

## Conference Paper

# 'We are not Exiles, we are Messengers': George Riabov and his Collection of Russian Theatre Design (USA)

**Alla Rosendfeld**

Ph. D, art historian, curator and art expert, Research Consultant at the Merrill C. Berman Collection of Early 20th Century Avant-Garde and Graphic Design

**Abstract**

This article is devoted to the history of George Riabov's collection of Russian art. Among art collections outside of Russia, the George Riabov Collection of Russian Art is unique due to its scope. It includes icons from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, graphic arts and sculpture from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, as well as 'lubki', posters and illustrated books from the early 1900s to the 1930s, nonconformist art of the former Soviet Union from the 1960s–1970s, and the works of Russian émigré artists. Consisting of important works of Russian art across the centuries, the Riabov Collection also features some major examples of stage and costume designs for theater, ballet, and opera created by the early twentieth-century artists. In 1990, Riabov donated his vast collection to The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (USA). The article traces the history of the Riabov collection and also places a number of important costume and stage designs in the collection in the context of the development of Russian theatrical design in pre- and post-revolutionary era.

**Keywords:** Riabov collection, Russian art, theater design, émigré artists, World of Art, Ballets Russes, art collecting

## 1. Introduction

George Riabov (1924–2013) formed his collection of Russian art over a period of almost fifty years. It consists of approximately one thousand works and reflects the development of Russian art from the fifteenth century until the 1990s. Among art collections outside of Russia, the George Riabov Collection of Russian Art is unique due to its scope; it includes icons from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, graphic arts and sculpture from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, as well as 'lubki' (popular folk prints), posters and illustrated books from the early 1900s to the 1930s, nonconformist art of the former Soviet Union from the 1960s–1970s, and the works of Russian émigré artists. In 1990, Riabov donated his vast collection to The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art

Corresponding Author:  
Alla Rosendfeld  
alla.rosendfeld@gmail.com

Published: 25 August 2020

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

© Alla Rosendfeld. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Questions of Expertise in Culture, Arts and Design Conference Committee.



OPEN ACCESS

Museum at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (USA). He also donated eight thousand books on Russian culture to the university's library.

At that period, Riabov introduced Dr. Norton Dodge, a well-known American collector of Soviet nonconformist art, to Philip Dennis Cate, then the director of The Zimmerli Art Museum and persuaded Dodge and his wife Nancy to permanently transfer his collection to Rutgers University, thus facilitating the creation of an influential center of Russian art at Rutgers. From 1992 to 2006, Dr. Alla Rosenfeld was the curator of the George Riabov Collection of Russian Art as well as of The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers.

## 2. Discussion

One important focus of The George Riabov Collection is theater, opera, and ballet stage and costume design by major Russian artists of the early and mid-twentieth century. Characteristic of its outstanding artistic value, this part of the Riabov Collection features works of artists who determined the development of the main stylistic directions of theater design. In 2003, the extensive Riabov's sub-collection of Russian theatre design at the Zimmerli Art Museum replenished with another important acquisition—a collection of rare catalogues, theatre programs and books, as well as archival materials related to Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* (The Herbert D. and Ruth Schimmel Gift of Ballets Russes-Related Materials).

Among the collection highlights are costume and stage designs by Alexandre Benois(1870–1960), Léon Bakst (1866–1924), Konstantin Korovin(1861–1939), and Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947). Although the works of artists such as Benois, Serge Sudeikine (1882–1946) and Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)are well known in Russia, the later period of their artistic careers abroad was not sufficiently studied in Russia. The Riabov Collection also includes works produced by a number of artists of Russian background, who have been living in the West for a long time and are little known to many Russian viewers (Dmitri Bouchene, Eugene Dunkel, Nikolai Remizov, Vladimir Shatalov, and Vladimir Odínokov).

