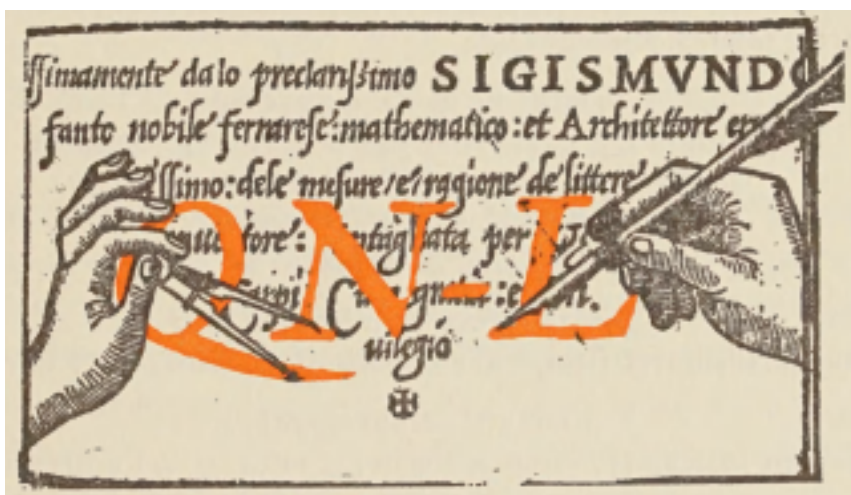


*The Book Club of California
Quarterly News-Letter'*

Quarterly News-Letter

LXVII NUMBER 4 FALL 2002



Speaking of Pochoir:

The Art Deco World of George Barbier

BY DR. ADELA SPINDLER ROATCAP

Bibliography Strikes Again!

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Speaking of Pochoir:

THE ART DECO WORLD OF GEORGE BARBIER

By Dr. Adela Spindler Roatcap

VANCE GERRY, printer at his Weather Bird Press in Pasadena, California, has recently published an English translation of an article written by Art Deco artist and illustrator George Barbier some time before 1932 and first printed in the Parisian journal *Arts et Métiers Graphiques* in 1937¹. As with most publications dealing with the art and craft of pochoir, Vance Gerry's little book sold out even before he finished printing it. Gerry chose this article because in it Barbier expounds on the history and technique of making pochoirs and extends his homage to Jean Saudé, one of the most important practitioners of this process. In clarifying the meaning of the word *pochoir*, Barbier tells us that it refers to the metal stencil, or patron, as well as to the finished illustration. The metal *pochoirs* used by Jean Saudé were miracles of delicacy cut out by goldsmiths with special tools. The worker in Saudé's atelier, Barbier explains,

...places his metal stencil on the paper to be illuminated and fills the holes with a brush full of color called a pompon or a goujon. These metal stencils are cut with a bodkin and are called pochoirs; as many colors, as many pochoirs....

Jean Saudé's magnificent book "*Traité d'Enluminure d'Art au Pochoir*", Paris, Aux Éditions de l'Ibis, 1925, is still the bible of the art of pochoir as well as a remarkable livre d'artiste. It was published in an edition of five-hundred copies, of which sixty, signed by the author and his collaborators, include such a patron as Barbier describes in his article, a metal stencil that seems to be a piece of fine lace rather than a sheet of metal. Saudé describes how, by using a series of pochoirs and applying layers of color on a page, the craftsman could create special effects, even reproducing works of art such as paintings by the old masters. This method also requires precise knowledge of the chemistry of color. To be a coloriste one needs to know, not only how to separate the colors in the specific design, but also how to create gradation of light and shade, and how to duplicate the effects of colors no longer in use. In addition, the skill of the stencil

¹ POCHOIR: An article from *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, Paris, 1938. By George Barbier; translated by Marie & Robert Lohse. Reprinted by Vance Gerry. Pasadena, CA: The Weather Bird Press, 2000

cutter, requiring the use of goldsmith's tools, takes years to master, not to mention excellent eye-sight. The patient, repetitive effort of applying color on paper or vellum, Barbier explains, was usually performed by young women with small hands,

*...work which demands of these vivacious hands this smiling dexterity,
this taste and skill which belongs to these little Parisiennes!*

George Barbier's books, issued in small editions, are now Art Deco treasures commanding increasingly steep prices. Among the most famous are those containing the designs with which he immortalized the performers of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and other theatrical personalities of pre-World War I and the 1920s. Four books, only four, bear witness to Barbier's interest in this topic: Nijinsky, 1913; Tamara Karsavina, 1914; Casanova, 1921; and *Vingt-cinq costumes pour le théâtre*, 1927.

