



Modern Dance and Its American Roots [1900-1930]

From Free Dance to Modern Dance

Attempts to approach the major dance trends

The decades 1890-1910 are synonymous with the transformations that swept Western society. Times were changing and the speed at which they took place defined the beginning of the 20th century! It was in this context that a new way of looking at movement in dance emerged. Historians talk of two trends developing alongside each other at the time: One "American" and the other "German". Together they will build the foundations of modern dance throughout the Western world and beyond.

The term "modern dance" has historically been used to describe these styles, but not without its use being questioned. At the time, the Anglo-Saxon term "*new dance*", or the more widely used French term "free dance", marked the first phase in the development of modern dance based on the search for new free and expressive shapes that relied on "natural" movements rather than the rigid formal constraints we see in classical dance, for example. It was a dance nurtured mainly by women who desired to be the choreographers and performers of their own works and stake out their female independence. Many of them went on to connect with avant-garde artists, particularly in Europe.

Free dance can trace its roots back to several different cultural influences. One instance is cabaret and its *skirt dances*. Another is oriental dance numbers. We also have late 19th century gymnastic practices and the changing methods which aimed to explore the dancer's body in a more natural way. Finally we see aspects of it in the style developed by Frenchman François Delsarte (1811-1871), a singer and teacher of singing and lyrical speech who was also theorist in movement. The language of gestures, according to him, is the most direct expression of the soul. Modern dance embodied the essence of this from the very beginning in reaching what was at the heart of one's innermost being. Delsarte was an important influence in Europe and even more so in the United States,



notably seen through the work of James Steele Mackaye and his method of "harmonic gymnastics", and then through Geneviève Stebbins.

Influences and Research: Nature, antiquity and expressing emotions

Research in free dance started by seeking to free the body, soul and thoughts. Dance is perceived above all as a philosophy of life based on a set of fundamental values that go beyond an artist's evolving technical methodology . Nature, antiquity and the Orient are the "other", a universal that dance draws on to offer the dancer happiness and an existential quest for meaning. Nature is the "other" of our industrialised society characterised by progress and speed, and also the proletariat and mechanised movements. Antiquity is the idealized other of a past society perceived as more serene and better educated. Finally, the East is the cultural other, full of ancient, mystical and spiritual traditions.

Delsarte's legacy tells us that expression is at the heart of dance practice. As early as the middle of the 19th century, Delsarte established the connections between gestures and emotions. In the United States, Delsarte's work was a permanent feature of the fin de siècle period and the first modern dancers - the sensory experience of movement, the feeling of heaviness and of successive movement, the awareness of breathing, the use of momentum, lightness, tension-relaxation and body flexibility are all indications of this. Gestural expression is ruled by the search for "harmonic balance" as defined by Delsarte. This is what Isadora Duncan meant when she spoke of finding the "initial movement" from which all human emotions are expressed. This initial movement finds its physical epicentre in the solar plexus.

As a young American girl who, as early as 1900, came to Europe with her family, Isadora Duncan reinforced, through her dances, her schools, and also her words and writings, the idea that dance should be the expression of the individual who dances and that



anyone can be a dancer not matter who they are! She is always represented barefoot in loose classical tunics in drawings by her contemporaries, such as Rodin or Bourdelle, Nothing must hinder the movement, neither in the body nor in the stage direction. No narration, but simply calling nature forth. No set either, because a backdrop curtain is enough, she often liked to say. On the other hand, she was steadfast to antiquity as a model and to nature as a vital essence.

Isadora Duncan's *Narcissus*: Duncanian principles in action

Whether in her solos or in the choral dances composed for her students, Isadora Duncan drew her inspiration from musical scores and reduced symphonic works for piano - Chopin, Schubert, Wagner, Beethoven, Scriabin - short works combined in programmes, which she called "concerts" or "recitals". In sometime around 1905 she captured the Greek myth of Narcissus based on a Chopin waltz in a recital dedicated to the composer. This was revolutionary. First, as dancing to music that was not originally written for dance was unconventional. Secondly, as the very rhythm of the dance combined the musical score and the natural rhythm of breathing. The movement alternates between tension and bodily relaxation and the opening and closing of the body in line with inhalation and exhalation. To take up the rhythm of life and nature, the movements develop in a continuous and uninterrupted flow, in a spatial and dynamic alternation between heaven and earth. She tried to release any muscle or joint tension so that the movement flowed through her body like waves lapping on a beach. Antiquity is also found beyond the costume and bare feet in the bodywork that made use of a spiralling up and down movement like posture in *contrast* to stiff ancient statues.



