

Russian Theatrical Designs in the Harvard Theatre Collection
LDI Round 5 Project Final Report



Submitted by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson, May 31, 2007.

Table of Contents

Project Description.....	2
Project Participants.....	4
Description and Cataloging	4
Conservation.....	4
Digitizing Methodology.....	6
Publicity and Outreach.....	6
Response from Users	6
Use of the Digital Resource.....	7
Web Site	8
Remaining Work.....	8
Project Timeline	9
Summary of Work Plan.....	9
Lessons Learned.....	10
Budget	11
VIA Search Strategies	11

Project Description

The main purpose of this project was to digitize in high resolution all or nearly all of the Russian theatrical designs in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

The Harvard Theatre Collection includes one of the most important collections in the world of original theatrical designs by Russian designers. Our Russian collection approaches in importance the museum collections in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and it exceeds in terms of numbers the Russian collections in the Theatre Museum of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the McNay Museum in San Antonio, the Dance Division of the New York Public Library, and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford.

The majority of the designs comprising the Theatre Collection’s holdings date from roughly 1890 to 1930 — a few earlier and some later — which, when one considers the roster of artists active in that period (Bakst, Goncharova, Larionov, Benois), is surely the “golden age” of Russian stage design. The majority of the designs are related to the Ballets Russes of Serge Diaghilev, the legendary institution that is remarkable for its confluence of artists, composers, dancers, and other artistic and intellectual figures who together effected a revolution in the arts.

The definition of “Russian” was intentionally inclusive, embracing not only Russian-born artists but artists of other nationalities whose work was produced in Russia, natives of the Ukraine or other near-neighboring regions, artists of Russian family heritage, and artists of other nationalities who worked as designers for the Ballets Russes or for other productions that did not take place in Russia but had some Russian connection or origin. Thus, for example, works for the Ballets Russes by the American designer Robert Edmond Jones and by Pablo Picasso, or works by the British designer Edward Gordon Craig for production in Russia, or artworks by the Ukrainian designer Alexandra Exter, were included.

Actually, the scope of the project changed in some minor ways, to include some illustrated manuscripts or letters, non-theatrical original artworks, and a sampling of complementary material such as illustrated programs and figurines. In addition, we made some significant acquisitions during the period of the project, and in some cases we were able to include those items.

679 records with digital images are now available in VIA (in a few cases, digitization of a single item included more than one page or side, so the number of images is slightly higher than the number of VIA records).



Fig1. Narcisse: costume design: Young Beotean
Creator: Bakst, Leon (1866-1924), Russia, artist

Project Participants

The project staff consisted of F. W. Wilson and Beth Carroll-Horrocks in the Harvard Theatre Collection (Beth was at about this time transferred to the Manuscripts Department in Houghton Library but continued to work in the Theatre Collection). Helen Grigoriev was hired in February 2003 as part-time project assistant, combining the two part-time functions that were a part of the original proposal. Also involved in the project was Dennis Marnon, Administrative Officer in the Houghton Library, for financial and logistic support. Wendy Gogel coordinated the project on behalf of OIS, and Maggie Hale on behalf of HCL. From Imaging Services, Bill Comstock and David Remington were involved through the project. Sarah Reidell became involved in the conservation of the collection shortly after the project began, after an extensive conservation component was added to the project.

Description and Cataloging

Closely related to the digitization of the designs – which also involved image correction and editing – was cataloging and data entry, and mounting the designs, with their catalog information, on VIA for free access worldwide. Data entry and cataloging, based both on examination of the original physical drawings and on research using the Theatre Collection's resources, were the responsibility of Helen Grigoriev, under the supervision of Beth Carroll-Horrocks. Frequently this required both original research and facility in reading Cyrillic manuscript, since many of the designs were identified through handwritten annotations. Fortunately, Helen Grigoriev came to the project with experience in both areas, as well as familiarity with the subject of Russian ballet.

Conservation

A further aspect of the project, not one that was originally envisioned, was the examination of all of the designs by the Weissman Preservation Center, and the treatment of most of them. This added dimension to the project provided for the repair, cleaning, protective housing, and other treatment of many of the art works, but it greatly complicated the logistics of the project, requiring many more inspections, transfers, and conferences. Frequently some treatments were made prior to digitization and afterward the works had to be sent once again to the Preservation Center for further treatment. Costs of treatment were not included in the project budget except as it affected Theatre Collection staff time.