Just who was George Barbier? Born October 10, 1882, in the French city of Nantes, Barbier studied with two local artists, de Broca and Lesage, developing skills in graphic design, posters, and greeting cards, before moving to Paris. He was inspired by classical French seventeenth-and eighteenth-century architecture, the Rococo paintings of Antoine Watteau, and the exquisite drawings of Ingres, whose emphasis on the precision of line Barbier carefully studied. He considered the new aesthetics of the 1890s — Japonism, the colored wood-block prints of Hiroshige and Hokusai, and the Ukiyo-e prints of theatrical personages and courtesans of Edo. Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of cabaret life and Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* did not fail to excite young Barbier. Tall, blonde, and affected by "Anglophilia," Barbier adopted the English taste for impeccable tailoring and country living, and even changed his name, signing his early work "E-W Larry," (for Edward William Larry) or just "Larry."

By 1908, "Larry" had become a student at the atelier of Jean-Paul Laurens in the École des Beaux-Arts, on the Left Bank, right across the Seine from the Louvre. He was an habitue of the museum, often drawing items from its collection of Greek and Etruscan vases, Tanagra figurines, and exquisitely colored Egyptian antiquities.

George Barbier's contemporaries were fashionable young artists who distinguished themselves by wearing a bracelet and calling themselves "The Knights of the Bracelet." Devoted to the "decorative" rather than to the "fine" arts, these emphasized modern fashion and the stage. Besides Barbier, the

group included Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape, Jean Cocteau, Charles Martin, Pierre Brissaud, André Marty, and the brothers Boutet de Monvel, Bernard and Roger. From precisely these confreres the best of the Parisian Art Deco artists and illustrators arose. An older, well-respected father-figure was the often flamboyant stage and costume designer of the Ballets Russes, Leon Bakst, who was about to astonish the art world with new conceptions of color harmonies.

George Barbier, as well as "tout Paris," attended the premier of the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre de Chatelet in May 1909, and was overwhelmed by the genius of Vaslav Nijinsky, Tamara Karsavina, Michel Fokine, Ida Rubinstein, and Anna Pavlova. It may have been Diaghilev himself who encouraged young Barbier to search for "motifs" in Cleopatra and Scheherazade. By 1910 "Larry" had already attracted the attention of Maurice de Brunoff and Lucien Vogel, editors and publishers of illustrated magazines devoted to the latest fashions, theatre, and ballet, such as the *Gazette du Bon Ton*, *Comoedia Illustré*, and *Le Théâtre*, as well as lavishly illustrated deluxe theatre programs and remarkable artist's books.

In 1911 Barbier made his own Paris debut by exhibiting ninety-two drawings, colored by watercolor or gouache, at the Galerie Bernard Boutet de Monvel on the rue Tronchet. On the cover of the exhibition catalogue, Barbier depicted two personages from the Ballets Russes: the kneeling Nijinsky as a Faun offering a basket of apples to a stylish young lady, perhaps Karsavina, from Leon Bakst's *Carnaval*. The Symbolist writer and poet Pierre Louys, in the catalogue's preface, compared Barbier to Hokusai, praising the freshness of his inspiration, his use of contemporary gestures and manners and his fidelity to the aesthetics of Greek art, that veritable hellenisme so well exemplified by a young Californian dancer — Isadora Duncan, also a favorite subject of Barbier's.

George Barbier divided his exhibit into three sections. First, images from Greek myth — Adonis, Dionysus, Ganymede, Psyche, and Bilitis. Then dancers from the Ballets Russes, and finally, "Belle du Moment." The couturier Paul Poiret, the jeweler Luis Cartier, and members of the international "beau monde," such as the Aga Khan, became patrons and collectors of the modish watercolors and miniatures of George Barbier. These originals were subsequently to be reproduced by the pochoir method.

The first of Barbier's books dealing with the theatre was *Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky*, with poems by Francis De Miomandra, printed at La Belle Edition, Paris, in July, 1913, and published under the auspices of Maurice de

Brunoff. Barbier's Art Deco style is distinguished by a classical, two-dimensional simplicity and a thorough understanding of the principles of composition. In *Nijinsky*, Barbier included one of the most famous ballet prints of all time, depicting the very short Nijinsky, as the Golden Slave, dancing with the very tall Ida Rubinstein as Zobeida in *Scheherazade*. The somber black and brown color scheme heightens the dramatic effect of the frenzied dance as well as the sexual innuendo. A second illustration depicts the Golden Slave placing an Art Deco rose on the body of the supine Zobeida. It was one of Barbier's exquisite watercolors of the legendary Ida Rubinstein in *Scheherazade* which was eagerly snapped up by the Aga Khan.

