



ROLF DE MARÉ AND BALLETS SUÉDOIS

Interview by Thomas Persson - Image research by Johan Rosell

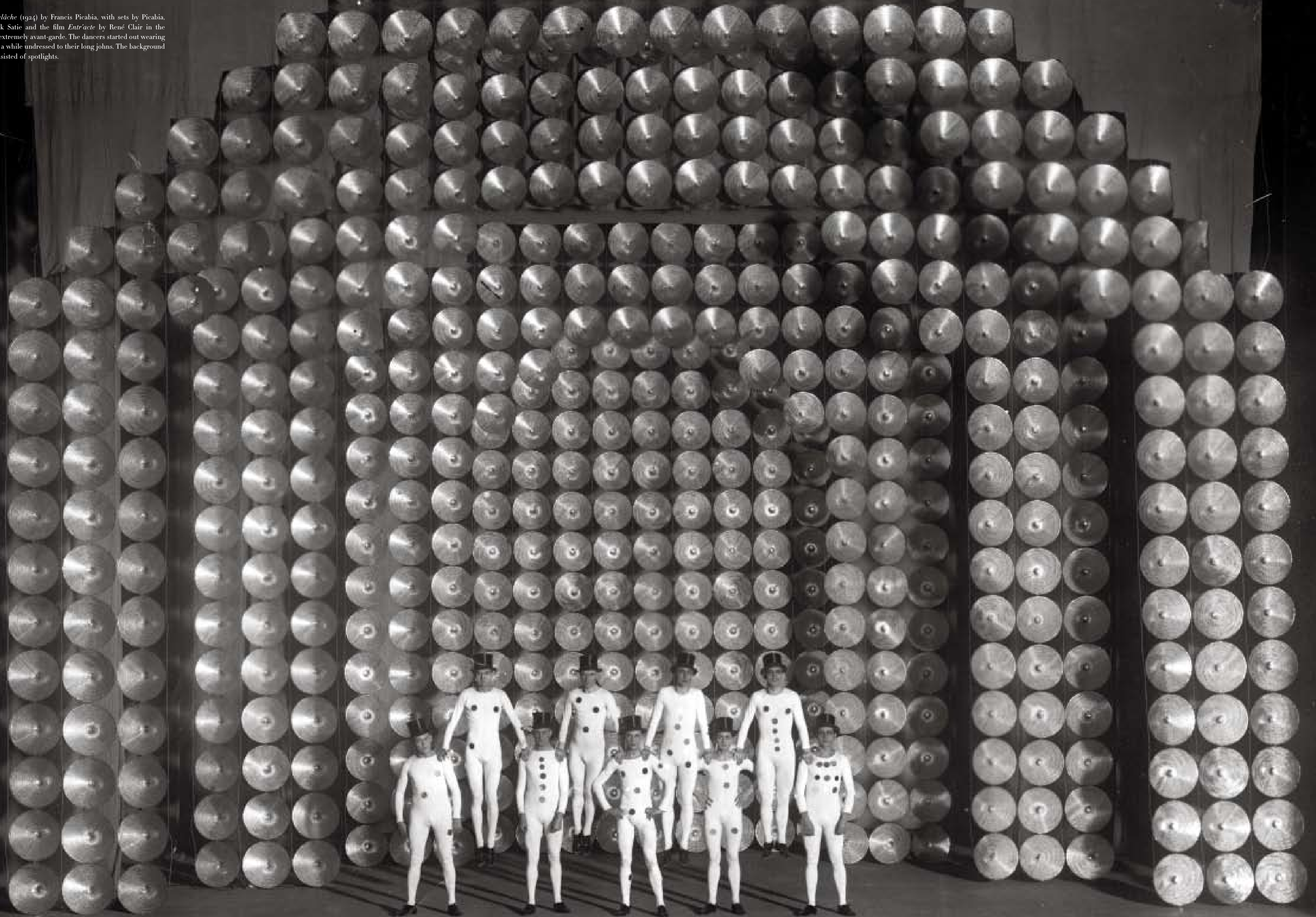
In its short-lived existence between 1920 and 1925 the Ballets Suédois electrified Paris by giving modern dance a whole new language. Jean Cocteau, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia and Erik Satie were among the many avant-garde artists who were given carte blanche to experiment on the company's stage, rivalling the famous Ballets Russes by thrusting the concept of ballet into the future. Behind the curtains stood its founder Rolf de Maré watching how *tout Paris* marvelled at the spectacle that had become a spirited extension of his private art collection. A Swedish aristocrat, a life-long patron of the

