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Madison Harding
SUNY Geneseo

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The American Modern Dancer— Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan

Madison Harding

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ABSTRACT

Both Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan paved the way for Modern Dance in America. Bringing new and individual elements, breaking previous stylistic restrictions, and changing the look of dance in America at the turn of the 20th century, these two women are considered the forerunners of American Modern Dance. With their free and natural movements, and as well as their dance clothing, they were also able to liberate the female form from standards previously faced by all women.

At the turn of the 20th century, art pieces from Japan and Paris, changes in fashion, and new forms of architecture influenced the beginning of the new “Modern” America and American dance. Two of the most prominent and influential forerunners in the American Modern Dance movement were Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan. Though each was distinct in style, both spurred from natural inspirations and rejected the rigidity of dance styles that had existed before them. Fuller brought the use of colored lights on an all black stage to emphasize the dancer, and Isadora Duncan brought both free and natural movements that followed free, movable, and nonrestrictive clothing for women. These two women were both highly recognized for their talent and innovation they brought into the world of modern American dance.

Modern dance began as a form of rebellion against the strict formalism of classical ballet, and a characteristic element of its style and aesthetic is freedom (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 114). Modern dance was affected by both social, and cultural changes occurring at the time, as well as different art forms from other countries. The Art Nouveau Movement created a new style of decoration for household objects, focusing on the use of either linear patterns or sinuous curves, where both ideas also influenced the new modern dance style. In addition to this, Ukiyo-e prints, popular art from Japan, also had significant effects on the American modern dance movement. A main element in these prints, were their light-heartedness, and the qualities present in these prints, as the image was seemingly lifted from the page, creating the concept of the “floating worlds” which was then transferred into the modern dance movement through the use of free, natural, and lifted movements. As far as cultural movements and happenings in America at this time, the Physical Culture Movement, which originated with Bernarr Macfadden, focused on

a new lifestyle that emphasizes an individual's physical health and well-being. This movement then drew attention to dance as a movement-based art form.

Loïe Fuller, one of the first and most influential American modern dancers, is characterized as “the embodiment of the Art Nouveau movement” with her use of mixed media choreography. She brought many new innovations to the dance world and changed the public's view on dance as a whole. Fuller was first inspired by the way light shone in a stained glass window in Notre-Dame de Paris seemed to dance on her white handkerchief. She attempted to replicate and expand on the experiences she had with those colored lights, using a long skirt in the *Serpentine Dance* to reflect and emphasize the colored lights on stage. Fuller emphasized the importance of these lights by saying that “our knowledge of motion is as primitive as our knowledge of color.” Because of these ideas, it seemed only logical to Fuller to combine these elements and focus on the dancer and their natural, free-flowing movements. Not only did her long, light reflecting skirt bring a new element to the American dance scene, but Fuller also was the first artist to drape the stage entirely in black. In doing so, she was able to center the attention on only the performer, with no other distractions (Chitwood, 2009). Also, Fuller was one of the first dancers to perform as a soloist, captivating the world with her original natural movement style, and changing the look of American dance.

Isadora Duncan, who is often recognized as the first modern dancer—despite Fuller's earlier arrival in American dance—created a significant original style of movement that is still recognized today. Duncan was born by the sea, and movement of the ocean and its tides inspired her dance style (Brown et al., 1998, p. 8). Her nature-based movement was seen both as a new form of individual expression and as a breaking away from the rigidity of the classical ballet technique, echoing her belief, “that dance should come from and be an expression of the spirit, inspired by nature” (Brown et al., 1998, p. 7). Duncan originally began her training in classical ballet, but she broke away from the technique when she thought the style did not suit her or her spirit, which then led to the discovery of her own style of movement (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 116). Not only did Duncan reject the ballet technique but also the conventional dress that came with it. She did away with the restrictive corsets, shoes, and tutus of classical ballet, and she danced barefoot with free and bare limbs in a flimsy and short Greek inspired tunic (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 117). Her free and natural movement, along with her loose and non-restrictive clothing, embodied the liberation of her spirit through her dancing, while entertaining and inspiring audiences. Another element brought into dance by Duncan, was the idea of dancing to “the accompaniment of great musical works...including many selections which had never been considered suitable for dance”(Kraus et al., 1991, p. 117). Many of these works were very large and dramatic, in the way that they were to be appreciated on their own, yet Duncan only considered the “best” musical works for her dancing, as her movements reacted to the music. With her distinct choreographic and performance style, combined with the pieces of music she chose to dance to, Isadora Duncan was able to create her own style of dance as a theater art.

Both Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan brought great change to the theater arts, and both are credited to the creation of American Modern Dance. Both dancers were highly focused on free, natural, and expressive movements as emotional and physical responses to music, adding to the impulsiveness of the natural movement. Another natural element utilized in either performance or choreography is “improvisation,” which both Duncan and Fuller exercised in their performances, allowing dancers the ability to improvise or converse with the audience only through movement (Shawn, 1975, p. 80).

Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan were tremendous influences on modern dance in their time. By freeing themselves from the restrictive dance forms, both were catalysts in the birth of many new forms and styles of dance to come in the future. Their work was able to broaden the theater arts in America, as well as around the world.

Today, evidence of the work by Fuller and Duncan is still seen in all different types of dance performances. Stages today are often draped in all black, and they frequently feature colored lighting in order to complement costuming, or to emphasize the mood of the piece, both of these elements created by the work of Fuller. Modern dance was born out of the innovations of Duncan and Fuller, and thus many of their choreographic elements are still present today. Modern dance is centered around the free and natural movement of the body, largely taken from Duncan’s dance style. Modern dancers perform barefoot, wearing non-restrictive clothing just as Duncan did in her time. Fuller’s more “serpentine” style of movement is also very prevalent in modern dance today, as much of the style is based on circular movements. Modern dance—and dance as we see it performed today—owes a great debt to the works of both Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan.

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