



EXPORTING RUSSIA: DIAGHILEV'S BEGINNINGS

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“The dream, the purpose of my life is to work creatively in the realm of the arts”
“It is only success, my friend, that redeems everything and covers up everything”

1. A Boy from Perm

- Born in St Petersburg but brought up in distant Perm, where he led a privileged life in an aristocratic family
- After his father's bankruptcy, he moves with his family to St Petersburg and studies law at the university
- Relies where he can on aristocratic privilege but also learns to be resilient in adversity
- His first artistic circle included Alexander Benois, Water Nouvel, Dmitry Filosofov; beyond this core were other artists, including Konstantin Somov and Leon Bakst
- Travels around Europe, makes a pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear Wagner's operas
- Dreams of becoming a composer, but brought back down to earth by Rimsky-Korsakov

2. “Mir iskusstva” – “The World of Art”

- Begins buying art in Europe
- Finds powerful patrons in Savva Mamontov and Princess Tenisheva (artistic colonies of Abramtsevo and Talashkino)
- Mounts the largest exhibition of non-Russian art in Russia (English and German watercolours) singlehandedly, and even writes a review
- Starts publishing a journal *The World of Art* which distinguishes itself by its emphasis on new, non-realist trends, and also for its quality of printing
- Altercation with Vladimir Stasov, leading promoter of realist and socially-conscious art; this causes a scandal, and sponsors pull out but the journal still makes a great impact
- Main trends: neo-nationalism, historicism, international contemporary art
- The journal finally folds, leaving him in debt – he has to sell part of his own art collection

3. Imperial Theatres

- Through one of the “World of Art” painters, Alexander Serov, Diaghilev finds patronage from the Court
- Is given a job at the Imperial Theatres to edit the annual
- Begins work on a production of Delibes' ballet *Sylvia* (the passion for the ballet genre originates with Nouvel rather than Diaghilev)



- Nouvel in 1897: “I think ballet has a great future ahead of it, but of course not in the form in which it exists at present. Our decadent aesthetic and sensual demands can’t be satisfied by the ideals of plasticity and beauty of movement that existed thirty years ago. We must make it a vehicle for our tender, refined, morbid feelings, sensations and aspirations. We must make it sensual par excellence, but sensual aesthetically and, if you like, symbolically. That vague, inexpressible, elusive feeling, to which modern literature is trying to give voice, obeying the clamorous demands of the modern spirit, must find, and in all likelihood will find, its realisation in ballet”
- Diaghilev loses the job due to power struggles around *Sylvia*

4. From St Petersburg to Paris

- Diaghilev’s greatest success in his homeland was an exhibition of Russian portraits which he himself sourced from the provinces
- He became a specialist in this area and even wrote a book about it
- In 1905 the exhibition was opened by the Tsar: two centuries of Russian portraiture
- In the midst of a revolution, writes the article “An Hour of Reckoning”:
“The end was here in front of me. Remote, boarded-up family estates, palaces frightening in their dead grandeur... we are living in a terrifying era of upheaval; we must give up our lives for the resurgence of a renewed culture... This is what history teaches us, and aesthetics confirms...”
- “You can now do one of only two things: either go out into the town square and give yourself up to every momentary madness... or sit it out in your study, cut off from life. ...I like town squares, but only in opera or in a small Italian town... but I’m not a ‘study man’ either ”.
- Diaghilev moves to Paris and together with Benois and Bakst mounts an exhibition of Russian art there: 12 rooms and 750 works. The focus is on original “new” artists like Vrubel, Larionov, Goncharova, Sudeikin

5. The Russian Concerts of 1907

- Diaghilev emphasises on the “nationalist” style rather than on the more cosmopolitan Tchaikovsky: highlights composers of The Five (a.k.a. the Mighty Handful)
- Makes useful connections with sympathetic critics: Calvocoressi, Astruc
- Emphasis on strong personalities and potential international celebrities: the bass Fyodor Chaliapin, the composers Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov and Scriabin
- Success, scandal and financial losses

6. *Boris Godunov* at the Opéra

- Fulfilled two goals at once: first, strengthening the success of Russian nationalist music in Paris by staging its supreme operatic masterpiece, Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*
- And second, capitalizing on Chaliapin’s extraordinary success
- Diaghilev essentially produced his own version of the opera by cutting and re-shaping it: to assist a non-Russian audience with an opera sung in Russian
- Emphasis on the visual: stunning sets and costumes by Golovin, one of the “World of Art” painters
- The problems of exporting opera: language and prohibitive costs
- Wild emotions and vivid exotic colour: both reinforcing and reshaping Western stereotypes of “Russianness”