arts, a publisher, and the founder of the world's first dance museum, Rolf de Maré's rich life and legacy have long been unobserved but are now the subject of a new and fascinating biography written by Erik Näslund, the director of Stockholm's Dance Museum. At the Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent, he sits down with Pierre Bergé, the co-founder of the Opéra Bastille and president of the Jean Cocteau Committee, to talk about the value of creative collaboration, the progress of modern dance, and why Rolf de Maré and the Ballets Suédois played an important role in French culture.



Jean Börlin, the star and choreographer of the Ballets Suédois, in a publicity shot for the *Skating Rink*, a ballet with sets and costumes by Fernand Léger and music by Arthur Honegger.

The ballet *Relâche* (1924) by Francis Picabia, with sets by Picabia, music by Erik Satie and the film *Entr'acte* by René Clair in the interval, was extremely avant-garde. The dancers started out wearing tails but after a while undressed to their long johns. The background of the set consisted of spotlights.



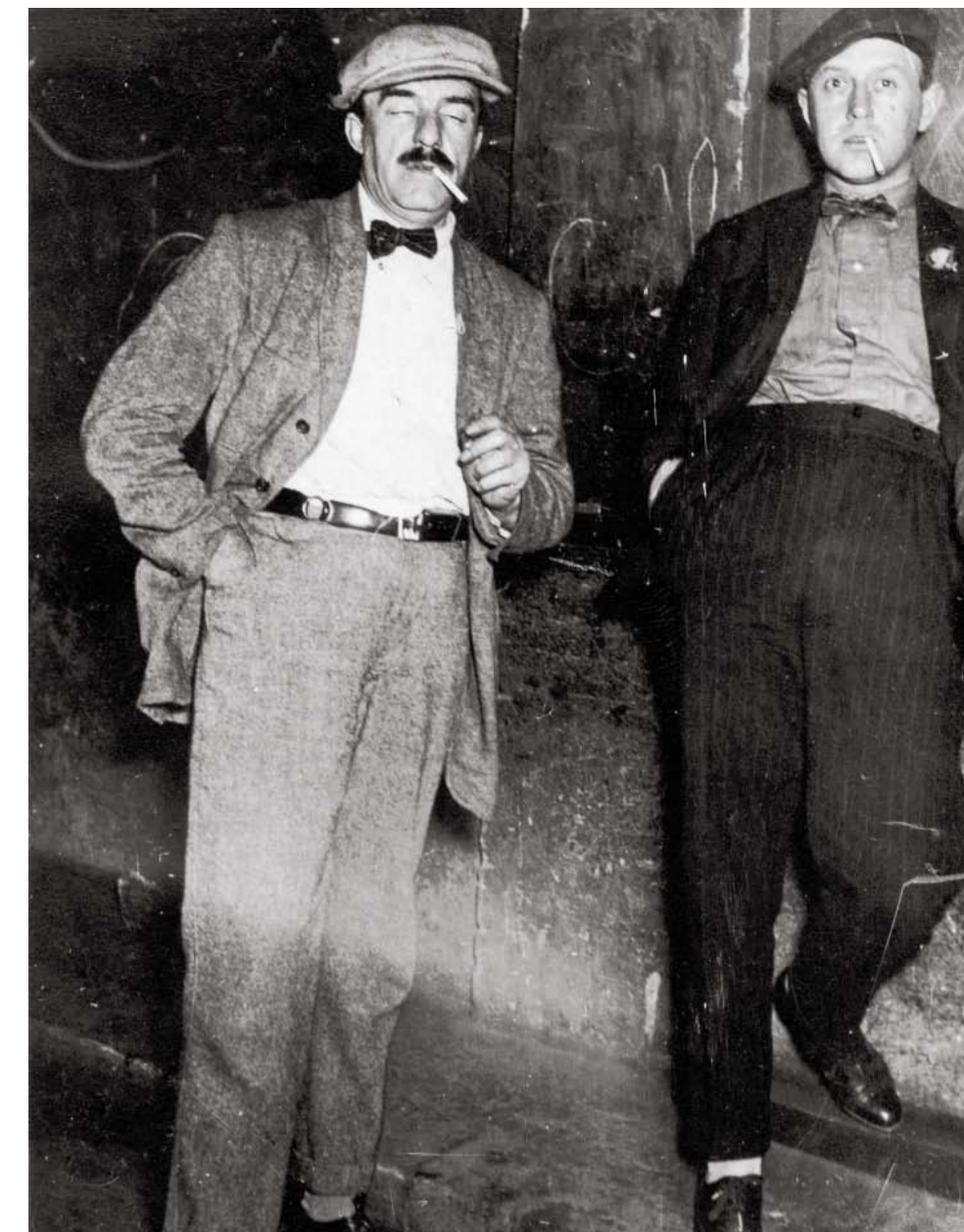


Rolf de Maré in his office at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.



A dinner with the participants of Jean Cocteau's ballet *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. The fourth man from the right hand side on the front row is Jean Börlin. Next to him in white sits Irène Lagut, who did the sets, and Rolf de Maré. Standing behind Börlin is Jean Cocteau. Number four to the left of Cocteau is the

prima ballerina Carina Ari and to her left is the composer Francis Poulenc. To the left behind Cocteau are the composers Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre and Arthur Honegger. The composers were all members of the group called Les Six.



Fernand Léger (to the left) and Rolf de Maré donned simple clothes and explored the working class bals musettes and bars of eastern Paris as inspiration for the *Skating Rink*.

Erik Näslund: What does *Les années folles* – the 1920s – mean to you, Monsieur Bergé?
