

**Robert Bruce's *Dionysos* Backdrop Design from the Gweneth Lloyd Collection**

Coloured in lush greens and purples, this backdrop design is by Winnipeg artist Robert Bruce and was created for Gweneth Lloyd's 1945 work *Dionysos* for the Winnipeg Ballet. It features a voluptuous nude female form embracing a large phallus that together suggest rolling hills and a tree in the foreground. With mountains and forests in the background, the whole design is framed by grape vines bearing dripping fruit and accented with the mask of tragedy, a serpent, a lyre and a stag's head. Not surprisingly, the blatant eroticism of this image was controversial at the time and incited the Lieutenant-Governor's wife to leave the performance in an outrage. Lloyd set the work to music by Rachmaninoff; a program note states: "The great god himself comes down from the hills to join with his followers in the wild celebrations at the time of the vintage." Welcome to this edition of Artifact of the Month. I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse.

Born in Grandview, Manitoba, in 1911, Robert Bruce studied at the Winnipeg School of Art in the late 1920s. From 1935 to 1939, he continued his artistic training overseas at the Central School of Art in London and at the Grande Chaumière in Paris. He then returned to Canada completing his studies at the Winnipeg School of Art with Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, a member of the Group of Seven and a founding member of the Canadian Group of Painters. Bruce worked as a staff artist at the *Winnipeg Free Press* from 1941 to 1943 and then served in the Canadian Army as a public relations staff artist recording army life and war-time support efforts on the home front. His work *On Your Own Time* won second prize in the First Canadian Army Exhibition in 1943. In 1946, he accompanied the Canadian military on an exercise called Operation Muskox, which sought to test military personnel and equipment in Arctic conditions. Bruce created a visual record of this massive manoeuvre. During his career, he created public murals and mosaics, book and magazine illustrations, fabric designs, and numerous paintings and drawings in addition to his work for the Winnipeg Ballet. He was also a professor at the School of Art at the University of Manitoba.

Prior to *Dionysos*, Bruce had designed costumes for three other works by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's co-founder, Gweneth Lloyd. These include *Triple Alliance* and *Façade Suite* in 1941 and *Through the Looking Glass* in 1942, as well as the cover illustration for the Winnipeg Ballet's 1941/42 souvenir program.

*Triple Alliance* was a comedic ballet depicting the goings-on in three different scenes: a Manhattan cocktail bar, a Canadian drug store, and an English pub. The program note read, "With toil forgotten and pleasure in view, in the evening, people of all sorts gather together with the tankard or glass as the link which joins the circle of congeniality." The work perhaps betrays Lloyd's own biases as she generalizes about the social activities in each country. The program note insinuates that Manhattan is full of socialites and social climbers who are unable to reveal their true emotions or expressions of themselves. The drug store scene depicts Canadian youths enjoying soft drinks and fruit juices to the sounds of the Wurlitzer. And in Lloyd's home country of England, the scene at the "public house" illustrates the mixture of young and old, rich and poor who gather there. Actors and chorus girls from a theatre next door drop by for a drink and the barmaid is portrayed as everyone's confidante. The program note describes this section as embodying the "basic English character" of "kindness, warmth and jollity."

*Façade Suite* consisted of seven divertissements that satirized various social dances. Set to musical parodies by William Walton, it featured a polka; a yodelling song with a milk maid, yodeller and a cow played by two dancers; a waltz that portrayed Gibson girls and the “mashers” with whom they flirt; a tango; a pop song; a country dance with a shepherdess and three lambs; and a Scottish rhapsody danced by female golfers, followed by a finale with the entire cast.

*Through the Looking Glass* was adapted from Lewis Carroll’s famous story and included nine sections – each inspired by a quote from the story. Bruce’s designs for the work included Alice, Tiger Lily, Slithy Toves, the Jabberwocky, Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee, the Red Queen and the White Knight.

Lloyd’s engagement of a local artist to design these works marks a shift in artistic collaboration in dance in Canada. With the post-war immigration of artists and the ballet boom that arrived in the 1940s and then accelerated in the 1950s, Canadian choreographers sought out local designers and composers with whom they could collaborate. Lloyd worked with artists including John Russell, Joseph Plaskett and Dorothy Phillips, as well as composers Walter Kaufmann, Barbara Pentland and Robert Fleming. Her contemporaries also followed suit. Toronto’s Boris Volkoff used John Weinzweig’s *The Whirling Dwarf* in 1940 and then commissioned him to compose *The Red Ear of Corn* in 1949. Jack Shadbolt designed sets and costumes for Vancouver choreographer Heino Heiden’s *Daphnis and Chloé*. Architect Jean Fournier de Belleval received critical acclaim for his décor for Elizabeth Leese’s *Lady From the Sea*, which used a commissioned score by Saul Honigman. De Belleval was also a character dancer and appeared with Leese’s Montreal-based company. Harry Freedman composed Nancy Lima Dent’s 1949 work *Dark Cry*, which she set on Toronto’s New Dance Theatre, and Hector Gratton created multiple compositions for Ottawa’s Nesta Toumine. Montreal’s Pierre Mercure composed several works for Automatist choreographers Françoise Sullivan and Françoise Riopelle. Vancouver choreographer Kay Armstrong engaged designer Stuart MacKay as well as composer Dolores Claman, who is famous for coming up with the long-time theme for “Hockey Night in Canada” if not for her ballet scores.

Robert Bruce designed over 100 costumes for the Winnipeg Ballet in its nascent years. He was part of a community of artists and supporters who helped set this feisty prairie company and the adventurous Gweneth Lloyd on the track that would ultimately lead to a professional ballet scene in Canada where Canadian themes were embraced and where Canadian dancers, choreographers, designers and composers demonstrated that there was no need to look south or across the Atlantic to find art. It was right here at home.

*To read more about Gweneth Lloyd, visit Pages in History on Dance Collection Danse’s web site, <http://www.dcd.ca/pih/gwenethlloyd.html>.*

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