aesthetic synthesis, as he explained in 1916:

In our modern ballet, the union of the line and rhythm of the dancer’s body, of his gestures and facial expressions, and the music, is intended to be as intimate as the union of text and music dreamed of...by Richard Wagner. ...we have at our command a more perfect medium for the arts of the theatre than any composer of opera... With the elimination of speech, with the emphasis on the factor of design, which must remain an inherent principle of the most fantastical ballet...we have an opportunity for combining music and the other arts more perfectly, [so that they] can express moods as well as represent events with unsurpassable intensity...all this, to me, represents the most significant recent developments in the theatre. (my italics)

From the company’s inception in 1909, design was an outstanding feature of Ballets Russes productions. Until the War, members of the Mir Iskusstva circle, chiefly the artists Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, designed most of the ballets. Bakst’s high-keyed exoticism and Benois’ lush romanticism in works such as Scheherazade (1910) and Petroushka (1911) defined the company’s pre-war visual style and contributed hugely to its success with European audiences. Russian modernists Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov were responsible for decors for the folk-themed ballets Le Coq d’Or (1914) and Soleil de Nuit (1915), which combined a kind of Slavic primitivism with a modernist sensibility. Nikolai Roerich designed the controversial Le Sacre du Printemps (1913), with its oddly cumbersome costumes that alluded to an imagined folk heritage.


31 Diaghilev (1916), quoted in Schouvaloff, 27.
By 1915, Diaghilev was looking beyond his Russian cohort in an effort to revitalize his company’s image by engaging with the European avant-garde, especially its visual artists. In his quest to be always at the leading edge of whatever was newest and most daring in the arts, Diaghilev explored collaborations with the Futurists while based in Rome during the War. The result was the dancerless, dynamic, color-and-light spectacle *Feu d’Artifice (Fireworks)*, conceived and designed by Balla with a score by Igor Stravinsky. A projected collaboration with Depero was aborted, but the experience led indirectly (having given him a taste for working with avant-garde artists) to Diaghilev’s commissioning Picasso to design *Parade*, which in 1917 became the first dedicatedly modernist ballet.\(^{32}\) *Parade* retained traces of Futurist aesthetics as a result of its décor having been partly executed in Rome, where Depero assisted Picasso with some of the construction.

In his program note for *Parade*, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote:

> The cubist painter Picasso and the most daring of today’s choreographers, Léonide Massine, have here consummately achieved, for the first time, that alliance between painting and the dance, between the plastic and mimetic arts, that is the herald of a more comprehensive art to come…This new alliance—I say new, because until now scenery and costumes were linked only by factitious bonds—has given rise, in *Parade*, to a kind of sur-realism, which I consider to be the point of departure for a whole series of manifestations of the New Spirit that is making itself felt today…\(^{33}\)

In claiming that the “new” integration of the arts in *Parade* heralded a new realism that was the sign of the future, Apollinaire was prophetic; in coining the word “surrealism”

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\(^{32}\) In 1916, Depero was commissioned to produce designs for *Le Chant du Rossignol*. The commission was later (1918) given to Henri Matisse.

for this “New Spirit,” he perhaps unintentionally reinforced Cocteau’s claim that this “ballet réaliste” was “plus vrai que le vrai” (“more real than reality,” or “truer than truth”).34 Apollinaire was making a claim for the present and future significance of artistic synthesis as a means to a higher reality, through total theatre. It was a claim that Picasso and Léger would have supported, and a prediction that they both were instrumental in fulfilling. Apollinaire’s own play Les Mamelles de Tirésias, subtitled “a surrealist drama,” premiered a month after Parade; its prologue proclaimed it to be a work of total theatre.

In exploring the rationale for these painters’ work with dance theatre, and the reciprocal impact of the experience both on their studio practice and on dance performance, we must consider the significance of dance itself as the medium for their experiments in total theatre. Why, when the writings of Craig, Appia, Kandinsky, Marinetti, and other theorists concerned actors and drama, and those of Wagner, the progenitor of their ideas, concerned music and opera, did ballet become the principal vehicle for the involvement of painters with projects for artistic synthesis in the early twentieth century? The historical reasons are complex, and they originate in Wagner’s views on the position of dance within the Gesamtkunstwerk.

The French theatre scholar Cécile Schenck reminds us that dance is usually regarded as the “figure de parent pauvre” (“Cinderella figure”) in the Wagnerian synthesis; yet, as she demonstrates, Wagner himself, in Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The Artwork of the Future; 1849), named dance as the natural source and matrix of all the other arts: “music

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34 Cocteau, widely quoted; given in its original context in Francis Steegmuller, Cocteau: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 179.
and poetry become intelligible, comprehensible, only in dance … to the man who is perfectly open to art [and] who not only hears, but sees.” Wagner’s interest in dance lay not in choreography, nor in the dancer’s skill, but in the capacity of the human body to effect a transition between the exterior world of appearances and “la sphère invisible de l’âme humaine” (“the invisible sphere of the human soul”). The composer believed, argues Schenck, that the symbolism of the drama was intensified through gesture, to which he accorded fundamental importance together with music and poetry, in his “ontologie du spectacle” (“ontology of the spectacle”). Wagner’s ideas were expressed in the early twentieth century in the teaching of Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, inventor of Eurhythmics, whose theories on the intimate association of musical rhythm and human gesture deeply influenced a generation of dancers and theatre practitioners, many of whom visited his school at Hellerau, Germany, between 1910 and 1914, or witnessed demonstrations in St. Petersburg or other European capitals. Diaghilev and his choreographers Michel Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky were among those whose contact with the Dalcroze method helped shape their ideas about the correspondence between dance and other forms of artistic expression.

Diaghilev and many of his contemporaries believed that dance was the ideal medium for aesthetic synthesis: of all the performing arts, dance—even more so than opera—is the one that can most fully integrate music, drama, poetry, gesture, movement, and visual art in performance. Dance is a non-verbal, non-naturalistic and essentially abstract artform in which the (interpreting) artist is also the artwork and the medium. Such an identification

35 Wagner, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The Artwork of the Future; 1849), Quoted in Schenck, 50-52. My translation of Schenck’s French translation of the original German.
of self and art correlates to an extent with modern painters’ emphasis on their own subjectivity in the articulation of their aesthetic vision. As an abstract artform, dance is uniquely able to express states of mind and different levels of reality, as Wagner understood. It has thus a natural affinity with the spiritual, and with dream, fantasy, the supernatural and the unconscious, all of which form the themes of a great many ballets, as well as of much modern art. Artists concerned with transformations of reality found in dance a correlative to their own formal concerns. The origins of dance in ancient ritual, and its association with arcane concepts like the music of the spheres lends it a mystical aura; it has been seen as a metaphor for rebirth, the life force, and for primal urges that connect it with the archaic beginnings of the race. In Nietzschean terms, dance may be conceived as a reconciliation of the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses—roughly, frenzy and order—whose dynamic tension may be regarded as fundamental to western culture.\(^\text{36}\)

For these reasons the dance stage above all others came to be seen as the natural site for the integration of the arts, including painting, which came to dominate its partners in artistic fusion.

Practical historical reasons also contributed to this state of affairs. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and their cultural impact in Europe, England, and America situated ballet firmly at the forefront of artistic modernism from 1909 onwards. Fashionable, highly visible, and at the center of a milieu of patrons with progressive ideas about art and the wealth to indulge them, the Ballets Russes offered an unrivalled opportunity to artists, whether they were seeking exposure and patronage, or wanting a laboratory beyond the canvas to

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\(^{36}\) First articulated in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche’s formulation of the central dichotomy of reality provoked controversy among the intelligentsia at first, but entered the modern psyche and was an important influence on Symbolism and Surrealism.
experiment with new ideas in new media. The same was true of the Ballets Suédois, whose founder, Rolf de Maré, emulated the Ballets Russes in this as in much else during that company’s brief but meteoric existence, and went even further than Diaghilev in courting leading vanguard artists, writers and composers of the day.

We should recall here that the Ballets Russes and Suédois did not take over and transform ballet wholesale in the 1910s and 20s. Traditional, nineteenth-century style romantic ballet was still performed on the stages of Paris, London, Rome, Stockholm, St. Petersburg and other European capitals, and enjoyed a loyal, if conservative, audience. The academies of those cities trained hundreds of dancers in the traditional danse d’école, although their curricula were increasingly influenced by new developments, and many of their emerging dancers went on to perform in the more modern styles, with more progressive ensembles. The new companies represented the artistically advanced, fashionable and daring edge, and they appealed at first to the self-consciously avant-garde, the young and the cultural elite, but as time passed, to wider audiences as well, as ballet broadened its scope to include the modern alongside the traditional in a fusion that continually develops and that keeps the artform alive today.

Having created a mise-en-scène in the preceding discussion for Picasso and Léger’s experiences with modern ballet, I shall proceed to investigate those experiences in detail in the following chapters, in which I use the words “theatre,” “dance theatre,” and “ballet theatre” frequently. By “theatre,” I mean a performance-based artform involving drama, poetry, dance, music, or some combination of these, presented by actors, dancers, singers, and other performers (usually but not always) on stage in a purpose-built facility (also called a “theatre”), for the benefit of an audience. In the following discussion, theatre is
always a public event, although private theatre performances are and were by no means uncommon. “Dance theatre” and “ballet theatre” apply to dance performances presented in the context just given, and are used interchangeably in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 examines Picasso and Parade, discussing the importance of theatrical subjects in Picasso’s work before his encounter with the Ballets Russes in 1917, and drawing connections between his groundbreaking décor for that ballet and particular themes and preoccupations in his studio work, including harlequins, horses, and Cubist construction.

In chapter 3, I look at the three more conventional ballets Picasso designed for Diaghilev together with their analogs in his painting, and in greater detail at Mercure, the controversial Cubist-classicist-Surrealist work he produced for Soirées de Paris in 1924. I examine how Picasso’s dance work affected his choice of themes, his introduction of theatricality into the composition of his Cubist still lifes, his negotiation with ideas of space, time, and the fourth dimension, and I argue that his adoption of classicism in the early 1920s was more than just a response to the “call to order” of that time—it was a direct result of his exposure to ballet. As well, I discuss Picasso’s drawings of ballet dancers, a fascinating and scarcely regarded aspect of his nine-year immersion in the dance world.

Chapter 4 deals with Léger and his two works for the Ballets Suédois, Skating Rink and La Création du Monde, in 1922 and 1923. I discuss the Swedish company’s aggressively avant-garde approach to ballet, and how Rolf de Maré’s aims matched Léger’s determination to achieve startling new effects by applying his “machine aesthetic” to the creation of theatrical spectacles in which the dancers functioned as inhuman or barely human parts of a moving décor. I investigate parallels to his scenic practice in his
painting, and demonstrate the way in which Léger’s film *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924, takes his ideas to a logical end by replacing dancers with inanimate objects. Finally, I conclude by comparing the theatrical achievements of the two artists in terms of their approach to the concept of total theatre. The close conjunction of date and location for Picasso’s and Léger’s last and most extreme design efforts in ballet allows us to scrutinize those works jointly and reveals their artist-designers’ humanist and anti-humanist agendas in relation to each other. I further consider their roles in the dehumanization of dance and in the triumph of art as performer, and why the role-reversal of art and performance on the dance stage marked out its short-lived, distinctive trajectory in the decade following the end of the First World War.
Chapter 2

Picasso and *Parade*: Representation in Four Dimensions

Picasso was the first twentieth-century Western artist to move with authority between the studio and the theatre, and in doing so he set a precedent that a great many of his contemporaries would follow. Between 1917 and 1924, Picasso was deeply involved with the Ballets Russes, for whom he created full décors for four ballets—*Parade* (1917), *Le Tricorne* (1919), *Pulcinella* (1920) and *Quadro Flamenco* (1921)—and a curtain for another, *Le Train Bleu* (1924) as well as the décor and much of the libretto for *Mercure* (1924), staged for a season of benefit performances, Les Soirées de Paris. At the same time, he executed numerous drawings of dancers resting, rehearsing, and performing, and a series of fine portraits of his collaborators in the ballet, including Léonide Massine, Igor Stravinsky and Erik Satie, as well as caricatures, impromptu sketches, and several major paintings inspired by his theatre experience.37 Picasso had the longest and the most far-reaching involvement with dance of any of the artists who collaborated with Diaghilev, de Maré or their competitors, and his productions were arguably the most original and important of any of them, both as scenic designs and for his work as a whole.

As Werner Spies insists, it is impossible to separate Picasso’s work for the theatre from his studio art, either in terms of the complex interrelation between the two during his five

37 Picasso also collaborated on at least eight other theatrical projects throughout his career, including Jean Cocteau’s drama *Antigone* (1922), and Serge Lifar’s ballet *Icare* (1965), wrote two plays, *Desire Caught by the Tail* (1941), and *Four Little Girls* (1950-1), and participated in four films, including Cocteau’s *Le Testament d’Orphée* (1959).
years of intense theatrical activity, or in its longer-term consequences.\textsuperscript{38} Everything Picasso did in the theatre was either the realization of ideas initiated in his painting and sculpture, often years beforehand, or the precursor to projects he would elaborate in the studio. Spies divides Picasso’s theatre-related work into four aspects, which may be paraphrased as follows:

1. Work for the stage, including sets, costumes and drop curtains;

2. Work depicting theatrical subjects as part of the iconography of imaginative compositions. To this I would add work depicting theatrical subjects from direct observation;

3. Work in which stage design operates as a compositional or theoretical principle;

4. Work in which real or symbolic movement echoes stage precedents.\textsuperscript{39}

Olivier Berggruen proposes, as well, work in which the scene depicted has the appearance of a staged representation; this seems to belong in Spies’s third category.\textsuperscript{40}

The originality of the first of these categories and its relationship to the next three form the subject of this chapter and the next.

In the period 1917 to 1924 Picasso’s experimentation with a range of concurrent pictorial expressions blossomed and diversified. Thus theatricality defines not only Picasso’s art, but also his self-fashioning as an artist; in his stylistic diversity he performs multiple

\textsuperscript{38} Werner Spies, “Picasso-Dramaturge,” in Henning Rischbieter, \textit{Art and the Stage in the 20th Century: Painters and Sculptors Work for the Theater} (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 76.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 76.

\textsuperscript{40} Olivier Berggruen, “The Theater as Metaphor” (27-37), in Berggruen, editor, \textit{Picasso Und Das Theater} (Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 28.
roles, both in order to divert and dazzle his audience, and to reveal aspects of his own artistic nature. Douglas Cooper argues that Picasso saw a parallel between art and theatre because “he has come to regard both as different though comparable ways of creating an illusory world…with images which …reflect, and so help us, the spectators, to recognize more about the world of reality in which we live.”\(^{41}\) As a painter it was Picasso’s task to show us those worlds and that reality, which is why he understood and visually interpreted the world of the theatre as intensely as he did.

**Picasso and Theatre: Early Work**

Stravinsky acknowledged in 1920 that Picasso had an “exceptional feeling for the theatre.”\(^{42}\) Despite his lack of theatrical background, the theatre was of vital importance to Picasso’s art and to his perception of himself as an artist from his early days in Paris. As an impoverished, emigré artist with little French, he was drawn to the itinerant circus performers and acrobats plying their trade near his Montmartre studio, many of whom spoke Spanish. That Picasso identified with these performers on the margins of society and depicted them in many paintings and drawings, especially in his Rose period of 1904-05, is a commonplace observation of the artist’s early history. In works like *The Family of Saltimbanques* (1905, fig. 1), and *The Actor* (1904), Picasso evokes the tragic loneliness of those outcasts who don masks to entertain a public that applauds their masquerade while shunning them offstage. The melancholy resignation of their everyday existence was what interested him, not the false gaiety of their theatrics. Picasso saw in them a parallel with his own situation, giving his own features to harlequins in, for


\(^{42}\) Igor Stravinsky (1920) quoted in Spies, 76.
example, *At the Lapin Agile* (1905, fig. 2). Harlequin became the first of his pictorial alter egos, the theme of hundreds of works at different periods throughout his life. This Commedia dell’Arte character was central to Picasso’s relationship with the theatre; he disappeared from Picasso’s imagery, however, when the artist first discovered Cubism, resurfacing around 1915, and was reinstated as a major theme of Picasso’s art while he was designing for the ballet. He appears on the drop curtains of *Parade*, Picasso’s first and most innovative ballet project, and of *Mercure*, his last.

If Picasso conceived of himself as the character Harlequin, an alternative part of his persona may also have been the actor behind the mask; the performer as well as the performed. As such, the artist is a performer and his art a performance. This is not a new observation when applied to modern art, but in Picasso’s case it can be made to seem particularly apt: his art’s diversity may be represented as a proliferation of, if not roles, then stylistic choices—Cubist, Classicist, academic realist, Rousseau-like naïf, Surrealist—each of which presents a new artistic face to his public, and all of which are capable of coexisting within the same performer/producer and of being called forth on demand. The problem with this analogy is that from the inception of Cubism, and particularly from around 1914, Picasso chooses from among a range of styles not for purposes of personal expression (Cubism is a style from which the artist’s ego is deliberately erased), but in defiance of a conventional model of artistic development, which he rejected. However, there may be a difference between an artist’s intentions and the way in which his output is received; the preceding characterization of Picasso as a Harlequin-like actor who adopts many stylistic roles applies to his reception, or to his staging of himself within the art world, if not to his production.
Harlequin functions as a metaphor for the diversity of Picasso’s art, as Yve-Alain Bois observes. As subversive trickster, shape-shifter, and master of disguise who “transform[s] the banal into the marvelous,” Harlequin’s traditional attributes perfectly fit the artist’s protean identity. But, as Bois also points out, the boundaries between Harlequin as theme and Harlequin as metaphor for Picasso’s artistic practice are porous. The character’s meaning at any given time is as slippery as his nature, and he appears in as many different styles as Picasso can devise whenever he wants to use him. The corollary is also true: when Picasso wants to experiment with a new style or a variety of styles, he frequently chooses Harlequin as a theme.

Many of the early images of traveling players and other social outcasts are theatrical not just by virtue of their human subjects, but in the staged manner of their presentation. In Circus Family (1905) the figures present themselves to the viewer in the form of static, formal tableaux vivants, their gestures, the direction of their gazes and their physical arrangement all emphasizing the artificiality of their poses against what look like painted backdrops. The most dramatic pre-Cubist exploitation of this theatrical mode is Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), in which the left-most figure seems to be holding back a curtain to reveal the women, turned toward and confronting an “audience” consisting of the spectator, in a carefully composed rhythm of abandoned self-exposure. Picasso returned to this staged compositional strategy in many of his figure compositions of the


44 Deborah Menaker Rothschild, Picasso’s “Parade”: From Street to Stage (London: Sotheby’s Publications in association with the Drawing Center, New York, 1991), 229.

45 Bois, 26.
late 1910s and early 1920s, with the important difference that as a result of his exposure to dance and dancers, his figures are invested with either movement or classical repose.

**Picasso and Ballet**

In spite of his long and close association with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and his marriage to a Diaghilev ballerina, Olga Kokhlova, Picasso was not particularly interested in dance as an artform. He was concerned with the visual aspects of its staging, and, as the drawings he made in various styles of dancers between 1919 and 1925 demonstrate, he was keen to explore the plastic potential of their bodies transformed by movement. Like Degas, and as with his own circus subjects, Picasso focused more on the dancers’ offstage activities. Ballet afforded Picasso rich opportunities to pursue his artistic preoccupations beyond the canvas, and his insatiable appetite for experimentation and invention drove him to take full advantage of these. It is significant that his theatre designs in this period were almost exclusively for ballet; the influence of dance specifically, and not just theatre generally, is crucial to Picasso’s art between 1917 and 1925 in several different ways, as I will argue.

**The Theatre as a Laboratory**

Dance took Picasso’s art and his life in new directions, expanded his repertoire of themes and images, and changed the way he approached pictorial construction. The dance stage became an important extension of his studio practice, as it provided a laboratory, or testing ground, for strategies he had first enunciated in the studio. Scenic design allowed him to experiment with pictorial and sculptural ideas in three dimensions in a large and flexible space, to animate and allow them to interact, thus adding the crucial fourth
dimension of time and movement that transformed art into performance; making it, in Jean Cocteau’s phrase, “plus vrai que le vrai.”

Parade’s cubist designs demonstrate this principle, especially in the characters of the French and American Managers—these living constructions of miscellaneous materials were developments of the cubist collages and sculptures Picasso had made in 1913-15. The results of his stage experiments fed back into Picasso’s practice, diversifying and complicating his approaches to representing reality. Further, the experience of composing a visual spectacle in three-dimensional space strongly influenced his approach to pictorial composition. Scenic design gave him the opportunity to allow form, color, texture, lighting, space—and moving bodies—to interact and to form plastic relationships in ways that painting and drawing could not.

The theatre was a prime locus of aesthetic synthesis whose inspiration was both metaphorical and practical: he could, and did, think of the stage as a gigantic but kinetic canvas, and conversely, of the picture surface as a static stage. He could also use the theatre’s lessons in arranging and rearranging scenic elements, and in the effects of color and movement, to order and dramatize his compositions. According to Olivier Berggruen, Cubism “led Picasso to understand that images or fragments of reality can be interchanged and assembled in a variety of ways,” and this knowledge gave him the tools he brought to his practice of playful experimentation in the theatre. Picasso understood that the practice of stage design resembled synthetic Cubism in this respect, and that insight may have been partly what attracted him to the theatre. This practice in the

46 Cocteau, quoted in Cooper, 67. See chapter 1, note 31.
theatre, in turn, stimulated the exploration of pictorial strategies in which “the notion of construction plays a key role.”

Picasso once observed: “Sculpture is the best comment that a painter can make on his painting.” Stage design, which combines sculpture, painting and architecture, proved to be better still for him as a means by which to elucidate and transform his painting practice. According to Diana Widmaier Picasso, the artist as scenic designer “[gave] birth to a new category of art that fuses architecture, painting and sculpture,” a claim that while perhaps overstated, contains a germ of truth. He certainly fused the three artforms in strikingly innovative ways and succeeded in persuading at least some of his audience that they were witnessing the birth of a new art of theatre, devised by an artist whose capacity for invention seemed limitless.

