

## 'Rite of Spring': Influence on the arts far-reaching

By [RICHARD CHANG](#)

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"The Rite of Spring's" impact on visual culture should not be underestimated.

The ballet, its costumes and set designs influenced other artists, designers and choreographers for generations to come.

It all started with Nicholas Roerich, a Russian painter, writer, archaeologist and mystic. A Slavophile and expert on ancient Russian history, Roerich painted the backdrops and designed the costumes for "The Rite of Spring."

But he did much more than that. Along with Igor Stravinsky, he conceived the story ideas for the production, which was based on pagan rituals and a primitivist desire to return to the earth.

Roerich made the dancers' costumes look like colorful Russian and Slavic folk costumes, and painted ritual symbols on them, such as circles, triangles, diamonds and crosses.

He created numerous costume sketches and painted the backdrops with tempera and pastel. Large works such as "Kiss to the Earth" and "The Great Sacrifice" were bucolic and naturalistic, while his costume drawings were filled with bright color inspired by fauvism, the avant-garde European art movement.

The celebrated dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky refused to even begin conceiving the ballet's dances until he saw the backdrops and costumes.

"Roerich was inspired by Matisse and Gauguin," said Kenneth Archer, an art historian who helped research the original 1913 production for the Joffrey Ballet's 1987 reconstruction. "He chose these reds and greens and blues that don't look like the traditional (ballet) colors. They were much more like the fauvists, the Post-Impressionists."

Roerich's designs incorporated shamanic symbols and patterns, which would have a profound influence on Nijinsky's choreography.

Twenty-four years later, Los Angeles choreographer Lester Horton picked up on the ritualism and designs and adopted "The Rite of Spring" with Native American dancers in a Wild West setting. The ballet made its American debut in 1937 at the Hollywood Bowl, and launched Chosen One Bella Lewitzky into stardom. She later founded her own important dance company.

### **TIES TO KANDINSKY**

With its dissonant notes, unusual rhythms and tribal dance moves, "The Rite of Spring" has been heralded as the birth of modernism. It paralleled the work by another Russian expatriate – Wassily Kandinsky.

The artist, writer and professor was also interested in Russian folk art and culture. But he pushed art toward pure abstraction, eliminating figures and recognizable subjects in his work and focusing on color, shape and line.

Kandinsky was fascinated with the relationships between color, music and visual patterns. In his book "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" (1910), he praised Ballets Russes for its "total art" combination of theater, music, art and dance.

Kandinsky's oil on canvas "Composition VIII" (1923) has been set to "Rite of Spring" in a surprisingly fitting animation on YouTube.

"I think that the whole model of the Ballets Russes was based on the idea that the dance and the music and the visual designs were working as one," said Lorin Johnson, associate professor of dance at Cal State Long Beach. "That kind of synergy – we look at dance that way today."

Johnson is serving as artistic advisor for the "L.A.'s Rite" festival and curated an exhibition of Stravinsky's influence on dance-makers in Los Angeles, including rarely seen photographs and sketches of the original 1913 production. "Stravinsky and L.A. Dance" runs Feb. 1-17 in the Stern Grand Hall of Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and is free.

## FROM ART TO LITERATURE

The list of artists who experts say were probably influenced by "Rite of Spring" runs long: visual artists Natalia Goncharova, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian, André Derain, David Hockney, Georges Braque and the cubists; choreographers Sasha Waltz and Shen Wei; and, of course, a host of musicians.

Hockney, a prominent British artist, did set designs for a 1981 production of "Rite of Spring" in New York and was influenced by Roerich's colors and naturalism, which he incorporated into his own work.

Millicent Hodson, a dance historian who also helped with the 1987 Joffrey reconstruction, compared the rise of abstraction in painting to what occurred onstage at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

"The use of stage space and the democratization of space, in which all parts are important, can compare to what happens to the canvas in abstract painting," she said.

Hodson even alluded to Irish novelist James Joyce and his modernist works, such as "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" (1916) and "Ulysses" (1922), as literary analogies.

"Joyce created a whole new grammar of writing, a sound-language," Hodson said. "Rite of Spring" is "the same track as someone like Joyce – to create a new consciousness of what the reader, or viewer, has to go through."

Ultimately, "The Rite" has had a major impact on the arts and our culture, one that still resonates today.

"It changed everything, and we accept those changes," Hodson said. "The rules that were broken then are now accepted as new rules."

**Contact the writer:** 714-796-6026 or [rchang@ocregister.com](mailto:rchang@ocregister.com)