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Dalí's Contribution to the Ballet

Salvador Dalí is well known for his contributions to Surrealist paintings, sculptures and other visual art works. Less known is his important work as a designer of theater sets and costumes for the ballet. Dalí, no doubt, was aware of the success of his sometime rival Pablo Picasso, whose stage designs and costumes for the ballet *Parade* provided him a legendary role in the history of ballet productions. The eminent Russian impresario, Sergei Diaghilev, engaged Picasso in Paris from 1917 to 1924 to create designs for *Parade* (1917) and *The Three Corned Hat* (1919), both choreographed by Léonide Massine, the leading ballet choreographer of the day.

**Throughout his career, Dalí made very significant contributions to the ballet with his decor and costume designs, as well as his librettos. ** Between the late thirties and early sixties, Dalí undertook a series of collaborations for the ballet, beginning with Léonide Massine's *Bacchanale* (1939) in New York and ending with the Maurice Béjart's *Gala* (1961) at La Teatro Fenice in Venice. Dalí was one of a number of prominent artists working for companies such as the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and other ballet companies throughout the world who offered the artists opportunities for experimental design.

While in France in the late 1930s, Dalí created the stage décor, costumes, and libretto for the Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo's *Venusberg* with choreography by Massine and music by Richard Wagner. Due to the war in Europe, *Venusberg* could not be performed. This ballet became *Bachannale* and was performed in 1939 at the Metropolitan Opera house in New York. The decor for the Surrealist ballet *Bacchanale*, which Dalí described in the program notes as "The First Paranoid Performance," includes a broken white swan (Leda, the symbol of love) with wings spread across the canvas, a temple seen through a break in the mountains behind the swan, and a sky filled with fiery figures. The landscape is endowed with Surrealist images including the skeleton of a

dinosaur, a "live" umbrella, and a corps of umbrellas, which pop open at the finale.¹ Encasing the interior of the backdrop is a series of boxes containing skeletal remains. Although executed in 1939, these enigmatic boxes might well be part of a conceptual art piece at the end of the twentieth century. As it is presented in Dalí's libretto, the story of *Bacchanale* is based on the hallucinations of the mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. The characters include a masochist and his wife as well as Venus, Lola Montez, and a corps of women on crutches.

Perhaps the most spectacular of all of Dalí's designs for the ballet was the decor for Massine's *Labyrinth* (1941), for which Dalí also provided the libretto based on the classic myth of Theseus and Ariadne.² A colossal bust, with an opening extending from the navel to the upper chest, occupies the foreground. Behind is a line of cypress trees casting an ominous mood, and a view of the seacoast with threatening skies. A second design for *Labyrinth* features a grove of cypress trees with bones strewn about on the earth around an altar.³

Other ballets featuring Dalí's designs were *Mad Tristan*, after Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (also with Massine as choreographer), *El Café de Chintas*, *The Sentimental Colloquy*, and *Mad Tristan* all created in 1944.⁴ In 1961 Dalí created the sets, costumes and libretto for the premiere of the ballet *Gala* (a tribute to his wife (also named Gala) choreographed by Maurice Béjart and performed in Venice at the La Fenice Theater.⁵

¹ Dalí *Monumental* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, March 25-May 27, 1998 and Sao Paulo: Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo (MASP), June 9-August 9, 1998), 20, 21. Also Karin von Maur, *Salvador Dalí 1904-1989* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie and Kunsthau Zurich, 1989), 276-277. Von Maur reproduces three sketches. See Also Walter Terry, *Walter Terry's Ballet Guide* (New York Popular Library, 1977), 44.

² Souvenir Program, *Original Ballet Russe*, 1941-42 season.

³ Sketches of Dalí's decor for *Labyrinth* are reproduced in Maur, *Salvador Dalí 1904-1989*, 282, 283.

