

# Feature



## Erté: "The Father of Art Deco" Stacy Meyn\*

*This contemporary costume designer epitomizes the Art Deco style through his work in theater, movies, art, and sculpture.*



Erté, c. 1920.

He lived nearly a century (1892-1990), creating stunning and elaborate costumes and stage designs, and his immortal style is instantly recognizable to this day. Most active during the 1920's and 1930's, Erté produced exquisite costume designs for the Ziegfeld Follies, the Follies-Bergère, "Harper's Bazaar" magazine, and MGM, among many others. His images were of gorgeous women draped in shimmering jewels, gossamer feathers, and rich vibrant fabrics, often decked out in massive elegant headdresses. When you say *Art Deco*, you say *Erté*.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, aristocrat Romain de Tiroff escaped his father's plans to place him in military service and became a painter and ballet aficionado. He made and modeled his first design at age five, with a little sewing help

from his always finely-dressed mother. He moved to Paris in 1912 to pursue a career in fashion illustration, with an apprenticeship in the haut couture house of Paul Poiret, and ultimately designed costumes and sets for the Follies-Bergère.

In order to protect his and his family's privacy, he chose the nom d'artiste "Erté," derived from the French pronunciation of his given initials (air-TAY). In 1914, he went to his first ball adorned in a silver lamé costume of his own design, complete with pearl wings and ebony-plumed cap.



Dress Design, with complete instruction to the dressmaker. One of THE few signed *Romain De Tiroff* in the lower margin with his address. Also signed *Erté* twice



Erté designed costumes for the dancer Mata Hari and illustrated for the Paris magazine *La Gazette du Bon Ton*. There followed a 22-year contract with Harper's Bazaar, which not only put Erté on the cover over 240 times, but on the map of high-level design. He also worked with George White's "Scandals" in New York.



Costume design for a Lantern-bearer in *Venise Au XVIII Siècle*, Follies-Bergère, 1919.

Extravagant, exotic, and romantic designs for the music hall, opera, and the traditional theater ensued, including Hollywood in 1925, when the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Louis B. Mayer, invited Erté to design for the cinema.



Costume design for Ganna Walska as the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Act II, Chicago Opera Company, 1923.

Erté's style stemmed from many sources, from Greek vase designs to Egyptian hieroglyphs, along with Russian, Persian, and Indian influences. He brought what, at the time, was termed "the Orient" to the West, replete with suggestive style and vivid colors, such as crimson, fiery orange, and jade green.



Costume design for the Diamond in *Les Pierres Précieuses, Folies-Bergère, Paris, 1923* and *Irving Berlin's Music Box Revue, New York, 1924*.

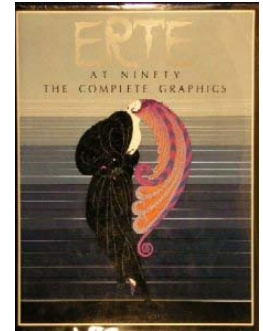
Not limited to the stage and screen, Erté also designed fabric, linens, handbags, watches, perfume bottles, ceramics, and even furniture. He did not wield a brush or a pen until the entire design was complete in his mind's eye. Accompanied by his snoozing cats, Erté would paint or draw into the wee hours of the morning, when his beloved solitude was at its height.

World War II and the buildup of the military-industrial complex relegated Erté to obscurity, until the Art Deco market resurfaced in the 1960's and demand arose for his sculpture and lithographic prints. His series "The Alphabet" and "The Numbers" were quite popular (the letter "J" at right).



In 1967, art dealer Eric Estorick ensured the revival of Erté's career through London and New York exhibitions, and another quarter-century of works hit the market, this time with affordable copies.

In 1975, Erté published a rather revealing memoir, *Things I Remember: An Autobiography*. Four years later, the Smithsonian Institution organized a retrospective of his work, which traveled to major museums in the United States and



Canada. Several large and glossy books were printed about his exploits and artistry: *Erte at Ninety*, *Erte at Ninety-Five*, and *Erte Sculpture*.

Erté left us in 1990 at age 97, but not before giving us the indelible images of his extraordinary imagination. During his long and productive career, he defined for future generations the elegant style of Art Deco.



*Stacy Meyn's "day job" involves instruction about aviation security and explosives detection, and she is halfway through her Master's in Education. Costuming and prop building are welcome alternatives. Herd electrons to [stacymeyn@yahoo.com](mailto:stacymeyn@yahoo.com).*

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