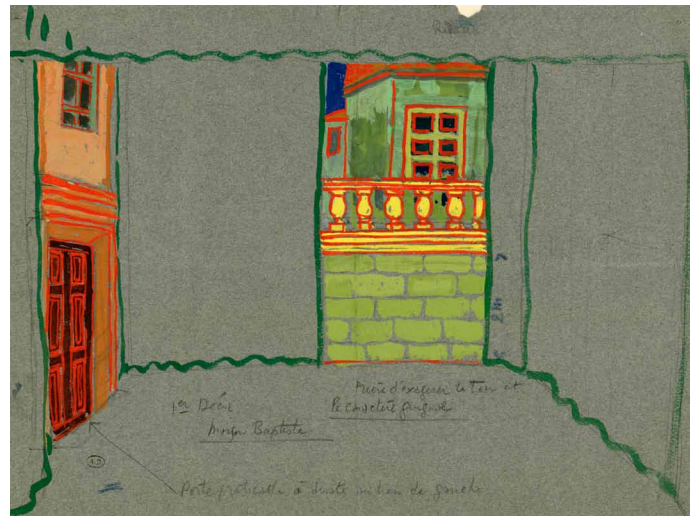


## Theatre Sets and Apparatus

The sets, curtains and other theatre apparatus designed by Édouard Bénédictus express cultivated splendour at times, sober ingeniousness at others, or the humour of his spirit and of the productions upon which he worked. The latter were of great diversity. The spectacles and plays evoking a journey through time and space allowed Bénédictus to imagine sumptuous scenes, playing upon a harmonious use of the precious and the exotic. This is especially the case for the play *Les Huns* by Abel Deval and Henri Béchade, performed for the first time on 2 March 1918 at the Comédie-Mérigny. Édouard Bénédictus designed its sets and its 225 costumes.

— 6. Set design for *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare (Paris, Théâtre Antoine, 1919) Graphite and gouache on paper © MAD, Paris



6.

— 7. Costume design for a revolutionary for *Plus ça change* by Rip (Paris, Théâtre Michel, 1918) Graphite and gouache on paper © MAD, Paris



7.

— 8. Costume design for a jester in *Les Mille et une nuits* by Maurice Verne (Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées then Théâtre des Variétés, 1920) Graphite and gouache on paper © MAD, Paris



8.

But he also worked on sets for works with a more classical theme, and for more modest productions which benefitted no less from his talents. He designed sets, executed by Emile Bertin, for the Shakespeare Society's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which opened at the Théâtre Antoine on 24 April 1919. Bénédictus's sets are highly intelligent in their design: composing around a simple stage space, he implements a system of curtains that are pulled aside to reveal a set that can evoke either Baptista's house, Petruchio's house or the street.

## From Drawings to Productions

Among the productions for which the Musée des Arts Décoratifs holds the designs, two are particularly well represented within the donation made by Edouard Bénédictus's widow, and cited in the press. The first is the performance of *Plus ça change* on 21 September 1918, a comedic show by Rip performed for the first time in Paris on 7 September 1915 at the Théâtre Michel. It tells the story of the Baron Jolibois des Sardines' journey through time as he flees his homeland that has been devastated by war and his mistress who has betrayed him. He travels through the ages, from the French Revolution to Prehistory, through the reigns of Louis XIV and Charles VI, and from Cleopatra's Egypt to ancient Greece. Two constants remain throughout each tableau: the war and the unfaithful woman. In addition to the design for the stage curtain, the museum preserves an ensemble of costume designs by Bénédictus representing each of the time periods through which Jolibois travelled, as well as costumes for the ballerinas representing the cardinal sins. Bénédictus succeeded Paul Poiret, who had designed the costumes for the play's 1917 production.

The second is the oriental spectacle *Les Mille et une nuits*, written by Maurice Verne and directed by Firmin Gémier. It was created at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 12 May 1920; then, in response to its enormous success, it was performed again at the Théâtre des Variétés on 12 June. This production brought together the major names in the performing arts, such as Andrée Mégard, Régina Camier, Victor Francen, the clown Footit and the dancer Habib Benglia. Maurice Verne's light re-writing of the show – which favoured a recreation of the Orient based more on the tastes of the day than the tales – reached new heights within the opulent ambience created by the set and the costumes. The designs by Bénédictus, precious and shimmering, gave the Caliph's palace, the Sultan's bath and the mosque incredible impact, and embellished the jesters, princesses, dancers and cortèges of fantastical animals. They were inspired by his research on animal and geometric motifs and his reflection upon the construction of the sets, the evidence of which can be found in the artist's sketchbooks. The latter bear witness to Bénédictus's abundant imagination and personal investment in these productions.

# Édouard Bénédictus

## A Spectacle of Colours



21 March  
— 23 June 2019



With the support of Les Amis du MAD



MUSÉE NISSIM  
DE CAMONDO

On the cover:  
— 1. Costume design for a black dancer for Maurice Verne's production of *Les Mille et une nuits* (Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées then Théâtre des Variétés, 1920)  
Graphite, gouache and silver accents on paper  
© MAD, Paris

— 2. Decorative composition for *Variations*, plate 7  
Gouache and gold accents on paper  
© MAD, Paris



2.

