REDISCOVERING GEORGE BARBIER, ART DECO ILLUSTRATOR AND COSTUME DESIGNER EXTRAORDINAIRE

We begin at the ending. 15 March 1932 witnessed the passing of George Barbier in Paris at the relatively young age of 50 after two years with an unknown illness. His funeral was held four days later at 7:45 A.M. in his native city of Nantes, on the Loire River in the west of France. It was an obscure ending to a truly remarkable life lived to its fullest among the high society and rich artistic scene that was Paris in the first quarter of the 20th century. His social circle included such notables as the poet Robert de Montesquiou, author Marcel Proust and jeweller Louis Cartier.

Born into the wealthy home of Nantes export/import merchant Charles Barbier and his wife Marie Mathilde Ertaud in 1882, Georges demonstrated his artistic talent at an early age. He was a student at the École régionale du Dessin et des Beaux-Arts in Nantes, where he could be found reproducing paintings housed in the local museum by such notable artists as Antoine Watteau and Ingres. He is believed to have spent several years in London before enrolling in the Paris studio of Jean-Paul Laurens at the Académie Julien in 1908. His time in England is shrouded in mystery, but his personal library that was dispersed upon his death housed numerous titles illustrated by leading English illustrators such as William Blake, Charles Ricketts, Gustave Doré, Arthur Rackham, and the famous Aubrey Beardsley. Barbier also owned personal correspondence by Beardsley, as well as some of his original illustrations for works by Edgar Allan Poe. Their influence on Barbier was profound. His connection to England may have influenced his decision to adopt an Anglicized form of his name.

Barbier’s maturity as an artist at the rather late age of thirty coincided with a period of radical change in fashion and design in Paris. In 1908 the famous Paris couturier Paul Poiret published his first album of new styles, illustrated by Paul Iribe, which would revolutionize women’s fashion. Gone were the whalebone corsets and petticoats, replaced by daring long gowns that revealed the female form. Vogue magazine quoted designer Jean Worth as proclaiming Poiret’s designs “suitable for the women of uncivilized tribes. If we adopt them, let us ride on camels and ostriches.” But Poiret’s designs prevailed, and were bolstered by the Paris debut of the Ballets Russes under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev in May 1909. Its dramatic and colourful costumes by Léon Bakst conquered the Paris fashion scene.

Among the Parisians captivated by the Ballets Russes and its principal dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Tamar Karsavina was George Barbier, who illustrated two exquisite albums devoted to the dancers. Dessins sur le danses de Vaslav Nijinsky was published in 1913, followed by Album dédié à Tamar Karsavina in 1914. Barbier’s passion for the theatre and ballet dominated much of his professional life for the following two decades, as he became one of the leading costume designers in Paris. His reputation extended across the Atlantic, for he sent his designs via the costume design house Max Waldy to be produced by the Brooks Costume Company in New York. Among his creations were costumes for Rudolph Valentino for his leading role in the silent film Monsieur Beaucaire in 1924. Valentino was the embodiment of the 18th century gentleman envisioned by Barbier in his illustrations and costumes. He wrote of Valentino: “The face of the famous actor is light gold in colour; the eyes of velvet shine with charming guile. The attractiveness of this fine face lies not only in the regular features, but also in the
caressing, sensual expression that veils his look, animates his nostrils, tightens his lips and leaves few women indifferent.” Barbier also created costume and set designs for risqué revues at Les Folies-Bergère and Casino de Paris, including a scene for Josephine Baker’s 1930 performance in the revue Paris qui remue.

The new fashions inspired by Poiret and the Ballets Russes gave birth to the publication of two new fashion journals in 1912: Journal des dames et des modes and Gazette du bon ton. These two exclusive fashion magazines were richly illustrated with coloured fashion plates using the colour stenciling technique known as pochoir. The ROM Library and Archives is home to rare complete holdings for both of these titles. George Barbier was one of the principal contributors to these journals, along with Paul Iribe, Léon Bakst, Bernard Boutet de Monvel, André Marty and Pierre Brissaud, who were known collectively as the chevaliers du bracelet for their flamboyant manners and dandyish appearance, and their sporting of a bracelet as a common accessory. Other artists represented in these journals included Erté, Adrian Drian, Roger Broders and the Spanish artist Francisco Javier Gosé.