Free Dance of Its Time:

The 20th century would be the century of movement, speed and its perception!

The beginning of the 20th century heralded the end of the Golden Age in the United States which was marked by technological and industrial advances, the conquest of the West and the gold rushes, and the iconic figure of the cowboy that allowed WASP¹ culture to dominate over all others. The United States came out of the First World War much more powerful and it set out on its economic domination. It even became the centre of culture in the 1920s before Black Thursday on 24 October 1929 and the Great Depression plunged it into worldwide notoriety. In France, the period at beginning of the 20th century before the Great War broke out is known as the Belle Epoque. The Belle Epoque is synonymous with economic, demographic and political changes and the period of incredible inventions and technological advances that changed the world forever. The 1900 World's Fair in Paris celebrated this ingenuity under the beam of electricity!

Loïe Fuller, La Fée Electricité And Her Visual Vibrations

The Electricity Fairy or Fairy of Light are the nicknames given to the American woman who arrived in France in 1892 to star in famous Parisian cabaret, Les Folies Bergères. It was from that very stage that she showed off her masterpiece of dance and its principles - the important thing was not the shape of the body's movement but the form the movement's dynamics took through the fabric surrounding it which she twirled around with the help of two long sticks. Her art was made all the more captivating with the combination of electricity by the use of multiple coloured projectors, scenic effects, such as the use of mirrors that reflected several more images of her body, and another piece of modern technology - staging lights. She defined her art as: "Movement is an instrument through which the dancer throws out visual vibrations and musical waves into space,

¹ Acronym for *White Anglo-Saxon Protestant*.

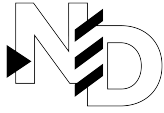


and with a masterful hand, expresses all human and divine emotions"². This idea of vibration is fundamental to the perception of movement and echoed another art form in its infancy in this era - cinema. Fuller's dances are not narrative but they summon the spirit of nature as seen in the titles of her solos: *Dance of the Lily*, *Dance of Fire*, *Serpentine Dance*... She sought an abstraction that captivated the senses. Each dance was created to music from the symphonic repertoire and was associated with specific colours, lighting techniques and projections. Cabaret dancing was not considered an art form in its own right and had many imitators plagiarized it. So Loïe Fuller went on to file several patents related to the inventions she created in her own personally laboratory, the stage. Thanks to her versatility as a conduit between worlds of cabaret and the theatre, and to her fusion of modern technology and nature as the spirit of perfection, she is considered one of the first artists to straddle the spheres of popular and high-brow art. She peaked the interest and adulation of spectators across the social classes. Ahead of her time as an artist, she was just as much forward thinking in her personal life. Feminist and openly homosexual, she also developed a love for production, an area reserved for men, and brought the Japanese Saddayacco company to Europe for the first time.

**Being “Modern”: A witness to the era
and offering a view on the world**

At the beginning of the 20th century, the United States and Europe saw the emergence of well funded dance critics at the same time as modern dance took off. John Martin, an American critic and essayist, was one of those. His mission was to analyse, explain and share what he thought of this expressive art created by artists freed from the great conventions of the 19th century and connected to their deep emotional experiences. According to him, modern dance was deserving of its own criticism that was not ruled by the musical or theatrical codes. It must take into account the strength of the bodies and emotions involved. In 1933, he published *The Modern Dance* with this in mind. To

² Loïe Fuller, “*La Danse*”, in *Ma vie et la danse*, Paris, coll. Mémoires&miroirs, L’œil d’or, 2002, p.171-172.



be a modern dancer, in fact, is perhaps above all to be able to translate into physical movements, the emotional and psychological movements that underpin an individual's beliefs and struggles.