Similar to many other Russians, Riabov's family had to emigrate from Russia after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. As N. A. Struve wrote: 'Russian emigration, voluntary or forced, happened due to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and the subsequent five-year Civil War. In terms of its quantity, inclusion of different social classes and

its duration — seventy centuries, as well as its political significance and rich cultural heritage, Russian emigration is a unique historical phenomenon. '[1]

George Riabov was born in the city of Torun, Poland, in 1924. In 1930-1944 he studied in Polish and German schools in Torun. Recalling his childhood and adolescence, spent with his parents, Russian emigrants Vasily and Emilia Riabov, George Riabov wrote:

Patriotism has always been a part of my upbringing, and it is always based on three grounds: the Christian faith of my parents, the veneration of ancestors and the love of Russian culture. No nation could be great without these three ageless truths. Since childhood, I was inspired by the beauty of church hymns, icon painting and nature...I was able to find this beauty in the gothic churches of Polish city of Torun — the city of an astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), in the forests and fields. I am grateful to my father for teaching me to love nature and to love all the manifestations of culture endlessly, especially Russian literature. I am grateful to my mother for sharing her deep understanding of art with me, for visiting our city museum and galleries together, buying books on art and for creating the special atmosphere of beauty at home. My parents constantly encouraged my activities on a long and difficult journey as an art collector. [2]

Riabov started collecting works of Russian artists since 1937. It was at the Day of Russian Culture, dedicated to the centenary of the death of A. S. Pushkin, when Riabov bought an artwork by Ivan Bilibin at the library of the Russian church in Torun. The art collector was not guided by economic motivation, he had no aim to invest in art and make a profit. Riabov invested all his rather modest savings in his collection. He collected the pieces that attracted his attention, or the ones he could afford, or the artworks that Russian artists living abroad gifted him personally. The process of collecting Russian art abroad provided him, the Russian, who by the will of fate found himself living in a foreign country, with the sense of involvement and love for Russian culture, and his uninterrupted connection with it. In the beginning of his art collecting, Riabov never imagined to what extent he would become involved in it. He selected artworks for his collection by himself and studied artists' biographies to become versed in art. Art collecting became an extremely important part of his life, and Riabov wished to become an expert in Russian art.

Riabov combined his art collecting activities with studies at the university in Germany, and later in the USA. In 1946–1949, he studied art history at Munich University and

worked as a translator for the United Nations Administration for Assistance and Rehabilitation and for the International Refugee Organization. Having received a scholarship from the International Refugee Organization and Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, George Riabov emigrated to the US in 1949. In 1951, he received a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree in 1952. At that period, Riabov served as president of the St Vladimir Russian Orthodox Youth Organization. He was also doing translations from Russian, Polish and German for the American Research Publishing Service at the US Department of State in Washington. In 1955, Riabov started working as an archivist and translator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As a guide-translator, he worked with ballet troupes of the Moscow Bolshoi Theater and Leningrad Ballet Theater named after Kirov, as well as with many Russian diplomats, government officials, famous artists and writers. At the same time, Riabov also organized art-history focused trips to Russia for representatives of American museums. The exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art, Huntington Hartford Collection in New York in 1967 was one of the most significant exhibitions organized by Riabov. It presented Russian art from the fifteenth century to present.

Among other exhibitions organized by George Riabov: Russian Icons in the New York Art Gallery A la Vielle Russie, which included the artworks from his collection (1962); Sergey Sudeikin at the Nikoff Gallery in New York, which also included works from the Riabov collection (1964). In 1964, Riabov also conducted research and translations for the exhibition *Architecture without Architects* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1967, he organized the exhibitions *Russian Portrait* and *Russian Landscape* at the Nikoff Gallery, which included works from his collection.

In 1997, an exhibition of Russian theater design drawn from The George Riabov Collection was shown at the Research Museum of the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg.

The costume designs included in the Riabov Collection are highly diverse, ranging from Russian folk art-inspired works created by Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962) and Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947) to Constructivist costume designs by Alexandra Exter (1882–1949) and Anatolii Petritsky (1895–1964). The stage designs in the Riabov Collection are similarly varied, reflecting the evolution from decorative, painterly designs, as seen in the works of Bakst and Benois, to more geometric and abstracted works such as those by Soudeikine and Exter.

The flourishing of Russian theatrical design began in the 1880s, after Savva Ivanovich Mamontov (1841–1918), a Moscow railway magnate and millionaire passionately interested in opera, founded his own private opera house at his estate at Abramtsevo, just outside of Moscow. In 1882 the state monopoly on entertainment events, which existed

since the time of Nicholas I, was abolished. In January 1885, the Korotkov Theater in Moscow opened with the premiere of “The Mermaid” by the composer Alexander Dargomyzhsky(1813–1869). The theatre was named after its director, but it went down in history as the Moscow Private Russian Opera (Mamontov’s Opera). It promoted the creative work of leading figures in musical art and affirmed new principles in theatrical design.