⁴ Dalí also created designs in 1953 for a project, *Harvesters*, based on a poem by Baron Philippe de Rothschild with choreography by Serge Lifar with music by Henri Sauguet. See Robert Descharnes, "The Three Cornered Hat and other Ballets," Carter, *Dalí and the Ballet*, 15. Dalí also created the original designs for Anthony Tudor's ballet, *Romeo and Juliet in 1843*, although Tudor did not use Dalí's designs in the production. The drawings for Romeo and Juliet are reproduced in Ralf Schiebler, *Dalí: Genius, Obsession and Lust* (New York: Prestel, n. d.) 10, and in Juan Jos Tharrats, *Artistasespa*

⁵ Thanks for information cited to Robert P. Descharnes, "The Three-Cornered Hat and other Ballets," 14-16, and Lynne Garafola, "Dalí, Ana Maria, and the Three-Cornered Hat," 17-26, in Curtis L. Carter, *Dalí and the Ballet*, exhibition catalogue, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, February 24-May 28, 2000. ISBN 0-945366 08 06.

Dali's Décor for the Three-Cornered Hat Ballet

The stage set and costumes for the *Three Cornered Hat* were created for a production choreographed by Ana Maria for her Ballet Español that took place in New York at the Ziegfeld Theater in 1949. The Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, a friend of both Dali and Ana Maria, provided the musical score. Dali had been introduced to Ana Maria by the theater impresario, Sol Hurok when he attended a gala event honoring Ana Maria. Dali proposed to Ana Maria that they launch a production of *the Three-Cornered Hat* ballet in the upcoming season. Why this particular ballet? Perhaps its setting in Dali's beloved Catalonia, and the opportunity to fulfill a long standing desire to tackle the ballet that had been so important in the career of his rival Picasso in the 1920s, made *The Three-Cornered Hat* a perfect challenge. In any event Dali, reportedly for a one thousand dollar fee, began preparation of the drawings for its stage set and costumes.

**The actual fabrication of the décor for *The Three-Cornered Hat* took place in the E. B. Dunkel Scenic Design Studios located on 41st Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenue in New York. **Eugene Dunkel had been an artist of the Russian avant-garde, who immigrated to New York by way of Greece. Eugene, the father, and his son George, born in 1917, ran a prominent theater design studio from 1931 to 1980 where many ballet sets were executed for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, the Metropolitan Opera, and various Broadway productions.⁶ Before undertaking the production of *The Three-Cornered Hat* in 1949, the Dunkels had worked with Dalí on the décor for *Bacchanale* in 1939 and also *Labyrinth* in 1941. George Dunkel recalled in a 1999 interview that Dalí visited the studio each day to participate in the painting of the décor and to oversee the work, which took about two weeks.⁷

**Dalí's scenic design for Ana María's *Three-Cornered Hat* ballet follows in the tradition of illusionist, painted flat scenery, and is intended for a stage framed by a proscenium arch. In its entirety, the set consisted of the scenic backdrop approximately 30 by 40 feet, plus four tabs approximately 28 by 10 feet each and two borders

⁶ Eugene and George Dunkel are credited as designers for various ballets in the programs of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Eugene Dunkel, *Magic Swan*, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1944-45 Souvenir Program. George Dunkel, *Swan Lake* and *Les Sylphides*, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1951-52 Souvenir Program.

⁷ Curtis L. Carter, Interview with George Dunkel, New York, December 23, 1999.

approximately 9 feet by 6 feet. **The painted tab for stage left featured the Miller's house (also painted on the backdrop), while the tab for stage right contained painted landscape and sky with bags painted at random, according to Dunkel. The borders had flying bags positioned at random with additional cypresses. Approximately ten sculptural helium filled bags each 3 to 4 feet high and thirty inches in circumference, simulating flour bags from the mill, added sculptural decor to the stage.⁸ Duncan recalls that the helium filled bags at first flew up into the theater rafters requiring that they be attached to transparent string to control the height to which they could rise during a performance.

