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VISUAL ARTS

Erté: Art Deco's Designer of Dreams

Erté, the foremost fashion illustrator of the Twenties and one of the pioneers of the Art Deco style, has just turned eighty. Recently there have been exhibitions of his work, a number of books about him, and a certain amount of celebration in his honor. It would be wrong, however, to assume that he is now the subject of a nostalgic revival. He has never stopped producing his distinctive designs for clothes, costumes and stage décor, book illustrations—anything that commands the attention of a decorative genius.

Erté began life in Czarist Russia as Romain de Tirtoff, where his boyhood impulse toward elegance led him into the ballet. That was too exacting a career; Erté's love of design and drawing kept him from making the required sacrifices. He went to art school, aiming to become a portrait painter in the academic tradition, but design—in the sense of meaning both invention and drawing—was his real talent and greatest pleasure. He had at that moment the good fortune and sense to give up all other means of creative expression in favor of fashion illustration. This choice of career must have seemed even less suitable than painting or ballet for the scion of a naval and military family. He eventually coined "Erté" from the French pronunciation of his initials, evidently to avoid embarrassing his family by signing fashion plates with their respectable name.

The fashion designer inhabits the mysterious, seemingly perverse world of feminine elegance, with its suggestion of costly tyrannies exercised at the expense of common sense, sound principles, and serious living. Since his emergence in the late eighteenth century, the dress designer has had the air of a mountebank, regularly summoned to the duchess's boudoir along with her fortune-teller—an air that is more or less acceptable to society depending on the epoch. Our self-conscious age, having long abandoned the class distinctions that kept the lady from actually dining with her *modiste*, now elevates him to the esthetic level of the poet and composer. The late Gabrielle Chanel, rejecting this enshrinement, once said, "We are not artists. We are artisans."

Erté, however, never has been an artisan. After leaving Russia for Paris, he entered the employ of *couturier* Paul Poiret in 1913. Paris then was reeling from the impact of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet, which had created an unprecedented theatrical explosion in the cultural world. Poiret began to adapt the sinuous, gaudy Oriental motifs of Russian costumes and décor to fashionable *couture*. Erté's talent was well suited to this emerging avant-garde chic. His designs were a success with Poiret, although at the time Erté could not claim credit for them.

Poiret's chief illustrators were Lepape and Iribe, whose fashion plates remain classics. These men were painters who only interpreted the designer. Erté, on the other hand, was not a painter, nor a genius at cutting and draping, but an authentic artist of design. The Erté creation lives on the page, not on the woman; thus it survives the eclipse of its mode. When Poiret closed his *atelier* during the First World War, for example, Erté continued to create. Dressmaking was irrelevant to his designs, despite the authority of their details. Once executed, they undoubtedly lost rather than acquired a dimension.

Most of Erté's fashion drawings between 1915 and 1927 appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* and form a remarkable oeuvre in themselves. They were printed as fashion fantasies, dramatic visions of possibility. These black-and-white ink drawings are perhaps the best work of the artist's long career. They are completely finished. Nothing is barely suggested, as is the case with so much modern fashion illustration—although there is no background, no milieu. It is always a solitary, elegant woman (sometimes two) against a stark, white ground. This sober clarity is in perfect equilibrium with the extravagant drama of the clothes themselves. The result gives the refined, undemanding pleasure of great surface beauty without any particular depth or complexity.

These works have been mistakenly compared to those of Aubrey Beardsley, whose name apparently leaps to mind whenever detailed black-and-white illustration is considered. Beardsley's drawings, however, are never designs, as Erté's emphatically are. Beardsley was a serious artist working in the exacting realm of satire. His elegant, detailed execution never obscures the harsh energy and disturbing

Erté in one of his own designs, 1923

ironic restlessness of his imagination. Erté properly denies any influence of Beardsley, attributing his obsession with linear design to Greek vase painting and Persian miniatures.

In the second quarter of this century, when feminine dress began to require new shapes and textures to suit brisker times, Erté side-stepped gracefully into theater. The gleaming world of the music hall, where the human body was adorned expressly for display, was a perfect channel for his gift. His work abounds in feathers and tassels, festoons of pearls and trailing fur—all infused with a kind of

Erté Fashions *by Erté, St. Martin's Press, New York, $10*
Erté *by Charles Spencer, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York, $15.95*
Erté *by Erté (Introduction by Roland Barthes), Rizzoli International, New York, Distributor, $70*
Ermyntrude & Esmeralda *by Lytton Strachey (Illustrated by Erté), Anthony Blond, London, $4.95*

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formal eroticism. In fashion these elements look theatrical; in serious drama they appear overblown and irrelevant; but at the *Folies Bergére* they are perfect.

