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The Modern Contributions of Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan

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Sponsored by Jonette Lancos

ABSTRACT

In this scholarly paper, I will discuss two American modern dancers and feminist pioneers, Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan. I wrote about the people, places, and things that inspired their movement styles as well as their own contributions and what resulted from them. All of relate to a current choreographic piece for Geneseo Dance Ensemble, created by Professor Deb French, which includes many themes shared by Fuller and Duncan.

Modern dance is an accumulation of many artists' ideas that reject the rigid and strict rules ballet has (Kraus, Hilsendager, & Gottschild, 1991, p. 112). Two pioneers of modern dance who formed the early contributions and elements were Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan. Both of these influential dancers used the concepts produced by Francois Delsarte, in which he depicted the three zones of the body and the three major types of movement (Shawn, 1976). Taking from Delsarte and others, including Bernarr Macfadden, Fuller and Duncan were able to start and define a not only feminist movement, but a modern dance movement as well (personal communication, spring 2017). Both Fuller's and Duncan's styles emphasized

self-expression and mobilization of emotions and natural-esque contemporary ideals that ballet and other forms lacked (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). As technology was developing in America, Fuller used it to her full advantage, which in turn inspired Duncan (Chitwood, 2009). American modern dance began its long journey with Fuller and Duncan, and their influences are clearly seen in many works throughout modern dance's path.

Francois Delsarte, a teacher of music in France, rejected his previous teachers' legacies and strived to create his own formulation of gestures. In the Science of Applied Aesthetics, Delsarte described his three zones of the body and three movement styles, all of which ultimately shaped Fuller's and Duncan's contributions (Brown, 1998, p. 3). The three zones of the body are the head and neck, torso and arms, and the lower half and legs (Shawn, 1976). Each of these zones represented a different human expression: The head and neck were associated with the mental and intellectual aspects of expression, torso and arms were emotional and spiritual, and the physical expression was represented by the lower trunk and legs (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). The movement categories were oppositions, parallelisms, and successions. Each category of movement can be clearly seen in modern dance, especially Duncan's work. Delsarte was able to categorize a structured system of gestures that was originally intended for musicians, but carried its in-



Figure 1. Loie Fuller in *La Danse Blanche* (Taber Prang Art Co., 1898).



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fluence and power into modern dance (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112).

Many dancers believe Duncan was the first to clear the path for modern dance; however, it was Fuller who originally inspired her (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). Loie Fuller was born outside of Chicago and grew up traveling the country in a musical theatre troupe (Chitwood, 2009). She was uninspired by ballet's rigid system and joined the "skirt dance" trend, but made it her own (Chitwood, 2009). Fuller enlarged a costume of a traditional dancer and used wood panels to manipulate it through the air, which is where her nickname of the "butterfly" originated (personal communication, spring 2017). Fuller also incorporated the use of technicolor lights and mirrors to reflect them and enhance the spectacle of her dancing (Chitwood, 2009). Fuller is considered to be the face of Art Nouveau, reflected in her fantastical use of shapes and drapery of her costume (class notes?). America was not as willing as Europe to accept this new form of dance, which led Fuller to pursue a career in Berlin and then in Paris (Chitwood, 2009). Fuller continued her American-inspired dance style in Europe where she met and collaborated with Duncan.

One of the most influential artists of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, was born in California, near the sea. Much of her work was inspired by the waves, the rhythm of the ocean, and the natural human expressions that followed (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). Similarly to Delsarte and Fuller, Duncan strayed away from strict rules for dance and viewed her body as

a translator for emotions and internal spirit (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). Duncan and Fuller studied the structures and the art of Europe and incorporated it into their work. Duncan had a heavy influence from Greek culture, from the drapes she wore to the statue-like poses assimilated into her work. Bernarr Macfadden started a physical movement with the Greek ideal "sound mind in a sound body," which kick-started Duncan's feminist and modern action (personal communication, spring 2017). Duncan's movement style consisted of fluidity and grace, all while capturing picture-worthy moments and snippets throughout the pieces. In Brahms Waltzes, choreographed by Sir Frederick Ashton of the Royal Ballet of England and performed by Lynn Seymour, a viewer is able to clearly see the Greek influences. The dance was a depiction of Duncan's style as well as a piece devoted to admiring her contributions-considering she refused to be videotaped (personal communication, spring 2017). The performance displayed Duncan's use of music visualization and gave the audience an image of what the music might look like (personal communication, spring 2017). Duncan's ideals allowed the European and American communities to gain support for the new and incoming American modern dance technique (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 112). Many other artists continued the emphasis on self-expression and rejection of rules and strict guidelines that Delsarte, Fuller, and Duncan first introduced. Modern works in the 21st century incorporate the freeing and spiritual movements used during Duncan's time, and the ideas are instilled in many dancers today.



Figure 2. Isadora Duncan (prancing left to right, holding salmon color cloth, wearing dark pink tunic) (Walkowitz, 1906-1965b)



Figure 3. Isadora Duncan (enface, one arm across herself, one knee slightly bent, white tunic) (Walkowitz, 1906-1965a).



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Through empirical study, I was able to encounter a type of modern dance similar to Duncan's naturalistic style. I was cast in a Geneseo Dance Ensemble piece entitled "Aqueous," crafted by Professor French for the spring semester of 2017. I noticed many similarities between "Aqueous" and the video of Brahms Waltzes. The movement we do in "Aqueous" is driven by the rhythm of the ocean as we dance to the sound of waves in the first section. This also relates to Duncan's seaside influence. The movements presented in Brahms Waltzes reflected the natural experiences one might have along the ocean, and the dancers in "Aqueous" aim to do so as well. In the second section of "Aqueous," we used fabric to also represent the pouring and draping of water. Fuller and Duncan were known for the use of fabric to extend their own body and create illusions of intricate shapes and manipulations. The fabric we use acts as the crashing of the waves as well as the flow of bodies of water, which once again, can relate to Duncan's original influence of the ocean. Lastly, the final section of "Aqueous" uses hard, pose like movements to capture the essence of the synchronized beat and rhythm of the ocean. Duncan included pauses that emphasized unique gestures that used specific formations of the hands, arms and torso, which can be seen throughout "Aqueous." When first rehearsing "Aqueous," I was moved by the powerful inspiration that Professor French has explained to us, however, I had not known previously of Duncan's modern dance style. After researching and listening to the lecture in class, I was able to connect the two. The performance of "Aqueous" will enlighten myself as well as other dancers and the audience of the ocean-like qualities of Duncan's modern dance contributions.

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