The Changing Roles of Art and Performance

Picasso’s scenic inventions were new art, but they were also new theatre. According to Cocteau: “Avant Picasso le décor ne jouait pas dans la pièce, il y assistait” (“Before Picasso, set design had no role in the theatrical work, it was merely present”). Picasso’s achievement, marking his décors and the productions for which he created them as modernist enterprises, was to change the roles of sets and costumes from accessories to the equivalents of actors. No longer merely background, Picasso’s designs synthesized

47 Berggruen, 30.
49 Diana Widmaier Picasso, “Picasso’s Creations for the Theatre and the Definition of Sculpture,” (135-163), in ibid., 156.
50 Cocteau, 1923, quoted in Erik Aschengreen, Jean Cocteau and the Dance, translated by Patricia McAndrew and Per Avsum (Denmark: Gyldendal, 1986), 73.
with the choreography, bringing visual art alive on stage. The luscious, pre-war stage
dressings of Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois for the Ballets Russes had prepared the
ground by making the ballet a vehicle for sumptuous decorative effects that competed
with the choreography for audience attention, and made possible “a total plastic
conception” of the stage, but these effects were still inert bystanders. In Picasso’s
hands, visual effects became more than mere effects; they took on roles and became part
of the action. Instead of serving as a backdrop to the drama or the dancing, art was now a
performer. Parade’s collaged Managers and Cubist set initiated this shift in 1917, and
Picasso’s last ballet, Mercure, took it to extremes in 1924, with dancers almost entirely
subordinate to large cardboard and wire structures personifying mythological characters
that moved across the stage. By this time, Picasso’s innovations were no longer unique:
design in the hands of Fernand Léger and Giorgio de Chirico, among others, was
assuming an increasingly dominant role in artist-designed productions for the rival
Ballets Suédois. Ballet, as a non-naturalistic, non-verbal, synthetic, and highly symbolic
form of representation provided, of all theatrical genres, a field uniquely receptive to this
shift in the dynamic between design and performer. Modernism was concerned with
pushing the boundaries of what art could be and could do, therefore freeing it from the
canvas and the plinth and expanding its role in the creation of live spectacle was a
logical, or perhaps an inevitable, move. Inevitably, too, such a modernist approach to
ballet did not win immediate public acceptance; both Parade and Mercure were critical

51 Spies, 76.

52 Lynn Garafola, writing about Diaghilev’s postwar ballets, states that “design…supplanted music as the
unifying element of Diaghilev’ productions…If before, dance had been an equal, now it became a
subordinate of design, with the goal of the choreographer being to enhance the inventions of scene painter
and commercial failures, despite being enthusiastically received by a small coterie of the
avant-garde.\textsuperscript{53}

**Ballet and Neoclassicism**

Picasso’s immersion in the aesthetic of ballet was, I believe, a major contributing factor
to his adoption of neoclassicism during the years of his involvement with the Ballets
Russes. Picasso’s aesthetic sensibilities and, quite possibly, his awareness of a potential
new audience for his work, were stimulated by direct contact with ballet. Between 1917
and 1924, he lived and worked for long periods in the aesthetic environment of an
academic artform that is ordered, disciplined, and technically precise, that endlessly seeks
perfection, purity of line and beauty of form, and that strives obsessively to attain an
exquisite harmony among its component parts—body, gesture, technique, musicality.
Added to the impact of classical and Renaissance art in Italy, where Picasso first
encountered ballet and dancers rehearsing and performing at close quarters, such
discipline and order must have helped reawaken his nascent interest in classicism as it did
in classicism’s principal subject, the human figure. Ballet’s influence would have made
Picasso particularly receptive, as well, to the “call to order” movement; a reinterpretation
of classicism that arose among certain artists in Italy, France and Spain during the First
World War, and persisted as an alternate strain of modernism into the 1920s.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} Neither ballet achieved the succès de scandale that attended *Le Sacre du Printemps (Rite of Spring)* in
1913, but both—especially *Parade*—were victims of their own avant-gardism.

\textsuperscript{54} Jean Cocteau coined the phrase in *Le Rappel à l’ordre* (1926). It was not an organized school, but a
stylistic tendency among artists from mainly Latin countries, characterized by simplicity, order and
restraint, and a respect for the forms and spirit of ancient and Renaissance art. Elizabeth Cowling and
Jennifer Mundy use the terms “classical/classicism” and “neoclassical/neoclassicism” interchangeably in
their *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, De Chirico and the New Classicism, 1910-1930* (London: Tate
Gallery, 1990). In order to preserve a distinction between the art of the Renaissance and ancient world and
Neoclassicism was only a minor influence on the designs for Picasso’s first ballet, *Parade*, but it was a major factor in the conception of his final one, *Mercure*. These two experimental, difficult and aggressively modernist works, both collaborations with the composer Erik Satie and the choreographer Léonide Massine, bracket Picasso’s ballet career. In the years between them, he designed three ballets that were more conventional narratively and choreographically but which his décors transformed into strikingly modernist visualizations of folkloric themes. These were *Le Tricorne* (1919), a traditional Spanish comedy of love and revenge with a score commissioned from Manuel de Falla; *Pulcinella* (1920), with music by Stravinsky after Pergolesi, based on Commedia dell’arte characters and their romantic misadventures; and *Quadro Flamenco* (1921), a classical flamenco performance by Andalusian dancers. Picasso also designed the drop curtain, or *rideau de scène*, for Cocteau’s jazzy celebration of fashionable twenties leisure, *Le Train Bleu* (1924), based on his small gouache *The Race* (1922, fig. 47). The remainder of this chapter discusses *Parade* in some detail; the other works, in particular *Mercure*, are examined in chapter three. In both chapters I focus on Picasso’s use of the ballet stage as a laboratory for his painterly projects; his animation of scenic design so that it becomes a performer in the theatrical event; and the influence of his ballet experience on Picasso’s neoclassicism. In order to gain a clear view of the trajectory of his involvement with dance, it is first necessary to consider Picasso’s reasons for becoming involved with the Ballets Russes, and the genesis of *Parade*.

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art that attempts to revive their ideals and forms, I use “classical/ist” for the former and neoclassical/ist” for the latter here.
Parade (1917)

At first glance, it may seem surprising that the leading painter of the Parisian Left Bank avant-garde, an anarchist and a bohemian with no previous interest in ballet, would willingly surrender a large portion of his freedom to work for Diaghilev’s elite, expensive Right Bank company with its *beau monde* milieu of patrons and hangers-on, and its egocentric and dictatorial director.\(^{55}\) However revolutionary the Ballets Russes were in their own context, they carried the sort of snobbish connotations that Picasso despised. It was Cocteau, attempting to bridge the cultural Left and Right in wartime Paris, who enlisted Picasso to design the new project he was developing for Diaghilev, to a score by Satie. Cocteau had been trying for several years to find a way of obeying the impresario’s infamous command, “Astonish me!”\(^{56}\) Bringing Picasso on board assured the new piece’s avant-garde credentials and Diaghilev, always keen to position his enterprise at the cutting edge of modern culture, was enthusiastic. Experimental and open to new challenges, Picasso welcomed the opportunity to exercise his artistic invention in an unfamiliar context, which he was well aware would give him wider exposure than any gallery show (his last, of his own and his dealers’ choice, had been in 1910). Diaghilev offered a degree of financial security, itself a powerful incentive during the war, as was the prospect of a sojourn among the artistic bounty of Rome, which Picasso had never visited and where the Ballets Russes had its wartime base. The artist was happy to escape his somewhat isolated existence in darkened wartime Paris for a while; he was


\(^{56}\) Several versions of this well-known story exist. See, for example, Steegmuller, 82-3.
mourning the recent death of his last lover, Eva Gouel; many friends and fellow-artists were away at the Front; and the Parisians tended to be hostile towards non-combatant foreigners like himself, especially ones who practiced unpatriotic “German” art.\(^{57}\) Furthermore, Picasso had been struggling for the past few years to establish Cubism as a viable alternative language to pictorial naturalism in the representation of physical reality; stage design offered the chance to test his ideas in three dimensions. He was sufficiently persuaded to defy the censure of his artist colleagues, whom Cocteau mockingly referred to as “doctrinaire Cubists,” in Montmartre. According to Cocteau: “Cubism was going through its austere phase…To paint a stage set for a Russian ballet…was a crime…Picasso scandalized the Café la Rotonde in accepting my invitation.”\(^{58}\) But Picasso was sufficiently nonconformist to obey only his own instincts, and not anyone else’s ideas of what he should or should not do.\(^{59}\)

He traveled to Rome with Cocteau early in 1917 to work on the designs for *Parade* while the Ballets Russes rehearsed and performed a season at the Teatro Costanza. In the studio Diaghilev found for him next to the Piazza di Spagna, with a view of the Villa Medici, the artist worked with prodigious energy, producing designs and maquettes for the set, and designing the dancers’ costumes, the huge puppet-like Managers, and the curtain, a vast painted drop that covered the proscenium during the overture, and whose purpose was to prepare the audience for the spectacle to follow. Here Picasso met his future wife Olga Kokhlova; he would attend rehearsals to watch her dance, and she often

\(^{57}\) Cubism was regarded as subversive of French art, therefore foreign and unpatriotic, which in wartime meant German. Sjeng Scheijen. *Diaghilev: A Life* (London: Profile, 2009), 331.

\(^{58}\) Cocteau (1949), quoted in Steegmuller, 165.

\(^{59}\) Also, as Elizabeth Childs has pointed out to me, Picasso (together with Braque) had invented Cubism, so he felt authorized in his own mind to depart from it at will.
accompanied him and other members of Diaghilev’s entourage on their Roman expeditions (fig. 3). Picasso sketched portraits and caricatures of members of the company (fig. 4), and explored the city’s museums, theatres, and back streets with Diaghilev, Cocteau, and especially Léonide Massine, Nijinsky’s replacement as Diaghilev’s choreographer and lover, with whom Picasso developed an immediate rapport. Together they visited museums, archaeological sites and the Sistine Chapel, and took a trip to Naples, where Picasso was “thrilled,” according to Massine, by the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum and the frescoes in the museum. The artist and the dancer prowled the back streets of the city, investigating old bookstores and the San Martino Museum, where Picasso picked up nineteenth-century postcards of Neapolitan scenes by Achille Vianelli, and photographs of peasants in local costumes. They also chanced upon street theatre performances of Commedia dell’Arte, a tradition still very much alive in Naples, and Massine purchased Commedia masks from some of the actors. The experience fed into Parade in different ways for both men, and provided the seeds of the Neapolitan ballet Pulcinella, on which they collaborated in 1920. Picasso returned to Paris ahead of Diaghilev and company to prepare for the season in which the new ballet would premiere; he was weary of the glittering social scene to which Diaghilev had introduced him in Italy, and craved, he said, “clothes splashed with paint.”

During the ballet’s Roman gestation and afterwards in Paris, Picasso’s interventions went beyond the designer’s usual role: his creative dominance increased to the point where his ideas were altering the shape of the libretto and the action onstage from Cocteau’s original

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conception. Picasso was effectively acting as a dramaturge, as Esther Schlicht argues; his “will to design” penetrated all aspects of the production. The result was that Cocteau was sidelined, to his intense frustration, especially when Picasso deleted some of Cocteau’s more “egregious gimmicks” (to quote the artist’s biographer, John Richardson), and substituted solutions of his own—which Satie and Massine preferred.

Scholars agree that Parade’s lasting fame is due to Picasso’s designs and to its shockingly new concept, allied with Satie’s music, rather than to Massine’s amusing but ephemeral choreography. Cocteau conceived Parade as a performance within a performance, a “grosse action toute simple qui groupe les charmes du cirque et du Music-Hall,” (“A simple roughly-outlined action which combines the attractions of circus and music hall”) as he told Satie, referring to the Larousse definition of a parade: “a comic act, put on at the entrance of a traveling theatre, to attract a crowd.” The idea was to mount a parody of variety and music hall acts, as vulgar as possible, incorporating “every possible kind of popular entertainment.” This pot-pourri of coarse and comic popular motifs presented as stylized high art was intended to confront highbrow taste by injecting the vitality of lowbrow artforms into the rarefied world of ballet. In Rome the artist and Cocteau had visited a local “dirty little theatre music-hall” where they soaked up the

63 Richardson, vol. 3, 34.
64 Alexander Schouvaloff, “Picasso’s Romance with the Ballets Russes,” (63-70), in Berggruen, 63.
66 Massine, 102.
“seedy vaudeville atmosphere” Cocteau desired for *Parade*. Picasso, whom Cocteau called a “rag-and-bone-man of genius” was the ideal choice to design his ballet; he had always “loved the contrast between the trivial and the highbrow” and delighted in the earthy and the vulgar. *Parade’s* ambition was the transformation of low and ephemeral culture into something lasting and significant. In this the ballet paralleled Picasso’s strategies in his Cubist collages, where he turned materials from everyday life into meaningful works of art. *Parade* took the popular art of vaudeville and music hall and “attempt[ed] to translate it into a totally new form,” according to Massine, but this new form was several years ahead of public acceptance.

*Parade*’s opening night audience on May 18, 1917 at the Théâtre du Châtelet failed to appreciate the subtlety of its creators’ intentions; the outraged reaction assumed the ballet was simply bad music-hall comedy, and shouts of “Sales boches!” (“Filthy Krauts!”) and other unflattering epithets filled the theatre. As Bernard Smith notes, “Cocteau’s efforts to unite the cultural Left and Right in the persons of Diaghilev and Picasso underestimated the chauvinism of his audience.” The objection to Picasso’s Cubist designs was at least partly political: avant-garde art was seen as subversive of French culture.

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69 Massine, 105.
70 For an account of *Parade*’s premiere, see Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life* (London: Profile, 2009), 330-31; Richardson, vol. 3, 38-42; Steegmuller, 186-7. The Théâtre du Châtelet is a Second Empire theatre on the Right bank near the Seine in Paris, originally seating 3,000. It was built at Baron Haussmann’s request in 1860-62 for the staging of drama, music, and variety performances. In the twentieth century, the theatre was increasingly used for ballet as well, and was reduced to 2,500 seats. It is still in operation.
culture, hence allied with the German enemy. Rothschild argues that Parade’s audience was outraged at the incongruity and perceived unsuitability of vulgar populism invading the elite preserve of the ballet stage, rather than shocked by its Cubism which, in contrast to most scholars, she suggests was too tame, familiar, and limited to cause serious offence.\textsuperscript{72} Several contemporary commentators did object quite specifically to the visual style, however, while most of the press regarded the ballet as a bad joke, both at its premiere and later on tour in Spain. Madrid’s \textit{La Epoca} called it “the product of a sick imagination…this Cubist ballet may be seen once as a curiosity but no more. Parade augurs no future for Cubism on the stage.”\textsuperscript{73} Audiences were also angry at the frivolous ballet’s insensitive timing, as the war was going badly and French troops were being slaughtered in horrifying numbers only a few hundred miles from Paris. Apart from the dancers, who loved it, only artists and intellectuals like Marcel Proust, Guillaume Apollinaire, Stravinsky and Juan Gris understood Parade and appreciated that it was something quite unprecedented in its synthesis of ballet, theatre, painting, and music.\textsuperscript{74} Proust told Cocteau the ballet was “a foretaste of the future,”\textsuperscript{75} and Gris wrote:

\begin{quote}
I like Parade because it is unpretentious, gay and distinctly comic. Picasso’s décor has lots of style and is simple, and Satie’s music is elegant. It is not figurative, has no fairytale element, no lavish effects, no dramatic subject. That’s why it stands right out and is better than the other ballets. I even believe that it is an attempt to do something quite new in the theatre.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} Rothschild, 32, n.10.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{La Epoca}, June 20, 1917, quoted in Richardson, vol. 2, 52.

\textsuperscript{74} Lydia Sokolova describes the how the cast enjoyed dancing Parade in Dancing for Diaghilev: The Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1989), 104.

\textsuperscript{75} Marcel Proust (1917), quoted in Judith Mackrell, Bloomsbury Ballerina: Lydia Lopokova, Imperial Dancer and Mrs John Maynard Keynes (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 123.

\textsuperscript{76} Juan Gris, letter to Maurice Raynal (1917), quoted in Berggruen, 52.
Apollinaire, who had famously coined the word “Surrealism” in his program note for
*Parade*, praised the work’s “alliance de la peinture et de la danse, de la plastique et de la
mimique qui est le signe évident de l’avénement d’un art plus complet.” (“alliance
between painting and the dance, between the plastic and mimetic arts, that is the herald of
a more comprehensive art to come.”)\(^77\) *Parade* was the first ballet to achieve such a
union, thanks to Picasso, and the synergy he established with Massine.

If Cocteau’s scenario for the ballet collaged elements of popular theatre, Massine’s
choreography and Satie’s music did likewise: “We decided…to incorporate jazz and
cinematographic technique in ballet form.”\(^78\) Massine stitched together aspects of
classical ballet, pantomime, acrobatics and jerky, frenetic, silent film-type action to a
score that was a witty pastiche of jazz and ragtime, interspersed with real-life sound
effects: whistles, typewriters, pistol shots, propellers and sirens. Music-hall and modern
life combined to generate, in Cocteau’s phrase, a spirit of “exhilaration in the absurd.”\(^79\)
*Parade’s* artistic subversiveness reflected something of the same spirit as Dada, which
was flourishing in Zurich at the time of the ballet’s conception. News of the Dada
cabarets had reached Paris the previous year, and Cocteau among others had been much
taken by Tristan Tzara’s poems, printed in *Nord-Sud*. In its deliberate flouting of
tradition, its use of random nonsense sounds (and, in Cocteau’s original libretto, words),
its inversion of the notion of art, and its anti-authoritarian stance, *Parade* is akin to Dada,

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\(^77\) Apollinaire (1917), in *Apollinaire on Art* (1972), 452, (English translation). Quoted in French in Massine, 112.

\(^78\) Ibid., 102.

\(^79\) Shattuck, 154-5.
but its creators in no way regarded it as a Dada ballet.\textsuperscript{80} Parade’s aim, unlike Dada’s, was not to shock the bourgeoisie but to appeal to the cultural elite. In contrast to Dada’s nihilism it was, according to Cocteau, a “ballet réaliste.”

Cocteau’s absurd yet “realist” libretto sets the action in a city street, outside a variety theatre, where a troupe of players performs three preview acts in an attempt to entice passers-by to see the show within. Each act is introduced by its manager: a French manager introduces the Chinese Conjurer, an American manager presents the Little American Girl, and a pantomime horse presents the two acrobats. Finally, having failed to drum up any interest from the public, the players and managers all collapse in comic despair. The ballet is an obvious metaphor for Cocteau’s romantic notion of the heroic avant-garde artist, failing to find an audience, and cruelly neglected and misunderstood by an obtuse and ignorant public—an unconsciously prescient prediction of Parade’s own reception. For all Cocteau’s grandiose ambition, Parade is frequently remembered today as no more than “a curtain and several striking designs”—and they were Picasso’s.\textsuperscript{81}

The Curtain

Picasso’s ten by seventeen meter curtain or “rideau rouge”—his largest single painting—was, in theory, intended to put the audience in a receptive frame of mind for the imminent performance (fig. 5). Instead (and this was probably the point), it gave them a misleading sense of familiarity, which the ensuing show instantly shattered. Much has been written

\textsuperscript{80}Francis Picabia’s Relâche (1924) for the Ballets Suédois, is usually regarded as the first real “Dada ballet”.

\textsuperscript{81}Schouvaloff, “Romance,” 70.
about the *Parade* curtain; it is one of Picasso’s best-known works, and is often
dissociated from the ballet, robbing it of much of its fertile store of meaning and
association. Alfred Barr has compared it to provincial scene painting, Roland Penrose to
traditional circus posters, and Douglas Cooper emphasizes its “sophistically naïve”
quality.\(^{82}\) Rothschild and Silver both note the curtain’s pictorial and psychological
affinities with Watteau’s itinerant players, especially those in *The Delights of Life* (c.1717-
18, fig. 6).\(^{83}\) Massine recalled that it “captured the sleazy charm and camaraderie of
circus life.”\(^{84}\) Silver describes the curtain as a “summation of the sources and mythic
stereotypes of the Latin tradition”; it is all this and more.\(^{85}\)

The scene is backstage in a variety theatre: against a landscape backdrop a group of
performers in theatrical motley—a harlequin, a Pierrot with his Columbine, a guitar-
strumming toreador, a sailor, a turbaned negro (“blackamoor”), and a woman in a hat like
Picasso’s 1905 *Majorcan Woman* (fig. 7)—are all standing or seated around a rough
table, watching a winged ballerina perched on the back of a white mare, also wearing
stage wings, who suckles her foal. The ballerina reaches out to a monkey that has
climbed a ladder leaning precariously against the rich red curtains that drape the set. A set
piece column and some props, a drum and a ball, complete the scene along with a
sleeping dog. Apart from its evocation of the milieu of popular theatre, the curtain in no
literal way prefigures the action; it creates a magical mood and a context, and its
ambiguously symbolic cast hints at deeper resonances beneath the veneer of gaiety and

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\(^{82}\) Rothschild, 212.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 222; Silver, *Esprit*, 121.

\(^{84}\) Massine, 106.

\(^{85}\) Silver, *Esprit*, 121.
bonhomie. Picasso also sounded a precautionary patriotic note with the tricolor-striped ladder and bands on the drum.

The figures and their setting reprise and update Picasso’s 1905 images of circus families, even to the animals and the props. *Family of Saltimbanques* (fig. 1) and *Circus Family*, already mentioned, are the most obvious precedents; dogs, monkeys and horses appear as human companions in many other works, for instance *Family of Acrobats with Monkey* (1905, fig. 8). The double frame of a painted theatre within a real one here confirms the staginess of those earlier compositions. Picasso/Harlequin occupies center front, focusing our gaze through the red and black of his diamond-patterned costume, which repeats the colors of the curtains. A popular interpretation assigns caricatured identities of the ballet’s creators to each of the characters: Harlequin is obviously the artist, Pierrot is either Cocteau (the resident clown) or Massine, the sailor is Diaghilev (who had a phobia of the sea), the moor is Stravinsky in blackface (after the moor in his ballet *Petroushka*), the guitarist is Satie, and the “Majorcan” girl is Olga Koklova (a Renaissance beauty). The ballerina may be Lydia Lopokova (who danced the female acrobat), or perhaps a generalized symbol of ballet or of love. Nesta Macdonald suggests two alternative identifications, Harlequin as Massine (who appears in the costume in another drawing and a painting, the 1918 Barcelona *Harlequin*, fig. 36) and the torero as Picasso (the Spanish guitar virtuoso, a self-parody). The painted company is the Ballets Russes itself, traveling players in motley—which, in a sense, they were.86

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86 Nesta MacDonal, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States, 1911-1929* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1975), 239-40. Macdonald’s case is persuasive; she illustrates photographs, and drawings by Picasso of each person in a facial pose similar to that of their painted alter ego. She also recounts how Lydia Sokolova remembered (after prompting), “everyone had been amused at the time by
Temptingly tidy as such an allegorization is, there is little hard evidence for it, and I prefer to read the figures as floating signifiers. They may indeed allude to real people, but all are popular types from the lowbrow variety theatre tradition that *Parade* parodies. Many of the characters have echoes and prototypes in Picasso’s painting: a 1905 drypoint of a male and a female acrobat balanced on horseback, titled *At the Circus* (fig. 9) is an interesting analogue to both this image and the characters of the acrobats in the ballet itself. However, like the human characters, the curtain’s horse is in fantastical costume, its stage wings transforming it into the winged Pegasus of ancient myth. The classical reference is perhaps a legacy of Rome, but it also puns on the artist’s name: Picasso/Pegasso, as Richardson has noted.\(^87\) The monkey is another Picassean alter ego: an agile, irreverent, sexually voracious trickster. Harlequin, as we have seen, is a major symbol, and the Pierrot, toreador/guitarist, white horse, and “Majorcan” woman are recurrent motifs in his work in different guises over many years. Even so, the possibility that the painted actors do represent the *Parade* team cannot be discounted. Collectively here they evoke the human solidarity of traveling players’ existence as well as the (slightly clichéd but still affecting) pathos of those who have chosen to live on the margins of society. Most importantly, in their liminal state between actors and characters, painted images and real people, they embody the fluid border between reality and illusion in the worlds of both art and theatre. As such, their representation on the curtain is particularly apt, since it marks the physical line between the reality of the audience and the fiction of the stage; a line that Picasso represents as unstable.

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the caricatures.” However, most modern scholars (including Rothschild) are skeptical, and conclusive identifications may not be possible.

\(^{87}\) Richardson, vol. 3, 37.
Signs of this instability are everywhere in the Parade curtain. The actors are offstage yet onstage; at rest while surrounded by the trappings of their art. The painted, Neapolitan-style backdrop (probably inspired by one of Picasso’s Vianelli postcards from the early nineteenth century, Taverna, fig. 10) may conceivably be a real scene, with the actors on its threshold, but the whole space is ambiguous and it is not clear where they are in relation to the proscenium. Their audience, however, must be the real one; the floorboards extend into our space, and the painted curtains frame the scene realistically from our point of view. The players’ and the audience’s worlds merge, as the curtain dissolves the barrier between them, even while its physical presence paradoxically instates that barrier. But are the curtain’s characters players or spectators, or both? They seem to be watching a circus performance by the equestrian ballerina and her monkey, with the toreador as accompanist, while simultaneously being watched by us.