For this production, Dalí made at least one working sketch from which a model was made.⁹ There are three signed and dated (1949) sketches pertaining to the backdrop reproduced in the Stuttgart Staatsgalerie catalogue, *Salvador Dalí 1904-1989*.¹⁰ The first image shows the backdrop with two figures dancing in the foreground. A second drawing shows the floating bags against a wall, again with two dancers on stage. In the third sketch, the guitar floats above a rounded doorway in a space that also includes the well with a tree growing out of it, a section of the Miller's house, and a couple of flour bags. In this third sketch, dancers can be seen in motion behind the scrim that forms the silhouette of the guitar.

On the surface, Dalí's backdrop appears rather straightforward, when compared to the more elaborate designs for *Labyrinth* and *Bacchanale*. Yet a closer look reveals that this master of illusion has something subtler in mind. There appears to be a cosmic interchange underway where the earth is both giving and receiving elements. The moon is seen landing on the earth, and earthly elements including sections of the Miller's house are in the process of being transformed and sent flying off into space. An orange tree which has lifted out of the ground is suspended in space, perhaps ready to follow the levitating doors and windows of the house that are also headed into space. In the midst of all of this, a mysterious, slender flowering tree emerges from the ruins of the well.

⁸ Interview, Dunkel, December 23, 1999.

⁹ Interview, Dunkel, December 23, 1999. Dunkel recalls that Dalí made one sketch for *The Three-Cornered Hat*, from which a model was made.

¹⁰ There are three studies for *The Three-Cornered Hat* set reproduced in Maur, *Salvador Dalí 1904-1989*, 310.

Elsewhere on the backdrop, a guitar shape functions as a mountain landscape. Through special lighting effects, the guitar-mountain painted on scrim and mounted on the backdrop, is transformed through a magical scene change. On cue, the scrim was lit from behind, and the lights in the foreground near the backdrop were lowered. Altered with special lighting effects, the guitar forms an opening in the canvas through which dancers can be seen moving, thus adding a dream-like Surrealist aura to the stage. This device enables a scene change that largely depends on lighting, thus enhancing the aesthetic interest of the audience in the design as well as contributing to the economy of the staging.

**The composition of Dali's decor for Ana Maria's *The Three-Cornered Hat* reflects the artist's on-going concern with classical order, proportion and structure in art. Here the cube-like shape of the Miller's house and the rectangular windows and door contribute to the architectural order of the scene. **Dark vertical cypresses in the background, which form an irregular line above the horizon, are also a part of the architectural structure, as are the guitar shape and the air-filled canvas bags covered with burlap.

**With such images incorporating elements of classical order and Surrealistic fantasy, the painted surface provides a visual context for the Spanish dances choreographed by Ana María. The Miller's white stucco house on the left, possibly inspired by coastal Mediterranean architecture of Dalí's Catalan homeland, is reminiscent of the artist's own house in Port Lligat. **Its sunlit door and the windows give the illusion of depth, and are turned on the diagonal for visual effect. Toward the right center of the backdrop is a well, made of brick in the shape of a cut-off tower and covered with white stucco. Now in ruins, the sides of the well are cracked open to reveal the underlying bricks. The greater planes of the overall backdrop are divided into a flat, illusionist landscape, which extends into deep space and meets an expansive sky. Cypress trees positioned above the horizon extend the landscape into the sky.

Characters and Costumes for *The Three-Cornered Hat*

**For the narrative, Ana María returns to the text of Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's version of *The Three-Cornered Hat*, published in 1874, which varies slightly from the libretto used for Massine's 1919 version of the ballet with stage designs by Picasso.

**Otherwise known as *The Corregidor and the Miller's Wife* or *The Miller's Wife and the Corregidor*, this witty Spanish folk tale, known to rustics as well as to learned Spaniards alike, may have originated from a clownish goat herder named Repela. It would have been recited at a festival at the manor, along with other romances and ballads.¹¹ According to Alarcón, the setting for the story is located in Andalusia – Dalí seems to have in mind a setting in Catalan -- at the beginning of the nineteenth century between 1804 and 1808. Based on this information, the story takes place during the Reign of the Bourbon King Don Carlos IV, concurrent with the Napoleonic era in Europe.