Fig2. Le Dieu Bleu: costume design: Baiaderes avec Paon
Creator: Bakst, Leon (1866-1924), Russia, artist

Digitizing Methodology

For each digital image created from the source object three digital files were produced:

- Archival Master TIFF file – uncompressed image file with resolution approximately 300 DPI but also varied depending on the size of the original.
- Delivery Detailed JPEG – compressed visually lossless image, 800 pixels in the long dimension -- derived from Archival Master images.
- Delivery Screen Size JPEG – compressed image with resolution 100 DPI.

Both JPEG images are delivered in VIA as part of a work record. See the example below.

Components: 2 images

Work



The image shows two versions of a drawing by Picasso. The left version is labeled 'Screen size' and the right version is labeled 'Detailed'. Both drawings depict a man and a woman sitting in chairs, facing each other. The man is on the left, wearing a suit and tie, and the woman is on the right, wearing a dress. The drawing is a pencil sketch on a light-colored background. The text 'Olga Picasso et son mari de Longjumeau' is written at the top, and 'Theat. Theatre Sarah Bernhardt' and 'L.M.' are written at the bottom. Below each drawing is a 'Save this...' button with a dropdown arrow.

Screen size

Detailed

Save this... ▼

Save this... ▼

Title: Portrait of Olga **Picasso**

Item Identifier: pfMS Thr 414 (131) (old call number)

Work Type: drawings

Publicity and Outreach

As a public announcement of the project, and as a summary presentation, we mounted a large exhibition of more than one hundred of the original art works during the fall semester of 2004. Selections were made and descriptive and explanatory text was written by F. W. Wilson. All aspects of the exhibition, including design, printing, matting, framing, and hanging, were performed by Theatre Collection staff. Announcements were mailed to an extensive list, both within and beyond the university, and a public reception was held at the beginning of the exhibition. A gallery flyer with color illustrations and a 28-page checklist were produced and distributed free of charge.

Response from Users

We have received many positive anecdotal comments regarding the availability of this collection and the quality of the imaging and cataloging. Clearly, the quality of the images is unusually vivid and detailed compared to what is generally found online. The reason for this was that it seemed essential to us that the images be usable for study of technique as for history or style. The images have been used by faculty and students whose interests are

in theatrical and commercial design, Russian history, theatre and ballet history, and art history. We know, from subsequent direct contacts, that faculty, students, and other researchers at Harvard, in other U.S. universities, and in institutions abroad have found this resource. A number of licensing (publication and media use) and exhibition loan requests have resulted from discoveries made online by researchers.

One criticism we have heard fairly often is that the public images are available in BMP format, not JPEG or TIFF, which are more often desired for professional purposes.

OIS determined that the images in VIA are in JPEG format and that some web browsers (for instance Internet Explorer) incorrectly save them in BMP format. JPG format is suitable for viewing, whereas the TIFF format becomes particularly desirable when some further use – publication, for example – is planned; but in that case we would expect the potential patron to come to us not only to obtain a suitable image but to obtain an appropriate license and in most cases pay the required licensing fee.

Use of the Digital Resource

Within the last year this digitized collection has proved to be useful to ourselves as well. During the current academic year, we have worked with New England Conservatory, which conducted a “Stravinsky season,” for which we provided images and descriptive information for a PowerPoint program that was shown repeatedly at public events, lectures, and in classrooms. We also allowed them to select images for use in their publicity and program material. We have begun to plan a major exhibition and symposium to take place in 2009, the centenary year of the Diaghilev’s founding of the Ballets Russes, for which the majority of our Russian designs were originally produced. This exhibition will again draw heavily from this collection. We have also supplied a large selection of these images to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Ballet, and other institutions, in the form of a PDF document, for educational purposes and as a tool in preparing for the Ballets Russes centenary. This document has also been used in conjunction with several class visits to the Theatre Collection.



Fig 3. Istar: set design
Creator: Bakst, Leon (1866-1924), Russia, artist

Web Site

One last component of the project as it was originally planned has not been accomplished, but we are poised to do it. This is the creation of a web site based on this collection. Some of the reasons for this were related to the departure of both project staff members before the project was completed, and to the exhaustion of funds allocated for the project, but most of all to the fact that by the time that stage in the project was reached, no clear mechanism was in place to enable an HCL unit to create its own project-based web site. We are informed (in May 2007) that HCL is encouraging web content submissions from library units. Since the content and structure both exist, we still look forward to being able to create this component.

Remaining Work

Over the past year we have been attempting to tie up loose ends. We continue to find occasional broken links and inconsistencies or errors in cataloging data, both in Hollis and VIA records. A few of the original designs need to be returned to the Preservation Center for final treatments that were deferred until after digitization and exhibition. Irina Klyagin,

our project archivist for Russian ballet and theatre collections, has been assisting with some of these last matters.

