



Portrait of Diaghilev

Natalia Goncharova

Not on display

Title/Description: Portrait of Diaghilev

Artist/Maker: Natalia Goncharova

Born: 1919

Object Type: Lithograph, Print

Materials: Ink, Paper

Measurements: Unframed: (h. 495 x w. 318 x d. 1 mm) Framed: (h. 636 x w. 537 x d. 40 mm)

Accession Number: 31184

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Russia

Goncharova, born in 1881 in the Russian Empire, started her artistic career as a sculptor but found her unique way of expression in painting. She was already exhibiting, when her productive partnership with Sergei Diaghilev, an art critic and ballet impresario, began in 1906. This led to Goncharova's, and her friend and future husband Mikhail Larionov's, works being presented in the exhibition of Russian artists at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris.

Later, in 1914, they started to collaborate on Diaghilev's Paris production of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera '*Coq d'or*', where Goncharova was designing the set and costumes for the performances. She applied a constructivist approach to the design, using principles of abstractionism rather than aspiring to copy the reality - a practice in line with other avant-garde artists' methods of the time. [1]

Goncharova continued working together with Larionov and Diaghilev for the further impresario's theatrical productions. During the War, they toured Spain and Italy. In 1919, Goncharova and Larionov produced a book, *L'Art Décoratif Théâtral Moderne* (Paris 1919): twelve pages of painting, which the 'Portrait of Diaghilev', traditionally known as "Grimes", was specifically created for. [2] The duo's theatre and ballet design involvement remained active until Sergei Diaghilev's death in 1929. After this shocking event Goncharova kept on painting and worked in both Europe and America. Her style was swaying between naturalistic and abstract approaches depending on the subject and context she was depicting, which can be seen as a representation of her versatile mastery.

This abstract portrait of Sergei Diaghilev resembles a three-part composition of geometric figures in bright colours, rather than a human face. The single detail reminding us of its human nature is the presumably nose contour in the centre. Following the avant-garde love for sharp lines and contrast colour pallets, the splashes of red, indigo-blue and dark brown brighten up the picture and depict the épatage character of Diaghilev himself. We can detect that the composition inherits the futuristic traits of demonstrating an object, or a person, from several viewpoints at the same time on the flat surface of paper. For instance, don't the brown arches on the left resemble the top hat from above angle, an item Diaghilev loved to wear so much?

Rada Brakhman, April 2023

[1] *UEA Collection of Abstract and Constructivist Art, Architecture and Design* catalogue, p. 19.

[2] Goncharova and Larionov, *L'Art Décoratif Théâtral Moderne* (Paris, 1919):

<https://macdougallauction.com/en/catalogue/view?id=10807>

Further Reading

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/videos/natalia-goncharova-and-diaghilevs-ballets-russes>
