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Influential Figures of Dance: Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan

Emma Jayne Porter

As dancers and people who study the artistry of movement, we need to take time to reflect upon where we would be in dance without the brave and creative souls who helped develop the art. Dance is an art form that originated centuries ago, but has evolved, developed, and expanded across the world. Beginning as a classical, codified set of movements, dance is now a complex art and an expression of emotion. Reaching their full potential and influence on the world of dance in the late 1800s and early 1900s were Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan. While Fuller focused on elaborate lighting, the use of costume, and the revolution of classical dance, Duncan developed a modernized form of movement that was natural and heart-felt. The effects of Fuller and Duncan's artistic additions to dance are still present in classes and on stages all around the world.

Before discussing the impact of Fuller and Duncan, it is important to understand the new era in dance that was beginning to unfold during their breakthroughs. Just at the turn of the century in 1898, Bernarr Macfadden formed the beginnings of the Physical Culture Movement (Lancos). Outlining the path to a good life, Macfadden stressed the importance of exercise, natural food, fresh-air, sunshine, and a quiet mind (Lancos). The American public tested Madfadden's theories of a healthy lifestyle and realized the benefits of following the steps to a "good life." Paired with the theories of art nouveau, dance became a popular pastime and source of entertainment for Americans of all ages. Art nouveau was a development of the oriental design elements and woodcut prints, ukiyo-e (Lancos). Sinuous curves, linear pattern, opposition, contrast, and asymmetry were design elements of art nouveau that fascinated the public. Between the movement aspects of the Physical Culture Movement and the design elements of art nouveau, the late 1800s and early 1900s called for a revolution in dance.

Loïe Fuller, born in 1862 in Fullersberg, Illinois, was a sensation to the world of dance, finding her peak at a time that called for change in the art of motion (Brown, Mindlin, and Woodford 11). Marie Louise Fuller, originally a child actress, found her passion in skirt dancing. "Skirt dancing consisted of graceful, somewhat balletic steps," in which voluminous skirts

enhanced movement (Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 116). After realizing that she could not appeal to the American audience, Fuller traveled to Europe in an attempt to make a career of her passion. In 1892, Fuller took the stage at the Folies-Bergère in Paris (Brown, Mindlin, and Woodford 11). Unlike Fuller's countrymen, the Parisians greatly appreciated her innovative style and expressivity. Fuller, nicknamed "La Loïe" by the French, became an overnight sensation (Lancos). The European audience looked past Fuller's mediocre technique, her less than refined skill, and her full-figured body; they saw harmony between movement, light, and material. Fuller shared her fascination of the play between light and cloth with audiences, expanding the art of dance beyond movement.

"Often characterized as the embodiment of the Art Nouveau movement," Fuller embraced the ideals of creativity, design, and expressivity (Chitwood 64). What Fuller did for the dance and theater world reaches far beyond what many other notable dancers have contributed. Fuller had the courage to oppose the accepted classical technique of dance, adding artistry and lighting effects. Imagine a dancer who is wrapped in 100 yards of beautiful fabric, surrounded by darkness, yet illuminated by only a few colorful lights (Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 116). Her maneuvering of the cloth with long bamboo sticks extending from her arms is natural, playful, and simply artistic. The light reflects upon the material and highlights the brilliance of dance. By incorporating these technical and design elements into performances, Fuller left audience members awestruck. As dancers and theater-goers, we still see the long lasting effects of Fuller. Modern dance done today is often natural, just as Fuller's dancing was. All stage performances use brilliant lighting and costuming to complement movement; this was Fuller's exact goal as an artist and dancer. Some say "her legacy is ascending," as technology is changing and Fuller's theories are becoming more relevant (Chitwood 66). From codified to natural, from plain to complex, and from dark to illuminated, there is no doubt that Loïe Fuller had a significant impact on dance.

In addition to revolutionizing dance as an art, Fuller influenced other legendary figures, like Isadora Duncan. Like Fuller, Duncan sought to oppose the accepted technique of dance in the 1800s. Born in 1877 in San Francisco, California, Duncan began studying classical ballet at a young age (Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 116). Finding that ballet did not satisfy her needs as an artist, and realizing that classical dance seems to "separate the gymnastic movements of the body completely from the mind," Duncan sought to develop a self-expressive form of dance

(Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 116). Dancing in concerts and revealing her true self in New York and Chicago, Duncan found that she could not appeal to the American audience. Like Fuller, Duncan traveled to Europe in search of inspiration and an appreciative audience. Duncan continued to develop her own personal expressive form of movement and was particularly inspired by her travel to Greece in 1899 (Lancos). Inspiration finally came to Duncan while observing the natural movement of waves on the beaches of Greece. The natural lightness, forward-backward motion, and flow of water brought a new image for Duncan to formulate movement around. Duncan's European performances became light-hearted and natural; her hair was let loose, she wore draping fabrics, and she danced with emotion and artistry. Soon a popular and appreciated dancer, Duncan performed in Budapest, Berlin, Italy, Greece, and Russia, in front of audiences who were captivated by Duncan's innovative style of dance (Kraus, Hilsendager, and Dixon 117). Duncan "liberated the spirit of dancing," and enlivened movement ("Trailblazers").

Today people can observe the significant impacts that Duncan had on the world of dance. Prior to Duncan, classical technique seemed to be the basis of all dance that captivated audiences in America. Duncan broke away from codified, disciplined dance and developed four movement theories. First, she believed that all movement originated in the solar plexus, the spiritual center of the body (Lancos). Frederick Ashton portrays Duncan's movement style in "Five Brahms Waltzes in the Manner of Isadora Duncan." By watching Ashton's piece, one can observe the importance of the solar plexus in Duncan's movements, as seen by a constant uplift in the chest and rising of the arms ("Trailblazers"). The second movement theory of Duncan's is breath rhythm, coinciding with the third theory of wave rhythm. Finally, Duncan theorized sequential movement, and emphasized flowing from one movement to another (Lancos). Although these four movement theories have allowed dance to evolve into art, the most lasting effect of Duncan is incorporating emotion, passion, and inspiration into dance. Where would we be today without artistic expression in dance? Modern dance, contemporary ballet, social dance, and artistic dance would not have evolved without Duncan's bravery to oppose tradition. By setting the theatricality of dance aside and emphasizing creativity, emotion, and expression, Duncan opened a new opportunity to dance.

Dance is complex and full of history. Today it is a recognized art form that has numerous branches, forms, and styles. Unafraid and firm in their beliefs, Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan

expanded dance beyond the accepted codified traditional movement. Fuller introduced the power of lighting and supported the design elements of art nouveau. Duncan contributed natural, flowing movement that was inspired by emotion and the environment. Both legendary dancers and choreographers propelled dance in a new direction. Because of Fuller's and Duncan's influences on dance, movement has become a complex art full of meaning and creativity.

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