Project Timeline

The project to 22 months to complete, beginning in December 2002 and ending in October 2004. The project was originally planned for 18 months. See the Summary of Work Plan section below for more details.

Summary of Work Plan

Our final work plan called for a project schedule of 18 months from initial internal preparations (training, workspace setup, hiring process) to completion (all material digitized, with associated cataloging, available in VIA and Hollis, and all material returned to Theatre Collection). Several factors (introduction of a conservation component into the project at a late stage, readjustment of throughput estimates from the digital imaging studio, adjustments of project staff work schedules) lengthened the schedule, so it became essentially a twenty-two-month project. Actually, work continued somewhat on the project over the following several months, as permanent departmental staff completed work left by the project assistant.

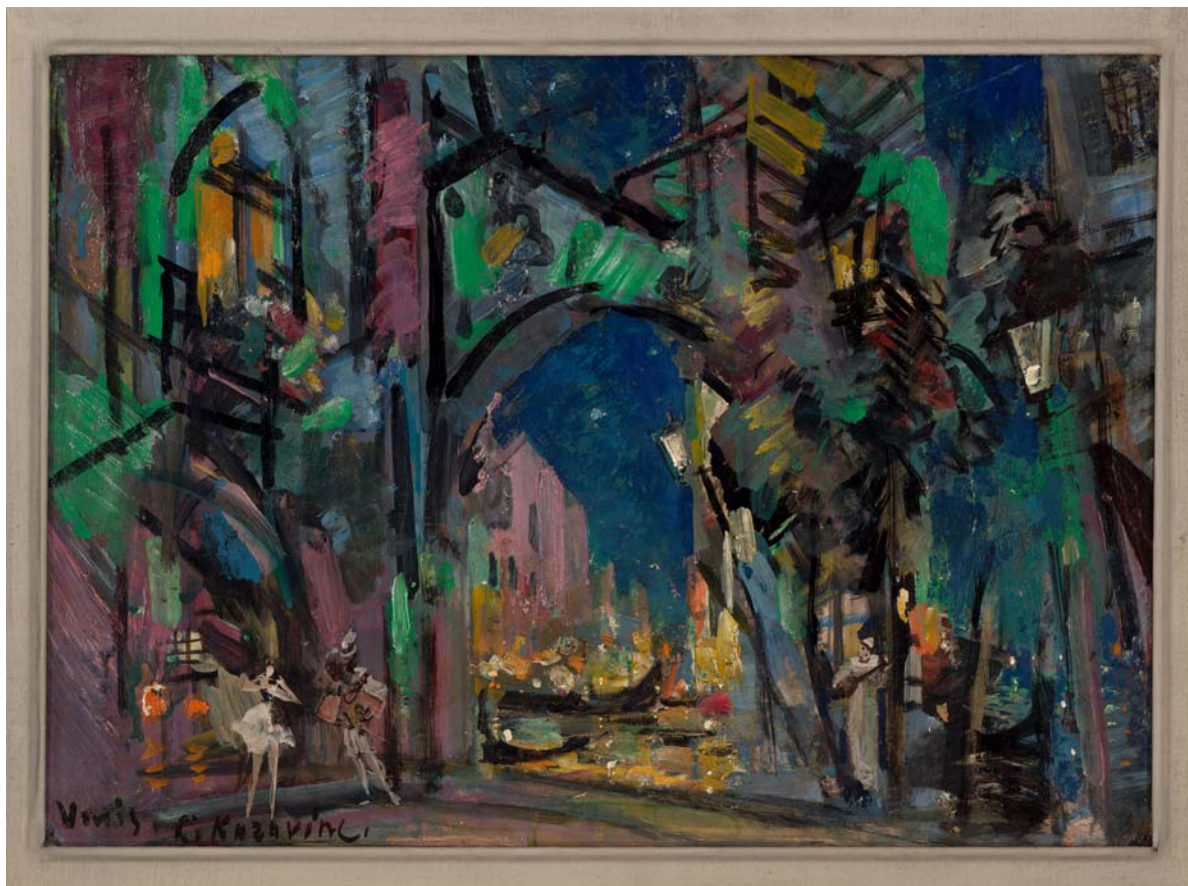


Fig 4. Le Carnaval: scene design: [night scene in Venice]
Creator: Korovine, Konstantine (1861-1939), painter (artist)

In the most general terms, the first 2 months (from December 2002) consisted of preparations and hiring; the next 2 months (from February 2003) consisted of examination of the collection and conversion of old cataloging information to build a recordkeeping and inventory framework; the following 16 months (from April 2003) consisted of selection, digitization, conservation, and cataloging, with related logistics and recordkeeping. The final 2 months (from August 2004) were largely concerned with the exhibition and documentation, inventory and checking. After the exhibition ended, the artwork had to be returned to the collection and records updated, and some material sent back to conservation for deferred work.