Pierre Bergé: I think the 1920s was important for the creation of art: in every form, for instance in haute couture. Art is a reflection of our society, of the times, of the *art de vivre*. *Les années folles* was a reflection: It was right after the First World War and it was a mix of influences from all over the world and Paris was the capital, the centre of art and creativity. So for me the 1920s is an expression of the *art de vivre* in France. The Ballets Suédois was very, very famous at the time. Yet, today you notice that very few people know about it. This is due to our changing conception of the arts.
Thomas Persson: Haute couture was very much part of the arts of the 1920s.
Pierre: Yes, and I mention haute couture for a reason because the niche of haute couture no longer corresponds to the *art de vivre*. The *art de vivre* has completely changed. Before the last war it was Art Deco, it was haute couture, there were lots of balls, dinner parties, opening nights, the opera, everything. Today, this has completely vanished and haute couture means absolutely nothing. Rich people today don't want to look rich. Look at the richest man in the world, Mr Bill Gates. Look at the people

who stay at the Ritz. Life has changed. Rolf de Maré and the Ballets Suédois is a thing of the past. I think that what you are doing now with the publication of your book is absolutely fantastic because we must know our roots. Our roots are very important in the lives of everybody.
Erik: If you do not know your history you may try to invent the wheel again.
Thomas: In 1933 Rolf founded the world's first dance museum in Paris – a huge contribution to the cultural life of the times. Yet, Rolf de Maré's importance in the arts has somehow been overlooked. Why is that?
Erik: One reason is probably that Rolf de Maré was not the kind of person who promoted himself and his achievements. He kept a rather low profile. And after 1945 he was not so active in Paris. He spent a lot of time on his coffee farm in Africa and constantly travelled around the world on expeditions, filming dance and collecting objects for his museum. It was not until the late 1950s that he returned in earnest to Paris but then he received a lot of attention again and was called the "Swedish Diaghilev". All the books and attention devoted to the legendary Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes have of course put de Maré in the shadow. But now the time is ripe to put the spotlight on him again.
Thomas: How did you get the idea of writing your book, Erik?
Erik: I have been sniffing around the subject

