

Erté

A Mirror of Fashion for 75 years



Erte in his studio at Serves, 1924. Photographers were so impressed that they snapped it from all angles.

An Affinity with the Present

Born on November 23, 1892, the Russian fashion and costume designer Romaine de Tiroff, also known as Erté (which is the French pronunciation of his initials, R.T.), was one of the most prodigious designers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unlike any others his designs were inventive, colorful and audacious. These characteristics took other designers and the fashion society by storm.

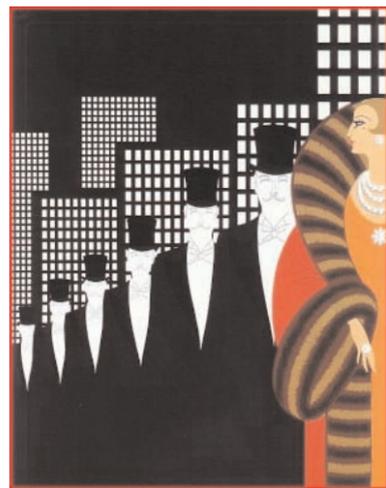
Erte's prominent, extended career began at the gentle age of six, through the act of sketching a dress for his mother Natalia Mikhailova. "Erte began his fashion career at age six when his mother had a dress made from one of his first sketches." (His father, Pietor Ivanovich, an Admiral of the Imperial Fleet, in the end, supported his son's natural born talent. As Erte himself reminisces:

"Of all the members of my family, it was my father who dominated my thoughts at this time. What a trial I must have been to him! Once I had staged my first rebellion against those wooden soldiers, there was no let-up." (Things I Remember 17)

Soon after all of this, in 1912, Erte left St. Petersburg for France. He studied at the Academie Julian and contributed to a Russian fashion magazine called Damsky Mir. Then in 1913, at the age of 21, Erte began designing dresses for Paul Poiret, a famous French couturier.

Within that same year Poiret presented some of Erte's drawings to Lucien Vogel, editor of La Gazette du Bon Ton, France's most famous fashion magazine during this time period. His first designs for the magazine were published the following year. Erte's first break into American fashion society was with his cover designs for the chic journal Harper's Bazaar as a fashion illustrator. Erte contributed his drawing to the journal for 22 years. Referring to covers for Harper's Bazaar, White states, "They shaped the entire modern tradition of fashion drawing." His first cover for the magazine was published January 1, 1915.

Strong powerful lines and triangles given by the gentlemen's heads are contrasted against the curvy shapes of the woman.



After a few years, Erte began designing sets for plays and musicals. "Erte is perhaps best remembered for the gloriously extravagant costumes and stage sets that he designed for the Folies-Bergere in Paris and George White's Scandals in New York." Erte also worked on many other projects "dealing with theatrical design, including a brief stint in Hollywood with MGM (Metro-Goldwyn Mayer) studio, at the invitation of Louis B. Mayer, in 1925." Louis B. Mayer sent for Erte at the recommendation of William Randolph Hearst, a mutual friend, to design for the film Paris, the story of a French couturier. "In inviting Erte to Hollywood Louis B. Mayer wanted to bring a new elegance to film decor."

Monte Carlo and the Harper's Bazaar

Thenceforth, as a result of World War One within Europe, the closing of many fashion houses caused the designer to go towards another direction. D'Assailly gives a clear depiction: "The two very successful shows with his artwork were before the stock market in 1929 crashed, which financially ruined the designer. Erte not only continued to design for the theatre, but for ballet and opera as well." What hasn't our exceptional Erte done? According to Adhikari, "Erte's extended career expands from the stage to the catwalk. Among the most elaborate of his designing jobs was that done for the show Casanova at the Scala in Berlin, in 1930". His work on this piece was one of the most lavish works Erte had ever done on costumes. His designs lead to the progression of the costumes made especially for music halls.

Soon after he worked on a New York show called, The Bottom of the Sea, which "gave him the opportunity to create innovative costumes to represent under water creatures." He designed a costume of a lovely pink octopus—not your average octopus costume, but a long flowing evening gown that had octopus arms swaying to and fro. Other remarkably thought-out costumes were those of the capes for the ballet La Mer (The Sea).

Erté seemed to go places in fashion no other designers had gone before. His designs live on as a memorial to one of the most imaginative and exciting artists that has ever lived.



Splendeur, evening gown for Bendels, New York, c. 1916. 9 1/2 x 6. The artist regards this as his favorite fashion design.

Another model of the vastness of success within Erte's fashion career can be seen in his designing outfits and performing pieces for one of the most famous showgirls of her time Mata Hari. Erte recalls:

"She was not really beautiful. She had a sensuous body, but she lacked personality and there was even something a little vulgar about her, although she would come to fittings wearing smart, classically tailored suits. She was always even-tempered and easy to get on with. Her exotic image was the product of her own vivid imagination." (Things I Remember 25)

Even though Erte felt all women were beautiful, his clothes were definitely designed for a slim and trim type of woman. "Not all women could wear the apparel Erte designed . . . for some this art was the door of escape into a gossamer never-never land." Using his flamboyant



159 *Symphony in Black*, London Symphony, London Palladium 1938. 14 1/2 x 10 1/2. Collection Mrs R.W.Beck, New York.

designs, Erte spent the next 22 years, elaborately illustrating, fashionable plumed hats and long, flowing dresses perfectly capturing the emerging designs of the Art Deco period.

