

The Art of Beauty Without Photoshop

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Italian Opera Singer Lina Cavalieri.

ST. PETERSBURG — Portraits and belongings of famous female dancers, actresses and singers from Russian theater during the late 19th and early 20th centuries are on display at the State Museum of Theater and Music in a new exhibit titled "Beauties of the Russian Stage: Beauty Without Photoshop."

The exhibit aims to showcase how beauty was portrayed before the days of the now-ubiquitous airbrushing and photoshopping techniques, when the woman in front of the camera was the same woman seen in the photograph. Even without the aid of a computer and a "touch up," these women were able to create evocative and unique images of themselves. The soft smiles and bedroom eyes worn by the women in the photos draw people in, making them believe that they are hiding some secret.

Take for example the portraits of Lina Cavalieri, an Italian who grew up in a Roman Catholic orphanage, ran away to join a traveling theater group, married the Russian Prince Alexander Baryatinsky and ended up on opera stages in New York City, Paris and St. Petersburg. In one

particularly striking portrait, draped in pearls and baring her shoulders, Cavalieri looks directly at the camera. It's coy and brash at the same time, a theme that seems to repeat itself in the exhibition. The sexuality exuded by these women seems simultaneously repressed and expressed, demure and overt.

Even dressed as a matador for the Mariinsky Ballet, Marie Petipa — the daughter of Marius Petipa, the noted choreographer — exudes femininity.

The limited technology of the day makes the spectrum of emotions all the more impressive. The lack of color and the inability to quickly capture images and manipulate them necessitated a subtlety of carriage and demeanor not seen today. The result is unique images of the soft, feminine beauty extolled at the turn of the century.

"Beauties of the Russian Stage: Beauty Without Photoshop" runs through Nov. 27. St. Petersburg State Museum of Theater and Music, 6 Ploshchad Ostrovskogo. Metro. Gostiny Dvor. St. Petersburg. Tel. (812) 310 1029. www.theatremuseum.ru.

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