Meanwhile, in London, Cyril Beaumont, an avid balletomane whose bookshop at 75 Charing Cross Road was just beginning to turn a profit, was so charmed by these prints that he hurried to Paris, met Maurice de Brunoff, and arranged to publish the English edition. In Bookseller at the Ballet, Beaumont remembered:

I remember sitting up several nights in my hotel bedroom until the early hours trying to find an English equivalent for Miomandre's beautifully phrased French. In due course the edition was printed and delivered to me, but when I tried to sell copies to other booksellers, I met with a cold reception. In those days the very suggestion that a publication dealt with Ballet caused a raising of the eyebrows. Nous avons changé tout cela.

In 1914, George Barbier's *Tamara Karsavina*, with poems by Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, was published in Paris by Pierre Corrad. Like *Nijinsky*, this small, square folio contains a set of twelve pochoir plates depicting one of Diaghilev's favorite dancers in her most popular roles.



Outstanding are the harmonies of violet, lavender, and rose in the sophisticated composition of Nijinsky and Karsavina dancing in *The Spectre of the Rose*, and the stark drama of Karsavina in *Giselle*. Barbier used only one color, green, and a solitary tree to express the sinister forest in which the Willies dwell. He allowed the black printing ink and the white Arches paper to serve as additional colors. The tiny details on the costumes and flowers are reminiscent of the “garland style” so popular then with Fabergé or Cartier, for whom Barbier also designed advertising placards.

After World War I, Barbier issued two more collections of theatrical designs. First, the now quite rare *Panorama Dramatique Casanova*, with costumes and stage designs created in 1918 for the playwright Maurice Rostand and published by Lucien Vogel in 1921—twenty-four charming plates which were meant to be framed, so that many a surviving volume is incomplete. In the preface, Barbier wrote about his predilection for the eighteenth-century Venetian Rococo style. He then chose his favorite typeface, a cursive Nicolas-Cochin de Peignot. *Casanova* was printed at the presses of Studium. The plates, many lavishly heightened with gold and silver, were realized at the atelier of the Parisian *coloriste* Daniel Jacomet.

In 1927, *George Barbier: Vingt-cinq costumes pour le théâtre* was published in Paris by Camille Bloch and Jules Meynal. The stunning silver paper cover embellished with its emerald green sanserif title has an inset black and white woodcut print, an Art Deco variation on Sandro Botticelli's portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as Venus. The frontispiece consists of an etched portrait of a dapper George Barbier by his friend Charles Martin. The plates were printed by Frazier-Soyer on white Arches paper, colored, using gold and silver paint as part of the intricate textile patterns, and mounted on gray Arches laid paper, with captioned tissue guards. Although the coloriste is not specified, chances are these complex compositions were colored by Daniel Jacomet or Jean Saudé. Barbier's job was to provide the watercolor or gouache originals, design the lettering on the cover and title page, and add ornamental figures and motifs as needed. His Paris atelier was quite busy during the Roaring Twenties with international commissions for fashions, theatrical costumes, textiles, graphics, and even interiors and furniture designs. It is as doubtful that he, George Barbier, ever cut the stencils for his pochoir as it is that an architect might mix cement and lay brick. In the quite lengthy preface to *George Barbier: Vingt-cinq costumes pour le théâtre*, Edmond Jaloux tells us that "George Barbier est un des artistes les plus précieux et les plus significatifs de notre époque."

Vance Gerry's reprint of Barbier's article includes a full-page illustration, colored by stencils, of course, of two "little Parisiennes" standing in a studio with great tall windows and tables on which the prints are neatly stacked, while their "vivacious hands" get on with the tedious job of applying layers of colors to the waiting sheets. This might be Barbier's atelier, of course, or that of one of the great *coloristes* or *chefs d'atelier* such as Jean Saudé, his confrere André Marty, or even Marty's student and collaborator, Daniel Jacomet, to whom we owe so many beautiful and rare *Livres d'artiste*.

Dr. Adela Spindler Roatcap is a professor of Art History and a frequent contributor to these pages.