for 35 years and when I was writing my books on the Swedish dancer Carina Ari, who was part of Rolf's company in Paris, and the painter Nils Dardel who was Rolf's close friend and lover for some years, I had the opportunity to further explore the subject of Rolf de Maré, the Ballets Suédois and Paris of the 1920s. So when I was appointed Director of Stockholm's Dance Museum in 1989, the idea of writing a biography of Rolf de Maré as art collector, ballet leader and museum founder gradually developed. He is an exciting character: a wealthy aristocrat who could have been content with living a life of luxury as a playboy, but instead used his wealth to promote art and artistic creativity. He was not an artist himself, but he had an eye for art and talent in others. And thus he wrote himself into the history of the arts: dance, theatre, music, painting...
Thomas: I think your book is interesting on so many levels. I love your narrative through the history of modern art, its movements and all the artists, and how Rolf de Maré used his ballet in Paris to create an avant-garde stage for art and creative collaboration.
Erik: Yes, and I think it was a very interesting period for the arts in general, the first decades of the 20th century, starting with Cubism, for instance, launched by Braque and Picasso, which then very quickly came to influence the other arts. In Russia especially, we find an incredible artistic creativity, particularly in the years before 1914, when Cubism and

Futurism were taken up by Russian artists and turned into a very special Russian movement. In the performing arts, as well, it was an exciting period both in Russia and in the West. Of course, the creative development lost its impetus to some extent because of the First World War, but after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and in the West in the 1920s, it picked up speed again. And Rolf de Maré and his Ballets Suédois became a centre for all the new artistic movements during its five years of existence in Paris. It became a hothouse for new "plants".
Pierre: It is also important to mention the Ballets Russes because it became famous at the same time.
Erik: Yes, without Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes there wouldn't have been any Ballets Suédois, of course. What they did for the dance and for the ballet was so revolutionary. After the Russians' début in Paris in 1909, ballet became "in fashion". It became fashionable to go to the ballet, and it had a big audience. Before the Ballets Russes, ballet was not considered an art form. It was only seen as an "amusement", pretty legs...
Thomas: It would be interesting to learn a little about how ballet went from amusement to art through the Ballets Russes.
Erik: What the Russians did was to engage great painters and great musicians for the ballet and so they created a synthesis of dance, dramatic action, music and painting. It was spectacularly colourful, dramatically

engaging and sensuous, not to say sexy. In the West, one had hardly seen male dancers on the stage before – they had almost disappeared during the late 19th century due to the cult of the Romantic ballerina – and when these Russian men, virile and virtuosic, flew across the stage, as if they had whirled in from the Russian steppe, the audience gasped, they had not seen anything like it. But it was the whole, unified, colourful expression that made the audience hold their breath. With painters like Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois creating the visual images and young composers like Igor Stravinsky creating the music, ballet came to be considered an art form. And the tremendous success of the Ballets Russes made it very tempting for other artists, not least painters – like Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Gris and many others – to collaborate in ballet projects.
Pierre: Yes, this is very important because it is true. And ballet became an art form because of the protagonists, its creators, like Nijinsky with Diaghilev. In a short time, he became a star, an icon, comparable with great rock stars like Mick Jagger or David Bowie of today. It's the same with Maria Callas and the opera. It's always the same. You have to find a great personality and suddenly people discover it as an art form.
Erik: That was what made Diaghilev and that period so extraordinary. It was a starting point for the whole experimental era of the

1920s. I also think that what was interesting with this period was the influence of painting and the decorative side of the performance. Very few choreographers are interested in that now.
Pierre: Nobody. You know, with Serge Diaghilev and Rolf de Maré it was the time of the painter, and it was completely different. You had the work of real artists – the painters, like Picasso for instance, and many, many others. And that was absolutely wonderful.
Erik: I think in Rolf's case the ballet was very much related to his art collection. He created a fabulous collection of modern art in the 1910s. He bought Braque, Picasso, Léger, and so on. In a way, I think he saw the ballet as an extension of his art collection. He wanted his paintings to come alive on the stage. It is typical that several of the painters in his collection were engaged as stage designers for his company.
Pierre: Because he was very involved in the art of his time. This is important because Rolf de Maré was one of the first to become interested in stage design, music and costumes, and that was the beginning of modern dance. He played an important part in modern dance.
Thomas: Do you think that it was Rolf de Maré's plan from the beginning, to become so experimental in mixing art with ballet and the stage? Or was it something that evolved more organically?

