

Sonia writes about Kokoshniks and the Firebird project

Firebird ballet characters included 13 imprisoned princesses that are held against their will by Koschei, and they are rescued by Prince Ivan and the Firebird.

The idea to create kokoshniks came from researching the cultural heritage of Russia. The kokoshnik headdress has been worn by women and girls since the 10th century in the northern regions of Russia and was very popular from the 16th to 19th centuries. It is still to this day an important feature of Russian dance ensembles and folk culture.

During the revival of Russian national culture in the early 19th century, they became part of the official court dress for royalty and ladies-in-waiting, but these revival headdresses were as much influenced by the Italian renaissance and the “French Hood”

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the arrival of Russian emigres in Paris, Kokoshniks became popularised within European Fashion. Queen Marie of Romania wore a Cartier tiara resembling the Russian kokoshnik for her portrait in 1924 and they were worn by the B

Over the centuries they have had various forms with different regions having their own style. Many are made of stiffened fabric, tied at the back with ribbon and highly decorated.

The kokoshniks designed for this project reflect various things:

1. Russian folk designs and patterns – flowers, chickens, birds, hearts
2. Firebird – representations of the mythical creature and the story, which is an old Russian folk tale – very well known
3. The designs from the original 1910 ballet by the Ballets Russes (Bilibin’s paintings and Bakst’s costumes)
4. Golovin’s designs for the 1910 Firebird ballet. Interesting parallels with ELTA – lots of artists, designers, choreographers, working collaboratively to create startling and innovative pieces, with an emphasis on exploring cultural heritage, lots of research. For example, Fokine studied Greek art and sculpture while creating *L’Après Midi D’Un Faun*.
5. Faberge style jewelled eggs reflecting Russian traditional painted egg designs – the nobility liked to adopt peasant style and design and upgrade it - kokshniks and eggs are a good example of this
6. Modern day slavery – a lot of the kokoshniks include words written in Russian (‘slave’, ‘prisoner’ ‘power’ ‘captive’)

I was very taken during my research on the various productions of the Firebird Ballet, by the Fire curtain designed by a woman artist Natalia Goncharova, of lots and lots of Russian buildings so I thought that it would be good to use this as inspiration for another set of designs. This fire curtain is in the V&A textile collection which is soon going to be based in Stratford.

I drew some fantastical prison buildings to symbolise the captivity of the princesses, again referencing modern day slavery. The prisons are decorated in the style of Russian wooden dachas

(summer houses) and are very decorative. These have been photographed and can be made into papers or patterns.

The kokoshniks made by the McGrath Makers have a different style and subject matter – they are larger shapes to make it easier for them to embroider. Each person decided what their tiara would celebrate, so they are very personal designs. Donald wanted to embroider himself dancing at a party with friends underneath a glitter ball, Gaynor wanted her favourite red roses, Menelik wanted to celebrate his Ethiopian heritage with royal Ethiopian lions, Sonya wanted her favourite animals on hers. Others, after I showed them traditional Russian designs wanted to embroider cockerels, birds, hearts and flowers

The Rag School are making fine twisted ropes that will provide trimmings for these pieces, and will also make parts of the Firebird costume which is being created as part of this project. It will include an ELTA printed fabric designed by Lorna Lambert (for the pantaloons) from some of the embroidered feathers that have been made to create the costume. It will echo the 1910 costume made for the Firebird character which was designed by Bakst. However ours will incorporate lots of hand embroidered elements.

The Monday group, led by Karen and helped by Laura, are making an embroidered costume for the evil Koschei character in the Firebird story, who has held the princesses captive. Karen has designed faceless Russian dolls for this. Celia created some monster designs, with lino cuts printed onto fabric, which will be used for other costumes.

For the outreach side of the project at the Art School run by Hopeful Futures, I discovered that a young man called Tahir who has severe Autism, was a very talented artist with a particular obsession with architecture and buildings. He has been working on a 'backdrop' of buildings that are drawn and coloured on paper and these will be collaged to create a large design, echoing Goncharova's fire curtain.

I made newspaper marionette style figures with several of the Art School group members and they painted and embroidered simple fabric costumes on the theme of the Firebird using folk art motifs.

Charles Mayer said this about Fokine's ballets '...all these productions rested upon solid knowledge – of museum artifacts, architectural reproductions, fashion plates and illustrations, portraits, historical costume studies, design portfolios – enriched, as in 1912, when he spent several weeks in the Caucasus making preparatory studies for *Thamar*, by direct observation'

It struck me, reading about the Ballets Russes, that part of ELTA's success in creating innovative community projects is that there is quite a lot of time spent on researching local and international heritage and making pieces that are relevant to the local community, as well as partnering with academics, artists and experts on its projects. It has a really collaborative ethos.