Revolutionary Study by Isadora Duncan:

A proletarian social manifesto

In the early 1920s and a few months after her arrival in Russia, Isadora Duncan created a set of solos under the title *Impression of Russia* where she searched for a revolutionary ideal beyond a mere more just and egalitarian life. She had come to Moscow to start a school but found herself confronted with the reality of destitution, poverty and violence far removed from the ideals proclaimed during the 1917 Revolution. To express how she saw Soviet life, she gave power to the proletarian struggle through dance in *Etude révolutionnaire* (1921). This solo is far removed from the lightness and joy often emanating from her dances. She embodied the workers in Scriabin's *Etude pathétique*. Those who pick up, press, push, those who do repetitive work gestures and also gestures of struggle: closed fists, pounding the ground, cries coming from the throat. The body is strong, dense, determined, defending the proletarian cause in the face of adversity, like Prometheus stealing sacred fire to offer it to humans. Classical references are never far away.

East Indian Nautch Dance by Ruth Saint Denis:

Eastern mysticism, the birthplace of the modern body.

Radha, *The Cobra*, *The Incense*, *Nautch Dance* are some of the many solos which toured Europe in as early as 1906 and promoted his work beyond just New York. Initially welcomed as exotic interludes, her dances offer a mystical dimension that lifts them from cabaret entertainment to theatrical recitals. For Saint Denis, Western dance was nothing but gesticulation cut off from its roots and ritual emanations. Her research wanted to reconquer this spirituality, particularly by mimicking Hindu traditions and



practices³. Dance is sacred. Dance is a philosophy of life to which the dancer must devote themselves fully in the tradition of the *devadasis*, those dancers in the temples of South India whose work Saint Denis borrows from and gives a Western touch: Puja rites, handling incense sticks, rich embroidered costumes, jewellery, bells... She fervently explored the undulations, especially those of the spine and arms, the repetitive twirls and also the stylisation of the hands and wrists, in addition to the work of the eyes in direct reference to the mudras. Music, props, the presence of musicians and extras instil an exotic atmosphere that goes to make for a magnificent show. The spectator enters the sacred universe of Hindu temples and finds them self in the presence of a ritual being carried out...

***Japanese Spear Dance* by Ted Shawn: proclaiming and exploring
a modern and masculine dancing body**

At the beginning of the 20th century, iTed Shawn is working on a masculine dance to recognized men in American culture who seem to have no place in an art of movement, expression of emotions and inner turmoil. Ted Shawn was originally destined for a religious life, but instead fought for a male dance woken with the theories of Delsarte and Eastern culture. This was an interest he shared with Ruth Saint Denis, his wife and co-founder of the Denishawn School. His solo *Japanese Spear Dance* (1919) is the result of the of bringing these two things together. In 1931, he bought Jacob's Pillow Farm in Massachusetts and founded an all-male company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers. The choreographic themes were different, but those relating to work, primitive being or spiritual faith reoccur. The movements require a overall mobilization of the body, intense muscular control, isolation and impact - a physical power of action that values the male dancer. With Ted Shawn, the modern dancer is born laying bare virility and emotions.

³ A Parliament of Religions was held at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. SwamiVivekananday introduced Hinduism. This event is an example of the links between East and West in the circulation of ideas and cultures.



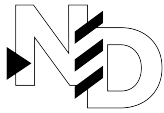
Being “Modern”: demonstrating a life philosophy

This first generation of modern American dancers does not separate creation and performance, with the possible exception of Loïe Fuller who sporadically performed her dances to women who accompany her as she liked being the inspiration for Art Nouveau or Symbolism in Europe. For others, teaching is itself a creative act; one must find the means to share this art under construction. Isadora Duncan is the figurehead of this. Convinced that all the children of the world must dance, she founded several schools in the West. She adopted some of her pupils went on to ensure her dances and her philosophy lived on. Today, American LoriBelilove and French dancer, Elisabeth Schwartz are beneficiaries. The Isadorables participate in this irrepressible desire to share that so much gave a spotlight to Isadora Duncan. Many people have seen her dance and have been influenced by it. In 1920, François Makhovsky founded a free dance school in Paris following in Duncan's footsteps. In the United States, there was another school which profoundly marked the development of American modern dance: the Denishawn School.

The Denishawn School (1915-1931): observing the world and study distant cultures to reach the universal.