Pierre: More organically, absolutely.
Erik: Yes, you are quite right. But the impetus from the beginning was more visual and decorative, related to painting. Then the ballet became more experimental and avant-garde in the 1920s. So when he closed his "shop" in 1925, after having created the revolutionary happening called *Relâche*, he felt he could not go any further on the road of experimentation.
Thomas: You write that art collecting was in Rolf's blood, inherited from his maternal grandmother, Countess Wilhelmina von Hallwyl.
Erik: Yes, to some extent that is true. For a long time he lived with his grandparents in their palatial home in Stockholm, where he was surrounded by his grandmother's collections and helped her catalogue them. I think this spurred him on in that direction. But when he started collecting seriously in 1913–1914, he took a completely different direction than his grandmother who was very traditional in her taste and started to create a collection with the focus on modern art in general and Cubism in particular. But that direction was the result of his meeting with the young Swedish painter Nils Dardel. He was the one who guided Rolf into modern art and cultivated his taste.
Thomas: And he was able to actively cultivate it because he was such a privileged man. Rolf came from a very rich family – one of the richest families in Sweden.

Erik: Yes, absolutely. So, of course, he had the means to do what he did – and besides, he was very privileged in being the favourite grandchild of the Countess von Hallwyl.
Pierre: Where did the money come from?
Erik: The money came from the forests, from the big timber industry in the north of Sweden. That was the foundation of this immense family fortune. So, of course, it was very important that he had money. It certainly helped.
Thomas: It was a good way to spend the money.
Pierre: [Laughs] I agree with you. Money must be spent on the arts. Always.
Thomas: It is so touching to read about Rolf de Maré's wonderful relationship with his grandmother, and how she supported his avant-garde ballet in Paris. Do you think the Ballets Suédois would have existed without the help of Countess Wilhelmina?
Erik: Without her wholehearted support it would perhaps not have been possible. Although she sometimes complained about the family fortune being spent on something she could not always understand, she never let him down. She often gave him birthday or Christmas presents in the form of a cheque of a couple of million Swedish crowns. A nice and understanding grandmother indeed!
Thomas: So with this money from the Swedish timber industry Rolf created a ballet that had a world of influences, from

A model of the set of *Skating Rink*. Roller-skating was popular among the working classes at the time and the ballet is set in a roller-skating rink.



the Spanish painter El Greco, to African influences and the jazz of Cole Porter. However, it was the all-Swedish ballets, *La Nuit de Saint Jean* (Midsommarvaka) and *The Foolish Virgins* that became the most loved numbers.

Erik: Today we find the more experimental pieces more interesting, whereas in that period the most popular things were the Swedish ballets which were considered very exotic for a continental audience. They used Swedish folklore dancing, in the same way the Russian ballet used their Russian heritage. So yes, the Swedish pieces in the repertoire were the most popular at the time when they toured Europe and America. Today we find those less interesting and we look more to the avant-garde creations that pointed more to the future, to our own time.

Thomas: Such as *Skating Rink*, one of Fernand Léger’s contributions to the Ballets Suédois. Cubism had already entered the ballet context with Picasso’s work for the Ballets Russes in 1917, but Léger went much further, making the dancers into mobile scenery for his art work, equipped with roller skates! This must surely have been very new in 1922? *Erik*: It certainly was. One had hardly seen dance like this before. But it was the idea of Rolf and his dancer/choreographer Jean Börlin to extend the boundaries of what dance can be. That is why many of the critics were after them. They could not grasp that they tried to create new concepts of dance and performing arts.

