



UC San Diego

## **(Re-)Discovering Diaghilev: Dandy, Director, Diplomat, Dictator, or Despot?**

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Who was Sergei Diaghilev? What did he do? Condemned by his own country as the ultimate exemplar of bourgeois decadence and depravity, he was excised from Soviet cultural history. Yet,

in the international world of art, music, dance, and theater, he was revered, even idolized, as the greatest impresario of all time. Creator, critic, curator, Diaghilev played all these roles, defining for many the very meaning of contemporary art in the twentieth century. In his role as founder and director of the legendary Ballets Russes, Diaghilev commissioned and patronized a veritable lexicon of artists, choreographers, composers, dancers, and designers: from Matisse to Picasso, Fokine to Massine, Debussy to Stravinsky, Nijinsky to Pavlova, Bakst to Chanel.

### **April 6: The Dandy (1872–1899)**

Born in 1872 to parents of nobility, Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev was raised in Russian high society and sent to study law at the University of St. Petersburg. In 1890, he joined the Nevsky Pickwickians, an informal circle of student intellectuals who founded a progressive art journal, *Mir iskusstva* (“The World of Art”). As Chief Editor, Diaghilev became the primary spokesman for contemporary art. In 1899, he was appointed artistic advisor to the Imperial Theatres in Moscow.

### **April 20: The Director (1899–1906)**

In 1905, Diaghilev organized a historic portrait exhibition of Russian art treasures at the Tauride Palace in St. Petersburg. He himself traveled to secure loans of more than 4,000 paintings, owned by 450 collectors. The innovative installation of the exhibition displayed groups of paintings in differently decorated interiors to create a sense of artistic synthesis. It was a huge success, catapulting Diaghilev to the pinnacle of the Russian cultural elite.

### **May 4: The Diplomat (1906–1909)**

The great turning point for Diaghilev came when he moved to Paris in 1906. He organized an exhibition for the Salon d’Automne entitled *Two Centuries of Russian Art and Sculpture*. Filling 12 galleries in the Grand Palais, it included 750 works by 103 artists. In 1907, he produced a series of concerts at the Paris Opera, featuring Russian

nationalist composers, which culminated in Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (in Russian) with Fyodor Chaliapin in the title role.

### **May 18: The Dictator (1909–1919)**

Influenced by the dance innovations of Isadora Duncan, Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the synaesthetic theories of Charles Baudelaire, Diaghilev finally achieved his ultimate synthesis of the arts with his creation of the Ballets Russes, which opened in 1909 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris. Dancers included Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, and Mikhail Fokine. The Ballets Russes toured throughout Europe and the Americas uninterrupted for two decades, from 1909 to 1929.

### **June 1: The Despot (1919–1929)**

Diaghilev conceived of music, choreography, set design, and costume as equal, integral aspects of the ballet, and he commissioned many great composers, choreographers, and artists to create original works for the Ballets Russes. In its 20-year history, the company could boast of an illustrious, international "Who's Who" of collaborators, elevating ballet to a new height in the cultural hierarchy. Ruthless and dictatorial, Diaghilev persevered in realizing his artistic vision, until, debilitated by diabetes, he died in Venice in 1929.

**Presenter:** Victoria Martino is a magna cum laude graduate of Harvard University and the University of California, with degrees in art history, music, and literature. She has written and lectured extensively on artists and composers of the early twentieth century, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Arnold Schoenberg. She has curated numerous museum exhibitions in Europe and the United States and published over 60 catalog essays and scholarly articles. A professional arts critic, she has published art, music, dance, and theatre reviews in several notable journals.