In 1941, Erte started designing for Suzy Volterra, a dancer for the Opera de Paris. He was designing for "Toi, C'est Moi," when he got into an accident, which prevented him from using his right arm. Erte describes what it was like, "I was desperate--being unable to work was a tragedy for me." After his experience he was convinced that it was essential to teach every child to write with both hands, just in case.

The Music Hall

In the 1930s Erte seemed to lose a little steam when it came to fashion business. "Although Erte's popularity in the fashion world (as opposed to the theatre) waned somewhat after the 1930s, there has been an enormous upsurge of interest in his work in recent years" During the remaining years of the forties and fifties Erte remained relatively obscure. Within the sixties he regained his popularity with the Paris Exhibition of his artwork.

Erte's last design for someone other than himself was thought to be in 1980 at the age of eighty-eight years old. As Meyer adds, "And one can only marvel at his creativity at that late age." Surprisingly, then, in 1988 Erte designed elegant costumes for the Broadway musical

Stardust. This would prove to be his last major project. In 1990, at the age of ninety-eight, Erte died. He was then called the "prince of the music hall" and "a mirror of fashion for 75 years". It is apparent that Erte's designs were innovative, decorative, and ahead of his time. As Schnachner states:

"From the sensational silver lame costume, complete with pearl wings and ebony-plumed cap, that he wore to a ball in 1914, to his magical and elegant designs for the Broadway musical Stardust in 1988, Erte pursued his chosen career with unflagging zest and creativity for almost 80 years."

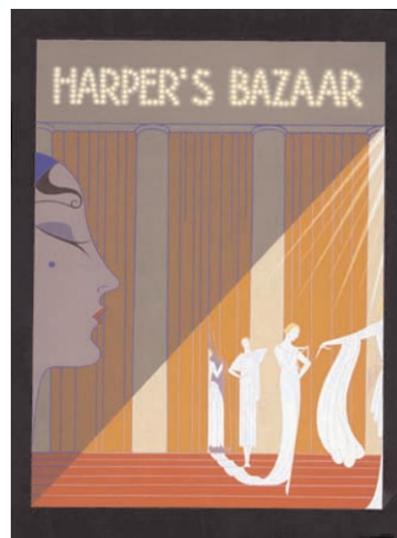
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New Techniques

Born 1892, Remain de Tirtoff, this flamboyant fashion and stage designer, was the son of a wealthy Admiral of the Russian Imperial Fleet, Piotr Ivanovich de Tirtoff. Destined by his father for a military career, Erté confounded expectation by showing an extraordinary talent for design. He also adopted the pen name, Erte, from the French pronunciation of his initials "R.T."

In 1912, at the age of 18, Erte moved to Paris, where he immediately found work sketching fashion illustrations for a Parisian designer, Paul Poiret. It was Paul who taught Erte the art of couture, helping him visualize the effect clothes had on the female anatomy. In 1914, Erte was hired by Harper's Bizarre. Using his flamboyant designs, Erte spent the next 22 years, elaborately illustrating, fashionable plumed hats and long, flowing dress-

Paris Openings,
Harper's Bazaar
Cover Design
March 1931
16 x 12 inches



es perfectly capturing the emerging designs of the Art Deco period. During this time, he also designed stage sets and costumes for the girls of the famous Follies-Bergère, the Ziegfeld Folly Girls, and George White's Scandals Club in New York City. After working on costume designs for Hollywood film studios, Erte left the magazine to create sets and costumes for the theater and opera. For the next 40 years, he used this venue to indulge in exotic, scandalously dressed celebrities, exuding the sexual power of the female body. Among his roster of clientele were Josephine Baker, Mata Hari, Gaby Deslys, and Anna Pavlova, just to name a few. These achievements earned Erte the title of "The Father of Art Deco".

Hollywood: A Frustrating Episode

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The advent of WWII saw the popularity of the deco period decline and with it, the decline of Erte designs. After a period of relative obscurity in the 1940s through 1950s, Erte found a new, enthusiastic market during the late 1960's, after several Salon shows in Paris, London and New York. He also made lasting friendships, among them was Amedeo Modigliani. At the age of 75, Erte began to create limited edition serigraphs based on his designs. Making serigraphs allowed Erte a wider audience and helped satisfy his creative needs. International success in this endeavor led him to expand his work to a variety of materials, most notably bronze. On his death in 1990, Erte was hailed as the "prince of the music hall" and "a mirror of fashion for 75 years". Erté pursued his career with unflagging zest and creativity for almost 80 years, and today, the influence and style of his work continue to live.

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One of his most charming and amusing series of costumes was made for London Symphony at the London Palladium in 1938.

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