The main characters of Ana María's ballet are developed from those found in Alarcón's tale. The Corregidor Don Eugenio, a Spanish magistrate is dressed resplendently in a green waist coat trimmed in red, featuring cream colored ruffled cuffs and vest, with purple trousers. His tri-cornered hat is light purple in color. Also colorfully dressed in a purple hat and pants with black-bow shoes is the Corregidor manikin, who acts as a surrogate in his namesake's absence during parts of the performance. The Miller's Wife, Mistress Fasquita (danced by Ana Maria), for whom Dalí designed two different costumes, wears a Spanish headdress with flowers and black lace extending to the shoulders. One of her multi-tiered dresses is red with yellow, green, and black trim; another is pink with a blue sash, trimmed in black crisscross stripes and accessories. The Miller (Uncle Lucas) is dressed as a Pierrot-like figure in black and white pants with jagged pattern, a sleeveless black jacket with small hanging tassels, blue sash, and open collar shirt. The Corregidor's wife Doña Mercedes is adorned in an elegant black dress detailed with lace. Other costumes for minor characters such as the priest, guards, and the

¹¹ Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, *The Three-Cornered Hat*, translated from the Spanish by Lawrence M. Levin, (New York: H. Bittner and Co., 1944), 5. The text is illustrated with woodcuts by Fritz Kredel. For some of its audiences, this tale of infidelity might have seemed off color. But the author notes that its central message, that, "Married people sleep together and that no husband likes to have someone else lie in bed with his wife," p. 6. Is hardly news.

performers in the Spanish Sevillanas and Jota dances of the ballet complete the 36 costumes of *The Three-Cornered Hat*. Female dancers in the Sevillanas wore peasant style black dresses with pink fringe on the neckline and flower patterned skirts. The men's costumes for the Sevillanas consisted of purple jackets and turquoise colored pants, both with black trim. In the Jota, the women wore blue and yellow floor length dresses with black crisscross designs and accessories. There are additional special costumes belonging to the Jota, for instance a green and a red dress each with cream frill, and a male dancer's costume with a blue shirt, green pants, and a yellow sash.

Dali's costumes for this ballet reflect a nineteenth-century International style of the period in which the tale is set, where individual costumes mirror the social standing of the different character roles. By emphasizing "character, situation, and folklore," his costumes are intended to create the ambience necessary to support Ana María's Spanish style dances. Dali's use of vibrant colors throughout, and his effort to suit the costumes to the individuality of the characters provide an overall strong visual presentation. The cut of the dresses is high waisted, extending to between the calf and the ankle. The costumes are beautifully designed and sewn to augment the character of the individual dancers and to advance the ballet's narrative. Yet their often multi-layered structures and weightiness would seem not to allow for maximum freedom for the human figure in motion.

Given the innovative theatrical spectacles that Dali has provided for his ballet productions throughout the twentieth century, he deserves a high rank among his peers. Only a few in his time, such as Picasso, rivaled the theatrical magic woven by the likes of his designs for *Bacchanale* and *Labarynthe*. Dance historian Lynn Garafola characterizes the designs for this ballet as "playful and surprisingly evocative of the ballet's Andalusian setting" and as harking" back to Picasso' designs for the *Three Cornered Hat* original Diaghilev production" but with important differences.¹² "Dali's use of lime green with eggplant purple and cherry red; his dramatic expanses of black; his simplification of the decorative detailing; his playful use of constructed expanses of

¹² Garafola, "Dali, Ana Maria, and the Three-Cornered Hat," 21.

