

CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICE OF THE LATE 19TH AND THE 20TH CENTURY (A CASE STUDY OF CREATIVE WORKS BY MICHEL FOKINE)

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ABSTRACT

The paper dwells on the aspects of creative work of the famous ballet master Michel Fokine that concern the plastic arts and have not been studied before: graphics, painting and sculpture which have had a sound influence on his choreography. The author analyses the function of the ballet master's works such as explications, drawings, costume sketches and sculptures. The author also studies new conceptual approaches based on the visual characteristics of Fokine's creative work and his ability to think in abstract and real categories. The use of Russian and international museum collections and private collections, as well as archives emphasise a synthesizing role of choreography in the arts of the late 19th and the 20th century.

Keywords: *plastic arts, synthesis of arts, ballet master's mind-set, creative method, analytical concept, graphic sources, production image.*

The figure of the Russian ballet master Michel Fokine is of considerable interest for modern art history. His creative work is an outstanding and memorable landmark not only in the history of choreography, but also in the whole cultural heritage of the late 19th and the 20th century. A ballet master and reformer of great intelligence and bright imagination, Fokine always aspired to master new ballet forms and new conceptual approaches to staging that gave rein to imagination and presented an idea as fully as possible. He firmly rejected ballet-staging patterns and put a great deal of effort into the development of his own system of images. Here lay his constant striving for creative perfection and discovery of himself and the world around him. The steady deepening of analytical and creative thought combined with its growing power, the scale of historic confluence and the resulting interconnections is one of the most important tendencies in the arts of the late 19th and the 20th century. It was clearly seen in Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (1909 to 1929) that presented all types of choreography on all kinds of subjects [1]. Naturally, Fokine's versatile talent, the diversity of his ideas and forms, and the impressive grace of his choreography have provoked a profound response in the sphere of art, while the fine art portfolio of Fokine himself is so remarkable that it deserves special attention. Despite the fact that the choreographer's fine art works are less known and hardly studied, they are valuable for us as they show the depth and originality of thought, the constant quest for ideas and the inspired artistry of the author [2]. Archival documents, sketches from museums and private collections abroad, paintings and sculptures by Fokine were created not for the sake of common cultural heritage but as a reflection of his personality and choreography [3]. Visual imagery is expressed in many different ways: through the inner interconnections of ideas and the complementarity of artistic forms. Therefore, the fundamental point of this paper is that we not only study the above-mentioned issues using objects of fine arts (which is logical, but insufficient), but also emphasise the synthesizing role of choreography in the creative process. Therefore, the mutual influence of different art forms in Fokine's work is analysed in an integrated way, in all their diversity.

There are four main directions in Fokine's fine art: ballet-master sketches and production explications, graphics for particular choreographic pieces, sculptural and painted self-portraits, and costume sketches. It is worth noting that for the ballet master, there was no line to separate his work from his life: making a

certain piece was itself a moment of creative vision and a moment of experience involving different impressions, observations and reflections.

The fine art works by Fokine present a counterpoint of his choreographic solutions, their conceptual and artistic essence that form the foundation for interesting reflections and observations, sometimes scattered around and sometimes connected together as an “algorithm” of an image.

Fokine thought and expressed his thoughts using not only words (verbally), but also abstract pictures. He thought within the framework of visual imagery where every movement had its own outline and a drawing induced visual images.

This function was fulfilled by the explications of the ballets such as *Le Rêve de la Marquise*, *The Firebird*, *Le Dieu Bleu*, and *Egyptian Nights*. The ballet master found it crucial to create the composition of new pieces in every detail, even if they were not going to be implemented in reality. In his work, Fokine concentrated not on the brightness of artistic form, but on the multitude of figures that he lined up diagonally, in pairs or in symmetrical rows with ordinal numbers. This was a way to solve one of the main problems of choreography – the problem of rhythm. We emphasise that it is the problem of rhythm, not tempo. These phenomena often get confused. Although, the problem of tempo (increasing, strengthening and decreasing tempo) can be seen in individual drawings.

Drawings, the ballet master’s expositions, can be divided into two groups. The first group of drawings is plans (top views) of choreographic scores. They depict compound compositional structures. A sheet is divided into four parts (small formats) like a ballet production is divided into acts and scenes. The scores of choreography for groups are numbered in consecutive order (1, 2, 3) and show the distribution of dancers in space, for example, in lines, circles, ovals or diagonals, together or separately from each other. Such an explication was used for the ballet *The Firebird* (1910, SPMTM).