Lessons Learned

We are asked to comment on lessons learned. We feel confident that this collection was well worth preserving and disseminating in digital form, and that the quality of the digital images has been well suited to the intended purpose and audience. I think we have already made good use of the resulting corpus of images, and this is already leading to increased external use. It was essential that we had a staff member involved in this project who was

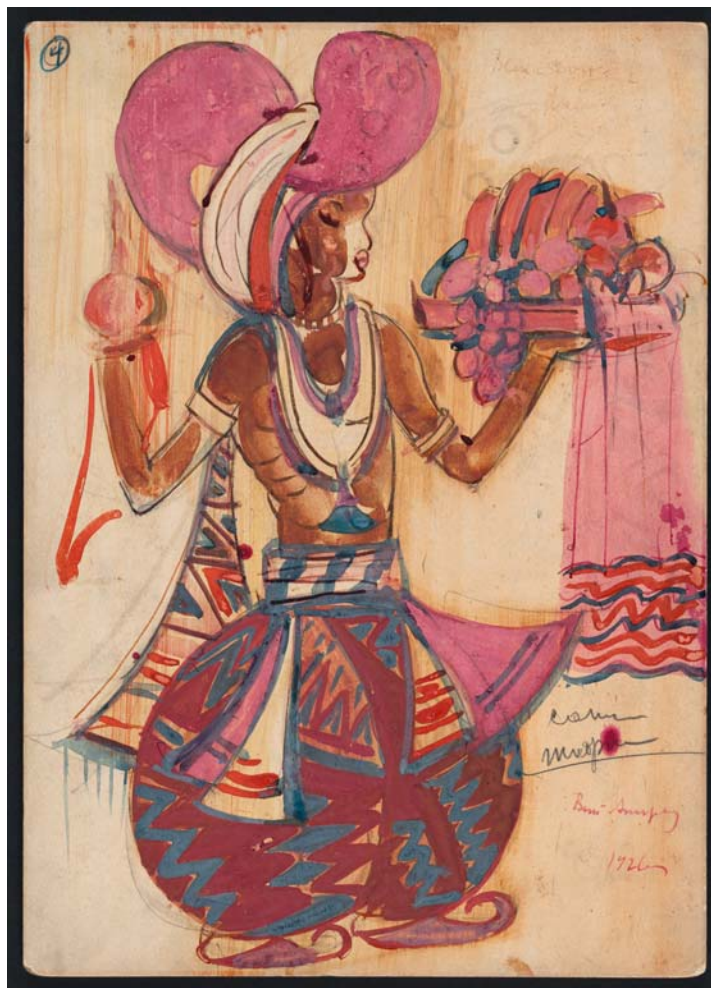


Fig 5. Legend of Azaide : costume design : eunuch
Creator: Anisfeld, Boris Israelevich (1879-1973), artist

familiar with the subject and the languages, and someone who was an experienced archivist and efficient manager. We certainly underestimated the time and complexity of logistics and recordkeeping, especially after the additional component of conservation was introduced, and also the number of special holding areas that would be required as multiple batches of artworks were in various stages of progress. We also should have assigned on a more official and systematic basis someone to proofread and correct VIA and Hollis records, because more errors were introduced into these records than we had anticipated.

Budget

Initial Budget:

Salaries and Fringe:	\$26,317
Digitization:	\$33,580
Other (web dev.)	\$2,500
Total planned expenses:	\$62,397

Initial Budget- Local Contribution: \$31,198.50

Initial Budget l - LDI Contribution: \$31,198.50

Final Expenses:

Salaries and Fringe:	\$36,853.84
Digitization:	\$29,070.00
Total expenses:	\$65,923.84

Final Local Contribution: \$34,725.34

Final LDI Contribution: \$31,198.50

Discrepancy: Project went over the initial budget by \$3,526.84. This cost was covered by the local unit. The additional funds were used to cover staff costs. Extra funds in the Digitization and the Other expenses line were also used for staff costs.

VIA Search Strategies

All of the records from the project contain the line: "Part of LDI project: Russian Theatrical Designs in the Harvard Theatre Collection". To find all the project records in VIA, search for Russian Theatrical Designs (with or without quotations), with a Limit to the Harvard Theatre Collection in Repository.

Submitted by
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