Inconsistencies of perspective and proportion (such as the floorboards’ orthogonal recession, the ladder’s instability, and the horse’s unnaturally bent neck) are clues to a multifaceted, discontinuous and contradictory reality, such as Picasso had been striving to represent in his Cubist works. The curtain’s style, however, is naturalistic and charmingly naïve, recalling the Pompeiian frescoes Picasso had seen earlier that year, with no hint of radical modernism; like the ballet to follow, it conceals true art beneath its diverting surface.

The curtain announces the audience’s entry into not only the show, but also the world of illusion and masquerade—and entertainment—embodied in the forthcoming performance. Its magical, dreamlike aura represents art itself, in fact the synthesis of all arts that this production has achieved, and it alludes to art’s unstable but liberating
relationship with reality. Harlequin, the focus of the composition, is the agent of conjoining art and illusion. Yve-Alain Bois refers to Harlequin’s power to “join incompatible worlds,” and cites Apollinaire’s poem *Crépuscule*, given to Picasso in 1905, in which Harlequin unhooks a star, and bows to his audience.\(^88\) Rothschild also cites the poem, and illustrates an early sketch for the *Parade* curtain, in which a costumed figure stands atop the ladder, affixing or removing a sun in the flies (fig. 11).\(^89\) Harlequin thus appears to be the magus of the performance, uniting heaven and earth, make-believe and reality, and spectacle and spectators: *Parade* was, in the end, seen as conceptually more Picasso’s ballet than anyone else’s.

**The Set**

As was often his practice, in designing *Parade*’s set, Picasso assimilated his personal surroundings into his work; the set (fig. 16) contains aspects of his drawings of the Villa Medici from the window of his Roman studio. In Rome Picasso helped Bakst paint sets for *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur*. Despite the two artists’ differences in style and approach, Picasso learned from Bakst in how to transpose lines, volumes and colors from his designs on paper into full-size constructions so as to be legible from the audience. *Parade* is often described as a “Cubist ballet” or “Cubism in three dimensions,” but this is true only of the set and the French and American Manager characters. Picasso saw

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\(^88\) Bois, 31.

\(^89\) Rothschild, 253; pl. 191, p.19. “Sur les tréteaux, l’arlequin blème / Salue d’abord les spectateurs: / Des sorsiers venus de Bohême / Avec des fées, des enchanteurs. / Ayant décroché une étoile / Il la manie à bras tendu / Tandis que des pieds, un pendu / Bat trois coups, pour lever la toile.” (“Wan harlequin mounts the boards / Bows to his audience: / Wizards from Bohemia / Fairies and Sorcerers. / Then he un hooks a star / Then twirls it in his palm / While a hanged man with his feet / Bangs three times to raise the curtain.”) Translated by Rothschild.
Parade as an opportunity to animate aspects of his Cubist experiments in representing reality from all sides; here he was in accord with Cocteau, who wanted “faire de la danse réaliste comme le cubisme qui est réaliste, qui… cherche le relief, le volume, la matière des objets” (“to make dance realist as Cubism is realist… as it seeks relief, volume and material of objects”)90 Picasso could also investigate the spatial ambiguities of the Cubist canvas via a stage set, with stage flats taking the place of flat pictorial planes. Cocteau originally envisaged the set as representing Paris, and later any city “where the choreography of perspectives is inspired not by what moves but by immobile objects, around which one moves, especially by the way buildings turn, combine, stoop, get up again and buckle according to one’s walk down a street.”91 Picasso’s set captures this sense of a kinetic perception of perspective and proportion: a sharply angled, incongruously faux-Baroque proscenium leans against rickety apartment building facades seen from multiple perspectives, with undulating rows of blank windows, punctuated by two-dimensional bushes. The total effect is jauntily irrational, but this is not advanced synthetic Cubism; it is Cubist suggestion meant to cue the audience to expect something modern and “artistic.” As Werner Spies argues, Picasso “refrained from simply fitting Cubism as an independent formal schema over a complex narrative theme” in his set design; rather he applied it as an “architectonic” approach, in stark contrast to the naturalist, narrative strategy he employed for the ballet’s curtain.92 Paintings from his trip

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90 Cocteau, from his notebook. Aschengreen, 77. My translation.


92 Spies, 82.
to Spain later in 1917 reflect Parade’s influence on Picasso’s vision of an urban scene: *View of Columbus’ Monument, Barcelona* is a striking example (fig. 13).

The Managers

The French and American Managers—“Picasso’s most imaginative attempts to merge painting and sculpture”—incorporate elements of both set and performers, and are the most original and absurdist features of Parade’s design (fig. 14).93 These eight-foot tall Cubist constructions trace their origins to Picasso’s collages and sculptures of 1913-15, notably *Man with a Bowler Hat, Seated in an Armchair* (1915, fig. 16), *Harlequin* (1915) and the relief sculptures *Guitar* (1912/13, fig. 15) *Guitar and Bottle* (1913). Like them, the Managers are assemblages of found materials (from the basement of the Théâtre du Châtelet) whose attributes represent their characters. They were artworks, and quite impractical as costumes, since they restricted the dancers’ movements to stamping their feet and gesticulating with their arms, mostly in one place. The French manager (who closely resembles the bowler-hatted man in the 1915 collage) is a *flâneur*: he sports a top hat, a curled moustache, a tuxedo front, an oversized pipe and a cane, with silhouettes of boulevard buildings and trees on his back. The American manager is assemblage of skyscrapers, industrial parts, and a ship’s funnel; he also carries a megaphone. They are monsters, “Une race terrible—espèces de dieux vulgaires de la réclame,” (“A race of terrible, vulgar divinities of advertising”) representing the crassness of certain types of theatrical promoters, and announcing Parade’s modernity in no uncertain terms.94

Theatrical references that have been cited for these preposterous giants include Jarry’s

94 Cocteau (1917), quoted in Rothschild, 70.
Père Ubu (fig. 18), and the giants Fafner and Fasolt from Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* (especially in Cosima Wagner’s 1896 production); the French manager may also be a caricature of Diaghilev himself (fig. 17).95 Picasso devised the Managers as visual replacements for Cocteau’s notion of shouted interventions broadcast either from the wings or from apertures in the set, which were intended, “in the spirit of Cubism” to “portray the feverish inanity of contemporary life.”96 Diaghilev vetoed any vocal content in a ballet, and Picasso’s larger-than-life, walking and gesticulating constructions transformed Cocteau’s original concept into a far more theatrical solution. Constructed in Rome with the assistance of the Futurist Depero, the Managers, who show Depero’s influence (fig. 19), evolved during rehearsals from walking sandwich boards adorned with advertisements and logos in the manner of Picasso’s café collages, into their final forms (fig. 20).97

The third Manager—the horse—also evolved from Cocteau’s original idea, and is almost certainly descended from “Le Cheval à Phynances” (the Phynancial Horse), itself a pantomime dummy, in Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. The pantomime horse with two people inside was a music hall staple; *Parade*’s was intended to carry a dummy “Negro Manager” on its back, but the idea was abandoned when the dummy kept falling off, so the horse itself became the Manager (fig. 21).98 This obvious lowbrow import from variety theatre, with

95 Ibid., 133.

96 Cocteau (1917), quoted in ibid., 132-3.

97 Diaghilev was working quite closely with the Futurists in 1916, and was vitally interested in their radical ideas on stagecraft and performance, in particular in changing the relationship between art and performer. His collaboration with Giacomo Balla on Stravinsky’s *Artifice du Feu*, has been mentioned in chapter 1. Picasso’s Managers may have been partly inspired by Depero’s own figures.

98 The Negro Manager was probably another music-hall reference; characters in blackface (or sometimes genuine African or Afro-European performers) were a staple of vaudeville.
its crude, baggy costume and awkward clomping movements, enraged *Parade*’s audience more than any other element in the ballet. Picasso modeled the horse’s head on an African Baule mask, whose angular facial planes and toothy grin present alternate menacing and comical aspects depending on whether it is viewed from the front or the side (fig. 22). Thus the horse, like the other two Managers, evinces a disturbing Cubist polysemy: all three fluctuate between human and non-human/animal and painting/sculpture, reality and make-believe, art and illusion, scenery and performer.  

Horses are a recurrent motif in Picasso’s work. In several pre-Cubist paintings (*Boy Leading a Horse*, 1906, fig. 23) they are graceful creatures that appear to exist in harmony with humans. Often depicted as part of groups of circus performers, (*Circus Family*, 1905) like the winged mare on the *Parade* curtain, these gentle horses share the pathos and underscore the nobility of their socially liminal companions. Especially poignant in this context, and a forecast of the darker turn these images were to take, is *Dying Horse Surrounded by a Family of Saltimbanques* (1920). After 1917, Picasso mainly uses a more aggressive formal geometry to represent horses. In dramatic contrast to those of his Rose period, these later animals appear in exclusively violent contexts, especially the bullring, itself a form of theatre, and war. The gored, emaciated beast in its death throes in *Dying Horse* (1917, fig. 24), for example, is contemporary with *Parade*. A series of drawings from 1923 depicts horses dying in the arena; the bullfight, incorporating the violent deaths of horses, was a perennial interest. The numerous studies

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99 Picasso’s Manager-horse reappears as the demonic pantomime horse in Cocteau’s 1925 play *Orphée*. That character does not speak, but raps out letters of the alphabet with its hoof, delivering what Orphée believes are messages from the beyond. Thus it parodies both Picasso’s horse and Cocteau’s own original intention of an oracular, disembodied voice. Surprisingly, no source that I have consulted notes either this connection or that with Jarry.
for *Guernica*’s iconic horse screaming in terror (1937), a knife in place of its tongue, recall the Manager-horse’s distorted double face, and lend it, retrospectively, a sinister edge. These post-World War I beasts are eloquent testimony to the brutality and suffering that humans are capable of inflicting on all animals including themselves, particularly in war. *Parade*’s two horses—one naturalist, the other Cubist—suggest opposing aspects of the human psyche: the curtain’s make-believe Pegasus is magical, nurturing, and empathetic; the Manager is ludicrous, grotesque and authoritarian. They evoke a wealth of possible (though unstable) oppositions: imagination/repression; illusion/reality; Western tradition/primitivism. Most clearly, they represent alternative approaches to the depiction of reality with which Picasso was working at that time, through a theme that was meaningful to him some years before *Parade*, and that became important again afterwards, although with very different associations.

**The Characters’ Costumes**

The Managers in “Picasso’s carcasses”, as Cocteau scathingly called them, are not characters (despite being operated by a person inside the structure) but “moving decorative elements”, “human props”, or “Cubist dance masks,” in deliberate contrast to the human characters.\(^{100}\) Picasso’s intention was “to exploit the contrast between three characters as ‘real’…and the more solemnly transposed unhuman, or superhuman, characters who would become in fact the false reality on stage, to the point of reducing the real dancers to the stature of puppets.”\(^{101}\) Rothschild argues that they effectively undermine the three variety turns they introduce, setting bourgeois crassness against the

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\(^{100}\) Cooper 25; Widmaier Picasso 158.

\(^{101}\) Cocteau, in *Nord-Sud.* (no other details). Quoted in Cooper, 21.
admirable qualities of mystery, daring and imagination represented by the Chinese Conjurer, the Little American Girl, and the Acrobats, respectively. The three acts are based on actual performers; the conjurer and acrobats were standard features of the traveling “theatre of marvels” or forain, a raucous, unsophisticated entertainment that was a close relation to the urban variety theatre or music hall. The Conjurer—always Oriental—performed illusions and gave the show an aura of exoticism and the marvelous (fig. 25). Picasso’s costume for Massine, with its swirls, waves and sun’s rays in intense red and yellow with black and white, evokes cosmic forces and works as a “metaphor for the creative spirit.” It may also hint, ambiguously, at a demonic dimension to the character. The Little American Girl plays to French stereotypes of America in the 1910s (as does her Manager); as Lydia Sokolova claimed, “Parade discovered America.” A mixture of silent movie child-heroines Mary Pickford (“America’s Sweetheart”), and Pearl White in The Perils of Pauline, she embodies pluck with cuteness, and defies convention. Her energetic routine of silent movie stunts, including swimming a river, driving a car and foiling a hold-up were meant to exhilarate and charm the audience. Picasso did not design her sailor-suit costume; it was bought off the peg at a Paris retailer (fig. 26). The male and female acrobats symbolize creative agility and gravity-defying ambition; their leotards were painted with celestial emblems and swirls that mimic their airborne twirls (fig. 27). Picasso visually distinguished the “real” dancers from the monstrous Managers by their costumes, and instated a metaphysical ambiguity about

102 Rothschild, 75.
103 Ibid., 101.
104 Sokolova, 103.
their characters; all four transcend their coarse origins to perform as metaphors for the flight of the human spirit in the modern world. Picasso’s costumes worked both in practice and as vital components of the décor. The dancers appreciated his instinctive sympathy with their need for freedom of movement, and the outfits are optically vivid and conceptually expressive. They are an important part of making *Parade* “something new and representative of our age,” an aspiration that was mercilessly satirized by cartoonists in the London press, when *Parade* premiered there in November, 1919 (fig. 28).  

Conclusion

Altogether, Picasso’s decors for *Parade*, incorporating the set, the costumes, the puppet-like managers and the scenic curtain were crucial to realizing the collaborators’ ambition that *Parade* should be “not so much a satire on popular art as an attempt to translate it into a totally new form.” As Picasso’s first venture into theatre design, it was outstandingly successful. *Parade* allowed him to pursue his preoccupation with exploring alternate means of representing the real in a new dimension that expanded its formal and semantic possibilities. He was able to concretize and animate painting, while announcing a more interventionist role for décor and for the designer in the total concept of the theatrical work. In claiming, as we have seen, that with *Parade* Picasso “[was] enabled…to give birth to a new category of art that fuses architecture, painting and sculpture,” but that this new art “is only truly valid during performance,” Diana

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105 Massine, 105; MacDonald, 245.

106 Massine, 103.
Widmaier Picasso makes a crucial point. Unlike anything else he had done, Picasso’s “new art” of theatre was predicated on its being performed—it was, uniquely, art in four dimensions.

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107 Widmaier Picasso, 156, 157.
Chapter 3

Picasso’s Later Ballet Designs: the Stage as a Rehearsal for Art

With Parade, Picasso discovered an affinity for theatre and an instinctive understanding of its visual requirements. He did not merely paint backdrops and dress dancers, he brought a painter’s and sculptor’s sense of plastic relations to the decor, combined with a dramaturge’s sensibility to the conceptual aspect of the performance, and in doing so gave a newly performative role to the visual elements of the production. In addition, he found a rehearsal space on the ballet stage for his own ideas on representation, and for the potential of his personal thematic preoccupations.

After Parade, Picasso continued his association with the Ballets Russes for several reasons. He was enamored of the theatre by now, fascinated with its possibilities for artistic experimentation. In particular, he had established strong creative friendships with Serge Diaghilev and Léonide Massine, and he was in love with and engaged to be married to Olga Khoklova, one of Diaghilev’s ballerinas. Not least, Picasso had become accustomed to the glamorous international beau monde cultivated by Diaghilev, with its wealthy patrons; it continued to exert a powerful attraction. This attraction palled after several years, but not before the social milieu to which Diaghilev had introduced him, as well as his ballet work, had helped establish Picasso’s reputation beyond question. The fact that some of his artist colleagues disparaged his new lifestyle and his design work failed to dismay Picasso, but he was careful to maintain his avant-garde credentials by continuing to produce challenging art at the same time as he attended gala openings and
society parties, wore bespoke tailoring, and dined at the best restaurants in Paris and London.

Picasso designed three more ballets for Diaghilev, all in a folkloric vein, and all popular successes. His last piece, *Mercure*, was a modernist fantasy in which Picasso’s own inventions dominated; it was originally done for Count Etienne de Beaumont’s Soirées de Paris, though Diaghilev revived it several years later. *Mercure* represented, more than anything since *Parade*, the intense, reciprocal meshing of art and theatre that characterized this period of Picasso’s work, and that exercised a continuing effect on his work thereafter.

*Le Tricorne* (1919), *Pulcinella* (1920) and *Quadro Flamenco* (1921)

Picasso’s next ballet for Diaghilev “showed triumphantly what Cubism could be and could do,” according to Lydia Sokolova. A much more popular and less aggressively avant-garde work than *Parade*, *Tricorne* was a traditional Spanish story rather than a multi-layered modernist allegory. Manuel de Falla wrote the work especially for Diaghilev, basing it on episodes from the nineteenth-century novel *El Sombrero de Tres Picos* (*The Three-Cornered Hat*) by Pedro de Alarcón (1833-91). A classic romantic comedy of attempted seduction, mistaken identity and revenge, it is set in an Andalusian mountain village in the eighteenth century. The narrative concerns the Miller and his beautiful wife, her attempted seduction by the villainous Corregidor, and his punishment and humiliation by the Miller, his wife and the villagers. The decor was a straightforwardly visual interpretation of the narrative in Picassean terms, with Massine’s

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108 Sokolova, 151.
Flamenco-inspired choreography and de Falla’s folk-themed music. Picasso felt a natural affinity for the Andalusian subject, and his pared-down design of simple shapes and limited colors conveyed the heat and glare of a sun-baked Spanish village, reported Cyril Beaumont, far better than a more detailed and realist one would have done. Diaghilev’s scene painter Vladimir Polunin, who painted the set in Covent Garden where the Ballets Russes prepared for Tricorne’s premiere, was full of admiration for Picasso’s “austere simplicity…with its total absence of unnecessary detail, the composition and unity of the coloring,” and the mathematical precision of his drawing. Compared with Bakst’s “complicated and ostentatious scenery,” he said, it was like coming from a hot room into fresh air.

Picasso’s set evokes a Spanish village in its mountain landscape: houses rendered in multiple perspectives with twisted walls and roofs indicate depth; the play of their angles against the curving bridge and arch, and the jutting, distant mountains complicate and add interest to the stage space (fig. 29). The restricted palette of ochre, grey, black and white gives coherence to the stage and sets off the dancers’ colorful and decorative costumes (fig. 31). The result is a stylized naturalism; the combination of Cubist distortions and classical order show Picasso at his most agile in reconciling theoretically incompatible pictorial styles, a strategy he was beginning to explore in his neoclassicist studio work. Tricorne’s costumes are a fanfare of bright colors counterpointed with black and adorned with exaggerated surface detail of stripes and swags; rococo fantasies intended to evoke the early paintings of Goya or the court portraits of Velazquez. Later historians regard the

110 Richardson, vol. 3, 120-1.
ballet as Picasso’s most successful theatrical work, but contemporary critic W.A. Propert complained that the costumes were “[visually] noisy dresses that never seemed to move with the wearers or assume the changing curves of bodies that looked as if they were art in cardboard.”\textsuperscript{111} Even Picasso’s most naturalistic and theatrically viable designs were criticized for overwhelming the dancers and making them appear redundant.

*Tricorne*’s curtain, like *Parade*’s, bears only a general thematic relation to the ballet itself (fig. 30).\textsuperscript{112} A self-consciously charming scene of decorous flirtation among spectators at a bullfight, it was intended to evoke the spirit of Goya’s tapestries. Diaghilev rejected Picasso’s more boldly Cubist original; his final version creates “a Spain of the imagination” in the same way as the set and costumes do.\textsuperscript{113} However, the *Tricorne* curtain is less anodyne than some critics argue. All Picasso’s rideaux de scène—*Parade, Tricorne, Mercure* and *Le Train Bleu*—serve to mediate between the stage spectacle and the audience, thus eliding the distinction between art and the real world, while they simultaneously instate it. The *Tricorne* curtain includes the real audience in the space of the depicted one; the iconic still life with a bottle and glass on the ledge at the front of the composition extends into our world, inviting us into the illusory one. Thus the artist makes us Spanish and creates the expectation of an authentically Spanish spectacle in which we are to participate. In his work in both the studio and the theatre,

\textsuperscript{111} W.A. Propert (1921), quoted in ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{112} The original curtain, in a reduced form, now hangs outside the Four Seasons restaurant at the Seagram building in New York City. It was considerably cut down by Diaghilev himself in 1926, and sold in order to raise needed funds.

\textsuperscript{113} Josep Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: From the Ballets to Drama (1917-1926)* (Cologne: Könemann, 1999), 137.
Picasso plays with the boundary between art’s and the spectator’s realities, highlighting the ambiguity of their relative positions.

Picasso’s venture into theatre had begun to attract others. By 1919, Diaghilev had flung his net wider in his quest for modern artists with high reputations and avant-garde cachet to design his ballets. He had already secured André Derain for La Boutique Fantasque, and was making overtures to Henri Matisse to create new designs for Le Chant du Rossignol. Picasso’s success with the Ballets Russes, and the boost to his fame that resulted, did much to overcome the initial resistance of the École de Paris community to the idea of working in the theatre.

Picasso believed that Pulcinella, his next ballet for Diaghilev, was the best he had ever designed, and told Douglas Cooper: “Çela correspondait le plus à mon goût personnel” “The sets correspond most closely to my personal taste.” Cooper regards it as a “complete success” in which all the elements—design, music and choreography—come together to make a perfect whole. The idea for the 1920 ballet was born in Naples in 1917, where Picasso, Massine and Stravinsky frequented Commedia dell’Arte performances in the ancient Forcella quarter and delighted in their farcical obscenity. Pulcinella’s simple, geometric set creates a Neapolitan street leading back and down to the harbor, with Vesuvius in the background (fig. 32). Acutely angled Cubist facades in the manner of Tricorne achieve an ingenious spatial recession, with blues and greys, augmented by a white stage cloth, giving a magical, moonlit effect. Massine’s Pulcinella mask, purchased in Naples (fig. 33), was the model for that character’s costume (fig. 34),

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114 Picasso (1960s), quoted in Cooper, 48.
contributing to the overall effect of a “comic masque” in a modified Romantic style.\textsuperscript{115}

The historically based costumes were more successful in general than Tricorne’s and less distracting for both dancers and audience. The disconnect between them and the set dramatizes Picasso’s scorn for stylistic consistency (“down with style. Does God have a style?”) and his facility at combining diverse elements on a canvas or a stage to produce a unified whole.\textsuperscript{116} This disconnect was also a product of his increasing artistic differences with Diaghilev.

Picasso quarreled fiercely with Diaghilev over Pulcinella’s decor, but was obliged to abandon his more modern conception, of which he produced three versions—all of which Diaghilev rejected, to Picasso’s fury—for the impresario’s traditional Commedia dell’Arte scheme. The artist had initially envisaged a theatre-within-a-theatre set: the central scenic drop was to have been flanked by side flats painted with nineteenth-century patrons in evening dress, viewing both the stage and the (real) audience from their loges, “as if it were intended to be a continuation of the stalls and the proscenium, inspired by the theatre of San Carlo in Naples.”\textsuperscript{117} The self-referential theatricality of this concept emphasized the artifice of the stage spectacle and created an impression of the stage as a puppet theatre; Picasso was fascinated by puppets, which, Cocteau said, “made fairyland far more convincing than human performers ever could.”\textsuperscript{118} Again, we see the competing realities of art/theatre and everyday life in the penetration of the performers’ space by the

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{116} Picasso, from Picasso Propos sur l’art, editors Marie-Laure Bernadac and Androula Michael (Paris, 1968), quoted in Berggruen, 29.

\textsuperscript{117} Cooper, 45. See also Palau, 188.