black; his including the ‘tails’ of the Corregidor’s dress coat—all set his work apart from Picasso’s and stamped it as his own.”¹³ If the decor for *Three-Cornered Hat* is at first glance more restrained, its imaginative visual catenations, together with the ballet’s richly colored costumes, weave a special magic of their own. Ana Maria’s production of *the Three Cornered Hat* with Dali’s décor and costumes received only one performance at the Ziegfeld theater. Evidently, the performance of the ballet itself did not fare well with the critics.¹⁴ This was despite the favorable reception to Dali’s imaginative design and colorful costumes. As far as is known, the ballet with Dali’s décor did not appear in subsequent road performances of the Ballet Española.¹⁵

Post-Performance history of the Stage Set and Costumes for Dali’s *Three-Cornered Hat*

**For a time, Dali’s creations for the *Three-Cornered Hat* ballet were thought to have been lost after their initial appearance in the performance of *Three Cornered Hat* at the Ziegfeld Theater in 1949. Subsequently, circa 1980s, art dealer Leonard Patterson purchased the décor and costumes from Ana Maria and arranged for their restoration, according to information provided by Ana Maria and Dunked.¹⁶ Subsequently, Max Lahyani, a private collector who lives in Switzerland, purchased the decor and props, and Jean Pierre Grivory, a private collector in Paris, acquired the costumes. **

**The decor for *The Three-Cornered Hat* was included in the exhibition, *Salvador Dali 1904-1989* curated by Karin Von Maur for the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (Cat. No 238), *Bühnenbild Zu Dreispitz (décor pour Tricorne)* 1949, oil auf sackleinwand, 900/895x1213 cm.¹⁷ Subsequently in 1998, the same décor (Cat. No. 372) and the costumes and props (Cat. Nos, 370. 372-394) Were shown in Brazil in the exhibition *Dali*

¹³ Garafola, “Dali, Ana Maria, and the *three-Cornered Hat*,” 19.

¹⁴Lynne Garafola, “Dali, Ana Maria, and the Three-Cornered Hat,” in Curtis L. Carter, *Dali and the Ballet: Set and Costumes for the Three-Cornered Hat*, Exhibition Catalogue, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, February 24-May 28, 2000,, 20, 21.

¹⁵ The history of Dali’s décor and costumes after the Ziegfeld Theater performance in New York warrants further investigation, A photo supplied by Descharnes and Descharnes SARL bears the caption, “Ballet Español Ana Maria in costume for *The Three-Cornered Hat*., Havana 1950. Costumes Designed by Salvador Dali.”

¹⁶ Curtis L. Carter, Interview with Ana Maria and her husband Alfredo Munar in Miami, Florida, 1998. George Dunkel, “Realizing Dali’s Scenic Designs,” 30, confirmed the role of Leonard Patterson in the restoration.

¹⁷ Karin Von Maur, *Salvador Dali 1904-1989*, Exhibition Catalogue, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1989), 310.

Monumental, organized by Robert Descharnea and Texoart for the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes do Rio de Janerio and the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand.¹⁸ Again, in 2000, Dali's decor and costumes for *The Three-Cornered Hat* were exhibited in *Dali and the Ballet: Set and Costumes for the Three-Cornered Hat*, at the Haggerty Museum of art in Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA.¹⁹ Curtis L. Carter, Director and Chief Curator at the Haggerty Museum curated the Milwaukee exhibition. In 2009-2010, the work was shown in an exhibition, *Le Printemp de Toulouse, Les Abattoirs* at the Toulouse Museum of Art.²⁰ Since that time, Dali's décor and costumes for this ballet have remained in the hands of the respective private collectors.**

¹⁸ Robert Descharnes, *Dali Monumental*, Exhibition Catalogue, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes do Rio de Janerio and the Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, Texoart, 1998, 255-265. See "O Tricórnio," 255, 256 for notes in the project.

¹⁹ Curtis L. Carter, *Dali and the Ballet: Set and Costumes for The Three-Cornered Hat*, Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art Marquette University, February 24-May 28, 2000.

²⁰ *Le Printemps de Toulouse, Les Abattoirs*, The Toulouse Museum of art, France, October 27, 2009-February 28, 2010. Information on the Toulouse exhibition is provided by Max Lahyani..