In the years that followed, Mamontov invited many of the leading Russian painters of the day, including Victor Vasnetsov, Valentin Serov, Vasily Polenov, and Mikhail Vrubel to create stage sets and costumes. Indeed, painters were central to the realization of Mamontov’s theatrical productions, often playing a role akin to that of the stage director or playwright.

Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939) began his career as a theatre artist in 1885, creating costumes and scenery for the productions of the Mamontov’s Moscow private opera. Throughout the 1890s, Korovin designed such productions as “Sadko”, “Khovashchina”, and “Prince Igor”. Korovin was especially impressed by the national landscape and village life of Russia; the scenes from the “Khovashchina”, inspired by Russian folklore, occupy a prominent place among his other works at the Riabov Collection.

The pioneering endeavors in theatre design initiated at the Mamontov opera were continued by a group of painters and writers associated with the cultural impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929) and known as the “Mir iskusstva” (The World of Art). Its members had a united goal of synthesizing the visual and performing arts. The World of Art artists such as Bakst, Benois, Ivan Bilibin, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and Roerich, made important contributions to the modernization of theatrical arts in Russia. Their most successful designs were commissioned by Diaghilev for his famed Paris seasons of Russian opera and ballet, the Ballets Russes (1908–1929), the landmark undertaking that breathed new life into European ballet as well as established the foundations of a new era in Western theater, opera, and dance. Shown on the stages of Paris and London, ballet performances of Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and Vaslav Nijinsky, with the designs of Benois, Bakst, and Korovin, made a real sensation.

Alexander Benois, one of the founders and ideologists of the World of Art, was a brilliant connoisseur of music and theatre. A man of many talents and interests, Benois was not only an artist but also a theoretician, historian, writer, critic and set designer. In the thirty years that he lived outside of Russia—in 1926, he moved to Paris, where he spent the rest of his life—Benois designed sets and costumes for many theatrical productions in Europe and the United States. Among his works in the Riabov Collection are designs for the ballet “Le Pavillon d’Armide” (1909), which was presented as part of

the Ballets Russes' first season in Paris, designs for Igor Stravinsky's (1882–1971) ballet "Petrouchka", and sets for a staged version of Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821–1888) novel, "The Idiot," commissioned in 1924 by Ida Rubinstein.

In 1909, Leon Bakst, another founding member of the World of Art and an active contributor to its journal, became Diaghilev's most valued collaborator, designing two to three productions every year. The Riabov Collection includes Bakst's stage design for the ballet "Le Dieu Bleu" (The Blue God), performed in the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in 1913. The ballet was staged by Michael Fokine to the music of Reynaldo Hahn (libretto by Jean Cocteau and Frédéric de Madrazo, based on an ancient Indian legend). The costumes of this ballet, as well as its choreography were inspired by the Siamese dance, while its stage sets represented stylized versions of ancient Indian temples. Bakst's scenery design from the Riabov Collection depicts an ancient Indian temple at the foot of a rock. The slopes of the rock are decorated with sacred images and entwined with large snakes, while giant turtles doze by the water below. On the left, a bright blue sky, strewn with stars, is seen in the lumen, against the background of which a golden openwork lattice looms, separating the sanctuary from the Ganges valley. This piece of Bakst's scenery is the masterpiece and one of the highlights of the Riabov Collection.

The work of Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957) is also well represented in the Riabov Collection. Costumes and stage designs for the operas "Boris Godunov", "Khovanshchina", and "Prince Igor", as well as for the 1926 cabaret revue "The Music is Coming" are of special note. Having started working at the theatre of Vera Komissarzhevskaya and at the "Antichnyi" (Ancient) Theatre of Nikolai Evreinov in St. Petersburg in 1907–1908, over the next five years, Dobuzhinsky designed sets for fifteen of Konstantin Stanislavsky's productions at the Moscow Art Theatre and also received commissions from Diaghilev to create sets for Ballets Russes productions. In 1924, Dobuzhinsky emigrated from Russia to Kaunas, Lithuania. He collaborated with a great number of famous theatres all over the world, and the Riabov's collection includes the artist's costumes and stage designs for various productions.