Thomas: The choreography was created by Jean Börlin – the star of the Ballets Suédois. Please tell us a little bit about him.

Erik: Jean Börlin worked with the famous Russian choreographer Michel Fokine, who had been part of the Diaghilev enterprise, when he visited the Stockholm Opera in 1912–1913. Fokine spotted the young talent and later on Börlin was able to study for Fokine, thanks to Rolf who sponsored the young man’s studies.

Thomas: Your book is spiced with the romantic fact that Rolf de Maré created a ballet so that his lover, Börlin, could develop his talents as a choreographer.

Erik: Yes, Rolf wanted to create a platform for him and that is how the Ballets Suédois came into being.

Thomas: It’s interesting that the story of two of the most artistic and innovative ballet companies in the world also is the story of two homosexual love affairs: Diaghilev and Nijinsky, Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin.

Erik: Yes, there are many similarities between these two couples. Both Diaghilev and de Maré had a talent for bringing out and nurturing creativity in others. But an important difference is that Rolf was rich, very rich, whereas Diaghilev was not. He always was on the verge of bankruptcy and had to find rich people in Paris and London to pay his bills. This meant that he also had to keep an eye on the audience’s tastes, whereas for Rolf that was not necessary. He could afford to go his own way completely, without any consideration as to what the audience would think or like.

Thomas: The Swedish Ballet’s dress rehearsals were events on a grand scale. The audience included dukes and princesses and maharajas, and artists such as Picasso, composers like Erik Satie, and the fashion designers Jeanne Lanvin and Paul Poiret – much the same audience usually present at the Ballets Russes’ gala performances. Both ballets appealed to the same players in the artistic fields and were part of the big debate, internationally.

Erik: The soirées of the two rival companies were important events in the Paris society and the artistic world – one had to be seen at their openings. Both Diaghilev and de Maré were shrewd in the way they mixed the audiences. It was important for them to spread the word. The mouth-to-mouth method is often the best way of marketing something. The heated debates about some of Rolf de Maré’s productions were of course also good for marketing. Neither Diaghilev nor de Maré avoided a scandal if they could smell one coming. On the contrary. They understood its promotion value.

Thomas: Yet, you write in your book that the Russian Ballet was pre-eminently elitist in character, whereas the Swedes were working for a democratisation of dance.

Erik: The Swedes toured the provinces every year, while the Russians kept to the big cities. I believe Rolf de Maré really wanted to spread dance to a much wider audience than his rival who was associated with high society, a reason why many left-wing artists were so shocked when their “comrade” Pablo Picasso accepted the offer to produce stage designs for Diaghilev in 1917. It was almost considered treason. The non-elitist mark of the Ballets Suédois was one

reason why a painter like Fernand Léger was attracted to the Swedes.

Thomas: There was a great sense of artistic collaboration in Paris in the 1920s.

Erik: I had a friend who was the wife of the painter Nils Dardel and a friend of Rolf de Maré. I remember she came to my home and she looked into my bedroom, and she said, “Oh, I see you have a ‘partous’”. And I said, “Well, Thora, what do you mean by that?” And she said, “A partous! We had that in Paris in the 1920s. A big, big bed that everybody got into.” And I think that was also the spirit of the 1920, artistically, that all the arts got into that partous and participated somehow. Everything was allowed, artistically, sexually and whatever. No one cared and everything was open. Somehow I think what you said about the war having opened all the frontiers is very important. I think the big bed

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—Pierre Bergé

is a metaphor of all the arts coming together and relating to each other.

Thomas: And wasn’t there more room in the Swedish bed than in the Russian bed? Was it not so that Rolf de Maré gave his artistic companions freedom to do what they wanted, while Diaghilev liked to have more control?

Erik: Absolutely, Rolf was much less dictatorial than his Russian colleague and that is why I think Jean Cocteau became so interested in the Ballets Suédois because it was more open. Diaghilev always wanted to have the last word, and I think Cocteau felt more freedom working with the Ballets Suédois. It was an attraction to work with Rolf de Maré. Cocteau was also very important in setting the tone of the whole era, of course. He wanted to mix the arts, like he did in *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. He mixed spoken theatre, dance, cabaret...

