Howard HODGKIN (London 1932 - London 2017)

Composition: Design for the Drop Cloth for the Ballet Pulcinella

Gouache and collage on paper, laid down on board.

444 x 825 mm. (17 1/2 x 32 1/2 in.) at greatest dimensions.

Howard Hodgkin's first foray into theatrical scenography came in 1981, when he designed both the sets and costumes for the dance Night Music for the Ballet Rambert in London. The director of the company, Richard Alston, has noted that it was 'the sense of theatre – of toy theatre, really – in Howard's pictures that commended him as the man for this kind of job. They often come with a sort of proscenium-arch shape around them: a strong sense of the frame, even when the paint spills over it. And of course, they're rich in colour, which is one way of being effective on stage.' Between 1981 and 2016 Hodgkin produced set designs (as well as, occasionally, designs for costumes) for several ballets, operas and dances; for the Ballet Rambert, the Royal Ballet, the Smithsonian Institute and the Mark Morris Dance Group. As John-Paul Stonard has observed, 'Many of [Hodgkin's] works have an enclosed, intimate and magical quality that evokes the space of the theatre, thick swathes of paint suggesting scenery drops, curtains or the proscenium arch. His sensibility and his particular touch, his very personal manner of putting paint on wood, seem to transfer naturally to the stage.'

Hodgkin seems to have found the process of producing set designs quite challenging, and at times somewhat frustrating. As he once stated, 'Designing for the theatre is a completely different activity from making your own work. You are following a brief not of your own making, and you can't have the same quality control over the end result. You don't even know what you've made until you see it on stage, by which time it's too late anyway.' Nevertheless, as he stated elsewhere, 'I like working for the stage because it's the opposite of working alone in the studio.'

This large sheet is a design for the front drop cloth for a production of the ballet Pulcinella, with music by Igor Stravinsky and choreography by Richard Alston, staged by the Ballet Rambert in 1987. Hodgkin provided several designs for the drop cloth and backdrops for the production, and also designed the costumes worn by the dancers5. Stonard has noted that, 'For both works made for the Ballet Rambert, Night Music (1981) and Pulcinella (1987), and for the Royal Ballet production Piano (1989), Hodgkin had a close working relationship with the production team as the work developed. The collaboration with Richard Alston and Ballet Rambert was particularly close and fruitful…For both productions Hodgkin designed costumes after attending rehearsals and seeing the way that the dancers moved and the way they communicated the story. His designs for these are characterised by their unmistakeably Hodgkinesque colour…Hodgkin's work for Pulcinella comprises perhaps the most strongly referential of his stage designs…His designs evoke both the light and colour of Naples and the

excitement and sense of the story.' Of his work on Pulcinella, Hodgkin pointed out that 'The real problem for me was to find some kind of visual language which was not literally representational, did not refer to the Commedia dell'arte and which did evoke Naples. The act drop and the costumes were the most difficult – also Picasso was always lurking over my shoulder, but, in so far as we all succeeded, it was Stravinsky that got us through.' The Ballet Rambert production of Pulcinella toured around Britain in 1987 and 1988 before its final performances at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London.

The use of elements of collage in the present work is a feature of several of Hodgkin's stage designs, although it is not generally found in his other works on paper. As Stonor points out, 'When hung in a gallery, Hodgkin's paintings need a great deal of space to themselves in which to glow and live their distinct lives. Sets by comparison, exist at very close quarters with all manner of other expressive activities, and therefore require, to a degree, the effacement of artistic personality; a delicate and diplomatic holding-back, a mutual respect…But what is held back is held back in the interests of a greater good: personality is transmuted into something more valuable. This distinction is an important one, and one which Hodgkin is very aware of. His use of collage in certain designs, a 'de-personalised' technique found very rarely in his work, underlines the difference.'

Most of Hodgkin's relatively few designs for the stage are today in private collections, although a design for the back cloth for Night Music of 1981 is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Hodgkin's collaged design for the poster of Pulcinella appeared at auction in 2018, while a different design for the Pulcinella poster was sold at auction in 2022.

Exhibitions

Aldeburgh, Peter Pears Gallery, Howard Hodgkin: Stage Designs, 2002.

Literature:

John-Paul Stonard and Anthony d'Offay, Howard Hodgkin: Stage Designs, exhibition catalogue, Aldeburgh, 2002, illustrated p.45.

Artist description:

The British painter and printmaker Howard Hodgkin is said to have decided to become an artist at the age of five. A pupil of Wilfrid Blunt at Eton College, where among his fellow pupils was Rory McEwen, Hodgkin was unhappy there and ran away from school twice, as he also did at his next school, Bryanston in Dorset. Between 1949 and 1950 he studied at the Camberwell School of Art before moving on to the Bath Academy of Art. Hodgkin first exhibited his work at a group show at the Bath Art Gallery in 1952, and the following year produced his first print. In 1962, at the age of thirty, he had a joint exhibition, with Allen Jones, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and later that year was given his first solo exhibition at the Arthur Tooth & Sons Gallery in London. Although the exhibition was not a commercial success, the gallery continued to show his work for several years, while later exhibitions were at Kasmin Ltd. in London and Knoedler in New York. Having collected Indian miniatures and drawings for some time, Hodgkin made his first trip to India in 1964, and was to return there regularly for many years, the landscape of the country inspiring a series of colourful screenprints.

By the 1970s Hodgkin had become established as one of the major British artists of his generation, with solo shows in London, Germany, Paris and New York and a first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1976, the same year that he was appointed CBE. In 1981 his work was included in the exhibition A New Spirit in Painting at the Royal Academy and three years later he represented Britain at the Venice Biennale with a display of twenty-four works; the exhibition later travelled to Washington D.C., New Haven, Hannover and London. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s he continued to exhibit widely in Europe and America, winning the second annual Turner Prize in 1985. Knighted in 1992, Hodgkin was given a major retrospective of his paintings in New York, Düsseldorf and London in 1995, followed by others in Edinburgh in 2002, Dublin, London and Madrid in 2006, New

Haven and Cambridge in 2007, Oxford in 2010 and Toulouse in 2013. In his last years the artist would spend the winter months living and working in India.