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Professor Farrell

Introduction to Art

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George Barbier and the Art Deco Era: A Love Story

They were perfect for each other. Not at first, first they would have to survive a war and take hold of the future. They would have to define themselves. Then, together they would flourish.

George Barbier made his way to Paris from his home in Nantes only a few short years before the outbreak of the Great War in Europe. He was studying under Jean Paul Laurens while also working as a costume/set designer for the new production company in Paris, the Ballet Russes (George). Barbier's contributions in theatre were visionary earning him a spot in the French haute couture world. George had received acclaim for his works at the 1910 Salon des Humoristes and regularly published illustrations in avant-garde publications in Paris and other commissions in various mediums thereafter (George). It is noticeable that his style varied for each project but in 1913 he found his own muse and began dedicating much of his time to personal publications (George). By the end of the war and with the rapid rise of the Roaring 20's, Barbier was ready to take center stage and the love affair began. The spirit of what would become Art Deco started to form. During the age between the world wars, with economic prosperity and a renewed optimism/exuberance for life, Barbier's creations were ushered out of the theatre and breathed life on the streets of Paris inspiring new fashions and styles of decor.

Fashion scholars today have commented on his artistic relevance and versatility in this era: “Barbier was in the forefront of the alliance between art and fashion. His superb draftsmanship, color sense, and ability to infuse freshness into historic influences combine to produce a distinctive image that defines the modernity of the art deco style” (Steele).

The pivotal muse marking the time Barbier started creating new personal publications in 1913 was found through his tie to theatre. The Ballet Russes hosted the masterful Russian dancer, Vaslav Nijinsky. Barbier became inspired by the “poetic” movements of the celebrated Russian dancer and went on to illustrate two books: "Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky" (1913) and "Album Dédié a Tamar Karsavina" (1914) (Nijinsky). From the stage to the pages of Barbier’s books and finally to the streets of Paris, scholars have recognized this path of inspiration and the influence the designs would have on popular culture. “[These were some] of the first lavishly produced editions de luxe that became so popular in France and London during the 1910's and 1920's” says one source (Nijinsky). Which elements of “Nijinsky and Tamara” would become characteristic of Barbier’s later work and the Art Deco era? His stylized space, color, shape, and line used to capture the essence of the dancers created scenes of exoticism, luxury, and grace that would soon blossom in the new lifestyle society embraced.

Through line and space, Barbier conveyed a far off exoticism and society envisioned an era of extravagance. The costumes of the dancers in the first book, "Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky," set the scene in palaces of India. Curved lines of flowing scarves, strings of pearls, pointed shoes, and loose fitting clothes

create movement as if the dancers were gliding across the stage. The illustrations in “Nijinsky and Tamara” took on an overall aesthetic suggestive of Ancient Greece. Barbier was said to have a great admiration for classical antiquity having seen Greek and Etruscan vases at the Louvre (Steele). The stylized compositions had the high contrast between the subject and the background similar to the Greek style. A crisp white figure demands attention against solid black backgrounds in many of the book’s illustrations. Simple silhouettes of a branch, a cloud, tasseled ropes, etc. give interest to the negative space but much of it is left undisturbed. Other illustrations have geometric borders framing the space commonly seen in Greek pottery. The two-dimensional depiction of the dancers is characteristic of the Greek pottery as well as Egyptian paintings Barbier also saw in the Louvre. Exotic influences found home in the rejuvenated post war economy. Privileged society was able partake in exotic world travel and see the diverse cultures of India, Greek, Egypt first hand. For others, the extravagance was popularly recreated for the love of the idea of travel. (Art). Barbier himself was described as having a “love of the exotic [resulting] in spectacular beribboned, furred, feathered, and jeweled fantasy costumes” often depicted as they were in “Nijinsky and Tamara” (Steele). Infusion of culture in fanciful costume-like garments and decoration was instated as a theme of Art Deco motifs.

The refined use of color and shape defined luxury in a modern sense and fostered an era of optimism. Geometric borders framing some illustrations as mentioned before, geometric shapes ornamenting the costumes and making up the architecture of the background in “Nijinsky and Tamara” would become a major

characteristic of Art Deco design. Geometric shapes stand out in high contrasting colors arranged in repeating checkerboard floor tiles or diamond patterned pants. To balance the sharp geometric details, soft organic and naturalistic shapes are used in clouds and trees, in floor pillows and lanterns. All of the illustrations are primarily black and white featuring accenting colors of golden yellow, orange, red, and blue. Intent and patterned repetition of both shape and color assisted Barbier in creating “bold, stylized images that conveyed mood and atmosphere” (Steele). The style is sophisticated and glamorous, it makes a bold statement and demands attention. The dark backgrounds are suggestive of nightlife and being out on the town. In these prosperous times, society felt comfortable making a statement by splurging on luxury goods (Art). People were having fun again after years of war and looking to what seemed like a bright future by fully embracing new modern luxuries.

Clarity of line and space in “Nijinsky and Tamara” exuded the dancer’s effortless beauty and grace. Society started to embody such confidence outlining an era of possibility. The “poetic” grace of the dancer had inspired Barbier. The illustrations emphasize long vertical lines from the tip to the toe. Necks are outstretched and arms are lengthened creating a narrative drama and graceful elegance within each character. This upright, elongated posture would continue in his later illustrations and went on to inspire the actresses of the era in their roles on movie screens (Art). Idolizing movie stars became a widespread source of style inspiration further spreading the influence of the dancer’s graceful aura. The clarity of space is attributed again to the element of high contrast in Barbier’s illustrations. The intensity of the subject against the dark abyss of the background could be

interpreted as an allusion to a spotlight. The Art Deco era also marked the liberation of women in many aspects. Every woman could become the starlit of her own performance. Women had entered the workforce during the war and remained after it ended, they were demanding equal pay, women had earned the right to vote and the liberation was creating a shift in society (Art). "Attitudes were changing and the progressive, modern women of the 1920's started rebelling against tradition" (Art). The flappers carried themselves confidently as the "found their wings" (Art). Anything was possible, even fantasy becoming reality; It was the era of possibility.

Sadly, the great era quickly met its demise. With the death of George Barbier in 1932 and Art Deco no longer having a place in the hardening world with the start of World War II in 1939, the optimism and possibility of the era had vanished. Albert Flament once said in regards to Barbier's work, "When our times are lost in the dust, some of his water-colours and drawings will be all that is necessary to resurrect the taste and the spirit of the years in which we have lived" (Steele). He could not have known of the shock the world would have to be resurrected from after the second World War subsided but Flament was right to believe the collective spirit of exuberance would be immortalized in the art of George Barbier. His unique utilization of space and application of color, shape, and line remind us of the modernity Art Deco embraced and the hopes the era held in a seemingly promising future.

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