Pierre: Cocteau is the perfect example: the mixture of all the arts. He had a talent for all of them, from poetry to cinema. But today it’s finished, even if the borders are all open. Today you cannot find an artist with all the sensibilities that Cocteau had.

Thomas: Because Cocteau was very much of his time...

Pierre: Yes, and he also made his time in many ways and that is why he was so important. It’s this wonderful blend between him and the rest of the people in his time. When I say “his time” I mean what was happening around him

– young people, young painters, young dancers, young choreographers. Cocteau was very, very important. He was an enormous creator in every sense of the word.

Erik: You knew him for many years, Monsieur Bergé.

Pierre: I met him in the beginning of the 1950s and we were friends until he died in 1963. It’s a family story between Cocteau and me. When Cocteau died I was a very close friend of his adopted son Édouard Dermit, who inherited Cocteau, and when Édouard married many years later he had a son. The godfather was Jean Marais and the godmother was Jacqueline Picasso. And for his (second or third) son I was the godfather, which means that we were a very intimate family story. I loved Édouard very much. He was a fantastic person. Very honest and incredible.

Thomas: Cocteau was also the one who really pushed the Ballets Suédois into the forefront of the avant-garde.

Erik: Absolutely. It might have happened anyhow but he was very important and made the ballet go in that direction. They met at an ideal time. Cocteau had had his break with Diaghilev a couple of years earlier and here was this young company appearing on the French stage that he could sort of mould and leave his strong imprint on. I think that was important to him.

Thomas: Cocteau said that Rolf de Maré, Nils Dardel and Jean Börlin did France a great favour by letting its young artists experiment on their stage, creating a completely new art form.

Erik: It was quite amazing – all the pieces of new French music that Rolf de Maré commissioned and brought to a wider audience. They toured all over Europe and in the States. It’s interesting when one reads reviews from this period – a lot of people were against what the Ballets Suédois did, people in the classical ballet were, of course, attacking them aggressively. But what everyone agreed on – and this is interesting – is that one could say a lot about the Ballets Suédois and what Rolf de Maré did but what they did for French art, for French painting, and especially for French music was outstanding! Everyone agreed on that, that they really did a lot to promote French art and music. I think that was really important in those days.

Pierre: How many pieces of French music did they commission?

Erik: In total they produced 24 new works, out of which I would say that 80 per cent was new French music. That is quite a lot.

Pierre: Very impressive, yes.

Erik: Then, of course, they toured Europe so French music was really spread around. Of course, that encouraged Diaghilev to start commissioning works from French composers. They were competing all the time. Discovering talent and having the possibility to nurture it. I think that was characteristic of both de Maré and Diaghilev, the nose and eye for talent. You also have a talent for spotting talent, Monsieur Bergé.

Pierre: Thank you very much. That is a great compliment.

Thomas: Yes, there is a similarity between you and Rolf de Maré. Like him you are into publishing, you are a patron of the arts, standing in the wings lifting someone else up and making sure that their creation reaches an audience. Rolf was a very good businessman, and like you, one with an enthusiasm for music and art, and the ability to recognise the very new and push it forward. It’s heartbreaking to read that in Sweden the newspapers were writing these awful things about Rolf de Maré, about his ridiculous collection of art and that he was wasting his money. But he was an innovator and a visionary!

Erik: Yes, it’s like they say: Prophets don’t get recognition in their own countries. That was probably true for him, too. He became a semi-official of the French state; he represented the French state on several occasions. He had a very high status in France. But that was also lost later on. Now it’s time to get it back.

Pierre: Absolutely, Rolf de Maré deserves great recognition here in France. It is time to do something in his honour!

BOOK TITLE: *Rolf de Maré – Art Collector, Ballet Director, Museum Founder*
AUTHOR: Erik Näslund
PUBLISHER: Langenskiöld’s


 The story of *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* was told by two commentators using megaphones. In this publicity shot Jean Cocteau shows how this was done. Cocteau didn’t participate in the actual performance.