Barbier’s fashion illustrations drew upon a variety of influences and themes, including classical Greece and its mythology, carnivals and masquerades of 18th century Venice, and orientalism. His illustrations often invoked an air of mystery, sometimes suggestive and at other times humorous, while incorporating the latest designs from the Paris ateliers. The pochoir technique used to create the fashion plates generated images that were especially rich in colour and texture. This methodology was routinely used in de luxe French publication of books and journals throughout the Art Deco period, but faded from use with the introduction of colour photography in the 1930s. While generating vibrant colour plates, the technique had its limitations in that it did not easily accommodate shading, and it was slow, labour-intensive and expensive colouring process. At the height of its popularity over thirty graphic design studios in France employed upwards of six hundred workers to colour the pochoirs.

Barbier applied his considerable artistic talents to a variety of projects. He published two sets of almanacs, also richly illuminated with pochoirs. The ROM has acquired the five-volume set of his miniature Guirlande des mois (1917-1921), bound in white satin covers and painted with Barbier illustrations. They depicted a radical post-war shift in fashions with the adoption of shorter and fuller skirts, backless dresses, and fabrics that accommodated the more risqué elements of the ‘tango’. Its sequel Falbalas et fanfreluches (1922-1926) was published in a larger format, within which Barbier exercised his flights of imagination with great success. His images portray hints of romance and youth, with historical settings that are purely imaginative and whimsical. The 1925 volume is especially noteworthy for its portrayal of the seven deadly sins. L’Ensie (Envy) is visualized as a maid gazing upon her mistress as she alights from a Rolls Royce. In another image Barbier imagines a canoe scene with Pocahontas and the Indian captive Englishman, Captain John Smith, whose life she is alleged to have saved at Jamestown, Virginia, by laying her head on his as her father is about to execute him with a war club.

During the course of his successful twenty-year career Barbier illustrated over thirty books by prominent French authors such as Pierre Louÿs, René Boleslve, Henri de Régnier, Albert Flament, Marcel Boulenger, Théophile Gautier, and Marcel Schwob. He also contributed illustrations to many popular
Barbier also worked as a commercial artist and designer. He created over a hundred jewellery designs for his friend, the famous Paris jeweller Louis Cartier. In 1914 Cartier commissioned him to draw an invitation card for an exhibition at La Maison Cartier. Barbier’s design, *La femme avec une panthère noire*, featured a classical Greek figure, attired in an elegant Paul Poiret gown, accessorized by the presence of a black panther. This stylized panther has been the iconic symbol of the La Maison Cartier since 1917. Barbier also worked on the design of Renault’s Vivastella model, catalogue covers for the Paris clothier High Life Tailor, menu covers for The French Line of transatlantic steamships, an almanac for the American merchant John Wanamaker, and illustrations for the Paris furrier Fourrures Max.

Barbier continued to work on several projects during his illness. His illustrated edition of ChOLDERLOs’ *Les liaisons dangereuses* was published posthumously in 1934. His friend and fellow illustrator Georges Lepape completed his illustrations for Pierre Louÿs’ *Aphrodite* which was published in 1954.

With his death in 1932, Barbier passed into obscurity. His extensive library of over a thousand illustrated books and literary works was sold at two auctions in December 1932 and March 1933. It is unknown as to who organized and benefited from the sales. Prior to his death Barbier arranged for the donation of his significant collection of over five hundred erotic Japanese Shunga prints to the Bibliothèque nationale de France to insure their posterity. No personal papers or photographs survived, suggesting his family may have censored his personal archives. It appears that his relatives from a more provincial Nantes were embarrassed by their accomplished cousin who had thrived in the heady urbane cultural scene of Paris, and were perhaps scandalized by his association with such a risqué lifestyle and overt expressions of sexuality. We know from the inscriptions in the books found in his personal library and from a 1929 biography by Jean-Louis Vaudoyer that Barbier was highly regarded by the Paris artistic elite. In Barbier’s copy of her book *Les Climats*, the Romanian-French author Anna, comtesse de Noailles, wrote “à Monsieur George Barbier dont le grand talent, l’esprit et la grande tristesse me sont chers, bien amicalement.”

However, it would be more than seventy-five years before Barbier would be honoured with a major retrospective of his original works held in 2008 at the Museo Fortuny in Venice curated by Barbara Martorelli. The first major exhibition in North America on Barbier will be mounted in 2013 at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. It will feature the extensive Toronto holdings of Barbier’s published illustrations drawn from the collections of the Library & Archives at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto Public Library Special Collections, and the George Grant Collection at the Fisher Library. The exhibition is curated by ROM librarian Arthur Smith, who became fascinated with Barbier pochoir’s in the mid-1990s when he encountered a volume of *Falbalas et farfreluches* while mounting a display of treasures from the ROM’s rare book collections. The exhibition ‘*Chevalier du bracelet*: The Illustrations and Designs of George Barbier’ will run from September 30th to December 20th, 2013 at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.