



The New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

Victor Jessen photographs

1930-1959

*MGZEB 22-0002

Processed by Emily P. Dunne in 2022.

Summary

Creator: Jessen, Victor

Title: Victor Jessen photographs

Date: 1930-1959

Size: 1.71 linear feet (7 boxes)

Source: Donated by Victor Jessen in 1990.

Abstract: This collection represents the photography practice of ballet enthusiast Victor Jessen. While his best-known work is the decade-long film documentation of the performance *Gaîté Parisienne*, this collection expands the breadth of his work to include his photography of other ballet performances by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the 1930s through the 1950s.

Preferred citation: Victor Jessen photographs, *MGZEB 22-0002. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Emily P. Dunne in 2022.

Creator History

Victor Jessen (1901-1995) was a Danish-born artist, draftsman, and ballet enthusiast who moved to Los Angeles in 1929. He is best known for his moving image work; Jessen secretly filmed hundreds of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performances from the 1930s to the 1950s. Jessen would arrive at a performance with his cameras concealed in a briefcase, with a customized "blimp" created to hide and muffle the camera sound, extra film cartridges, and a blind eye from a sympathetic usher. Always trying to get a clear view of the stage, but also a place where he could slyly set up his equipment, Jessen could only record very brief fragments of performances before having to reload and manually wind his camera. Over thirty years, Jessen documented all or parts of over thirty ballet performances, including *Coppelia*, *Les Sylphides*, and *Gaîté Parisienne*.

From 1944 until 1954, Jessen attended and recorded multiple performances of the Ballet Russe de

Monte Carlo's *Gaîté Parisienne* starring Alexandra Danilova, Frederic Franklin, and Leon Danielian. After painstakingly filming each performance part, he spliced the film strips in order, and he paired it with the secretly recorded audio from a 1954 performance to create a complete recording of the performance. Over ten years, the footage jumps from various camera angles in different theaters, creating a dizzying effect. This montaging technique offers a unique approach to documenting dance.

In addition to his film work, Jessen also created still images from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performances. Undoubtedly also made covertly, many with a Leica camera or possibly printed directly from his film strips. These images provide context and documentation of other Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performances from the 1930s through the 1950s. The photographs, like his films, are impressionistic, grainy, and blurry. While caused by the physicalities of his camera and enlarging the images to such a large size, these stylistic choices are deliberate. In an autobiographic essay, Jesseen commented that he disapproved of dance photographers that utilized a flash to capture a static picture of the dancers and that the secretive nature of the recordings was an intentional part of his documentation.

Scope and Content Note

The Victor Jessen photographs are comprised exclusively of black and white photographs made of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. The material dates from the 1930s through the 1950s, but the individual photos are undated. All of the photographs have been mounted on board with the title of the ballet and often the specific movement or act of the performance printed below the image. The collection depicts over twenty ballet performances arranged alphabetically, primarily *Les Sylphides*, *The Seventh Symphony*, and *Coppélia*.

Each picture is mounted on either an 18 x 22 or 28 x 32-inch matboard and signed by Jessen. The backs of photographs list either Jessen's address or information about the picture, including the camera, developing information, and paper type. In addition to the mechanical and chemical information Jessen includes the note, "Photographing the Ballet Russe's performances is forbidden."

Key Terms

Subjects

Ballet -- 20th century
Ballet dancers -- Photographs
Stage photography

Occupations

Cinematographers.

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Photographs

Names

Jessen, Victor
Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo

Container List

- b. 2 f. 1 *Le Beau Danube* 1930s-1950s
- b. 2 f. 2 *Capriccio Espagnol* 1930s-1950s
- b. 2 f. 3 *Cinderella* 1930-1950s
Some identified by the French title, *Cendrillon*.
- b. 1 f. 1 *Coppélia* 1930s-1950s
- b. 2 f. 4
- b. 2 f. 5 *L' Coq d'Or* 1930s-1950s
- b. 2 f. 6 *Devil's Holiday* 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 1 *The Eternal Struggle* 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 2 *Gala Performance* 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 3 *Giselle* 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 4 *Graduation Ball* 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 5 "Gypsy Dances" 1930s-1950s
- b. 3 f. 6 *The Hundred Kisses* 1930s-1950s
Some prints identified as the French title *Les Cent Baisers*.
- b. 4 f. 1 *Paganini* 1930s-1940s
- b. 4 f. 2 *Les Patineurs* 1930s-1950s
- b. 4 f. 3 *Raymonda* 1930s-1950s
- b. 4 f. 4 *Scheherazade* 1930s-1950s
- b. 4 f. 5 *Scuola di Ballo* 1930s-1950s
- b. 1 f. 2-3 *The Seventh Symphony* 1930s-1950s
- b. 4 f. 6 Music by Ludwig van Beethoven.
- b. 5 f. 1-3
- b. 5 f. 4 *The Sleeping Beauty* 1930s-1950s
Most photos depict the scene "Aurora's Wedding."
- b. 1 f. 4 *Solo* 1930s-1950s
An unidentified solo performance selected for the 1936 Grand Central Palace International Photographic Exhibition.
- b. 5 f. 5 *Swan Lake* 1930s-1950s
- b. 1 f. 5 *Les Sylphides* 1930s-1950s
- b. 6-7
- b. 1 f. 6 *Symphonie Fantastique* 1930s-1950s