The theatrical works of Natalia Goncharova epitomizes the transition from the Symbolist style of Diaghilev's early productions to modernist aesthetic of the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde. Goncharova was internationally recognized for her designs for the Ballets Russes production of the ballet "Le Coq d'Or" (The Golden Cockerel) mounted at the Paris Opera in 1914. In 1937, Colonel de Basil's Russian Ballet revived the staging, and commissioned Goncharova to fashion new costumes based on her 1914 designs. The artist's design for a male costume for the 1937 production reflects

Goncharova's sustained interest in such Russian art forms as icon painting, painted signboards, popular prints, and hand-made toys.

Nicholas Roerich's interest in ancient Slavic culture also attracted Diaghilev's attention; the latter invited Roerich to participate in the World of Art exhibition and create designs for the Ballets Russes productions. In 1913, Diaghilev commissioned Roerich to produce costume and set designs for the ballet "Le Sacre du Printemps" (The Rite of Spring) to the music of Stravinsky. It was performed by the famous dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1888–1950). The Stravinsky-Roerich-Nijinsky collaboration produced some of Diaghilev's most ground-breaking work: the melding of Stravinsky's 'barbarous' rhythms and Nijinsky's experimental choreography resulted in a piece that scandalized contemporary audiences in its thoroughly modernist reaction to pagan dances. Appropriate to the ballet's subject matter, Roerich's sets and costumes featured depictions of ancient Russia. To create his designs, the artist—an archaeologist and ethnographer who viewed antiquity through the prism of folk art—relied on historical sources, folk beliefs, legends, and surviving monuments. One of the theatre designers to write for the stage, Roerich helped Stravinsky conceive his ballet.

As Fokine noted:

Roerich's works for the Russian opera, ballet and drama have always created the atmosphere of high artistry and helped the performer. Painted in a broad manner, his scenery has never entertained viewers with unnecessary details and colorful effects, on the contrary, they encouraged viewers to concentrate and understand the meaning, the spirit and the character of acting and music.

[3]

The Riabov Collection includes a stage design for N. A. Rimsky-Korsakov's opera "Skazka o tsare Saltane" (The Tale of Tsar Saltan, 1919), a design for an unrealised production at the Covent Garden (London), as well as a design of Ovlur's costume for A. P. Borodin's opera "Kniaz' Igor" (Prince Igor) staged by Diaghilev in 1914 at the Royal Theater Dryuri Lane (attributed by E. P. Yakovleva).

The work of Alexandra Exter in the Riabov Collection exemplifies the frequent interchange between innovations in modernist painting and stage design. Exter developed innovative methods for the spatial rendering of artistic images on the stage through the use of geometric and three-dimensional forms. She was friends with such exemplars of modern art as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Georges Braque (1882–1963), Guillaume Apollinaire, and Filippo Marinetti (1876–1944). Exter began working professionally for the theatre in 1915–1916, when she created Cubo-Futurist sets and costumes for Alexander

Tairov's Kamernyi(Chamber)Theater in Moscow. Exter and Tairov collaborated over the years, aiming to embody the synthesis of various arts on stage. Exter's other design work included costume designs for ballets performed by Bronislava Nijinska and Pavlova. The Riabov Collection includes her design for a male Georgian dance costume (1925), signed by the German dancer of Russian origin Elsa Krueger. A close friend of Exter in Russia, Kruger commissioned the artist to create her dance costumes.