Sketches of compositions that are formed by one, two or three figures comprise the second group of pictures. These drawings are quite concrete: each picture defines a certain movement for a dynamic or static pose. It is not only a scheme, but also an image of movement, which can be seen in sketches for *Le Dieu Bleu* (1914, SPMTM) and *Egyptian Nights* (1908, SPMTM). The chronology of sketches for *Le Dieu Bleu* shows the evolution of movement from singular figures to compositions including two or three figures. The character of movement developed from dynamic one to static one. As a real artist, Fokine managed to get the right proportions and gestures of male and female figures. Among the scores for groups in *Egyptian Nights*, there is a central female figure, which attracts particular attention, looking like a sculpture from the Hermitage or the Egyptian Museum.

Schematically, this is how Fokine tried to organise the structure of a new piece. Like an architect, he created constructions from different figures pursuing his goal. For him, abstraction was not a lifeless scheme, but an active, efficient and transforming force. Therefore, taking into account graphical means, the author deemed it possible to analyse the role of fine arts at the early stages of work on a choreographic piece.

The image of pompous Baroque dance is reflected in Fokine’s drawings for the ballet *Le Rêve de la Marquise* to music by Mozart (1921, SPMTM). The figures of the King, the Queen and the Little Page, who holds the train of the Queen’s dress, vary the direction of a round dance that has a linear structure and moves frontally, towards the audience. These drawings, done masterfully with black ink, create an image of the pompous and epic Baroque style, which is presented so brightly in the costumes of the 18th century. Heavy crinoline skirts, tight bodices, high pompadours, powdered wigs, ceremonial gestures and pretentiously slow movements – all this can be seen in small but highly expressive choreographic

sketches by Fokine. They have a certain narrative and combine the features of ballet-master expositions and easel paintings.

One of the characteristics of Fokine's personality was his determination in learning and constant aspiration for self-improvement. With great tenacity, he tried to study new spheres of human life, explore new spaces and comprehend the complexity of existence.

According to documentary sources, Fokine was also a painter and a sculptor. Since his adolescence, he had gravitated to fine arts. He created paintings and sculptures in his own, original manner and, without any conscious effort, gained recognition among professionals in the art industry. Fokine studied arts closely, although he did not have formal education in this sphere. The works of his favourite artists had a sound influence on his own style [4].

A separate group of Fokine's fine art works is formed by his self-portraits. The subject of a picture is a mirror-like reflection of the author's state of mind. So, the distance between the author and the subject plays an important role, providing an aesthetic experience. There are two sculptured *Self-portraits* (tinted plaster – SCTM, plaster – f.c.) modelled by Fokine in an abstract and expressive manner. They accurately convey not only the look of the author, but also his typically intensive thought and inner concentration. Creating these portraits, Fokine considered not only himself, but also his contemporaries. This was his intimate and autobiographical contact with time itself. In each of the two painted portraits (both portraits – f.c.), Fokine found a special keynote. In his early full-length portrait, Fokine depicted himself in a stage costume as if perceived by the audience. The portrait contained an element of posturing, even adornment, and an interest in his own personality as an actor and as a dancer. Another, a half-figure portrait, which was created during his late period in New York in 1926, is similar to a sculptured self-portrait. The ballet master's image is self-sufficient due to his magnitude, composure and the richness of his personality. This portrait is deep and multidimensional, filled with romantic emotions and an inclination towards introspection. Each portrait of Fokine gives us the ingenuousness and freshness of artistic experience, and the joy of getting to know such a changeable and, at the same time, eternal image of the choreographer.

Apart from *Self-portraits*, there is another living and highly expressive lead pencil drawing *Portrait of Igor Stravinsky* (SMFA DPC), depicting the author of music to many ballets by Fokine [5].

Fokine sets a completely different challenge in his work on a series of choreographic performances. His artistic approach is already familiar, but its connection with reality is completely new; it is the first point to consider when analysing the stylistic expression of Fokine's choreography. The drawings for *Harlequin and Two Ladies* and *The Adventures of Harlequin* are full of grotesque Italian comedy, which emphasises the atmosphere of that epoch. The pictures for *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* to music by Paul Dukas, *The Firebird* and *Russian Fantasy* (all – f.c.) are characterised by *lubok* elements typical for the works by Natalya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov with their intentionally simplified style of drawing. This material is real-life and inevitably emerges in the course of rehearsals and performances. It attracts the attention of the audience to the stage and the development of events. The plot acts as a conceptual, dramaturgic and emotional engine of the image. On the one hand, the plot of these easel drawings is based on a quite widespread artistic approach. Looking at them evokes living associations with Russian folk tales, magic, fantasy and miracles. On the other hand, such traditional plots show the novelty of the author's view. For instance, the drawing *Russian Fantasy* presents a village house with a gable roof, a magical forest and the dark sky with glittering stars. The plot of this drawing is not individual objects, but the whole atmosphere and the feeling of life. In this paper, we are not touching upon the innovations in stylistics or the original use of traditional expressive means, which can be seen in other works by Fokine. It is a separate problem, which played a crucial role in the development of choreography in the late 19th and early 20th century. To sum up the discussion of folk tale drawings, we emphasise the importance of expressiveness, spectacularity and clarity of artistic images.

