

LESSON FIVE: Ideal Performance



IMAGE THIRTEEN: Oskar Schlemmer. German, 1888–1943. Study for “The Triadic Ballet.” c. 1921–23. Gouache, ink, and cut-and-pasted gelatin silver prints on black paper, 22 5/8 x 14 5/8" (57.5 x 37.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lily Auchincloss



IMAGE FOURTEEN: El Lissitzky. Russian, 1890–1941. *The New Man* from *Figurines: the three-dimensional design of the electro-mechanical Show “Victory over the Sun.”* 1920–1921, published 1923. One from a portfolio of ten lithographs, composition: 12 1/8 x 12 5/8" (30.8 x 32.1 cm); sheet: 21 x 17 7/8" (53.3 x 45.4 cm). Publisher and printer: Robert Leunis & Chapman, Hannover. Edition: 75. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase 1944. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

The history of modern art has many examples of artists’ collaboration with choreographers, musicians, and writers in the staging of performances, many of which shocked audiences. While artists were more likely to be responsible for set designs and costumes, some also wrote and even directed performances.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will compare two different designs for theatrical costumes by artists Oskar Schlemmer and Lissitzky.
- Students will consider how these artists applied their artistic ideals to theater design.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to think about the role that costumes play in a performance. What can costumes tell us about a character? How can costumes tell a story?
- Ask your students what kinds of choices might be made by a director who is staging a performance (dance, opera, or play).
- Ask your students what kinds of choices a set designer might make.
- Ask your students to consider the expectations of an audience going to see a performance. What is the role of the audience?
- Ask your students if they have ever seen a performance that shocked or angered them. Ask them to explain the circumstances.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Begin by looking at Schlemmer’s Study for “The Triadic Ballet” (Image Thirteen). Explain to your students that this is a preparatory sketch for a ballet developed by the artist.

- Ask your students how many figures they can identify in the image. Ask them to describe each figure in detail. What do your students notice about the space these figures inhabit?
- In-class writing exercise: Ask your students to choose a character in one of the sketches. Ask them to write a short description about the character. Who is this person? What is he or she wearing, and why? Ask what name they would give to the character.

Study for “The Triadic Ballet” reflects Schlemmer’s interest in numerical patterns. “We must allow ourselves to be astonished by the marvel of proportion, by the splendour of arithmetical ratios and numerical correspondences, and construct the principles we need from the results of such enquiries,” he once wrote.¹²

The word “triadic” refers to the prevalence of the number three in the performance: three dancers, three musical movements, and three artistic elements (dance, costume, and music). Developed by Schlemmer over the course of several years, the ballet did not have a plot. Instead, the figures told a story about moving geometric forms. The ballet was set to music by the avant-garde composer Paul Hindemith.

Between the years 1923 and 1929, Schlemmer, who taught painting, drawing, and sculpture at the German Bauhaus school, also directed the school’s “stage” workshop. The Bauhaus, an artistic collective as well as a school, valued the integration of the arts, and focused on producing, “pure,” modern forms in painting, furniture, architecture, and other applied arts. The stage workshop made masks, costumes, and sets, and students were trained in professional stage production. The performances, which also toured venues outside of the school, embodied and promoted the Bauhaus. While he used abstracted, geometric forms, Schlemmer maintained the importance of the figure. As he once wrote:

12. Oskar Schlemmer, in “Diary Extracts, July/August 1923,” *Art in Theory*, 308.

But one great theme still abides, immemorably old but everlastingly new, the depicted object and creative subject of all times: humanity, the human figure itself. Man has been described as the measure of all things. Indeed!¹³

Direct your students' attention to Lissitzky's *The New Man* (Image Fourteen). Refrain from telling them the title right away.

- **Ask your students what shapes they can identify.**
- **Introduce your students to the work's title, and ask them to identify the figure. Ask them to describe how Lissitzky represented different parts of the body. Does it seem appropriate to them that this figure is called the "*The New Man*?"**

"The New Man" is a character in the radical 1913 Russian Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*. Met with outrage by audiences when it was first performed in St. Petersburg, *Victory over the Sun* would only be staged once more that year. As the title suggests, the opera tells the tale of conquering the sun. The first half of the opera consists of four scenes featuring the capture of the sun; the second half, consisting of two scenes, explores life after the sun's capture. The audience's discontent was due in part to the radically chaotic music by Mikhail Matiushin and the nonsensical text by Aleksei Kruchenykh. But the audience was also shocked by the minimal set and bright, geometrically shaped costumes designed by Malevich.

Lissitzky saw a production of the opera in 1920 and was inspired to stage it with mechanical puppets. In doing so, Lissitzky would have further reinforced *Victory over the Sun*'s Futurist intentions. In the title page of the portfolio, Lissitzky emphasizes the modern vision of the opera, writing, "The sun as the expression of old world energy is torn down from the heavens by modern man, who by virtue of his technological superiority creates his own energy source." Although the project was never fully realized, Lissitzky's portfolio of puppet designs exists, featuring such wildly named characters as "Globetrotter in Time," "Gravediggers," "Caligula in the Same Person," "Traveler through All the Ages," "Telephone Talker," and "The New Ones."

Lissitzky played a major role in the modern Russian art movements **Suprematism** and **Constructivism**, as well as in the international movements **de Stijl** ("the style"), Bauhaus, and Dada. Like many of his Russian peers, Lissitzky was dedicated to furthering the goals of the Soviet Union. He firmly believed in the benefits of mechanically reproduced art, and he repeatedly mass-produced his books, posters, and prints.

- **Ask your students to compare the figures in Lissitzky's *The New Man* and Schlemmer's *Study for "The Triadic Ballet."* What similarities can they find? Based on their observations and this lesson, ask your students to identify some themes and ideas shared by both artists.**

13. Ibid, 308.

ACTIVITIES

1. And the Award goes to . . .

Ask your students (in groups or individually) to write about a futuristic costume design they consider to have been successful. The costume they choose may be taken from a movie, play, ballet, or opera. Ask your students to consider what kinds of choices the costume designer made and what makes the design effective.

2. Design a Costume

Ask your students to design a set and costumes for a scene from a play (either of their own choosing or from a play being read in class). Students should begin by sketching some designs and writing a proposal outlining their ideas for the costumes and set.

3. Great Collaborations: Art, Dance, Music

Direct your students to research the collaboration projects of artist Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage, and choreographer Merce Cunningham.