As he was pursuing this work, he also patented a process for creating laminated glass in 1909 and founded the Société du Verre Triplex in 1911. His discovery was a major advance for the automobile industry. During the First World War, he worked for the Ministry of War as an inventor. His creations earned him membership in the Legion of Honour in 1921. During the key years from about 1918 to 1920, Édouard Bénédictus worked on performances, theatrical productions and spectacular shows as a costume and set designer. Following this phase, he devoted himself entirely to the decorative arts. He would focus in particular on designing decorative motifs for wallpapers and especially textiles, in a style representative of the Art Deco movement. Édouard Bénédictus notably collaborated with the houses of Brunet, Meunié et Cie, and Tassanari & Chatel. He also published several collections of modern, luxury decorative compositions, of which the Musée des Arts Décoratifs preserves the original gouaches: *Variations* (1924), *Variations II* (1929) and *Relais* (1931), published posthumously.

### Édouard Bénédictus: “Wizard, Inventor, Painter, Dramatist”

Bénédictus was a man of many talents: he worked as a chemist, painter, publicist and decorator. The first part of his career was divided between decoration and chemistry. Initially specializing in inlaid leather, he participated in the Universal Exhibition of 1900 and became a member of the Société des Artistes Décorateurs in 1902.

A prolific, multidisciplinary and expert creator, Édouard Bénédictus was immensely fascinating to his contemporaries, although his work has been largely forgotten today. An article in *Romans-revue* presented him in 1921 as a “wizard, inventor, painter, dramatist”. Homages to him abounded after his death on 28 January 1930, with high praises being sung by the notable personalities in his entourage. Paul Léon, the general director of the École des Beaux-Arts, called him an “innumerable Proteus” and Yvanhoé Rambosson, a poet, art critic and honorary curator of the City of Paris’s museums, said that he “held a singular attraction, presenting himself like a sort of emanation of the sacred mystery of intelligence,” and that “he was reminiscent of the great creators of the European Renaissance, to which nothing of interest to human thought remained unfamiliar.”



3.

### Édouard Bénédictus and the Performing Arts

The discoveries made by Édouard Bénédictus as a chemist are quite well known. Similarly, his work as a decorative artist specialising in textiles and his decorative motif designs published in the 1920s have been presented in several exhibitions and publications. However, his drawings for costumes and sets for the theatre, opera and live spectacles are partially unpublished and have never been the object of specific study.

Indeed, it was a complicated business. The names of the designers were eclipsed by those of the actors and singers, used on the billboards to attract the public, and by those of the playwrights, composers and directors in particular. Furthermore, in the twentieth century, many modern painters were making forays into the realm of the performing arts: their mystique and renown overshadowed the decorators who specialized in this field. In 1919, the director Arsène Durec organized a Scandinavian tour for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, with the aim of promoting French theatre: amongst the authors of the 7,000 kg of sets that he brought with him, the names Vuillard, Derain, Marquet, Matisse and Vlaminck are more familiar to today’s audiences than that of Bénédictus, whose work nevertheless appeared alongside theirs.

— 3. Theatre set design for Maurice Verne's *Les Mille et une nuits* (Paris, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées then Théâtre des Variétés, 1920)  
Graphite, gouache and gold and silver accents on cardboard  
© MAD, Paris

— 4. Costume study for *Acis in Polyphème*  
Graphite and gouache on paper  
© MAD, Paris

— 5. Costume sketch for a *Sim in Plus ça change* by Rip (Paris, Théâtre Michel, 1918)  
Graphite, gouache and gold accents on paper  
© MAD, Paris



4.

We do not know how Édouard Bénédictus came to work in design for the theatre, or what his exact role was within these initiatives. But we can speculate about his working relationships – and even friendships – that endured over a number of projects, in particular with Firmin Gémier, the actor, stage director, theatre director and promoter of popular theatre. The decorator Emile Bertin partnered with Bénédictus for the productions of *Les Mille et une nuits* and *The Taming of the Shrew*: it appears that Bénédictus designed the models and Bertin was in charge of fabricating the full-scale sets. Édouard Bénédictus also worked with the costume designer Marie Muelle for *Les Huns* and *Plus ça change*.

In his sketches for sets and costumes, Bénédictus made very specific suggestions regarding the choice of textiles. His pleasure and virtuosity in playing with colours and motifs, the animation of his drawn characters as a pretext for using the fabrics that they were wearing, and his unusual choice to not pin fabric samples to his designs but rather to draw them directly foreshadow his future work as a textile and wallpaper designer.



5.

Édouard Bénédictus was himself passionate about music and the performing arts. A member of the Société des Apaches, he mingled with numerous composers such as Maurice Ravel and Maurice Delage, as well as with designers the likes of Georges Mouveau, who worked for the Paris Opera, in this intellectual milieu. His uncle, Louis Bénédictus, was a musician and composer. Édouard’s second wife was the singer Violette Gounin. Furthermore, he attended numerous performances and galas that brought together the A-list of Paris, where he was able to see productions by artists such as Léon Bakst and Loïe Fuller. Finally, even though no trace of it exists, Yvanhoé Rambosson recounts how Bénédictus composed “a symphony that his death obliged him to leave unfinished.”