An important period of Fokine's development as an artist was his work on the ballet *Egyptian Nights*. In this piece, the ballet master demonstrated his skills as a scene painter and a costume designer. It was his vision of costume images that had formed the base of contemporary ballet vocabulary. Their attractiveness is in the fact that the ballet master tried to use them to convey the essence of the ancient Oriental dance and breathe life into the characters. His costumes lined up as friezes in old cathedrals embody famous faces in profile poses that rhythmically move one after another. The clothes outline the figures, hiding the contours and showing only their silhouettes with the help of wide tucks. The artistic language is concise, modest and delicate: bright colours are not in abundance. Each costume is of ochreous grey colour, which corresponds to the idea of the piece. Wigs, shoes and make-up (accentuated eyes, dark eyebrows, bright lips) are characterised by a new style – a polychrome Egyptian sculpture. Sandals have replaced ballet shoes.

The visual stylistics, which originated from ancient Egyptian monuments in terms of the “canonical” development of artistic thought, has created an ideal image model thereby acting as the dynamic spring and the conceptual core of the piece. Meanwhile, the ballet based on real sources is unlikely to be a historical chronicle. It is more like an iconic symbol of Egypt, a poetical portrayal, where photographic accuracy is less important than an artistic image and a complete picture puzzle made of pieces of reality.

The possibilities of stylisation were not comprehended enough in the ballet world. At the turn of 20th century, Fokine tried to solve this issue along with the representatives of the artistic movement “Mir iskusstva” (World of art), namely Alexandre Benois, Léon Bakst, Boris Anisfeld, Nicholas Roerich, Alexander Golovin and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. Léon Bakst played a particularly important role in Fokine's artistic development. He was the chief scenic designer of almost all the ballets made by Fokine for Ballets Russes. His experiments were noteworthy not only in the context of the ballet master's biography, but also in the prospect of the development of Russian ballet as a whole. Costume sketches for *Cleopatra* illustrate the line of Fokine's thought from the idea of a plot to its realisation on the stage. It is clearly demonstrated by the author's focus not on the atmosphere and the treatment of light and shade in certain scenes, but on the graphical expression of dance gestures, poses and movements. The audience does not experience any insufficiency, because the verbal expression of thought of the choreographer is in line with the requirements of modern fine arts, primarily of visual narrative.

This stylistic approach leads to unexpected and unique transformations of classical forms of fine arts in ballet productions by Fokine. His creative work can be considered as a result of his self-determination, which reflects his artistic taste and world view in the late 19th and the 20th century. His admiration and thorough study of wood sculpture and painting had a sound impact on the visual style of his ballets. Lifar claimed: “It is hardly possible to dispute the common view that the greatest strength of Fokine is stylisation and stylised ballets are his best works, for example, *Scheherazade* (the Orient), *Cleopatra* (Egypt) and *Daphnis et Chloe* (ancient Greece). In these pieces, Fokine demonstrates such a deep knowledge of style of different epochs and nations and such erudition which no other choreographer in Russia (or even in the world) has [6: 233-234].” The ballet master was inspired by the expositions at famous museums in Saint Petersburg, as confirmed by Ivanov: “Since the very childhood he had demonstrated a natural affinity with drawing. He was a regular visitor of the Hermitage and the painting exhibitions at the Russian Museum, where he mastered his skills by copying the paintings of Russian and foreign artists. Later, his choreographic works were marked by that promising artistic tone, which had been formed by his various aesthetic inclinations” [7]. His encyclopaedic knowledge of arts and culture and the use of real historical sources guaranteed the authenticity of visual imagery.

What makes these ballets attractive to viewers is the author's ability to find graphic and scenic equivalents for cultural monuments (reliefs, murals, easel works, etc.) and make the process of comprehension of an idea exciting not only for the mind, but also for the soul. He perceived working on each choreographic piece like a wonderful life full of meaning. In every production, Fokine set

increasingly challenging creative goals climbing yet another step towards mastery. The bright artistic personality of Fokine was formed by a unique combination of dance, graphics, painting and sculpture. Each of these complex elements was fully expressed in all his works. The scope and concentration of original ideas and opinions, the clarity of thought, the vividness and freshness of associations define the uniqueness of Fokine's choreographic works and make them an important part of the cultural heritage of the late 19th and the 20th century.

ABBREVIATIONS

SCTM – Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum.

SPMTM – Saint Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music.

f.c. – foreign collection .

SMFA DPC – The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Department of Private Collections.

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