



Romain De Tiroff dit Erté

1892-1990

Flowers, 1925

Gouache sur papier

Titré et numéroté au dos n°362

Dimensions : 37 x 27 cm

Dimensions : 14.57 x 10.63 inch

## Biography

Romain de Tiroff (1892 -1990) turned the French pronunciation of his initials into the famed Erté pseudonym. Now, his name is forever linked to fashion, music hall shows and the Art Deco spirit, a movement of which he is recognized as the leader.

The genesis of Romain de Tiroff's art can be found in his native St. Petersburg, a French-speaking city where art was omnipresent in the first decade of the 20th century. Erté began working for opera companies after 1945, and his passion for Russian ballet and memories of performances at the Maryinsky Theatre in his youth always nurtured him. His parents held season tickets to the famed St. Petersburg theater, and the young Erté went nearly every Tuesday to see performers like Sarah Bernhardt in *La Dame aux Camélias*, Serge Prokofie in his 1911 debut and Rimsky-Korsakov, a friend of his father's. The influence of his hometown also can be seen in the artist's poetic, dreamy and sometimes dramatic character. During his long visits to the Hermitage Museum, Erté assiduously observed Greek vases, Persian miniatures, Oriental arabesques and the solid nobility of Russian art. All these artistic influences would later find their way into his work with infinite subtlety. Ballet had a strong impact on the young boy, who at the age of nine began dance lessons with the great choreographer Marius Petipa. Torn between dance and drawing, Erté hesitated for a long time between his two passions. Convinced that he couldn't go without drawing every day while he sometimes forgot to dance, in the end, Erté chose drawing.

Although he officially left St. Petersburg in 1912 to study architecture at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, Erté had already signed his first contract with the fashion magazine *Damiski Mir*. He sent the publication Parisian fashion designs to support himself, in addition to the allowance paid by his sponsor each month. When the young man arrived in Paris, he was alive with the rhythm of Diaghilev's Russian ballets and immediately found his place. By 1913, Erté was working for Paul Poiret, the most famous couturier of the day, and designed his first theatrical costume for dancer Mata Hari. Despite his short tenure there due to the onset of the first World War, Erté received exceptional training, developing an eye for perfection, a deep respect for the importance of design and an awareness of the many secrets hidden within stage costumes. Establishing himself in Monte Carlo in 1915, he began sending his first works to *Harper's Bazaar*. This marked the beginning of a remarkable collaboration with the influential fashion magazine, for which he produced a total of 240 covers. Between 1915 and 1936, Erté sent no less than 2,500 drawings for the inside pages of the magazine, which held an exclusive contract with the artist. Music hall performances enjoyed their greatest success in France between 1919 and 1953, and Erté played a major role in them, thanks in part to his long collaboration with Max Weldy, the costume designer at the *Folies Bergère*. He also began a long collaboration with Pierre Santini at the *Bal Tabarin* in 1933, which ended in 1952.

Meanwhile, between 1925 and 1926, Erté's international reputation took him to Hollywood, where he worked for a time for Metro-Goldwin-Meyer. He was commissioned to design sets and costumes for a number of films, including *Ben Hur* and *La Bohème*. His Hollywood adventure was cut short by the inconsistencies of the film *Paris*; the artist felt that the MGM film did not properly showcase his beloved city and Erté ultimately refused to be associated with the film. Journalist Maurice Feuillet wrote in the *Gaulois Artistique* on April 21, 1927: "Erté is not only an inventor of frivolities, a skilled costume designer, a magician of decor and an enchanter of enchantments, he is above all a creator of symbols, and this is perhaps one of the most endearing forms of his talent." After all, the man's creations possessed form, color and uniqueness that made them in vogue worldwide. The theater, with its ballets, magic and marvelous shows held under the glare of electric spotlights, was an empire that Erté loved because he could give shape to his fantasies. There, the unreal mingled with the real and fiction became reality. Having already designed costumes for actresses and opera singers for one-off shows, after 1945 he was commissioned to design all the sets and costumes for opera and ballet

productions, which brought him immense success. Erté was always uncompromising on the refinement of his sets, all crafted with perfect balance and grace. Starting in 1916, Erté recorded all his creations in his archives and kept a copy of each of his gouaches. This was almost certainly to ensure that no one would steal his designs, as had happened with Poiret. Each drawing was titled and numbered, and sometimes dated, while commissions and shows were recorded in large registers. The methodical work was reminiscent of the military rigor of the naval officers from whom he descended. Above all, these archives allow us to appreciate the fertility of his imagination today, and to follow the precise evolution of his commissions.

A perusal of archives and articles reveals the artist's uncompromising public image became that of a humble and modest man who, despite his many successes, was delighted by the extremely favorable reception of his exhibitions at the Grosvenor Galleries in London and New York in 1966 and 1967. The Metropolitan Museum of Art saluted his genius by acquiring all works presented in a retrospective, which would be shown to the public the following year in the exhibition Erté and his contemporaries. Erté's most famous creations include the anthropomorphic alphabet, in which each letter is represented by a woman's body in motion, designed in 1928. He also created numbers in the same spirit, as well as the seasons, the four emotions and jewellery. Always in search of new adventures, at the age of 70, Erté began a new career as a sculptor and lithographer, bringing his finest artworks to a new audience.

#### Museums

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New-York  
LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Victoria and Albert Museum, Londres

#### Bibliography

Erté, Charles Spencer, 1970, London  
Erté at ninety: the complete graphics, edited by Marshall Lee, foreword by Jack Salomon, 1982, London  
Erté at ninety: the complete new graphics, edited by Marshall Lee, foreword by David Rogath, 1987, London  
Erté, Jean Tibbets, 1996, New York