\textsuperscript{118} Cocteau (1917), quoted in Richardson, vol. 3, 10.
audience, and vice versa. *Pulcinella* had no curtain, so the role of mediator between spectacle and spectators was to have been performed by the set itself. Stravinsky’s praise was fulsome: “Picasso…performed a miracle and it is difficult to say what enchanted me the most, his color, his plastic sense or the astonishing sense of the theatre displayed by this extraordinary man.”\(^{119}\) The final designs for *Pulcinella* apparently satisfied (almost) everyone, despite the fact that they were produced under duress and represented a radical compromise with Picasso’s original vision for the ballet. One lesson that Picasso was obliged to learn from working with Diaghilev was that compromise can be a spur to creative excellence. It was not a lesson to which he was temperamentally disposed; the requirement that he tailor his ideas to the needs of the company and the demands of its imperious leader fuelled the growing tension within the collaboration.

The rejected designs were repurposed for *Quadro Flamenco*, the final ballet Picasso designed for Diaghilev, in 1921 (fig. 35). This piece was a traditional Flamenco performance, with dancers taking turns to perform combinations and solos in front of a group of musicians. The absence of narrative or period setting meant that greater emphasis could legitimately fall on the design, and it provided an ideal opportunity for Picasso to exploit his theatre-within-a-theatre idea. Vignettes of sophisticated theatre patrons in their boxes in an extravagantly Baroque auditorium are executed as false trompe l’oeil painting, drawing playful attention to the artificiality of the construct; the couple at upper left is an homage to Renoir’s *La Loge* (1874). *Quadro Flamenco* was a

\(^{119}\) Stravinsky (1935), quoted in Cooper. 48. The unusual absence of a curtain was possibly an aspect of Picasso’s original puppet-theatre concept, or else a by-product of the protracted artistic disagreement between him and Diaghilev over the design of *Pulcinella*. By the time he produced set and costume designs acceptable to Diaghilev, Picasso may have felt disinclined to embark on a last-minute design for a curtain.
novelty that survived for a single season, as the flamenco dancers were not permanent members of the company.

Correspondences Between Theatre and Painting, 1917-21

Picasso’s painting in these years is charged with references not only to his stage design, but also to his wider experience of theatre. These fall mainly into the second and third of Werner Spies’s categories of Picasso’s theatre-related work (see p. 27): that which depicts theatrical subjects (from his current and immediate past ballets) as part of the iconography of imaginative compositions; and that in which stage design operates as a compositional or theoretical principle. In the latter, a series of still lifes, Picasso conducts a dialogue between the two-dimensional painted surface and three-dimensional space, with Cubism and naturalism presented as alternate and equally viable representational modes. In the former, he returns to naturalistic as well as Cubist and neoclassical idioms in his elaboration of subjects from the Commedia dell’Arte.

Pulcinella was the theatrical fulfillment of Picasso’s long-standing preoccupation with the Commedia characters Harlequin (Arlecchino) and Pulchinella (Punch, Polichinelle), and the experience of the ballet generated several important paintings and a large number of related drawings on the theme in a variety of styles. Aside from the Rose Period circus actors, Harlequin has several precedents in Picasso’s work. Harlequin (1915) is rigidly Cubist; his divided head and enigmatic, free-floating smile link him to the 1917 canvas Harlequin and Woman with Necklace, painted in Rome during preparations for Parade. The latter work’s running or dancing figures are unusually animated, perhaps by Picasso’s concurrent and exhilaratingly new experience of ballet. The 1915 figure
appears to be composed of flat cutouts resembling stage scenery, although it predates Picasso’s involvement with the theatre by two years. Its flat assemblage style, however, came outrageously to life with Parade’s Managers.

The Barcelona Harlequin of 1917 (fig. 36) was executed after Parade, in a strikingly different style from earlier Cubist experiments. In costume but out of character, the melancholy and introspective subject of this naturalistic composition leans rhetorically on a balustrade beside a red curtain, contemplating perhaps his entrance onstage, perhaps deeper concerns. Whether or not he is a “generalized portrait of Massine” as Elizabeth Cowling suggests, he stands at the beginning of Picasso’s essays into classicist figure composition.120 If we read him as Picasso’s alter ego, he may be reflecting on the new directions that both art and life—he had just become engaged to Olga—were taking. A harlequin with a violin from 1918 (Si Tu Veux) is an exuberant return to synthetic Cubism. If we read all these figures, with Bois, as a metaphor for the artist’s stylistic versatility and a signifier of his mercurial proclivities, then their proliferation in this period is an indication of Picasso’s restlessness and his desire for artistic experimentation across several fields, a central one of which was theatre. Pulcinella with Guitar in Front of a Curtain (1920, fig. 37) is an offspring of the ballet. The titular character, in Cubist form with realistic Commedia mask, appears to take a bow before a red stage curtain, its folds delineated as gaps through which geometric shapes are visible. The gouache Pierrot and Harlequin (fig. 38), done shortly after the premiere of Pulcinella, synthesizes different modes of representation with realistic and schematic hands cohabiting on the

120 Cowling and Mundy, On Classic Ground, 206.
same surface, indeed, on the same body. Furthermore, while Pierrot’s outfit indicates the folds of cloth and the ruffles of a collar, Harlequin’s body is constructed in an almost surrealist manner: a flat surface pierced by randomly spaced windows, like the American Manager’s skyscrapers. These Cubist studies of Commedia figures culminate in the two canvases entitled *Three Musicians*, painted at Fontainebleau in the summer of 1921, after Picasso had finished work on *Quadro Flamenco*. Whatever personal symbolism these last two works may have had for Picasso, they are undeniably virtuoso performances of synthetic Cubism that synthesize not only their own component forms and colors, but all of Picasso’s previous painterly and theatrical forays into Commedia performance and performers.

A group of still lifes, begun at Saint-Raphāël in 1919 after *Tricorne*, articulates a different kind of relationship to Picasso’s theatre practice. These consist of staged Cubist tableaux of iconic objects: bottles, glasses, papers and musical instruments on pedestal tables in front of an open window, framed by draped curtains. The presentation is frankly theatrical, with the objects as actors on a stage, the window frame as a proscenium, and the view beyond as backdrop, all accentuated by the rhetoric of the curtain. *Still Life in Front of a Window, Saint-Raphaël* (1919, fig. 39) is typical: Cubism and naturalism are juxtaposed as two modes of artifice within the one reality; the Cubist still life presents itself to the viewer, counter-intuitively, in a naturalist setting of table, window, curtains, balustrade and seascape. Bright backlighting throws the shadow of the iron railing onto the floor with extreme clarity, emphasizing real depth by the convergence of its lines. The lines between the floorboards merge seamlessly with these shadow lines, as the index of depth collapses back into pattern. *Still Life in Front of a Window Overlooking the Église*
St. Augustin, painted in Paris in 1919, shows the view from Picasso’s top-floor apartment in the Rue La Boétie. It is a sparser composition in form and color, the Cubist tabletop and still life set against a naturalist vista of Parisian rooftops and the church’s dome, hazy with distance. An exaggerated shadow on the wall reiterates the guitar’s curve, overlapping the two optical modes operating in the painting. In these and similarly themed works, Picasso situates Cubism within a context of neoclassical illusionism, reconciling two apparently antithetical styles, and demonstrating the equal viability of both. There is surely a gesture here towards Matisse’s Nice paintings of sea views through balcony windows; significantly, the first Matisse-Picasso joint exhibition was held at the Galerie Saint-Honoré, Paris, in January 1918.

Brigitte Léal regards the Tricorne curtain, with its glass-and-bottle still life linking the audience’s and the ballet’s worlds, as the beginning of this series, and notes the existence of sketches for the curtain with Cubist still lifes superimposed. In the paintings that these became, according to Léal, Picasso presents “the image of an image…the still life enshrined like a reliquary or a monstrance on the altar of Cubism,” revealing the artifice of art. The artist made two Cubist constructions at this time that relate to his maquettes for the Tricorne set; one of these, Fruit Bowl and Guitar, appears two-dimensionally in Still Life with a Guitar on a Table in Front of an Open Window (1919), and both appear in several other paintings. As painted sculptures or sculptural paintings, they explore the interplay and continuity of surface and void, inside and outside, and exemplify the evolution of Picasso’s experience in theatre design into productive studio projects. It is as if Picasso is reflecting on the theatre’s capacity to transform and abstract reality, while

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121 Léal, 176.
presenting it as reality nonetheless, but of a different order. As Bois notes, a dimension of “oneiric (sur) realism” inhabits these works—an appropriate characterization of theatrical reality in relation to everyday life.\textsuperscript{122} Picasso is also acknowledging the possibility of a continual oscillation between different modes of perception, essential to the accommodation of theatrical illusion within a rational view of the world. The compact between audience and performers central to this accommodation is what is often called “a willing suspension of disbelief.” Because of its extreme lack of realist illusion, ballet does not submit readily to this formula; Picasso may be attempting, in the still lifes of this period, to acknowledge and negotiate such a relationship.

Not all the still lifes from 1919, nor the quite similar works from 1924, confront Cubism with naturalism as unequivocally as the two pictures just mentioned. \textit{Still Life with a Mandolin and Guitar} (1924, fig. 40), and others like it reprise the abstracted forms Picasso created for the ballet \textit{Mercure} in the same year. All nevertheless unmistakably stage the objects as dramatis personae arranged for the spectator’s benefit, and play with transitions and transformations between art and reality. They also address the issue of spatial illusion in different media.

Both painting and the stage seek to represent real space, whose dimensionality is different from their own, so each employs tactics and compromises to persuade the audience that it is seeing a credible representation of the space that its members themselves inhabit and experience. The space of a painting is smaller than that which it represents; that of the stage may be larger, smaller, or the same size The part may serve to stand for the whole:

\textsuperscript{122} Bois, 32.
an entire stage may represent a small room or (for instance) a whole house or street. Painting is two-dimensional, but, if realist, seeks to look three-dimensional; the stage is three-dimensional, but can appear flat, giving the illusion of a picture from the audience’s viewpoint, especially if it is framed by a proscenium (as most stages were in the early twentieth century). Nevertheless it too seeks to represent or at least indicate the existence of real space.

To achieve spatial illusion on stage, sets may be arranged to present different perspectives simultaneously, the stage floor may be tilted, flats or set pieces are constructed and set at exaggerated angles, and objects are differently scaled in relation to each other to construct an artifice of depth and of changing viewpoints. Picasso does all this in his sets for *Parade*, *Tricorne* and *Pulcinella*. Painting uses perspective (aerial and atmospheric), differences in scale and clarity, and different viewpoints together on one surface, in a single image or in series, whereas Cubism presents objects from multiple viewpoints simultaneously. Designing for the stage presented a challenge to the Cubist Picasso, coming as he was from a painter’s practice. He had to renegotiate spatial illusionism from a two-dimensional surface to the limited three-dimensionality of stage, and he also needed to consider how that experience would translate back onto the canvas.

The main difference between stage and canvas is the presence or absence of the human figure moving through space, indicating time. Picasso acknowledges the human perception of time and movement in his two-dimensional work by means of cubist fragmentation, as a way of representing successive moments of seeing an object, moving past and around it. In his dancer drawings, he did it with a minimalist, flowing line, making the lines of bodies synchronous with the movement of air that sweeps along with
them. His stage sets look like still lifes, some of them within frames: in *Parade* the Baroque theatre doorway with its Orphic lyre mimics a proscenium arch; in *Tricorne* the buildings frame the bridge and mountains, all of which is united and framed by the curve of a great arch, repeating the arched bridge below it. In *Pulcinella* the street receding to the port and view of distant Vesuvius is framed by the walls of houses, the whole set framed in turn by a false painted proscenium. *Quadro Flamenco* uses *Pulcinella’s* rejected design of a painted theatre with boxes, spectators, curtain, columns, and of course, proscenium, framing no realist scene but a painting of a vase of flowers: a still life. Picasso develops the framing trope throughout his designs, but abandons it in *Mercure* (except in the scene of the Bath of the Three Graces). *Mercure*’s plastic poses are enacted against a flat, blank backdrop, in shallow space and accompanied by movable set pieces. Here he abandons illusion of reality for the ambiguous world of myth, leaving spectators to intuit the spatial aspect for themselves. Thus, in four of his five decors, the artist makes the set look like a painting that is trying to simulate a real space, when it is, in fact, real; in other words, he make a three-dimensional space look like a two-dimensional space trying to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space. Its true dimensionality is enforced by the human figures that move across it, establishing real depth and spatial relations, and an optical conflict between the painted set and their own existence in real space. They also establish the fourth dimension—time—by their movement, and it is this, rather than the artist’s pictorial illusionism, that conveys a sense of real space on the stage.

In the still lifes he painted in 1919, right after *Tricorne’s* premiere, Picasso reverses the process. These paintings engage directly with the confrontation and interpenetration of
different spatial dimensions in painting and in stage design. In these works, he presents us with a painting on a flat surface, of a painted Cubist still-life, staged like an actor in an (illusory) three-dimensional, quasi-theatrical space, all of which is in truth only two-dimensional. He complicates this by the inclusion of a painting of a real sculpture as part of the still life, which is the actual painting’s subject. This sculpture is a Cubist construction, which is itself a fusion of real and illusory space—it now takes on another dimension to its identity as a painted representation of a real thing. The Cubist sculpture exists in reality, and itself plays with illusions of space and dimensionality, as a three-dimensional object constructed of painted two-dimensional illusions of the real space that it in fact inhabits. Like Picasso’s stage sets, these paintings use the framing motif, as their painted Cubist arrangements are framed by an open window with theatrical curtains; the frame acts as a metaphor for the unstable site of meeting and exchange between real, pictorial and theatrical space.

The realist space Picasso invokes in these paintings is more real in its illusionism than the sets he puts on the actual stage in their stylized distortions, yet they lack the essential ingredient to make them real—human movement. The artist emphasizes this absence by showing us what the depicted paintings are: still lifes. The Cubist multiple viewpoints represent the movement of the viewer’s perception, but they are contained within a static set. Thus, Picasso plays with the intricate permutations of spatial illusionism between real, pictorial and theatrical space as he shuttles between all three, and incorporates elements of each into the others in order to explore their relationships and probe the nature of visual reality and of optical experience.
Picasso is recorded as having said, “For me, painting a picture is to get involved in a dramatic action during which reality gets torn to bits. This drama sweeps it along over all other considerations. The three-dimensional act is only secondary as far as I’m concerned. What matters is the drama of the act itself, the moment where the universe escapes only to encounter its own destruction.”\(^{123}\) This strongly suggests that he saw image-making as a process occurring in four dimensions, an analogue of dramatic action. While it may be argued that his considerable experience in the theatre led him to slip naturally into a theatrical metaphor as a way of explaining his experience of painting, it is also possible that it was his work in the theatre that led him, later, to view painting in this manner. In drama and dance, movement in space and time—whether physical motion or the process of narrative—is part of the act of creation. It is not usually thought of as being an aspect of painting, but for Picasso, as he says, painting meant destroying reality in order to recreate it in a different mode—an active and time-defined process. Time made his art live on stage, in accordance with theatrical practice. His immersion in orchestrating creative art in all four dimensions simultaneously on the stage may well have influenced his idea of what it meant to create on canvas.

Is it possible that Picasso found in stage design a way of channeling ideas on the nature and application of the fourth dimension in space (apart from time), current in Parisian intellectual circles in the first two decades of the twentieth century? As Linda Dalrymple Henderson has shown, such ideas were influential in the development of Cubist theory by

\(^{123}\) Picasso, quoted in Bernadac and Michael, in Berggruen, 36. No date is given for this statement; Berggruen puts it “later in [Picasso’s] life.”
Apollinaire and the painters Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes. They had their origins in the theories of nineteenth-century mathematicians, especially Charles Howard Hinton in England and Henri Poincaré in France, on the notion of a higher or fourth dimension, or “hyperspace,” and in their work on non-Euclidian geometry, which sought to describe spatial realities beyond the observable universe. In their attempts to define transcendent states, such ideas took on a mystical character in their adoption by some writers, and were associated with the development of Theosophy by P.D. Ouspensky and others, in which form they attracted artists including Kandinsky. The idea of the fourth dimension as time was popularized in the science fiction of H.G. Wells, who was much read in translation in France; this notion persisted together with spatial formulations of higher dimensions in the intellectual debates in 1910s Paris. Alfred Jarry, author of the Ubu plays and friend of Picasso, was an advocate of this new geometry, and used it in devising his own pseudo-science of 'Pataphysics.

In their challenge to conventional, positivist science, the new geometries were part of a widespread intellectual move in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that strove to overthrow empirical certainties and acknowledge the relative nature of knowledge, sensory perception, and truth. Such ideas spoke strongly to artists who wished to refute traditional modes of spatial perception and representation, and assert the validity of new and higher spatial conceptualizations that reflected not the everyday appearances of forms but, as Metzinger put it, “their real life in the mind.”

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125 Metzinger, “Note sur la peinture,” in *Pan*, Oct-Nov 1910. He was referring to Picasso’s analytical Cubist paintings. Quoted in ibid, 64.
expanded on the fourth dimension in *Les Peintres Cubistes* (1913): “the fourth dimension…represents the immensity of space eternalizing itself in all directions at any given moment;” and further, “has come to stand for the aspirations and premonitions of the many young artists who…live in anticipation of a sublime art;” one which “takes the infinite universe as its ideal.” Both writers echo Hinton’s assertion in 1904 that visualizing the fourth dimension is only possible in the (artist’s) mind, and that it entails conceiving of a form in all its aspects simultaneously—a proposition that would seem to have particular relevance to Cubist theory and practice.

Picasso was not a theorist, and there is surprisingly little evidence that he was much affected by the ideas of Jarry, Apollinaire, Metzinger or his circle’s resident exponent of the new geometry, Maurice Princet, although they all lived in close proximity in the building known as Bateau Lavoir in Montmartre between 1908 and 1912. Henderson herself concludes that his susceptibility to the new ideas “does not seem to have been very great,” and that the influence tended to go in the other direction, Princet’s geometrical theories being formed partly in response to Picasso’s analytical Cubist canvases of this period. Picasso’s paintings strongly resemble attempts by mathematicians to render the fourth dimension visually, but it is more probable that he was discovering his own way to revolutionize spatial representation, having been exposed to a discursive climate in which the fourth dimension and non-Euclidian geometry were


128 Ibid., 59.
of vital interest, rather than that he was consciously attempting to illustrate mathematical propositions.\(^{129}\)

Moreover, by the time Picasso made his first stage designs in 1917 he had moved on from analytical to synthetic Cubism, including Cubist sculpture, and the debate on higher dimensionality had also moved elsewhere. Even if he is unlikely to have deliberately invoked such ideas in his theatre work, having apparently found them of scant interest five to ten years earlier, they are nonetheless of interest for our purposes here. The discourse of the fourth dimension in space and in time, coeval with his early development as an artist, supplies a frame within which to view Picasso’s practice in stage design in relation to his construction of two- and three-dimensional space in his art. Stage design freed Picasso from the spatial limitations of the two-dimensional canvas, with its need for pictorial illusionism; it allowed him to construct a space simultaneously visual, tactile and mobile, to realize space in all its aspects, forms and directions at any given moment, and to project this through time, thus achieving multi-dimensionality in both its spatial and its temporal aspects. None of this is inconsistent with the theoretical approach to Cubism advanced by Metzinger and Gleizes, although they were no doubt among the “doctrinaire Cubists” who in 1917 disapproved of Picasso’s turning his talent to designing ballets.\(^{130}\)

Picasso designed no more full decors for the Ballets Russes after 1921, perhaps because Massine had left the company in that year, much to Diaghilev’s dismay, and without the

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\(^{129}\) See the projections of four-dimensional figures by Esprit Pascal Jouffret (1903), in ibid., figs. 9, 10, and discussion, 57-59.

\(^{130}\) The phrase is Cocteau’s: see n. 58.
choreographer Picasso lacked his preferred creative partner for ballet. In any case, relations with Diaghilev had deteriorated considerably, especially after he rejected Picasso’s design for a backcloth for a planned re-staging of Nijinsky’s *Après-Midi d’un Faune* in 1922. Picasso accused Diaghilev of declining standards, complaining about his “power monopoly” that inhibited the artist’s creative freedom, as it had on *Pulcinella*, while Diaghilev grumbled that Picasso “didn’t give a damn about the ballets.” Picasso was unwilling to continue to compromise his own ideas, and chafed at being forced to submit to Diaghilev’s wishes—which often seemed more like whims. The final straw may have been when Picasso proposed a ballet with a still life theme: an enormous plate of meat on stage, around which dancers dressed as flies would buzz, removing bits until it was empty. This sounds like an instance of Picasso’s iconoclastic humor, a “bonne blague” (“good joke”) meant to tease Diaghilev and puncture his pretensions; whether or not Picasso was serious, Diaghilev was not amused. The next and final ballet Picasso designed reunited him with Massine and Satie, his collaborators on *Parade*; this was *Mercure*, in 1924, for Comte Étienne de Beaumont’s season of diverse entertainments, *Les Soirées de Paris*.

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131 Picasso designed a “simple, timeless” beach setting, which failed to please Diaghilev, who complained, “I wanted Egypt and you’ve given me Dieppe.” Quoted in Cooper, 52.

132 Scheijen, 345.

133 Cooper, 53.

134 For an account of the background to *Les Soirées de Paris*, see Massine, 158-60.
**Mercure**

*Mercure*, which premiered on June 15, 1924, at the Théâtre de la Cigale (now La Cigale) in Montmartre, was a ballet in name only.\(^{135}\) This most provocative of all Picasso’s stage designs consisted of a series of tableaux vivants, or “poses plastiques” (“plastic poses”)\(^{136}\) illustrating aspects of the god Mercury’s mythological personality, accompanied by Satie’s score.\(^{137}\) As a performance, *Mercure* blended dance, mime, static poses, sculpture, and drawing, supposedly unified by the “universal language” of mythology.\(^{138}\) It was one of the earliest dance pieces to be conceived with “a subject but no plot,” according to Satie.\(^{139}\) The line between reality and illusion, drawn in plastic terms, was not so much blurred this time as totally collapsed. To present each of the work’s thirteen scenes, or tableaux, dancers in stylized classical costumes froze in imitation of sculpted groups (some after ancient bas-reliefs) in front of huge, two-dimensional cut-out shapes of wire, paint and cardboard. These abstract cutouts represented various mythological figures, including the Three Graces with Cerberus (fig. 41), and Pluto abducting Proserpina (fig. 43); they were manipulated from behind by concealed dancers so that they moved awkwardly on and off the shallow stage. In the scene of the Bath of the Three Graces, men in wigs and cardboard breasts merge with the cardboard surface of a constructed

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\(^{135}\) The Théâtre de la Cigale opened in 1887 on the site of Boule Noire cabaret. Seating 1000, it initially staged reviews, but became known as a venue for operetta, vaudeville and avant-garde performance of various kinds in the 1920s. It closed for a time but reopened in 1987, mainly as a pop music venue.

\(^{136}\) Subtitle for *Mercure* from the program (1924), cited in Cooper, 56. See Berggruen, 208, for a full list of the ballet’s tableaux.

\(^{137}\) Shattuck remarks that *Mercure* “is not Satie’s best work,” 173.

\(^{138}\) Richardson, vol. 3, 258.

\(^{139}\) Satie (1924), quoted in Quoted in Ornella Volta, “Picasso as Playwright,” in Berggruen, 112.
pool, fusing—and confusing—designed and human elements, and parodying Picasso’s own bather paintings of 1918-23 (fig. 42).  

Scholars agree that Mercure was predominantly Picasso’s ballet in conception as well as in design, and his constructions dominate the proceedings, taking over the dancers’ roles and superseding them.  

Art is performer in Mercure as never before.