Constructivism, with its principles of bare stage construction, clear contrasts of texture, and the rhythmical link between sets and actors' movement, dominated the forms of Russian stage design during the 1920s. Exter often experimented in the field of theater design. Her stage design for "The Merchant of Venice" by William Shakespeare is one of the fifteen works from the album "Theater Designs, " published in Paris in 1930. This album is an anthology of the artist's theatrical ideas. Almost all sheets in this album are unrealized projects. The album with an edition of 160 copies has never been printed. The sheets were all produced by Exter manually using the stencil technique, and the artist signed each sheet in all copies. For Exter, such undertakings functioned dually to provide a source of income as well as a way to promote her work.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the challenges faced within the Russian theatre were met by the use of new artistic methods that included mass celebrations and street festivals. With their reliance on spontaneity, overtly experimental nature, and the intimate involvement of spectators that they engendered, such theatrical forms dramatically changed the dynamics and aesthetics of stage direction and set design. Soviet agit-prop theatre, which communicated Bolshevik ideology through its performances, is represented in the Riabov Collection by Nina Aizenberg's (1902–1974) costume designs for the Blue Blouse theatre, one of the widespread forms of the genre.

Works by Russian émigré artists, who began to design sets and costumes for various West European and American productions during the 1920s, are also featured in the Riabov Collection. For instance, Eugene Berman (1899–1972) and Eugene Dunkel (1890–1972) designed numerous Broadway productions as well as contributed significantly to the fame of New York's Metropolitan Opera and Milan's La Scala by executing designs after such modern masters as Marc Chagall (1887–1985) and Salvador Dali (1904–1989). Leon Zack (1890–1980) collaborated with theater companies in Germany and France, while Serge Tchekhonine (Chekhonin;1878–1936) worked with Vera Nemchinova's Russian Ballet in Paris, which carried on the artistic legacy of the Ballets Russes.

Nikita Baliev's Théâtre de la Chauve-Souris (The Bat), whose productions were extremely popular in Paris and New York in the 1920s, invited Russian émigré artists



Remizov, Tchekhonine and Sudeikin to produce stage designs for his productions. Their works are well-represented in the Riabov Collection.

In September 1922, Sudeikin arrived to the United States with Baliev's theater and settled in New York. Among his most prominent works at the Riabov Collection are the designs for the ballet "Paganini" to the music of S. V. Rachmaninov (1939) and designs for George Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess," staged at the Alvin New York Theatre in October 1935 by Ruben Mamulyan, a student of Evgeny Vakhtangov.

### 3. Conclusion

Speaking about the first wave of Russian emigration, Struve noted:

Their message reached the world, it was voiced in all the languages of the world and manifested itself on all continents. It reached Russia too... After all, the message must be read and experienced in the homeland — this is indeed the innermost and great dream of the first wave of Russian emigration, and this is precisely their hope and testament. [1]

Tracing the aesthetic connection between the past and the present of Russian theatre design, the Riabov Collection greatly contributes to research on Russian theatre and encourages its glorification and promotion in the West.

### Editor's note

Dr. Alla Rosenfeld has received her Ph. D. in modern and contemporary art at The Graduate Center, City University of New York in 2003. Previously, she was a graduate of the Faculty of History and Theory of Art of the Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture named after I. E. Repin in St Petersburg. She had many acquaintances among colleagues in Russian museums and believed that it is important to consult these specialists regarding attributions of Russian artists' works at the Riabov Collection, which were later included in the permanent exhibition of the Zimmerli Art Museum. When working at the Zimmerli, Dr. Rosenfeld often consulted such well-known experts in various areas of Russian art as Elena Barkhatova, Yurii Bobrov, Tamara Galeeva, Irina Karasik, Olga Musakova, Elena Nesterova, Eleanora Paston, Yevgenia Petrova, Aleksandra Shatskikh, and Elena Yakovleva. These experts consulted the Zimmerli Museum regarding the proper attributions and dating of various artworks. Tamara Galeeva and Elena Yakovleva in particular have provided help with attributions of

theater-related artworks from the Riabov Collection. The expert opinions of Russian art historians allowed excluding certain questionable works from the Collection. This article is another example of fruitful collaboration between American and Russian art professionals.

## References

- [1] Struve, N. A. The Exiles and the Messengers. Retrieved from <http://abzubov.com/page1030626.html>.
- [2] Riabov, G. (1990). Speech Delivered at the Meeting of Members of the Board of Trustees of the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University During the Transfer of his Collection. Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA.
- [3] Fokin, M. (1919). Manuscript of the Article for the Newspaper *Vore Herrer* (Copenhagen). Quoted in Yakovleva, E. P. (Ed.) (1993). *Roerich and Theater*. Postcard set, issue 2. Moscow: International Roerich Center.