



Erté (Romain de Tirtoff) (1892-1990)

by Julia Pastore

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One of the most innovative designers of the twentieth century, Erté created striking Art Deco fashion designs. His sketches featuring exquisite women, sheathed in vibrant fabric, glittering jewels and feathers, have inspired everyone from *haute couture* fashionistas to Las Vegas showgirls and drag queens.

Born Romain de Tirtoff to a wealthy family in St. Petersburg, Russia on November 23, 1892, Erté discovered a love of costuming through the ballet. By his teens, he was sketching his own designs and at age 20 ventured to Paris. A private man who wished to protect the privacy of his conservative family, he created his nom de plume, Erté (ER-Tay), from the phonetic pronunciation of his initials. This playful and clever, yet genderless, nom de plume added to his mystique.

Erté's early designs and costumes for the dancer Mata Hari brought him some attention, as did his illustrations for the Paris magazine *La Gazette du Bon Ton*, but it was not until his drawings appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* that he gained widespread recognition. From 1917 to 1937 he did hundreds of dazzling pen and ink drawings and 240 covers for the weekly fashion magazine.

More than any other designer, Erté brought the decadent style and rich colors--jade green, crimson, and orange--of the Orient to life for Westerners. Influenced by everything from Greek vase paintings to Egyptian idols, Indian iconography and Russian religious art, Erté's designs embraced the exotic; they often seemed straight out of *Arabian Nights*.

Exquisitely detailed and precise, his drawings are playfully erotic, emphasizing luxury, beauty, and spectacle. The women in his drawings may be scantily clad, but the somewhat androgynous female form is beautified and celebrated rather than exploited.

When male figures are incorporated into his design, they are nearly always homoerotic. His designs were so popular and imaginative that Erté was given space in *Harper's Bazaar* to describe his scenes in quaint Wildean tales.

The independent spirit that fired his creative life also suffused his private life. For Erté, his art was his life and he claimed solitude was essential in all stages of his work.

At the height of Erté's fame in the mid-1930s, the sudden and tragic death of Prince Nicholas Ourousoff, his friend and business manager, dealt him a severe blow. The two had lived together in Monte Carlo from 1914 to 1923. Although the details of their relationship are ambiguous, this was one of the most defining friendships of his life. Another was with a Danish designer named Axel.

Between the two world wars, Erté designed spectacular scenery and costumes for the ballet, opera, theater, and music-hall. His work on the Ziegfeld Follies, the Folies-Bergère, and shows at the Casino de Paris and the London Palladium is considered some of his best. But Erté's imagination stretched far beyond clothing. He designed everything from fabric, linens, and furniture to handbags, watches, and perfume.

bottles.

Although Erté continued to work extensively throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it was not until the Art Deco revival of the 1970s and 1980s that his work again became fashionable, particularly in the United States. Many of his lithographs, including *The Alphabet* and *The Numbers* series, became popular posters.

In 1975, he published a memoir, *Things I Remember: An Autobiography*. While discreet, the book is frank about the number and nature of his romantic liaisons, including descriptions of the homosexual demimonde of 1920s Paris.

Vigorous and working until the end, Erté died on April 21, 1990 at the age of 97. His unique vision and genuine talent have made him a lasting fashion icon.

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