Mercure’s theme and the mythological figure constructions were extensions of Picasso’s concurrent interest in classicism, articulated in a stylized semi-Cubism; through them he was able to explore his interest in giving his paintings “palpable” form beyond the painted surface. His neoclassicist art shows no great involvement with mythology, Mercure notwithstanding, but occasional pieces like Nessus and Deianeira (1920), capture the ballet’s exuberant treatment of mythological themes. In Mercure, the Three Graces (a theme that preoccupied Picasso in the early 1920s) are amorphous forms layered with openwork wire mesh, minuscule periscope heads protruding above their bodies like that of 1915’s Seated Man, or the (abandoned) design for the Negro Manager astride the horse in Parade (fig. 21). The figures, chariot and horse in Proserpina’s abduction (fig. 43) are continuous-line wire constructions resembling line drawings, animations of similar drawings of people and animals from the preceding few years. Gertrude Stein called them “pure calligraphy,” and Werner Spies has compared them to

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140 This example of Mercure’s humor fell flat, with audiences regarding it as vulgar rather than charming, as Picasso and Massine had hoped.

141 Cooper, 54.

142 Ibid., 59.
Surrealist automatic writing. Picasso experimented freely with this mode in preparatory studies for *Mercure* (fig. 44); it survived in a number of openwork wire sculptures, such as *Project for a Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire* (1928). *Mercure*’s drop curtain reverts to familiar Picassian motifs in its depiction of a guitarist Harlequin and a violinist Pierrot, drawn in fluid continuous line, superimposed over flat, Cubist blocks of color (fig. 45). Line and color are separate here; associated on the picture surface but not defining each other, as in several contemporaneous paintings, including *Two Women in Conversation* (1924, fig. 46). This separation of line and color is repeated in the cutouts and scenic backdrops.

Few photographs of the production exist, and it is impossible to appreciate the full impact of *Mercure*, at which, reports Robert Maillard, “astonishment was total.” Critics, predictably, were hostile: Cyril Beaumont declared the ballet “incredibly stupid, vulgar, and pointless,” and even the dancers disliked it: Lydia Lopokova wrote to her fiancé John Maynard Keynes that *Mercure* was “no ballet no parody but somehow a stupid fake” meant to “pull the noses of the public.” The Surrealists, however, were full of enthusiasm, despite having picketed the opening, shouting “Bravo Picasso, down with Satie!” and “vieux pompiers” (“pretentious old…”) at the cast and audience. André Breton later sought to make amends for the fracas by extolling Picasso’s creation of

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146 Lydia Lopokova (1924), quoted in Mackrell, 254n.

147 Massine, 160. Satie and the Surrealists had a long-standing feud.
“troubling modernity at the highest level of expression.”¹⁴⁸ Breton genuinely admired Mercure, seeing affinities with his own ideas in Picasso’s concept; indeed, it has been called a proto-Surrealist ballet.¹⁴⁹ Initiates of the avant-garde approved Mercure’s originality, sophisticated cultural references and humor—some even found it “moving” and “beautiful”—but the ballet was nonetheless “a resounding failure.”¹⁵⁰ Those viewers perceptive enough to recognize Picasso’s daring experiment in collapsing the boundaries between theatre and art, illusion and reality, and abstraction and naturalism to create a new form of art in four dimensions understood the prophetic nature of Mercure.

According to Louis Aragon: “Nothing stronger has ever been brought to the stage…It is also the revelation of an entirely new style for Picasso, one that owes nothing either to Cubism or realism, and which transcends Cubism just as Cubism transcended realism.”¹⁵¹ Diaghilev, who felt threatened by a rival modernist enterprise staged by his defectors Massine, Satie, and Picasso, took over and re-staged Mercure in 1927 in London, but it again failed to ignite public interest, and has hardly ever been revived. A few days after Mercure’s premiere, the Ballets Russes opened in Le Train Bleu at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, with Picasso’s drop curtain based on The Race, a 1922 gouache of two running maenads, his only contribution to that ballet (fig. 47). Mercure was Picasso’s last ballet; he had pushed the dominance of stage design so far that choreography barely

¹⁴⁸ André Breton (Paris-Journal, 20 June, 1924), quoted in Cooper, 59-60. As an attempt to ingratiate himself and win Picasso for Surrealism, this was only partially successful; Picasso never allied himself with Breton and his followers, although he was wise enough to maintain good relations with them, realizing that his status at the front of the avant-garde was helped by their association.


¹⁵⁰ Cooper, 56; Maillard (1957), quoted in Palau, 411.

existed and the dancers were almost irrelevant. For a variety of reasons, he had “had enough” of ballet by this time (see p. 93-4) and may have felt that he had exhausted the possibilities of dance theatre as a creative vehicle.\footnote{Richardson, vol. 3, 263.}

**Drawings of Dancers, 1919-1925**

Exposure to ballet revived Picasso’s interest in classical figure composition, and he produced a number of studies of dancers at different times during his association with the Ballets Russes, although he made no major painting on the subject until *Three Dancers* in 1925 (fig. 65). The earliest group of dancer drawings was made in London in 1919, during rehearsals for *Tricorne*; the artist was invariably to be found in a corner of the rehearsal studio, watching with a sketchbook in hand. Massine described how

> “Picasso, who was always intrigued by the process of molding a ballet into shape, attended most of our rehearsals, which he said he preferred to the actual performances. What really fascinated him was seeing the dancers resting between dances, and the lines of their bodies in repose as they gathered their forces for the next burst of activity.”\footnote{Massine, 123.}

At first, Picasso made copies from old publicity photographs of Olga’s, like the one from 1916 of a group of ballerinas posed in costume for *Les Sylphides* (fig. 48). The first version, illusionistically modeled in pen and watercolor, is faithful to the photograph (fig. 49), but a later free interpretation from the same photograph shows the beginnings of the distortion and caricature that Picasso played with in the rest of the London drawings (fig. 50).\footnote{Olga is at the front of the group in the photograph and the first, realistic, copy. In the later, linear version, all the ballerinas have Olga’s face, creating a strangely unnerving effect. Did Picasso regard all female dancers as versions of his ideal beloved at this time?} Enlarged hands, balloon-like arms and thighs, bulging breasts, exaggerated facial
features and affected poses turn these dancers from sylphs into comically elephantine grotesques, rapidly sketched in linear style (fig. 51). Picasso was experimenting with neoclassicism in earnest at the same time, in images of classically-draped women in timeless settings; he seems to find comic relief in his ballerina caricatures, where he mocks both classicizing art’s perfectionist pretensions, and classical dance’s self-consciously aesthetic stylization. A seated pastel of Olga in rehearsal clothes (1920, fig. 52) is an exception; delicately modeled and finely observed, this tender study in the manner of Degas nevertheless emphasizes her muscular dancer’s calves and forearms.

The drawings he made for the programs of the company’s 1923-24 season in Monte Carlo and Paris, however, are spare, lyrical evocations of physical grace in movement, using an extreme economy of line. These intensely observed rehearsal sketches also allude to Degas in their truthful and unsentimental recording of dressing-room rituals and choreographic vignettes, underlining what Alexander Schouvaloff calls Picasso’s “romance” with the Ballets Russes. ¹⁵⁵ They were recycled (with his permission) in Ballets Russes programs until at least 1928, well after Picasso had ceased to be involved with the company. Picasso’s association with the Ballets Russes was by now firmly part of the company’s modernist credentials as well as a defining feature of its visual identity, and Diaghilev was not prepared to abandon it. It would be unfair to claim that Diaghilev exploited Picasso for his name, as his professed high regard for the painter’s art was genuine. Nevertheless, Diaghilev was acutely aware of the commercial and artistic benefits for the Ballets Russes of its association with the artist, whose reputation as the leader of the modern movement was growing throughout the period of their

¹⁵⁵ Schouvaloff, “Romance,” 73.
collaboration—due in no small degree to the opportunities for exposure and patronage that Diaghilev provided. The relationship was to the advantage of both, as both were well aware; by the time Picasso broke with Diaghilev, he no longer needed him. The same may not have been as true for Diaghilev.

Observing dancers gave Picasso a chance to draw freely from live models, and, as Cooper notes, this “enriched his plastic vocabulary,” providing a repertoire of new poses, groupings and figural relations he would use in his paintings, in particular the neoclassical works of this period.\textsuperscript{156} Picasso made a number of drawings of dancers in the classroom and in rehearsal while in Monte Carlo with the Ballets Russes in 1925. Several drawings of predominantly male dancers that appear in Ballets Russes programs in 1926, 1927 and 1928 display an extraordinary sensitivity of line and a classical poise and balance in their compositions that foreshadow the 1930 etchings for Albert Skira’s edition of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} (figs. 55).\textsuperscript{157} A group of five nude dancers in particular (evidently at least partly imagined) evokes an intense but controlled Orphic frenzy equal to the best of these (fig. 54). Picasso includes a deliberate reference to classical tradition in a sketch of three male dancers relaxing in the studio (fig. 56): the right-hand dancer’s Hellenic profile and iconic pose quote Rodin, Benjamin West, Dürer, Michelangelo, and—Picasso’s probable immediate source—Ingres’ \textit{Oedipus and the Sphinx} (c.1826).\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{156} Cooper, 22.

\textsuperscript{157} I studied and photographed several of these drawings from the original programs at the White Lodge Museum of the Royal Ballet School, Richmond Park, London, in August 2011. They have rarely been re-published: all of them in Cooper in 1968, and two just recently in Elizabeth Cowling and Richard Kendall, \textit{Picasso Looks at Degas} (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute and Yale University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{158} Richard Kendall also notes Ingres’ painting as a source for this drawing, and points out that Picasso may have seen the small version of it that Degas owned in one of the sales of the contents of Degas’ studio after the artist’s death in 1918. (Cowling and Kendall, 145). He could also have seen it in the National
The homage to Ingres is significant: Picasso revered his classical purity and modeled these and other line drawings at that time on the master’s style. A sensual response to the human form also pervades the sketches; in the last-mentioned, and another of two danseurs at the barre, this is palpably homoerotic, perhaps another nod to classical precedent. These under-appreciated drawings make a fascinating record of Picasso’s changing relationship with the ballet itself; Douglas Cooper asserts, hyperbolically, that “Not even Degas…studied and noted dancers’ movements with quite the same degree of intensity,” a claim one might wish to challenge.¹⁵⁹

One drawing dated January 1925, Two Seated Dancers, is a rare semi-Cubist treatment of its theme, invested with classicist gravity and order (fig. 53). It bridges the naturalistically neoclassical dancer drawings and his only painting of dancers, Three Dancers (also 1925, fig. 65): Picasso’s climactic, violently Cubist expression of his own conflicted feelings about dance (among other matters) at the end of his career of designing ballet productions. However, dance continued to inflect his work from time to time; the surrealist series of Acrobats from 1930 (fig. 58) is indebted to the earlier ballet drawings; without them it is doubtful that he could have so uninhibitedly imagined the plastic possibilities of the human body.

¹⁵⁹ Cooper, 65.
Picasso and Classicism

Picasso’s experience of ballet did more than just re-orient him towards figure composition in a neoclassical mode. It was a seminal influence in his adoption of neoclassicism as one among several alternative representational strategies with which he experimented between 1917 and 1925. A great deal has been written about Picasso’s second neoclassical period, and numerous explanations proposed for it. I do not intend to go over old ground, but rather to suggest ways in which the stylistic traits usually described as classical owe their existence and form to ballet. Phoebe Pool points out that Classicism as a term is “probably not susceptible of fixed definition,” but in Picasso’s case lies in “an intermittent need for conceptual, generalized forms, with parts harmoniously related to the whole, and considerable economy of color and line.” To this list I would add clarity of expression, simple compositions, and a tranquil, timeless, oneiric mood. Pool also asserts that Picasso’s neoclassicism, on the whole, does not involve “free translations from the Antique,” although this is precisely what Mercure was. As antique subject matter in radically modern guise, this provocatively avant-garde ballet thrust Picasso’s neoclassicist and Cubist concerns playfully together in the context where he could experiment most freely with the juxtaposition of diverse ideas: the theatre.

160 The terms “neo/classical” or “classicist,” although widely used, are inadequate to cover all Picasso’s naturalistic output at this time. His assimilation of sources from the classical tradition is complex and involves a negotiation with Cubism, and other influences. I use the terms here, however, according to scholarly convention.

Picasso encountered ancient art first-hand at the same time as he encountered ballet, in Rome and Naples in the company of Massine and Stravinsky, another artist interested in rejuvenating the classical tradition in a modernist idiom. The coincidence is significant; while he obsessively attended rehearsals, as Richardson tells us, watching his new love, Olga, in *Les Sylphides* (Michel Fokine’s homage to classical ballet blanc) and helped Bakst paint the sets for Massine’s new work *Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur*, Picasso can hardly have failed to absorb the aesthetic of ballet. Always avid for new sources of inspiration, he would have been impressed by ballet’s discipline, order, symmetry, and attention to the harmonious relation of its parts to the whole (to paraphrase Pool). Ballet is an artform with a venerable classical tradition; the concurrent observance and reinvention of that tradition was the hallmark of the Ballets Russes. Picasso’s experience of it may well have contributed to the resurfacing of his interest in applying classical principles to his art, dormant since his work of 1905-6, when he became interested in African art as an alternative. The time was propitious towards the end of the war for a revival of classicism across the arts; principally French, Italian and Spanish musicians and writers as well as painters turned toward tradition and order to invigorate creative expression. In part this was in reaction to the war’s brutal chaos, in part an assertion of Mediterranean against Aryan culture, and in part an alternative to the anti-traditional poses of Dada and the Futurists. In addition, Yves-Alain Bois identifies Picasso’s move

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162 Richardson, vol. 3, 5. Ballet blanc is the nineteenth-century classical ballet style in which ballerinas wear full white tutus, for example *La Sylphide* (1832), and *Giselle* Act II (1841) (the Wilis’ scene).

163 For example, *Two Nudes*, 1906. Regarded by scholars as the “first phase” of Picasso’s classicism, this period is characterized by his discovery of Ingres and archaic Iberian sculpture, and by references to Greek sculpture, Maillol, and Cézanne. See Cowling, *On Classic Ground*, 200; Pool, 199.

164 Including, for example, composers Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, and Manuel De Falla, and poets Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and Raymond Radiguet.
into neoclassical figuration as his stand for representation against the threat of abstraction, and a need to recoup the past in the face of its perceived imminent destruction—literally and aesthetically.\textsuperscript{165} An interest in ballet as both artform and aesthetic source makes sense in this context, and perhaps helps explain why dance became so important in the culture at this time. Also important is the concern of artists with the idea of Apollonian order versus Dionysian frenzy, whose complementary opposition as an underlying principle of art had been articulated, influentially, by Nietzsche in 1872.\textsuperscript{166} These forces, often found in tension in Picasso’s classicist works, may be seen as reconciled and mutually expressed in dance.

Picasso’s translations of dance’s classical values into pictorial terms first found expression in his many portraits of Olga, and in his line drawings of some of his Ballets Russes collaborators. Richardson observes that Olga was “a perfect vehicle for [Picasso’s] emergent classicism.” He captures her serene beauty, elegant form and reserved manner in, for instance, \textit{Portrait of Olga in an Embroidered Dress} (1918, fig. 59). According to Elizabeth Cowling, Olga’s fan and embroidered dress are a version of Harlequin’s and Pierrot’s costumes; they mark her as an outsider, or perhaps someone playing a role.\textsuperscript{167} The painting quotes Ingres’ \textit{Portrait of Madame Devauçay} (1807, fig. 60). Ingres was a major inspiration; the style of linear portraiture in which Picasso depicted Stravinsky, Satie, de Falla, and Massine (fig. 61) was indebted to the old master who, after his 1905 retrospective, was regarded as one source of modern (specifically

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Bois, 29-30.}
\footnote{Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy, Leipzig, 1872).}
\footnote{Elizabeth Cowling, \textit{Picasso: Style and Meaning} (London; New York: Phaidon, 2002), 325.}
\end{footnotes}
French) classicism.\textsuperscript{168} Picasso had already begun working in this style before 1917 and the Ballets Russes; the 1915 portrait of his dealer Ambroise Vollard is a fine example. Ingres’ influence also permeates the ballet drawings already discussed. These show, as well, the first signs of Picasso’s tendency to parody as well as embrace the classical tradition in both art and dance; but as Douglas Cooper tells us, “mockery is one of Picasso’s sincerest ways of expressing admiration.”\textsuperscript{169} Picasso was “too much a rebel” to follow the “rappel à l’ordre” religiously; his irreverence invests his classicist works with a subversive, Dionysian undercurrent.\textsuperscript{170} From 1921 to 1923, Picasso produced a series of paintings of nudes or classically draped women (and occasionally men) with heavy, sculptural bodies, swollen limbs and idealized facial features, singly or grouped, standing, seated or lying in generalized or vaguely Attic settings.\textsuperscript{171} These enigmatic works hint at but don’t articulate a narrative dimension, and are infused with a languid, timeless and hauntingly tragic air, as if of a dream or a distant, mythical world. (More prosaically, Richardson sees these figures as bored.\textsuperscript{172} These are the most intense and oddly disquieting of Picasso’s classicist explorations. Their women echo his caricatured ballerinas, with a less obviously parodic intent, yet an undertone persists of mocking convention while simultaneously paying it homage. \textit{Large Bather} (1921), and \textit{Three


\textsuperscript{169} Cooper, 63.


\textsuperscript{171} Many of these works, from the summer of 1921 that the Picassos spent at Fontainebleau, are directly indebted to Rosso Fiorentino’s paintings in the palace.

\textsuperscript{172} Richardson, vol. 3, 433.
Women at the Spring (1921, fig. 62) are among the most authoritative of these. The disciplined compositions of these works, their atmosphere of ordered harmony, their muted palettes and pale drapery, and their focus on the semi-nude female body as the primary site of meaning, all bespeak the internalization of an aesthetic derived from ballet and taken to an imaginative extreme. Furthermore, they embody the veiled and paradoxical eroticism of the ballet blanc, in which semi-clad women’s bodies project their sexuality, while simultaneously inscribing them as pure and untouchable, creatures of myth, not flesh. Picasso’s monumentally fleshy madonnas and sirens inhabit a mythic mindscape, and owe a debt to Renoir’s large-limbed nudes as well as to Pompeiian frescoes, but their genesis occurs at least partly on the ballet stage.

Related to these are the Bather pictures, done at different times from 1918 into the early 1930s. Those from the early 1920s exhibit a softer, faux-naïve naturalism, and their ethos is pagan and Dionysian rather than serenely Apollonian (fig. 63). Awareness of the body’s potential for unfettered movement animates these painted and drawn images of naked women reclining, running, and playing on the shore or emerging from the sea, in shallow, stage-like space, in poses that often echo the ballet drawings; Douglas Cooper calls them “an artistic reconciliation between the classical world and the ballet school.” One of the most commanding of these is Two Women Running on the Beach (The Race) (1922, fig. 47), which Picasso allowed Diaghilev to reproduce in gigantic size as the drop curtain for Le Train Bleu, a ballet conceived by Jean Cocteau and choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska in 1924, with costumes by Coco Chanel, to music by Darius

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173 Cooper, 64.
The bather pictures anticipate that ballet’s theme of Jazz Age beachside frolics; Picasso’s sprinting giantesses are an ironic prelude to Cocteau’s rather slight piece. Diaghilev was determined to continue exploiting his former association with Picasso for its fashionably avant-garde cachet; after 1924 he continued to use The Race curtain as a front-cloth for Ballets Russes performances. The success of this tactic is demonstrated by the fact that Le Train Bleu is sometimes incorrectly, or disingenuously, classified today as one of Picasso’s ballets.

Another theme related to the classical was the Commedia dell’Arte, whose Harlequins and Pierrots, as we have seen, Picasso did not abandon during his ballet years. Adopted by several artists beside Picasso (Derain, Gris, Gino Severini), the Commedia “fulfilled the idea of modern classicism at the same time that it provided an alternative storyline” to Greek myth. The Parade curtain incorporates Commedia motifs with classicist naturalism, and evokes the signature dreamlike mood that invests Picasso’s most emphatically neoclassical imagery. But neoclassicism did not necessitate naturalism. As Elizabeth Cowling explains, Picasso’s Cubist canvases at this time manifest a classicist impulse. Traditional subjects treated neutrally and inexpressively, with an emphasis on form and structure of observed reality, color subordinated to line and form, a stress on

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174 Picasso took no part in enlarging the painting for the ballet curtain; this was the work of scene-painter Prince Alexandre Shervashidze, who often worked with Diaghilev. Picasso was so pleased with the reproduction that he inscribed the curtain to Diaghilev.

175 See ibid., 64.

176 For example, the DVD produced by the Paris Opéra Ballet, entitled Picasso and Dance (Kultur International Films, 2005), which features only Le Train Bleu and Tricorne.

177 Silver, Chaos, 145.

harmonizing the work’s component parts, and a contemplative effect, characterize the Cubist work he pursued simultaneously with varying styles of classicist naturalism. The open window series of still lifes are examples, and the two versions of *The Three Musicians* (1921) synthesize Cubist, neoclassical and theatrical concerns. Synthetic Cubism itself, as Olivier Berggruen points out, is a language of “visual shortcuts,” as is stage design;\(^{179}\) Picasso’s work in stage design was crucial, argues Brigitte Léal, to the reconciliation of these two “apparently antagonistic” styles.\(^ {180}\) *Parade* in particular, where the eclectic clash of Cubism, realism and classicism was sanctioned by theatrical artifice, provided an invaluable crucible for negotiating their confrontation and coexistence in his work.

While Picasso’s ballet experience influenced the development of his unique practice of classicism, classicism fed back into his stage designs in one ballet above all: *Mercure*. The mythological theme treated with playful irreverence and the simplified Cubist and linear designs are obvious extensions of his artistic concerns onto the stage, as is the treatment of the piece’s central visual image: the Three Graces. The theme of three nude or lightly draped women in close physical proximity was a long-term preoccupation; it had featured in Picasso’s work under different titles since the early 1900s. He rendered it in a variety of media and styles: *Three Women* (1908) is an early pre-Cubist work related to *Demoiselles of Avignon*; *Three Women at the Spring* (1921, fig. 62) and its studies, variously called *Three Women at the Fountain*, are analogues; a line drawing, *Three Bathers by the Shore* (1920), and an ethereal *Three Graces* in oil and charcoal (1925, fig.\

\(^{179}\) Berggruen, 36.

\(^{180}\) Léal, 173.
among many other examples, testify to his preoccupation with the theme around the time Picasso designed *Mercure*. His 1924 studies for the ballet itself include an exuberant trio of dancing Graces in continuous line (fig. 44), and a half-linear, half-Cubist sketch over irregular blocks of color, the technique he used in *Mercure*’s curtain. Clearly the subject was important to Picasso, and he used it when he wanted to experiment in different styles and techniques. The ballet provided him with an opportunity to realize it in three and four dimensions—the cutout and wire sculptures and the men in drag—while also parodying it. Thus a subject with a venerable classical tradition became, like Harlequin, a vehicle for constant transformation and reinvention both in the studio and on the stage, and an important bridge between the two.

Classically, the Three Graces present themselves as a single ideal of female beauty from three viewpoints, separate but connected, but Picasso’s Graces are more conflicted than their classical prototypes. For him, to fragment the ideal was to critique it; in a sense, he subjects the academic notion of female beauty to the same process as his still lifes, dislocating and examining it from several angles in order to discover what art is:

“Academic training in beauty is a sham…the beauties of the Parthenon, Venuses, nymphs, Narcissuses, are so many lies. Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon,” he told Christian Zervos in 1935.¹⁸¹ In the early 1920s, Picasso was perhaps less cynical about beauty and less iconoclastic, but his gargantuan nymphs and swollen ballerinas show that he was ready to disrupt (but by no means abandon) conventional assumptions about classical canons, in

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¹⁸¹ Picasso (1935), quoted in Cowling, 27.
art as in dance. His neoclassicist works of art enact a conversation between tradition and modernism, as did the choreographic style of the Ballets Russes.

