

ERTÉ (ROMAIN DE TIRTOFF)

"How would you know it was Harper's Bazaar without an Erté on the cover?"

- William Randolph Hearst

Romain de Tirtoff was born to a wealthy family in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1892. In 1912, he answered the siren call of Paris, home of tempestuous artists, intriguing aristocrats, and reigning divas of opera, theater, and society. It was in the City of Light that Erté adopted his new name, derived from the French pronunciation of his initials, "R.T." From his earliest days in Paris, Erté thrived under the tutelage of the celebrated designer Paul Poiret. In a city where decadence was *de rigueur* and elegance was synonymous with opulence, Erté was a living example of this dictum.

He gained even greater popularity with his artistic designs for the stage. His first costume was for Mata Hari, the exotic beauty-turned-spy, in 1925. He would go on to create lavish, richly decorated sets for everything from music hall shows like George White's Scandals or the Folies Bergère, to costumes for the Rockettes of Radio City Music Hall, to dramatic works for performances at the Glyndebourne Opera. There was no mistaking an Erté production, extravagant in its scope and flawless in its execution.

These much-emulated, but never equaled, characteristics also marked his celebrated covers for Harper's Bazaar, for whom he designed over 200 covers between 1915 and 1937. In the words of Alan Riding of *The New York Times*, "(Erté's) highly stylized designs of women draped in beads and furs helped define fashion for a generation." These same languorous, fantastical drawings also graced the covers of *Vogue*, *The Illustrated London News*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*.

The breadth and scope of Erté's artistic achievement earned him accolades and honors from collectors, critics, art writers, the press, and his countrymen. He earned the title "Officer of Arts and Letters" from the French government in 1976; the Médaille de Vermeil de la Ville de Paris, presented in 1982; and the French Legion of Honor, awards in 1985. Numerous books, films, and television documentaries have attempted to capture the essence of Erté's magic.

One clue to his boundless energy and irrepressible inventiveness lay in Erté's refusal to ever do one thing for too long. Believing that "monotony engenders boredom," Erté always sought to expand, develop, and augment his ideas. Working alone, often late at night when he was free from interruption, the master of elegance continually searched for new themes, new details, and new expressions for his devotion to opulent beauty.

"I'm in a different world," he wrote, "a dream world that invites oblivion."