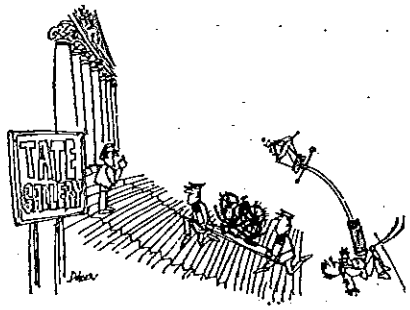
"I never draw anything," Erté says, "until I have it completely worked out in my mind." There are no false starts, no nervous attempts, no changes. He is extraordinarily sweet, composed, and devoid of arrogance—the result, perhaps, of more than half a century of success. It is a public modesty based on private assurance so complete as to be almost unnoticeable. Smiling, he murmurs, "I am always in a dream." It is obviously something he has said often, and is, equally obviously, his real secret. He is a dream personage, a rosy, silvery man with a perfect figure, gleaming with smiles and jewels. The career of this artist, the contemporary of so many tormented creative souls, illustrates the ancient idea of art as play. Here is a lifetime clearly spent in the constant exercise of personal delight.

And what of portrait painting? Landscape? Sketching from life? "Ah, no," says the dreamer. "Reality is always there. Why should I need to show what it is like?" One might well believe that he has long since ceased even to *see* what it is like—the better to preserve the crystalline perfection of his art, his personal beauty and serene heart, and, of course, the prolonged continuation of his success.

ANNE HOLLANDER

An Anti-History of Art

From among the vast number of cartoons commenting on modern art published in the last seventy-five years, the Tate Gallery of London is selecting about 100 for an exhibition that will run from May 23 to July 8, 1973.



Aside from its humor, the exhibition should be a fascinating anti-history of contemporary art. Its intention is to chronicle popular myths, misunderstandings, and prejudices about modern art, as well as to expose its elements of pomposity and needless obscurity.

In addition to cartoons making fun of contemporary works of art and styles of painting and sculpture, the show will include caricatures in which the artist is made to resemble his own work and lampoons of public figures or events in the form of works of modern art.

In the interest of making the exhibition as representative as possible, the gallery's keeper of exhibitions welcomes readers of *SR/The Arts* to contribute information regarding cartoons or, if possible, to loan clippings from newspapers and periodicals.

For details contact: Miss Corinne Bellow, Tate Gallery, Dept. SRA, *Millbank, London, S.W. 1.*

The New Art News; Or, Cents and Sensibility

"There is a genuine thirst for art information that publications haven't been satisfying," declares Milton Esterow, former associate director of the Kennedy Galleries (Old Masterish American art) and, before that, assistant to the cultural news director of the *New York Times.*

Last August Esterow and a group of investors paid *Newsweek* $350,000 for *Art News,* at seventy-one the oldest American art publication. Esterow, as the new editor and publisher, fired all of the full-time editorial staff, except for managing editor Elizabeth C. Baker, whom he calls "terrific."

In his inaugural editorial/memo in the October issue Esterow talked to readers as if they had a lot to learn about art: "We are going to open your eyes to a more penetrating picture than you have ever seen before of this strange and exciting world." He knocked art writers (always a popular pastime): "There has never been a greater flood of nonsense written about art. Or a time when there were more special pleaders on the scene attempting to lead the public up one garden path or another."

The contents of the magazine are still in transition. The October and November issues showed Esterow's influence in such articles as: "10 years of the Art Dealers Association: How both buyers and sellers have gained," "A dealer's notes on how to bargain elegantly," and "What, $410,000 for a Louis XV table?" Esterow assigns many of his stories to *New York Times* reporters who write intelligibly and who, presumably, are not sufficiently *au courant* with contemporary art to be considered "special pleaders." Esterow himself writes "The 'Vasari' Diary," a *New Yorker*-like talk-of-the-town column that features anecdotes about obscure—perhaps even fictitious—dealers, artists, and collectors.

Reader reaction is predictably mixed. One critic lamented, "It looks as if we can say goodbye to the old-fashioned *Art News* articles on younger artists whose work is topically interesting but not yet of Establishment status." Mario Amaya, newly appointed director of the New York Cultural Center, is more optimistic: "I'm always in favor of change. New people foster new ideas. Let's wait and see."

The Countess Goes to College

Many a businessman has scored points as an art patron by installing a great chrome abstraction in a bank lobby. But Norton Simon, retired head of the great food (Hunt-Wesson), drink (Canada Dry), and publishing (McCall's) conglomerate, has a better idea. The Norton Simon, Inc. Museum of Art has just loaned 100 paintings and sculptures to Princeton University for a year. Although small, the collection is sumptuous, offering such masterpieces as Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Theresa, Countess Kinsky* and Giovanni Bellini's portrait of Joerg Fugger, as well as works by the giants of the School of Paris—Degas, Picasso, Matisse.

After a year, what then? Simon isn't saying. But more art patrons might decide to lend instead of donating collections outright to institutions. The recent "de-accessioning" of a van Gogh and a Rousseau by New York's Metropolitan Museum raises fears that a gift could end up, embarrassingly, at auction. □