The End of Ballet, 1925

Picasso stopped designing ballets in 1924 at around the same time as he abandoned classicism. He and Olga spent the 1925 season in Monte Carlo with Diaghilev and company, and he drew the dancers taking class, but this was the end of his association with the Ballets Russes, or with any dance production, for many years. Picasso had decided that the ballet was “distracting and time-wasting” after all, and wanted no more to do with it; he was fed up with the bitchiness, snobbery and constant high drama he found in the ballet world, and increasingly frustrated by Diaghilev’s despotism and his efforts to control the artist’s design work.\(^\text{182}\) His marriage to Olga was also becoming increasingly fraught with dissatisfaction. The two things were not coincidental: the romance of ballet had come into Picasso’s life and art together with his love for Olga, and when his attraction to one faded, so did his use for the other.

Later that year, Picasso painted *The Three Dancers*, also called *The Dance* (fig. 65). Inspired by his emotional reaction to the death of his old friend Ramon Pichot, this huge, disturbing canvas may also be read as a savage farewell to his life in the ballet world, as well as a reprise of *Demoiselles d’Avignon*. Three nude women, watched by a silhouetted profile (perhaps indicating death) perform a parody of a ring dance, staged dramatically before a window very like that in the 1919 still lifes. This is yet another version of the Three Graces, but here the “intimations of dislocation and unreason” in Picasso’s

\(^{182}\) Richardson, vol. 3: 277.
neoclassical works explode in Cubist frenzy; dance’s primitive, Dionysian aspect trumps any pretence of classical order. Distorted by the painter’s mockery, the three figures seem tormented by incessant motion, the central one offering her crucified body as a kind of ritual sacrifice to the madness of their dance. Picasso, the restless survivor, made sure that this would not be his fate.

**Conclusion**

It is possible to argue that Picasso made the most significant contribution to the performance of art of any individual artist in the twentieth century. His close involvement with dance—a performance-based but highly visual artform—for eight highly fertile years had important consequences for his art and, reciprocally, for art’s role in the language of theatre. On his art, as Cooper says, “the influence of the theatre was all-pervading.” It gave him a rich vein of new subject-matter, including some of his most enduring and personally resonant imagery; it reoriented him to the possibilities of the human form, and stimulated his varied excursions into classicism; it gave him a rehearsal space where he could experiment with compositional structures in three dimensions and animate pictorial ideas in performance; and it provided a forum in which to arbitrate the tension between Cubism and Classicism, proving that they were equally valid means of representing reality which could exist in creative juxtaposition on the stage or on the canvas. Importantly, theatre was also an opportunity to extend art into the fourth dimension, activating it through time.

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184 Cooper, 66.
Picasso gave the theatre “some of the most imaginative and most memorable” décors of
the twentieth century, and created one signature work, *Parade*, which has become a
byword for modernist innovation and “total art” on the stage.\(^{185}\) Above all, he altered the
relationship of design and performance in dance productions, establishing décor as “avant
tout un création indépendante, soutenant l’esprit de l’œuvre à représenter, une forme
d’art autonome possédant ses problèmes particuliers et soumise à ses lois propres”
(“above all an independent creation, supporting the spirit of the work to be performed, an
autonomous art form with its own problems and subject to its own laws”).\(^{186}\) After
Picasso, for a time, choreography and music were subordinate to décor, which became a
performer in its own right. However, he was not alone in this project: other artists,
including Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Giorgio de Chirico, Pedro Pruna, and Natalia
Goncharova, working with the Ballets Russes, the Ballets Suédois, the Paris Opéra and
other companies (not to mention the Dadaists and Futurists operating on their own) were
also changing the role and status of stage design, making it increasingly elastic and
dissolving the boundaries between art and performance.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{186}\) Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, *Les Ballets Russes: Serge Diaghilew et la décoration
Chapter 4

Léger and the Ballets Suédois: Stage Design as “Object-Spectacle”

Theatre design was essential to Léger’s concept of art in the 1910s and 20s. Whereas Picasso was a conscript who became a devotee for a few years, Léger was eager to work with Diaghilev even before Parade had awoken a whole community of artists to the possibilities of stage décor. According to Judi Freeman, he “avidly followed the activities of the theatre world.” In 1916, while serving in Argonne, Léger tried to contact Diaghilev through Natalia Goncharova, and urged his fiancée, Jeanne Lohy, to call on him: “He may need to have information about me. It is necessary that you go there. A little bit of courage…Diaghilev is a serious matter.”187 Léger’s overtures proved fruitless, but he soon found a suitable vehicle for his ambitions in Swedish millionaire art collector Rolf de Maré’s Paris-based company, the Ballets Suédois. De Maré and his close friend and collaborator, artist Nils Dardel, had bought several paintings from Léger in the 1910s, so the artist was already an old acquaintance when de Maré invited him to design the ballet Skating Rink in 1923. Léger designed two ballets for the Ballets Suédois: after Skating Rink came the primitivist work La Création du Monde, regarded as the company’s masterpiece, in 1924. Léger designed just two ballets for the Ballets Suédois, but their momentum carried through into Ballet Mécanique, his experimental film made at the same time as Création, that synthesized his interests in dance without bodies, in the

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187 Judi Freeman, “Fernand Léger and the Ballets Suédois,” in Nancy Van Norman Baer (editor), Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925 (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1995), 88-89. Léger’s interest in theatre was lifelong; he explained it at length in several essays collected in Functions of Painting, first published 1925. Initially, he appears to have seen stage design as an opportunity to construct works on a large scale involving the articulated movement of different parts, both separately and in connected mechanisms.
poetry of mechanical objects, and in the new technology of film. He coined the expression “object-spectacle” in his essay “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle,” published in 1924 in Bulletin de l’effort moderne, to describe his theatrical ideal: a spectacle based on the physical environment of objects rather than on the human qualities of performers. This aesthetic informed both his projects for the Ballets Suédois.

The Ballets Suédois

The Ballets Suédois may be understood as an extension of Rolf de Maré’s art collecting activities; it enabled him to collect not only paintings but “the modern art movement itself.”188 The ballet company was also a vehicle for his young lover, the versatile and eclectic dancer Jean Börlin. Trained at the Royal Opera of Stockholm and a pupil of Diaghilev’s first choreographer, former Russian Imperial Ballet teacher Michel Fokine, Börlin inspired de Maré to found a ballet company that would “conquer the world.”189 De Maré’s ambition to inject a contemporary sensibility into Swedish art and dance was unrealizable in conservative Stockholm, so in 1920, he and Dardel moved the company’s base to Paris, and set up in the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, with Börlin as choreographer and premier dancer. Börlin had traveled widely in Europe and North Africa and studied with Jacques-Dalcroze; he brought his diverse experience of the performance traditions of different cultures to the Ballets Suédois. The Parisian critics lauded his productions for their originality, their emotional expressiveness, and their


diversity of style and theme, and Börlin was hailed by some as the new Nijinsky. De Maré’s vast fortune guaranteed almost unlimited resources and publicity, and the Ballets Suédois soon emerged as a serious rival to Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes: “This performance [the company’s first season] places the Ballets Suédois next to, not behind, the Ballets Russes,” declared L’Ere Nouvelle in 1920. In 1923, an American critic described them as “beginning where the Russians left off, so far as interpreting the modern spirit of art is concerned.”

At first the Suédois’ repertoire and approach appeared to imitate that of the Ballets Russes: Iberia, a Spanish-themed ballet, looked a lot like Tricorne; Nuits de St. Jean did with Nordic folklore what numerous Ballets Russes works, such as Le Coq d’Or, did with Russian traditions; Le Tombeau de Couperin capitalized on the “period modernism” of Les Femmes de Bonne Humeur. Börlin even restaged Jeux, Nijinsky’s 1913 ballet about a love-triangle on the tennis court. Further, De Maré and Börlin sought collaborations with vanguard painters, writers and composers—including Diaghilev collaborators Jean Cocteau, Claude Debussy, and André Derain—as Diaghilev had done. De Maré wanted Picasso to design for him, according to Richardson, but the jealous Cocteau intervened; still resentful over Parade, he convinced De Maré that Picasso’s décor would “upstage” his ballets. Instead De Maré chose Léger and Picabia, who may have seemed like suitable rivals to Picasso. It soon became clear that the Ballets Suédois

190 A. Coeuroy (November 1920), quoted in De Groote, 12.


192 Lynne Garafola coined the phrase “period modernism” to describe modern ballets set in earlier historical periods. Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, 77.

193 Richardson, vol. 3, 211.
was determined to reinvent and outdo the Ballet Russes with more audacious and experimental productions in which visual art took a role of unprecedented dominance over dance, Cocteau’s warnings notwithstanding. They aggressively claimed the avant-garde high ground from which Diaghilev had to some extent retreated in the early 1920s. The Suédois became a focus for the younger members of the Parisian avant-garde, including the opportunistic Cocteau, the artists Jean and Valentine Hugo, and the group of composers known as “Les Six,” (several of whom contributed scores to their ballets), and attracted a more fashionable following than the Ballets Russes, who by this time had lost some of their radical cachet and become identified with the cultural establishment.

The Ballets Suédois lasted for only five years, but their impact on modern dance, modern art, theatrical spectacle, and even film was significant.194 None of their ballets survived in twentieth-century repertoires, however; Börlin died in 1930, and there was no Massine or Lifar or Nijinska to carry on their work and create a tradition, as with the Ballets Russes.

Lynne Garafola claims, as well, that because “De Maré’s growing interest in artists like Picabia and Léger…threatened to evict dance entirely from the avant-garde performance gallery that the company had become,” the Ballets Suédois was “written out of dance history” for most of the twentieth century.195

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194 De Maré disbanded the company in 1925, after Relâche (Performance Cancelled), a Dada performance devised and orchestrated by Picabia and incorporating René Clair’s film Entr’acte, realizing that with Relâche, the Ballets Suédois had reached an artistic cul-de-sac.

195 Lynne Garafola, “Rivals for the New: the Ballets Suédois and the Ballets Russes,” Paris Modern, 82, 83. The company and its achievements were largely forgotten until the 1990s when interest in recreating some of the works surfaced, and a conference and several books and exhibitions stimulated a reevaluation of their contribution to modernist arts and reinstated the Ballets Suédois in the consciousness of modernist scholars. A comprehensive survey by Swedish scholar Bengt Häger (1990) and a biography of de Maré by Erik Näslund (2009) of the Stockholm Dance Museum have been published and translated into English; an exhibition, “Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet, 1920-1925” was shown at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco in 1995; ballet reconstruction team Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer have restaged four of
An important part of the Ballets Suédois’ significance in the interlinked histories of modern art and modern dance is Rolf de Maré’s professed belief in dance as the highest expression of collaborative artistic synthesis, and his determination to realize his vision of total theatre in the company’s productions. In this, too, he modeled himself on Diaghilev, with the difference that de Maré’s commitment to dance was superficial.

“Modern ballet is…the synthetic fusion of four fundamentally divergent arts: choreography, painting, music, and literature…The Swedish Ballet has always held as its principle the intimate association of the[se] four arts…[which] mutually supplement one another [and] offer the possible approach to a perfect totality.”196 The critics, for the most part, were convinced: “Les ballets Suédois…veulent du nouveau. Le Ballet moderne, c’est la Poésie, la Peinture, la Musique autant que la danse: synthèse de la vie intellectuelle d’aujourd’hui” (“The Ballets Suédois…want what is new. Modern ballet is poetry, painting, music, above all dance: synthesis of the intellectual life of today.”)197 However, the Ballets Suédois’ style of artistic synthesis elevated painting over the other arts. De Maré, for all his proclamations about aesthetic fusion, was at heart an art connoisseur and he was not particularly interested in ballet for dance’s sake; he wanted to turn the ballet stage into a moving painting that absorbed the dancer as a kinetic element in the overall spectacle—Cocteau’s “décor qui bouge” (“scenery that moves.”)198


197 From La Danse (1924). Quoted in Schenck, 52. My translation.

198 Schenck, 56. See also ch. 1, note 2.
Moving scenery, incorporating some of the visual effects De Maré was after, had a precedent in the wildly popular nineteenth-century invention, the diorama. Invented by Louis Daguerre (who later co-invented the daguerrotype) in Paris in 1822, dioramas provided a highly detailed and visually immersive theatrical experience. An audience was presented with realistic landscapes and historical scenes that gave the illusion of changing subtly, due to the manipulation of light, mirrors and painted screens. Daguerre’s techniques were widely imitated and dioramas became a widespread form of entertainment based on spectacle and wonder, just what Léger was striving to deliver in his theatre designs. Whether or not he and De Maré had mobile dioramas in mind is not clear, but their staging ambitions were determinedly modernist.

In hoping that “something of the beauty that can be found in these paintings [in his collection] can be recreated in dance,” de Maré found a willing disciple in Börlin, who claimed to derive his choreographic inspiration from painting: “Chaque tableau qui m’impressionne se transforme en moi en danse… Je dois mes créations aussi bien aux maîtres anciens qu’aux modernes” (“Each painting that moves me is transformed in me into dance… I owe my creations as much to the old masters as to the moderns”), to which he added, plaintively, “Une danse est éphémère. Autant que le danseur lui-même” (“A dance is ephemeral. Just like the dancer himself”). Perhaps from a desire for immortality, as well as avant-garde advantage and genuine aesthetic conviction, Ballets Suédois productions gave an increasingly prominent role to pictorial design at the

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expense of choreography, inevitably sacrificing the presence of the dancers themselves (as Börlin unwittingly predicted) to the total scenic vision. Throughout the Suédois’ life, critical reactions to the subordination of dance by a self-styled ballet company were mixed. Fernand Divoire remarked admiringly, on two occasions: “The Ballets Suédois represent intelligence and painting, rather than dancing…” and “The Ballets Suédois are living paintings”), while André Levinson deplored the “capitulation pure et simple du danseur devant le peintre” (“unconditional surrender of the dancer before the painter”).

De Maré’s ambition was to expand the frontiers of modern dance theatre and give the world a new kind of art, a perfect synthesis of music, movement and pictorial image: “The word ballet does not cover what we are out to create,” he announced in 1921. In Léger, he found a collaborator in total sympathy with this aim. Among the painter’s many writings on art, “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle” (1924), is crucial to understanding his approach to theatre and his practice with the Ballets Suédois. Léger, whose text reveals an innately theatrical sensibility, saw life (especially city life) as a fast-moving spectacle, and the stage as a mobile painting. In daily life, “objects, lights, the colors that used to be fixed and restrained have become alive and mobile,” therefore, “we must renew the man-spectacle mechanically” in order to compete, on the stage, with the dynamism of the modern environment. In order to invest the theatre with “plastic qualities” that were essential to its renewal, dancers should

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201 Fernand Divoire (1921 and 1923), quoted in De Groote, 88.
become more like acrobats; they should “accept the role of ‘moving scenery’ ” and “direct the advent of the spectacle-object,” thus providing “the mechanism for unexpected plastic qualities that would come into play and animate the stage.” Written after *La Création du Monde*, Léger’s second ballet for de Maré, and heavily influenced by his experience of that work, “The Spectacle” is a manifesto of his mechanics of theatre. He advocates a shallow stage, with a vertical emphasis in the décor, and mobile background scenery; dancers as “moving scenery” on the stage, “heavily made up, or masked” to eliminate human expressiveness, the face “stiff, fixed, frozen, rigid as if it were metal,” and “set gestures.” The dancers, or as Léger calls them, the “human material” should move in groups with clearly defined rhythms, sacrificing nothing to the “general effect”, which aspires to “cross the footlights” and “conquer the audience,” creating “a whole new and unexpected world.”206 There is more than a hint of Dada performance here; Léger’s sense of a continuity between life and art, and his challenge to the audience’s expectations, were prefigured at Cabaret Voltaire.

In “The Ballet-Spectacle and the Object-Spectacle”, published in *Bulletin de l’effort moderne* in 1925, Léger goes further still in applying the machine aesthetic of his painting to the dance stage. He declares that realistic, human-centered ballet is “stale”; that it is necessary to move from a spectacle centered on the individual to a “mechanical choreography” in which “man becomes a mechanism like everything else.” The human figure’s value is no longer sentimental, but plastic. Once the “human measure” disappears and the scenery (i.e. the dancers, appropriately costumed) moves, the human body

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206 Ibid., 35-47.
becomes a means not an end, and the spectacle attains “a whole, planned unity,” so that its “charm encompasses the entire stage.” In this way only, Léger writes, the “maximum effect” is obtained: the unexpected or surprise effect that captures the audience’s attention.\textsuperscript{207} Such is Léger’s prescription for a new, mechanical theatre, a total artwork where the human element is effaced and the precision of objects in clearly timed and ordered motion governs the action. If this clockwork aesthetic appears to contradict Léger’s aspiration to “the shock of the surprise effect,” it is a contradiction that he resolves by arguing that only a spectacle based on the new realities of “industry and commerce” has the capacity to engender such a response.\textsuperscript{208} His ideas on the dehumanization of performance have a precedent in the theories, discussed in chapter 1, of Edward Gordon Craig and the Futurists Fortunato Depero and Enrico Prampolini.

In the same article Léger expresses his admiration for Charlie Chaplin’s ability to enchant his audience by producing the unexpected in his comedies. Léger was fascinated by Chaplin, as were many French modernists: not only his brilliant manipulation of surprise as a comic strategy, but also the origins of his Little Tramp character in vaudeville, his existential status as an outsider (with which artists tended to identify), and the plastic versatility of his performing body all resonated with modernist ambitions (fig. 66). Léger was excited by the possibilities of film, which he regarded as a significant new visual idiom of enormous interest to artists. His homage to Chaplin in his mobile relief sculpture

\textsuperscript{207} Léger, “Spectacle,” 71-73.

\textsuperscript{208} Léger, ibid., 35, 36. Léger’s ideas have an obvious affinity with Taylorism, and it is perhaps significant that some of his writing appeared in the Taylorist journal \textit{L’Esprit Nouveau}. Ramsay Burt discusses this aspect of the artists’s work in his \textit{Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race” and Nation in Early Modern Dance} (Routledge, 1998), 42-4.
(almost a puppet) *Charlot Cubiste*, 1923 (fig. 67), appears in the opening and closing frames of Léger’s own 1924 film, *Ballet Mécanique*.

Léger’s stage designs and *Ballet Mécanique* were extensions and animations of his painterly preoccupations with the mechanical and technological artifacts of the new century. He became enraptured by military technology during his war service, and set himself to depict the industrial reality of modern life; to be, according to Douglas Cooper, “the conscious herald of the shock, thrills and confusion among which modern man is condemned to live.” The machine aesthetic that Léger developed celebrated the unique poetry and beauty of mechanical design as he saw it: “We live surrounded by beautiful objects that are slowly being revealed and perceived by man; they are occupying an increasingly important place around us, in our interior and exterior life. Cultivate this possibility…so that…children may be taught to admire beautiful manufactured objects.” In his painting from the end of the war to around the close of his tenure with the Ballets Suédois, Léger addressed mainly urban and industrial subjects, rendered “with the maximum of vigor and vehemence” in a style of Cubist fragmentation and recombination using flattened perspective and pure colors. Léger’s response to his environment was formal and plastic, not sensory or intellectual; his paintings, with their precisely defined and individualized objects, lack any sense of atmosphere, attitude, or emotion. The occasional (usually faceless) human figures, or parts of figures, are modeled like the other objects, as anonymous as machines and not differentiated from

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211 Léger, quoted in Rischbeiter, *Art and the Stage*, 92.
them in affect. All the elements of Léger’s mechanized, Cubist landscapes are synthesized into a formal and chromatic unity, the overall architecture of greater importance than the individual parts. Yet they are neither dry nor static; Léger achieves a dynamic rhythm and a sense of urgent, pulsating life through his arrangement of forms and colors. It is mechanical, not organic life, but its vitality creates an intense aesthetic pleasure at once plastic, decorative and kinetic. Léger captures the effect of his paintings of this period, such as the *Mechanical Elements* series, 1918-1923, (fig. 68) in a passage about modern life from his essay “The Spectacle”:

Speed is the law of the modern world…Life rolls by at such a speed that everything becomes mobile.

The rhythm of life is so dynamic that a ‘slice of life’ seen from a café terrace is a spectacle. The most diverse elements collide and jostle one another there. The interplay of contrasts is so violent that there is always exaggeration in the effect you glimpse.\(^{212}\)

The invitation to collaborate with the Ballets Suédois gave Léger the opportunity to animate the dynamic rhythm of his paintings in reality, on a three-dimensional stage with a décor and with live dancers he could dress and have a hand in moving as he wished. The experience allowed him to realize his ambition to work in theatre, to execute the large-scale, experimental artworks he desired, and to develop the concept of the object-spectacle that had its genesis in his painting and that drove his subsequent theatrical and cinematic art.

\(^{212}\) Léger, “Spectacle,” 35.
Skating Rink, 1922

Léger’s first ballet for the Ballets Suédois, *Skating Rink*, took its theme and setting from contemporary life, which vitally interested him. Léger was convinced that the artist must “rise to the plane of beauty by considering everything that surrounds him as raw material; to select the plastic and theatrical values possible from the whirlpool that swirls under his eyes; to interpret them in terms of spectacle; to attain theatrical unity and dominate it at any price.”213 These words could apply to *Skating Rink*, whose setting was, almost literally, a whirlpool: a popular roller-skating rink where the central drama takes place against an incessant, swirling crowd of skaters. The ballet was inspired by Ricciotto Canudo’s 1920 prose poem *Skating Rink à Tabarin*, which was itself inspired by Chaplin’s 1916 short film *The Rink*.214 Canudo also collaborated on the ballet as librettist, interpreting his poem for the stage: “The whirlwind of skaters is an allegory for the more desperate whirlwind of life.”215 In his attempt to capture the “savage atmosphere” of these demotic pleasure-halls and to ensure his collaborators did as well, Léger dragged Börlin, de Maré and Dardel to Paris skating rinks and dance halls night after night.216 The Swedish patricians may have felt acutely out of place, but the painter reveled in the frenetic, seedy glamour of these spectacles of real life that he wanted Börlin to recreate on the stage. In reality a mainly working-class haunt, the rink functions in Canudo’s poem as a microcosm of society, a “vortex of flesh” where every social class and type is

213 Ibid., 36-7.


216 Canudo, Quoted in Näslund, *Rolf de Maré*, 292.
found, and where the rivalries and romances of individuals are played out in the intense theatre of the pitiless crowd’s collective gaze.217

For Léger, the skating rink, with its raw, violent passions, was a source of the vitality, speed and motion he loved in modern life; the rhythm it imposed on its human users had a mechanical regularity that absorbed the individual into the constantly moving mass. Canudo’s simple but ambiguous narrative involves an outsider—the Poet or Madman, danced by Börlin—who enters the rink and attracts the Woman away from her working-class beau, the Man.218 The Madman and the Woman perform a frenzied, erotic duet. The men fight, the Madman defeats the other, and the Woman collapses, dead or insensible, to be carried out by the Madman, as the distraught Man is swept away by the relentlessly circling crowd. The press made the obvious comparison with Nijinsky’s Sacre du Printemps, staged by the Ballets Russes in 1913; the frenzied, ritualistic group movements and the female sacrifice to appease male egos/gods are clear parallels, but the staging of Skating Rink was vastly more advanced than anything Nikolas Roerich (Sacre’s designer) could have imagined.