It was in Los Angeles that Ruth Saint Denis and Ted Shawn founded their school in 1915, the Denishawn School. Fascinated by oriental cultures, the dances and teaching are imbued with spirituality. Dance was a philosophy of life which finds its roots in this mysticism coming from another place, crossed with the precepts of the Delsartiens. Classes were given outdoors, dancers wore Indian sari, lotus positions, mantras stylizing the hands, and movements with trays on the head, all displaying a strong Eastern influence. However, the artistic activities were varied and open to many Western practices, not excluding the so-called "ballet" exercises or the Dalcrozian⁴ method

⁴ For questions of text format, we choose to go into further detail into the Dalcroze method in the text devoted to the emergence of German modern dance.



coming from Europe. By observation, the dancers experimented with movements from other fields of gesture, particularly those of work. Some exercises aimed to explore sensations and to experience the body as a whole, others tended to study "musical visualisation". Within their company, they came up with numerous creations and tours in which themes from distant civilisations, in time as well as in geography, conjured up strong and mystical ideas of the imagination.

At the End of the 1920s, A Second Generation: Modern dance and the dramatic piece

In the late 1920's, many students left the Denishawn School and tried their hand at modern choreography at the same time as working for revues and music halls to earn a living. Martha Graham, alongside Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman founded their companies and schools. They developed modern dance on the East Coast and the critic John Martin would support this new generation under the name "Modern Dance".

The expressive dimension remained at the foundation. However, the means to achieve this were evolving in a world of financial backing - at the end of the 1920s, education was a means to meet its needs. Ted Shawn advocated an eclectic approach to learning so that each dancer could find his or her own style and therefore his students each had a distinct style. They applied Modern Dance according to gestures modelled on the principles of *Contraction and Release* by Martha Graham, *Fall and Recovery* by Doris Humphrey. The first supports a dancing body drawing its strength from the lower abdomen, from the contraction and relaxation of the pelvic floor, the source of *pathos* and impulses. The second one defines the dance by an imbalance, suggested as "an arch stretched between two deaths", a symbolic death of the body lying on the ground and the body standing on its two feet. Between the two, the arc of living and expressive movement is drawn. Modern Dance was born!



The choreographic pieces are also formulated differently, what many critics and American dancers will call *dramatic pieces*, modern works where the narrative that emerges develops the power of human emotions and tragedies. This period of economic crisis brought the United States into the Great Depression of the 1930s and Modern Dance evolved themes and compositional structures to expose the American cultural identity⁵.

***Appalachian Spring* by Martha Graham
or the evocation of a strong and hopeful America**

In her American cycle, Martha Graham draws her resources from American⁶ culture. For example, her 1935 solo *Frontier* is based on a memory, her family's train journey from the East Coast to the West Coast. The spirit of the American world, it also moved away from the Eastern mysticism of Ruth Saint Denis - whom she was a pupil of - to touch on psychoanalysis: this was Martha Graham's approach. She also moves away from the natural movement so much sought after by free dance to offer the body the dramatic power necessary for the expression of emotion and human *pathos*, in line with Carl Gustav Jung's theories on the collective unconscious.

Appalachian Spring, a later work from the 1940s, sets out the issues at play. The work sets the drama in a Protestant community in Pennsylvania and recalls the pioneering spirit of the 19th century: a couple, a pioneer woman, a pastor and his female congregation seek to build their future of their faith. It's a story of new life in a new country where the dance embodies the hope of a better future, just as, in the year 1944, the hope to an end of the Second World War. Isamu Noguchi's scenography and Aaron Copland's music also hark back to the *Shakers* culture. Martha Graham and her husband Eric Hawkins play the role of the newlyweds. A young dancer, the second man to join the company, took on the role of the pastor, Merce Cunningham...

⁵ We will develop this part further in the next section.

⁶ In these various creative cycles, Martha Graham was deeply interested in Mexican and Native American Indian ancient myths.



Credits:

Excerpts selection

Céline Roux

Text and bibliography selection

Céline Roux

Production

Maison de la Danse

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Holder of a doctorate in the history of art, Céline Roux is an independent researcher. Specialising in the performative practices of the French choreographic field, she is in particular the author of *Danse(s) performative(s)* (L'Harmattan, 2007) and *Pratiques performatives / Corps critiques # 1-10* (2007-2016) (L'Harmattan, 2016). A lecturer, trainer and teacher, she works in a variety of higher education contexts as well as coaching dancers. She also collaborates in the artistic projects of contemporary dancers-choreographers, whether for artist archives, the production of critical texts and editorial projects or dramaturgic coaching. She has contributed to a number of digital projects for the sharing of choreographic culture such as 30ansdanse.fr. Alongside her activities in/for/around choreographic art, she has practice dhatha yoga in France and in India for several years.

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