For the set, Léger created a “thoroughly Cubist image in perpetual motion,” according to Erik Näslund.219 Skating Rink was the first completely abstract ballet design, as well as the first to use a theme from contemporary life, and the score by Arthur Honegger, one of “les Six,” kept pace with the feverish action. Léger’s design was based on curves and

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217 Canudo, quoted in Häger, 162.

218 The Madman is based on Chaplin’s character in The Rink, but with a darker and more tragic complexion.

219 Ibid., 293.
circles, mirroring the circular movement of the corps of dancers with their gliding steps. The backdrop was curved, suggesting the outer limit of the rink and describing the path of the crowd’s collective movement (fig. 70). Its top half was covered in an abstract geometric design in vivid colors, with smaller circles encompassed by a pair of arcs that together crossed the stage and contained an arrow, indicating the primary direction of movement, and the stylized letters “R I N G.” The lower half was a mainly blank area of flat color, against which the dancers, in their bright costumes that repeated the geometry of the set, moved in kaleidoscopic, choreographed patterns. The total effect was intended to be that of a giant, living painting, a kinetic image in which the human presence was subsumed in the painterly scheme, and the dancers became mobile colors and volumes, anonymous components of a great, multi-hued mechanism in a state of continual transformation. Léger realized his vision of “moving scenery” for the first time in *Skating Rink* (fig. 71).  

The art critic Maurice Raynal wrote, after the opening night: “Léger does away with the dancer as a representation of human elements. The dancer, in his view, should become an integral part of the décor, a plastic element that will be a moving part of the décor’s plastic elements.”  

Maurice Bex was less complimentary, complaining of “a curtain which so thoroughly creates the effect of movement that it becomes a substitute for the dancers themselves, who appear not to move at all.”  

The integration of the dancer into the décor was Léger’s means of solving the conflict he experienced between a static set and mobile dancers. When all was unified, Léger

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221 Maurice Raynal (1921), quoted in Garafola, “Rivals,” 72.

222 Maurice Bex, *Révue Hebdomadaire* (February 25, 1922), quoted in Häger, 166.
achieved his desire for the ideal ballet with “mobile décors which will evolve in the manner of films, presenting a spectacle that is repeatedly renewed.” In organizing the different masses of dancers onstage, color was key. According to Léger, he attempted: “obtenir la plus grande intensité scénique uniquement par la technique des tons purs appliqués à plat” (“to obtain maximum scenic intensity using one technique alone: the application of pure color with no attempt at creating perspective”). By clothing groups of dancers in different colors and setting them against each other at different speeds, Léger created contrast and parallelism of speeds, colors and volumes, resulting in the aesthetic “intensity” he craved for his stage spectacle.

As well as grouping dancers by color, Skating Rink’s costumes served to differentiate social types and to integrate the dancers visually into the décor. According to Léger, they were divided into “popular” costumes for the working-class figures, and “fantasy” costumes for the upper class ones (fig. 72). The Madman’s and Woman’s outfits adapted Chaplin and Edna Purviance in The Rink; the Man was dressed as an “Apache,” a genre of working-class Parisian toughs who frequented leisure sites such as skating rinks, and had their own distinctive style of dance, which Börlin incorporated into the choreography. The designs for the women’s costumes tended to be composed of curving forms, and the men’s of sharply angular ones. Judi Freeman points out that Léger turns the corps dancers into the human cast of his paintings of contemporary life—interchangeable, faceless components of the urban landscape, in works such as The

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223 Maurice Raynal, Der Querschnitt (1922), quoted in Häger 166.

After seeing the production in Berlin, Carl Einstein wrote, “The people [here] have already looked like something out of Léger for some time; [so] I was wildly pleased by what was in fact the “realism” of the Léger-style get-up!”

Léger’s rideau de scène (fig. 73) is an abstract jumble of geometric forms and fragmented body parts on a planar surface. Large concentric discs mimic skate wheels; faces, hands and feet jostle and collide, and the whole composition conveys an effect of jerky, incessant rhythm and vibrant human and mechanical activity. Once again, curvilinear shapes denote female characters, and angular ones are males. Both the curtain and backdrop use the same visual language that Léger was employing in his paintings from 1919-21. The Level Crossing, final version (1919, fig. 74), for example, prefigures Skating Rink’s décor; like the curtain, it features typographic fragments, a directional arrow and the same concentric discs, high-keyed primary palette and visual dynamics, executed in Léger’s precise and objective brand of Cubism. Random paraphernalia of the urban scene are scattered across both curtain and canvas: traffic and rail signals, signage, lights, wheels, beams and girders. The painting also juxtaposes geometric shapes asymmetrically on a depthless field, in a jaunty rhythm that evokes organized, repetitive motion. Other paintings, such as Disks in the the City (1919) forecast the ballet’s curtain in interspersing human fragments among the industrial landscape. The regular, industrial rhythms of the city transpose perfectly to the dance stage, where they describe the

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movements of skaters on a rink, “spinning the desperate meaning of life.” Léger’s imagery, however, radiates an optimism at odds with the nihilistic mood of Canudo’s poem. *Skating Rink*’s set and costumes are visually equivalent to many of Léger’s paintings of contemporary, urban subjects from this time: with the insertion of the dancers the ballet is effectively an oversized, kinetic, three-dimensional canvas.

Léger’s designs had been completed before Börlin’s choreography, and the dancer used them as a template for the ballet’s movement, which conformed to the geometry of the set—jerky, angular steps, synchronization, and sweeping, circular motions suggestive of skating. This inversion of the usual order demonstrates how strongly the visual aspect drove the overall planning of the work. Canudo concurred with these priorities; as early as 1911, he had written that dance should be “an art of synthesis, and not solely choreographic entertainment.” While *Skating Rink* synthesized dance, drama, music and painting, it also conjoined high art and vernacular idioms. In visual terms, these included signage, stenciled numbers and letters, traffic control signals, and indications of mechanized transport. *Parade* had set a precedent for incorporating references to popular forms of entertainment into ballet; *Skating Rink*’s collaborators did likewise with silent film comedy (Chaplin’s *The Rink*) as well as skating, and added Parisian street dance in the Apache dance performed by the Man as his challenge to the Madman.

In *Skating Rink*, Léger moved consciously toward the performance of art in a more decisive manner than Picasso in *Parade*, or anyone else, had yet done. According to

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227 Canudo, *Skating-Rink à Tabarin* (1920), quoted in Häger, 162.

228 Canudo, quoted in Freeman, “Léger and the Ballets Suédois,” 90.
Pascale de Groote, he “integrated Cubist aesthetics with the dynamics of Futurism.”

His creation of “moving scenery” was a bold extension of ideas for the masking or substitution of the performer by fabricated carapaces, mechanical constructions, marionettes and lighting that originated in the theories of Edward Gordon Craig and were more ambitiously explored by the Futurists. Diaghilev had flirted briefly with Futurist performance ideas during the war, when he and Balla produced *Feu d’Artifice*, and in his unconsummated collaboration with Depero, whose influence is evident in Picasso’s Managers in *Parade*. Léger took the dehumanization of ballet a step further by integrating the corps of dancers into the decor, making them functional parts of a scenic mechanism. However, Canudo’s drama of the Madman and the couple gave principal roles to individualized humans and invested the spectacle with a narrative that placed subjective human values in the foreground. Art had a leading role in *Skating Rink*, but it was not yet the solo performer; Léger’s second commission for the Ballets Suédois, *La Création du Monde*, would achieve the apotheosis of art and the all but total erasure of the human element in modern dance.

*La Création du Monde, 1923*

The genesis of the Ballets Suédois’ most spectacular work lay in Blaise Cendrars’ *Anthologie Nègre*, a collection of African origin myths compiled by the poet and published in 1920. Cendrars’ anthology, and the ballet it inspired, capitalized on the craze for all things African and African-American in Paris after the war, from tribal art to jazz

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229 De Groote, 53.
Jean Börlin’s own strong interest in African art and dance and his ethnographic research resulted in a solo performance, *Sculpture Nègre*, in Paris in 1920. In 1921 Léger and Cendrars approached de Maré with a proposal for a “ballet nègre,” which was to be “the only possible ballet nègre in the entire world and to be that which endures as definitive of the genre,” according to Léger.231 Darius Milhaud (one of Les Six) was overjoyed to be asked to compose the music, as it would give him the opportunity to use the knowledge of American jazz—music with “roots in the darkest corners of the negro soul”—that he had gained on a visit to the United States.232 Léger was not especially interested in “primitive” art for its own sake; he was too infatuated with the modern industrial world and the beauty of its mechanical objects. He viewed the proposed “ballet nègre” as an opportunity for developing the visual technologies he had initiated in *Skating Rink* into “a grandiose, dramatic ballet,” which would constitute “a truly modern theatre.”

Cendrars’ libretto adapted the first part of *Anthologie Nègre*: “Légendes Cosmogoniques: La Légende des Origines,” which describes the gods Mébère, Nzamé and Nkwa creating first the heavens and the earth, then the plants and the animals, and finally the first man and woman. In Léger’s *mise-en-scène*, the curtain, painted in an earth-toned hybrid of African and Cubist idioms with enormous masks representing the three gods, rises on a darkened stage (fig. 75). Gradually, the shapes of giant beings emerge from the shadow:

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231 Léger (1921), quoted in and translated by Háger, 191.


233 Ibid., 98, 102.
the gods, in the form of twenty-six-foot high free-standing cut-outs, who move slowly around the writhing, formless mass at center stage:

À l’origine des choses, tout à l’origine, quand rien n’existaît, ni homme, ni bêtes, ni plantes, ni ciel, ni terre, rien, rien, rien. Dieu était et il s’appelait Nzamé. Et les trois qui sont Nzamé, nous les appelons Nzamé, Mébère et Nkwa. (At the beginning of everything, right at the beginning, when nothing existed, neither man, nor beasts, nor plants, nor sky, nor earth, nothing, nothing, nothing. God was and his name was Nzamé. And the three who are Nzamé, we call them Nzamé, Mébère and Nkwa.)

Stylized mountains appear behind them, and then clouds, a moon, and stars against a deep blue sky, painted on a frieze that moved in concert with the evolution of the narrative. Out of the impression of seething, primeval chaos, creatures and other abstract beings gradually take form: insects, seven-foot birds, monkeys, sorcerers, (N’guils), fetishists, and messengers of the gods:

Nzamé a fait toutes choses: le ciel, le soleil, la lune, les étoiles, les animaux, les plantes, tout… (Nzamé made all things: the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, the animals, the plants, everything…)

Two semi-human forms are revealed, as the first man and woman arise and perform an erotic “dance of desire,” and the other creatures join in. As the lights fade out, the “primal couple” is left alone, surrounded by nature:

Cet homme qui fut ici-bas le premier des hommes, notre père à tous, Nzamé le nomma Sékoumé, mais Dieu ne voulut pas le laisser seul. Il lui dit ‘Fais-toi une femme avec un arbre.’ Sékoumé se fit une femme, et elle marcha et il l’appela Mbongwé. (That man down there who was the first of men, the father of us all, Nzamé named him Sekoumé, but God did not want him to be left alone. He said to

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him, ‘use a tree to make yourself a woman.’ Sekoumé made himself a woman, and she walked and he called her Mbongwé). 236

The effect of this completely unprecedented ballet scenario was made all the more striking by the fact that not a single recognizable human figure was to be seen on stage; all the creatures, messengers and proto-humans were painted constructions or cutouts, either carried by dancers whom they entirely concealed or encased, or worn by dancers moving awkwardly on stilts. Léger had achieved his ambition to totally submerge the “human material” in the scenery; this time the dancers did not just merge with the decor, as they had in *Skating Rink*, they disappeared into it (fig. 76).

Léger’s logic for disguising the dancers originated in classical theatre. He argues in “The Spectacle”: “The mask dominates classical theatre, and the most primitive peoples use it as a means of creating spectacle. They realized…that on stage the human resemblance was a barrier to the lyric state, the state of astonishment.” He believed that genuine theatrical illusion could only be achieved by making the stage reality as different from the audience’s reality as possible, and he achieved this by effacing the humanity of the performers: “[The mask was devised] to make a break between the visual atmosphere of a room and that of the stage, to make the individual disappear in order to utilize the human material, to create fiction on the stage. The human material appeared, but it had the same spectacle value as the object and the décor.” 237 These words are important for an understanding of Léger’s practice as a scenic designer; if his purpose is truly “to create fiction on the stage,” it follows that the human performer must cede place to the object-performer, and that means art takes center stage.

Léger pursued his research for *Création*’s sets and costumes extremely seriously. He began preparations for masking his dancers by studying ceremonial masks in books on African sculpture, in the Musée d’Ethnographie, and in private collections, including that of art dealer Paul Guillaume, who had staged the first exhibition of African art in Paris, the highly influential “Exposition d’Art Nègre” at the Galerie Devambez in 1919.\(^{238}\) Plans to study at the British Museum came to nothing, but Léger filled sketchbooks with drawings of tribal masks (fig. 79) and designs using actual masks, (figs. 77, 78) which he later transformed into Cubist versions of African sculpture. Despite the depth of Léger’s research, he made no real attempt at ethnographic authenticity in his designs, and in fact this was not the point. Nor was he responsive to the masks’ magical qualities as Picasso had been in his African-influenced works years earlier. Léger was interested in the plastic potential of tribal material, its energy and life force, and he did not hesitate to adapt it to suit his purpose in creating a fully integrated aesthetic for the ballet that was “primitive” in appearance yet also recognizably modern in style.\(^{239}\) The flat, depthless field and pure, unmodulated colors; fragmented geometric forms; and abrupt juxtapositions of figurative and abstract motifs in the ballet’s designs identify its contemporaneity. The ballet’s primitivist aesthetic was dictated by its subject-matter; Léger’s “interest was directed toward the ‘primitive in modernity’, daily life in the ‘wilderness’ of the technological world.” \(^{240}\)

\(^{238}\) Rosenstock demonstrates that many of Léger’s costume designs can be sourced to illustrations in Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* (Munich, 1915), and Marius de Zayas’ *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (New York, 1916); 480.

\(^{239}\) Rosenstock, 482, argues that African art represented the same source of elemental human vitality that Léger found in vernacular entertainments like music-halls and skating-rinks.

A comparison of the two curtains—the rideau de scène or drop curtain and the back curtain—serves to illustrate the previous point. Various designs for the drop curtain (fig. 75) show its imagery to have been severely abstract and entirely flat, dominated by the three deities rendered in Cubist multiple-point perspective and a restricted palette of ochres, black, and blue for the suggestion of a sky behind the deities’ heads. Wedge-shaped segmented forms at the lower front and to the sides suggest the primal, uncreated state of the earth, and stylized clouds, moon and stars—the first entities made by Nzamé—occupy the top third of the curtain. This curtain’s purpose was to create a mood and prepare the audience for the spectacle to follow. It would have risen to reveal a more colorful backdrop (fig. 76) suggesting a noticeably more evolved world: the deities are now well upstage and less prominent, having changed places (presumably in the course of their creative endeavors), and are backed by sharp-edged mountains, shaded to suggest depth and space on earth. The clouds are higher and better formed and the moon, previously full, is new again, as befits the dawn of Creation. Overlapping side flats also give an impression of receding space, and parts of living creatures emerge from a mass of living matter center-stage. As the drop curtain rises, an abstract idea in the mind of God gives way to actualized reality in the world. The effect would have achieved Léger’s dearest wish, and captured the audience in pure astonishment.

Designs for birds, insects, messengers, fetish figures, N’guils and other creatures are stylistically consistent with the curtains, but on a smaller scale: abstract, fantastic, and surreal (fig. 80). The birds have dazzling plumage, but many of the other costumes use a palette of ochres with black and white. The humans’ costumes (which were also full-body disguises) are “a cross between primitive sculpture and calligraphic renderings of jazz-
age figures,” according to Judi Freeman. Surface patterns were meant to evoke African sculpture and ceramic objects. Léger was constantly seeking the “maximum scenic effect”, and wanted his deities to be mysterious and frightening. Darius Milhaud wrote: “Léger wanted to adapt primitive Negro art and paint the drop-curtain and the scenery with African divinities expressive of power and darkness. He was never satisfied that his sketches were terrifying enough.”

 Création’s African imagery has neither precedent nor afterlife in Léger’s painting; he abandoned ethnographic “primitivism” as subject matter once the ballet was finished. An affinity exists nonetheless between the aesthetic interest in human origins that Création exemplifies, and Léger’s own mechanistic art. They share a reductive aesthetic: a drive to return to and celebrate simplicity, purity, and an essential state of being. Léger’s machine aesthetic represents a valorization of fundamental forms that constitute the building blocks of more complex entities; he isolates and aestheticizes elemental parts of machines as well as human forms, which he treats as if they are machines. In doing so, he consciously advances a poetics of objects, of (quite literally) the “nuts and bolts” of how things work, which he articulates in his published writings. Léger’s industrial, as opposed to anthropological, primitivism implies no psychological complexity, emotional subtlety, or spiritual dimension; he glories in the pure objecthood of all things, including “the human element.” Form and function, color, shape and rhythm are employed for their essential natures, and valued, as is the human “primitive,” for their regenerative potential.

 In “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object Spectacle,” Léger writes that

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241 Freeman, 100.

242 Milhaud (1952), quoted in Rosenstock, 482; Häger, 190.
learning to appreciate the “the wheel…the circle…the ball, the sphere…the beautiful object with no other purpose than what it is,” is necessary in order to renew modern aesthetics, and indeed society itself. In doing so, he parallels the utopian aspirations of writers who sought a renewal of human culture in the art and civilization of non-Western countries like Africa.

The abstract motifs of Création’s décor are suggestive of African art, but they are stylized in the direction of Art Deco—the decorative style that this ballet, along with other “stereotypical reduction[s] of African art” at large in the culture was at least partly instrumental in generating. The choreography of mobile sculptures and scenic pieces (also carried by the dancers, adding to the confusion between set and performer) integrated with the set to create a total, kinetic, Cubist painting in four dimensions—a mechanomorphic vision of the creation of the world. Herein lies the expression of Léger’s apparently sublimated machine-age preoccupations; his characteristic mechanical and urban imagery was inappropriate for this ballet’s subject-matter, which demanded a fashionable Africanist aesthetic. Instead he mechanized the set and performers themselves, turning them into the gyrating components of a mechanical organism.

Léger further dramatized and modernized the performance with spectacular stage lighting that silhouetted everything in chiaroscuro: he and Cendrars had envisioned that “the lighting, which must always be kept in movement, will be discontinuous (a play between

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243 Léger, “The Spectacle,” 44.

244 Rosenstock, 483.
light and dark),” and Cyril Beaumont recalled the action “[taking] place in semi-
darkness,” with “an interesting play of light and shade.” Léger also looked back to
Picasso’s innovations. Pascale de Groote notes that Parade had set the precedent for
dancers forming “a unity with their costumes,” but in no other way did Picasso’s 1917
design approach the “moving, expressive totality,” or the dehumanization of the dancers
that Léger achieved with Création. Börlin’s choreography was equally abstract;
references to natural human movement were notably absent. André Levinson described it
as an “aberration, taking on living dancers to imitate the formula of exotic sculptures by
contorting themselves.”

The exotic, primitivist theme produced the inevitable comparisons once again with Sacre
du Printemps, but for different reasons than with Skating Rink. In fact Création
celebrated not sacrifice but birth—the presumed birth of western art and civilization in
Africa, and it spoke of a desire for a rebirth of society in Europe. The war was still only
four years over, and the memory of its human and cultural devastation was fresh. Cécile
Schenck identifies a contradiction in Création, which she situates in the ballet’s nostalgia
for a primitive, lost Eden; this, she argues, critiques the “entièrement mécanique et
proprement inexpressif” (“entirely mechanical and tidily inexpressive”) means of its
execution, a means inseparable from modernity. Similarly, Laura Rosenstock argues


246 Cyril Beaumont (1937), quoted in Häger, 191.

247 De Groote, 60.

248 Levinson (1923), quoted in Häger, 44.

that the popular perception of African freedom and spontaneity in his time contradicts the mechanized, dehumanized aesthetic with which Léger interpreted that continent’s art.\textsuperscript{250} These contradictions are undeniable, but they may be less contradictory than they appear. To be sure, Léger had a vision for societal rebirth, but it was a mechanical and not a nostalgic one: “We are at the end of a crisis. Let us try to act with newer, brand-new materials…we have found what we are competing with. We must renew the man-spectacle mechanically. We can make the materials themselves move, set them in action.”\textsuperscript{251} In spite of some superficial indications to the contrary, \textit{Création} heralded Léger’s brave new world of object-spectacle. It was his most perfect realization on stage of the performance of art.

In “The Spectacle”, Léger paid tribute to Rolf de Maré, “who was the first person in France to have the courage to agree to a spectacle where everything is done with machinery and the play of light, where no human silhouette is on the stage; and to Jean Börlin and his troupe, who are condemned to the role of moving scenery.”\textsuperscript{252} In truth, Börlin and the dancers had become frustrated with their subordinate role in the company’s ballets: “the dancer must cease to be the sandwich-man condemned to carry the great painters’ advertisement boards,” Börlin complained, (probably) unconsciously invoking \textit{Parade}, to Alexis Roland-Manuel, who composed \textit{Le Tournoi Singulier} for the Ballets Suédois in 1924.\textsuperscript{253} By now de Maré was well on the way to eliminating dancers

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{250} Rosenstock, 482.
\item \textsuperscript{251} Léger, “Spectacle,” 36.
\item \textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 41.
\item \textsuperscript{253} Jean Börlin (1924), quoted in Häger, 232.
\end{itemize}
and dancing from the ballet altogether. Thirteen months after Création, in December 1924, he almost succeeded with Picabia’s Dada anti-ballet Relâche, a production whose denial of most of ballet’s essential values sounded the demise of the Ballets Suédois. In June of the same year, Picasso’s Mercure at the Théâtre de Cigale reproduced some of Léger’s “moving scenery” stage techniques in a more minimalist idiom, with less public success. The tide of critical acceptance of this kind of ballet experimentalism was turning; there was a feeling that ballet’s partners in artistic synthesis had unfairly staged a coup. As Roland-Manuel warned: “By dint of welcoming so many strangers into its house, dance is now under threat of being evicted by those same painters, men of letters and musicians, guests whose insolence matches their ingratitude.”

It would not be long before the austere neo-classicism of Georges Balanchine, first for Diaghilev and then in America, reoriented the focus from the decor onto the dancer’s body, and banished the painters’ grandiose visions from the ballet stage.

Reciprocal effects of his stage experience on Léger’s painting may have been less far-reaching than in Picasso’s case, but in a sense he had been painting stage sets for years. Léger constructed his sets like his paintings, layering flats painted with geometric elements to create a shallow perspective that reproduced in reality the illusionistic surface/depth dialogue of two-dimensional works of art. His immediate postwar compositions—or at least, those that imply some sort of object-ground relationship—all have an artificial, constructed appearance; objects and human or humanoid figures coexist on a shallow stage as integral parts of a whole, unified by color and formal relations just as in theatrical decors. A series of Animated Landscapes (Paysages Animés)

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254 Alexis Roland-Manuel (1924?), quoted in ibid. 232.
from 1921 (fig. 81) prefigure the effect of Création’s backcloth, with its African gods in
a primeval landscape, in their statement of the relationship between the figures and their
settings. As a painter of Cubist landscapes and interiors, Léger was probably always more
interested, and hence more successful, in the construction of scenic space than Picasso
was. Figure compositions in domestic or industrial environments, such as Three Women
(Le Grand Déjeuner) (1921, fig. 82) are similar in effect, as are still lifes, for instance
Pear Compotier (1923). The monumental size of some of Léger’s canvases from these
years, together with the theatrical presentation of the figures, and the way they
“advance[s] strikingly into he viewer’s space” all bespeaks a theatrical sensibility at work
in the studio. 255

In these works all objects are of equal value, formally as well as emotionally; the “human
material” is hardly more important than the tables, chairs, animals, fruit, industrial
components, hunks of dead meat, or wall and floor designs. Human and inanimate
elements lose their individual identities and become equivalent as surface pattern. The
interchangeability of the woman’s breasts and the chair arms in Woman with a Cat
(1921), are a perfect instance of this process of objectifying and dehumanizing, reducing
all to pattern (although the cat exhibits more personality than its owner). The only
difference between these compositions and their animation in the theatre is the fourth
dimension—time and movement—which they imply, but lack in practice. Léger’s
painting succeeds in his stated aim of endowing the human, the object and the décor with

255 Katharina Schmidt, “Fernand Léger: the Monumental Figures and Mural Paintings of the 1920s,” in
Canto d’Amore, 324.
“the same spectacle value” visually, but, like Picasso, he knew that performance turned these elements into living spectacle, and recreated them as a new pictorial reality.256

After Création, Léger had finished with theatre for a time, as his interest in extending the capacities of performative art turned to the new medium of film, whose advanced technology appealed to his mechanical proclivities, as well as his populist sympathies. His next project was a film, Ballet Mécanique, which gave him the opportunity to explore another kind of pictorial reality altogether; to push his ideas further than he had been able to on stage, and to do it in a medium that opened up new opportunities for the mechanical transformation of the human.

Ballet Mécanique, 1924

Léger’s enthusiasm for film was longstanding. His fascination with Chaplin’s comedies has been mentioned; he also admired the films of French filmmaker Abel Gance, whose La Roue, 1923, influenced the rapid-cutting sequences in Ballet Mécanique. Léger worked with Marcel L’Hébier on L’Inhumaine, (released 1924, fig. 83), for the set of which he designed a mechanical laboratory; Jean Börlin and the Ballets Suédois also performed in several scenes. Léger directed Ballet Mécanique with assistance from the American filmmaker Dudley Murphy; the commissioned score by Georges Antheil was not used in the original film.

Ballet Mécanique (figs. 84, 85) is a montage of rhythmically moving everyday objects, as well as shapes, numbers and type, intercut with fragmented human content. It employs, states Felicia McCarren, “dance—or the idea of dance, especially without dancers—to

figure the notion of machinic modernity.”257 Repeating shots of madly gyrating kitchen equipment, wine bottles, artificial legs, Christmas baubles, shoes, hats, a tombola wheel, fairground rides, and machinery; shrinking, swelling and transforming circles and triangles; and switching words and numbers, alternate with disembodied opening and closing human eyes, lips and teeth viewed from unusual angles, marching feet, a woman on a swing, and a laundress climbing stairs—a shot repeated “to the point of exasperation,” as Léger explains in his essay on the film.258

In their mechanical dance, the inanimate objects are equivalent to the human elements; all are mechanisms together, sharing identical kinetic and plastic values. Léger employs repetition, fragmentation and close-up (“the only cinematic invention”), together with alternating speeds and intensities of focus to de-nature the object-actors as well as the human actors, defamiliarizing them and disorienting the audience.259 Commonplace gestures by human actors are edited to become clockwork routines devoid of any meaning beyond their own motion; all this effectively presents us with a new, unexpected version of reality. Thus, Léger captures the factor of surprise so vital to his concept of the spectacle. In giving objects a life of their own, Léger renders human agency irrelevant—except his own, as filmmaker, but this is perhaps meant to be invisible.


258 Léger, “Ballet Mécanique,” in Functions of Painting, 51.

259 Ibid., 50. Léger’s surprising claim perhaps reveals his own limited or cynical view of cinematic innovations.
Léger’s idea of “l’objet dans l’espace” is intrinsic to Ballet Mécanique. The film asserts the independence and individuality of “the beautiful object with no other purpose than what it is,” by presenting completely autonomous objects freed from the constraints of their usual contexts: the roles which give them meaning in everyday life, and yoke them to human use. As Léger asserts: “The contemporary event is the personality of the objects; they are coming more and more to the forefront. Man fades into the background and must direct their arrival…Objects have a plastic strength that nothing can disturb.” In his article “Ballet Mécanique”, Léger writes that concurrently with making the film in 1923 and 1924, he was doing “paintings in which the active elements were objects freed from all atmosphere, put into new relationships to each other.” The Mechanical Elements series. (fig. 68) fit this description. In these paintings, the artist draws attention to the mechanics of the composition with its interlocking components, and he constructs a kinetic impression through the rhythms of form and color. Léger prepares the way, in Ballet Mécanique, for a future where objects assume a dominant role, the human is reduced to a subsidiary, and dance is the movement of machines. As a film, Ballet Mécanique is the logical fulfillment of his machine aesthetic, being itself a mechanized product.

Francis Picabia mocked Léger’s cinematic activity for seeming to compete with his own production for the Ballets Suédois, Relâche, which included René Clair’s film Entr’Acte:

260 Cooper, Léger, x.

261 Léger, “The Spectacle,” 44.


“Now Léger has just finished a film with the help of Murphy and machines! They’ve discovered machines again! … Fernand Léger, you’re a fine painter, a great colorist, but you’re no intellectual, so why try to fool us?” Picabia’s tone, rude as it is, complements the film’s playful spirit, and its framing device, Léger’s Charlot Cubiste, conveys the same sense. The Chaplin puppet (whose French nickname, Charlot, puns on the name of the film’s producer, André Charlot) deconstructs and reassembles itself, its parts somersaulting in a graceful dance (fig. 84). Thus Charlot is in one respect the film’s ideal master of ceremonies: a film character himself, and the automaton-clown, whose uninhibited mechanical body expresses the ludic principle Léger’s film applies to objects. However, the Chaplin character, used in this context, embodies a contradiction of which Léger was presumably oblivious: Chaplin’s screen persona, the Little Tramp, is an emblem of human pathos—an unlikely mascot for a film glorifying objects.

Abel Gance reportedly once said: “when you find yourself with a completed film, you are still far from having realized your dream.” Léger continually re-edited Ballet Mécanique, and several different versions exist (including one with hand-colored scenes), so that it is impossible to identify an original. This too, as Christian Viviani argues, is in keeping with the playful, “farceur” (“practical joker”) spirit of the film, and indeed with its celebration of mechanical reproduction and the proliferation of objects.

264 Francis Picabia, quoted in Delia Ciuha and Raphaël Bouvier, editors, Fernand Léger (Fondation Beyeler. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 86.


Having succeeded in his project to create a fully dehumanized plastic spectacle, Léger was far from ready to stop. According to Swedish dance and art historian Bengt Häger, Léger was “profoundly influenced” for many years to come by his collaboration with the Ballets Suédois, a claim that merits further investigation.\footnote{Häger, 43.} Certainly, his experience designing for a monumental space in the theatre, organizing the diverse elements of backdrop, flats, proscenium and costumed dancers into a coherent visual composition, gave Léger confidence to tackle the monumental canvases and mural paintings he turned to in the 1920s. The conception and construction of theatrical architecture also had a positive impact on his painting for actual architecture; what Christopher Green refers to as his “deepened awareness of the relationship between painting and architecture as a harmonious relationship.”\footnote{Christopher Green, \textit{Fernand Léger and the Avant-Garde} (1976), 303, quoted in Schmidt, 327. Léger later developed a close relationship with Le Corbusier that led to several large-scale commissions on buildings.} Furthermore, having successfully achieved his goal of astonishing the viewer on stage by means of the contrast and juxtaposition in parallel of colors, forms and images, Léger understood how to achieve this in his art. He was able to intensify the impact of many of his later paintings by applying to them the principles he had developed in stage design. In a larger context, claims Hartwig Fischer, his stage experience was instrumental in refining Léger’s ideas about the possibility of collaboration between artists of different kinds, including architects, to produce a “complete and social [public] work of art”\footnote{Fischer, 242.} that would lead to a better society, such as he envisaged in “The Spectacle”:

\section*{Notes}
267 Häger, 43.
268 Christopher Green, \textit{Fernand Léger and the Avant-Garde} (1976), 303, quoted in Schmidt, 327. Léger later developed a close relationship with Le Corbusier that led to several large-scale commissions on buildings.
269 Fischer, 242.
The visual world of a large modern city, that vast spectacle…is badly orchestrated… If the spectacle offers intensity, a street, a city, a factory ought to offer an obvious plastic serenity…Let’s organize exterior life in its domain: form, color, light….Color and light have a social function, an essential function…a psychological value; [their] moral influence can be considerable. A beautiful and calm environment.\textsuperscript{270}

Léger’s work with de Maré and Börlin informs his extensive writings and his teaching, in both of which he expounded his theories on painting, dance, theatre, film and the plastic arts. Léger continued to work in film and theatre, collaborating again with de Maré on Serge Lifar’s ballet \textit{David Triumphant} in 1936, and restaging the Ballet Russes’ \textit{Le Pas d’Acier} (originally designed by Georgi Yakulov) in 1948. Léger’s later designs, such as that for Milhaud’s \textit{Bolivar} for the Paris Opéra, 1950, are not the all-embracing plastic and visual inventions he conceived for the Ballets Suédois, but decorative transfers of his paintings to the backdrop and wings. He never again achieved on stage the audacity or the breathtaking visual impact of either \textit{Skating Rink} or \textit{Le Création du Monde}, although he went on to create equally striking works of (mainly public) art. Léger’s later work asserted a more humane vision for art and society, but in the stage designs he created for the Ballets Suédois in 1922-23 and in his foray into cinema in 1924, Léger unequivocally achieved the triumph of the object, and probably the ultimate expression on the dance stage of his own invention, the object-spectacle.

\textsuperscript{270} Léger, “The Spectacle,” (1924), 46.
Conclusion: the Performance of Art

In the scholarship on Picasso, Léger, and their scenic design for dance productions, a suggestive conjunction has gone overlooked. The two artists produced their last ballets within the same year—eight months apart, in fact—in Paris: Léger’s *La Création du Monde* premiered on October 25, 1923, at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées; and Picasso’s *Mercure* opened on 15 June, 1924, at the Théâtre de la Cigale, a few miles away in Montmartre. It is reasonable to assume that in the highly energized cultural environment of 1920s Paris, these two provocative theatrical events occurring so close together in time and space may have been associated in the public consciousness. Both were performed by dance ensembles that were self-proclaimed leaders of the avant-garde; both featured scores by leading modernist composers (Milhaud and Satie); both were set by star dancer-choreographers (Börlin and Massine) known for their unconventional approaches; and both were vehicles for the visual inventions of two of the most celebrated modernist painters in Europe.

Their similarity did not end there. Both works, hardly ballets by conventional standards, freely interpreted mythological subject-matter—African and Greek—in highly idiosyncratic, fantastical ways that communicated more about their artist-designers’ styles and preoccupations than about the ballets’ ostensible themes. Finally, both took to extremes the dehumanization of the dancer—the subjugation of the human element to the scenery and costumes. Both productions announced, in ringing terms, the ascendancy of art as performer.
Picasso may well have seen *La Creation du Monde*; the Ballets Suédois’ seasons were artistic events that attracted a fashionable and avant-garde crowd. Richardson tells us that Picasso and Olga both attended the opening night of *Skating Rink*, “the most original, startling and modernist décor since *Parade*” but that Picasso’s verbal response to Léger’s brilliant spectacle was characteristically cryptic: “his Cubism is not my Cubism.” We do not know whether or not he saw *Création*. Whether or not he borrowed from Léger the idea of dancers as “moving scenery” is therefore also unknown, as evidence is lacking of either artist commenting publicly on the other’s stage work. Nor have I found mention by any commentator on the conjunction of the two ballets, which is striking for several reasons. Picasso’s giant cutouts of the Three Graces, Cerberus, Persephone and other figures of classical myth parallel Léger’s oversized African deities and creatures, also cutouts, and also carried by dancers who disappeared behind them. Picasso did not go as far as Léger in making his performers part of an all-enveloping, mobile décor; his backdrops and his whole design were minimalist and his cutouts autonomous by comparison. Moreover they were static and posed, whereas Léger’s were mobile. However, if *Création* was the first instance of such figures being used onstage, *Mercure* was the second. In a sense these two productions were a high water mark of art and artifice in dance theatre; thereafter the tide began turning back toward greater naturalism, and the human body, rather than the décor, became once more the primary vehicle of artistic expression.

Although the close geographical and temporal concurrence of Picasso’s and Léger’s last ballets throws them into joint focus and highlights their common ground, these two works

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271 Richardson, vol. 3, 212.
are equally instructive for what their differences reveal about the essential difference between the two artists. Despite their similarities, they reveal Picasso as more of a humanist, and Léger more as a devotee of the machine. Whereas Léger reduced his “human material” to unrecognizable mechanical parts, Picasso kept a reference to the human body in the cutouts, as well as the actual costumed bodies, of Mercure’s tableaux vivants. Léger wanted to erase the body in favor of the machine, which was his prime referent in Création, notwithstanding the work’s “primitive” vivacity. Picasso conducted an experiment, with the theatre as his laboratory: would an audience accept his Graces as real bodies, represented in a Cubist idiom? They were goddesses, after all, not humans, so there was logic in representing them non-naturalistically. In one scene, he also made the Graces male dancers in drag, playfully reversing the nineteenth-century convention of the female dancer “en travestie” impersonating male roles, and reviving the even older one of men playing women in drama. Picasso thus introduced a very human theme of gender indeterminacy into Mercure; such a consideration was irrelevant to Léger, as his dancers (with the exception of the First Man and Woman) were all genderless, hidden behind costumes and set pieces. However, Picasso’s dehumanized décor perversely insists on its foundation in humanity; Léger’s firmly rejects it, replacing human spectacle with “object-spectacle.”

A related contrast between the two is also apparent in the overall visual concept of the ballets. Picasso’s is flexible and invites the audience’s imaginative participation, whereas Léger’s is fixed, and refuses it. Picasso’s minimal but suggestive décor plays to the audience’s sense of humor and contingency, giving each viewer agency to collaborate, and complete the spectacle’s meaning. Kandinsky proposed just such an interaction
between viewer and stage event in his formulation of how the Gesamtkunstwerk would
operate, opening the way for a new concept of audience. Through the operation of the
viewer’s subjectivity, he or she can discover the marvelous, in Surrealist terms—which,
however expressed, has always been the purpose of theatre. Breton and Aragon
recognized this quality in Mercure, hence their admiration for Picasso’s part in it.

Léger, on the other hand, leaves nothing to chance, or to the viewer. He controls every
aspect of the scenic design, prescribing the arrangement of the set and even determining
the dancers’ stage placement with mechanical precision, in order to guide the audience
response: to “cross the footlights” and “conquer” the viewers, in his words. By filling the
spectators’ senses with so much detail of color, form, movement, and sound, and
encompassing the entire stage, backdrop, wings, proscenium, and curtain with his total
design, Léger leaves no space for their imaginations. He offers not collaboration but
ravishment; we have no chance to discover the marvelous for ourselves, it is presented to
us ready-made. Like much of Bakst’s décor, Léger’s for Création is all embracing and
complete in itself, and leads the viewer nowhere beyond its own reality. The difference
between the two artists’ scenic designs, therefore, is that between the human and the
machine: one admits infinite possibility; the other, once programmed, admits only its own
program. Audiences mainly received Création with enthusiasm, but were puzzled and
irritated by Mercure. The former’s spectacular display of strident color and pulsating
movement, its fashionable African theme, and Milhaud’s commanding score were pure
entertainment, whereas the latter’s minimalist aesthetic, from its abstract sets and frozen
tableaux to Satie’s understated rhythms, was geared to appeal solely to initiates of the
avant-garde.
It is tempting to regard *Mercure* as Picasso’s reply to Léger: an assertion of humane values against mechanized ones, and the open-ended possibilities of the imagination against the predetermined ones of the machine. *Mercure* paradoxically affirms humanity while seeming to deny it, just as Cubism asserts the tangible existence of reality while apparently fragmenting and abstracting it. Picasso’s aesthetic is subtle and reflexive while Léger’s is spectacular and extroverted, and both have a legacy in later twentieth-century dance theatre and its design, although nothing exactly like either was produced again. Apart from the Ballets Suédois’ last piece, *Relâche*, and a few late Ballets Russes works, it would be many years before visual artists regained such an uninhibited role in design for dance performance.

The goal of artistic synthesis in the theatre presupposed the involvement of artists from the beginning, and artists taking up scenic design in the 1910s and 20s may be regarded as an expression of modernism’s expanded ambition for the potential of art. An important reason why artists like Picasso and Léger rose to the challenge of working in a new and untried context was because they recognized theatre as a field of avant-garde experimentation with enormous potential for their own practice. They could use the stage as a laboratory or rehearsal space for ideas from their studio work that then fed back into that work and rejuvenated it. Along with artists in other disciplines, they also wanted to practice a more synthetic art, and theatre presented an ideal opportunity; collaboration with other artists—dancers, choreographers, composers, writers—enriched their ideas, and contributed to the prevailing view of art’s potential to be more inclusive, audacious, and wide-ranging than in previous times. In addition, such attitudes may be construed as a critique of the isolationism of traditional academic art and of the entrenched positions...
of its hierarchies; a critique that was at the heart of the modernist project. More
democratic, and at the same time idealistic notions of what art could be and could do had
been evolving since the late nineteenth century. A belief—albeit a theoretical one—in
art’s potential to change society for the better, and prepare it to face a rapidly
transforming future by being more broadly engaged with real life, was a defining feature
of early twentieth century aesthetic culture; to achieve such goals, new forms of art were
needed, and artists had to be open-minded and ready to embrace them.

A consequence of artists’ engagement with dance theatre was that art itself became a
performer, often displacing the human performers with whom it had set out to
collaborate. This trend in dance developed in parallel with Futurist and Dada
performance, and shared many of their characteristics. It was the inevitable result of the
aspiration for a total artwork, and it led to the creation of scenic spectacles where the
artistic vision of the total event, to paraphrase Berghaus, replaced the interpretation of a
dramatic or choreographic text as the goal of the performance.272 The reasons why the
ballets discussed in the preceding chapters were products of this brief historical moment
are found partly in the evolution of an aesthetics of performance outlined in chapter 1,
and partly in other historical factors. They were to some extent products of a postwar
effusion of the arts, which sought to challenge the austerity and heal the trauma of the
Great War, and which looked forward optimistically to a bright future in a new, modern
society. They were the offspring, as well, of a union between visual art, theatre, and
dance, under the banner of the Gesamtkunstwerk, at exceptionally transformative
moments in the development of all three arts. This was no accidental meeting, but a

272 Berghaus, 46. See chapter one, n.3.
product of the trajectory of the modernist movement, and its result was multifaceted artistic expressions like the dance works we have discussed.

By the 1930s, however, ambitions for the interrelation of the arts in a theatrical medium had begun to dissipate, to be replaced by a move toward strengthening the specificity, or “purity,” of individual artforms within their own media.\footnote{Koss, xxv-xxvi.} In dance, this began with a renewed emphasis on the dancer’s body as the primary locus of expression, and a concomitant de-emphasis on theatrical effect achieved through stage design. We have already noted a resistance to the dominance of design by commentators such as Alexis Roland-Manuel in 1924; the composer’s criticism indicates the rise of a conviction, certainly among dance practitioners, that the submission of both the performing body and the choreographer’s invention had gone far enough, and that a “call to order” was due in dance, similar to that which had occurred in visual art, music and literature. The instigation of a return to ballet neoclassicism was the work of George Balanchine, Diaghilev’s last choreographer and the founder of modern ballet in the U.S.A. Balanchine emphasized classical technique, but gave it a modern force and directness. He stripped away the narrative and heavy scenic apparatus of nineteenth century Russian Imperial ballet, as well as the “lifestyle” topicality and extraneous visual material of much recent dance. His methods revolutionized ballet for the twentieth century and were adopted by choreographers internationally, notably Serge Lifar, Roland Petit and Kenneth Macmillan.

Artistic collaboration in the theatre did not die, however, even if it did retreat into a preoccupation with aesthetic “purity” and medium specificity for a time. Picasso, Léger,
and many other artists including Joan Miró, André Derain, André Masson, Isamu Noguchi, and Salvador Dali continued to design for dance, drama, and opera, but their contributions were more genuinely collaborative and less overwhelming than the avant-garde productions of the immediate post World War I period. The legacy of the theatrical art-performances of that era includes experimental performance collaborations in the 1950s and 60s involving, among many others, artists Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, performance artist Allan Kaprow, choreographer Merce Cunningham, and composer John Cage. Later twentieth century phenomena such as Happenings, Performance Art and Fluxus are descended from the collaborative ventures and scenic innovations of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois, as well as from Dada and Futurist performance. The creation of a total visual effect of “art in movement” onstage, where the human element is subsumed by the artist’s vision and the choreography makes no reference to the body’s limits, has also survived. Since the 1940s, the Nikolais Dance Theater founded by Alwin Nikolais, in the U.S.A. and in France, has produced abstract dance theatre in which dancers merge with lighting, music and objects to create a total environment of which they are only a “de-centered” part; Bengt Häger traces the origins of their work to Léger’s productions for the Ballets Suédois. More recently, Julie Taymor’s The Lion King invites direct comparison with Léger’s Création du Monde in its African theme and its use of dancers whose human status is transformed (rather than disguised) inside oversized animal puppets and pieces of scenery which function as both

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274 Häger, 42.
performing costumes and performing objects. A dominant musical score and spectacular lighting complete the synthetic effect. Given the subject matter, and Taymor’s history of using animated puppets and other objects in her stage spectacles, a debt to both Léger and Picasso seems intuitive: she may be the most direct contemporary heir to their theatrical innovations.

The experimental creations of artists with dance companies discussed here occupied a relatively brief period, but one which was productive in diverse ways for the subsequent fortunes of both artforms. As well as a characteristic expression of modernism in its time, we may regard it as a forecast of the future, in which the boundaries between artforms have increasingly dissolved, and much art aspires to be in some sense performative.

275 At least one writer has noticed the connection, but John Bell, in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects* (MIT Press, 2001), 9, misplaces the emphasis, in my view, in referring to *Création du Monde* as merely “an intriguing predecessor” to *The Lion King*. 
Bibliography


Illustrations to Chapter 2

All works of art, excluding photographs, are by Pablo Picasso unless otherwise indicated

Fig. 1. *Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905. Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Chester Dale collection.

Fig. 2. *At the Lapin Agile*, 1905. Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Fig. 3. Olga, Picasso and Cocteau, Rome, 1917. Photograph. Musée Picasso, Paris.

Fig. 4. Caricature of Massine, Bakst and Diaghilev in Rome, 1917. Green ink. Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris.
Fig. 5. Curtain for *Parade*, 1917. Tempera on canvas. Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne, Paris.

Fig. 6. Antoine Watteau, *The Delights of Life*, c.1717-18. Oil on canvas. Wallace Collection, London.
Fig. 7. *Majorcan Woman*, 1905. Gouache on cardboard. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

Fig. 8. *Family of Acrobats with Monkey*, 1905. Watercolor. Göteborg Museum of Art, Sweden.
Fig. 9. *At the Circus*. 1905. Drypoint. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 10. Achille Vianelli. *Taverna*, early 19th century. Ink and wash drawing. Present location unknown.
Fig. 11. *Parade*: study for curtain, with an acrobat “unhooking” a sun, 1917. Watercolor and pencil. Musée Picasso, Paris.

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All works of art, excluding photographs, are by Pablo Picasso unless otherwise indicated

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All works of art, excluding photographs, are by Fernand Léger unless otherwise indicated.

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