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The Innovations of Modern Dance

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ABSTRACT

As Art Nouveau became prominent within American style and physical culture was establishing itself among the United States, the art of dance was evolving with the times. With the shift in art style came a collaboration of ideas in the arts, including the combination of movement and emotion studied by Francois Delsarte and the blend of music and movement in the teachings of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. As a result of the work of these artists and the changing lifestyle of the United States, new innovations were brought into the world of dance. Previously viewed as an art known for the structure and tricks of ballerinas, women such as Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan ushered in modern dance. Modern dance rejected the performative aspect of dance and allowed it to be composed based off the movements tied to those feelings. Loie Fuller introduced new components of ingenuity to the art of dance, debuting with lights, props, and fabrics, inspired by the shifting styles of the period, which broadened the dynamics of dance as a performance. Isadora Duncan, a feminist, argued for the rawness of human emotion within movement, a component to dance inspired by Delsarte and Dalcroze. These artists had integral roles in paving the path for future modern dancers and brought back the artistic aspect of dance within performances. Modern dance evolved the world of dance to become an art that is composed of humanness and emotion.

During the end of the 19th century, America was experiencing a cultural renaissance. Art Nouveau was becoming the new popular style, Americans were beginning to live by the ways of physical culture, and new means of expression, music, and dance were influencing each other. With social and artistic movements on the rise, different divisions of the arts were largely impacted and intermingled with one another, influencing dancers Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan to usher in modern dance within America.

Movements like Art Nouveau and other ideas that circulated around America in the late 1800s and early 1900s introduced new styles and ways of life to people around the country. Making their way to mainstream culture, these influences changed ideas introduced within the period. Art Nouveau came to the forefront for art and style. With patterns of lines flowing in sinuous curves, Art Nouveau was inspired by Japanese art, in particular, wood prints called *ukiyo-e*. It impacted the paintings of artists, the decorations in buildings, and the art of dance. Art Nouveau impacted fabric and color as well, something that Loie Fuller would eventually embrace in her dances. While Art Nouveau affected

the world of the arts, physical culture was gaining traction in American households across the country. Physical culture, established by Bernarr MacFadden, promoted a healthy lifestyle, physically and mentally. Along with ideas of enjoying the outdoors, exercising, choosing healthy eating habits and overall health, more Americans were encouraged to become active. Offering Penny Restaurant chains and creating a hotel and promoting healthy habits, MacFadden spread physical culture. His work caused dance to become more popular as people searched for healthy activities to engage in. Feminism was gaining traction as well, with many witnessing the suffrage movement, the push for freedom of choices, and the rejecting of gender roles. A particular feminist stood up for both physical culture and women's rights, known as the athlete Elsa Von Blumen. Not only did she advocate for women's rights, but she paved a path for them to achieve excellence in athletics. In a newspaper detailing Von Blumen, it states, "Von Blumen saw herself as more than just an athlete. She knew she was a role model for girls and young women at a time when the suffrage movement was gaining steam across the country" (Lahman). Von Blumen dissociated from the stereotypical, restricting corset and dresses, something that Isadora Duncan would also resist when performing. Art Nouveau, physical culture, and feminism would set up an environment where new dance styles could grow and flourish.

While the culture of the Western world was changing and influencing the future of the arts, people were breaking barriers with their methods of movement and music. Francois Delsarte was a teacher within the arts of theater and music in France. Throughout his life, he would analyze how people would physically react when in certain emotional situations. He developed the idea of three zones of the body representing the mental, spiritual, and physical. Although Delsarte was not a dancer, he studied and searched to understand natural reactions to emotion, the very basis of what modern dance became. Richard Kraus et al. (1991) state that "It was Shawn's view that Delsarte's teaching was the first to reveal what modern dancers call tension and relaxation or contraction and release..." (p. 115). Ted Shawn, a future pioneer in dance, regarded how Delsarte's work truly impacted modern dance. Modern dance is founded in the idea of being made of natural movements and expressing genuine emotion. Delsarte was able to connect emotion to the body's reaction, which was vital research to the foundation of modern dance. In addition to Delsarte's contribution to the movement of the body, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze was able to connect movement to music. Dalcroze was a music teacher in Switzerland, and he decided that his students needed a way to better connect to music. Kraus et al. (1991) mentioned that "His technique provided a basis for strengthening the dancer's or musician's sense of rhythmic and harmonic through a progressive system of music visualization and other exercises" (p. 115). With the lessons he created, he was able to connect dance and music, so they thrived together. With Delsarte connecting emotion to movement and Dalcroze connecting movement with music, they were able to make contributions to the arts that would end up opening doors for the future development of modern dance.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, dance was widely perceived as entertainment full of structure and tricks brought on by years of tradition, ballet in particular. The

presentation of dance being a form of expression was unique to the emerging dancers of the time. One of these dancers was Loie Fuller. Fuller came into recognition for her unorthodox style when performing dance. Using her ingenuity, she came up with new ways to enjoy the art of dance. Most of her fame stemmed from her use of fabric, allowing it to billow and flow around her when dancing, along with her use of light effects. Most of these designs were inspired by Japanese art and the style of Art Nouveau. Brown (1998) states that “Although Fuller was said to be a mediocre dancer who had had less than half a dozen dancing lessons in her life, the effect she created was spectacular” (p. 116). Fuller’s innovations were groundbreaking and caused the conventional structure of dance to be pushed aside. Her inventions brought a new beauty to the art of dance. Fuller wanted to connect dance to music in a different relationship than the normal composition to organization. As Brown (1998) describes, Fuller said, “In general, music ought to follow the dance” (p. 116). Fuller’s own ideas of dance could be connected outside of the established world of dance; arguably she expanded the dance world’s borders. She connected her ideas with that of Dalcroze, understanding that dance and music were intertwined in a special way. With her contributions to the dance world, Fuller was able to bring in the ideas of Art Nouveau and Dalcroze and take the steps that would lead to the establishment of modern dance.

In addition to Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan was integral to the introduction of modern dance. Duncan grew up disliking the rules of ballet, which made it feel restrictive to her. She believed that the real beauty of movement in the world was natural, such as the pulses of the waves in the ocean and the way the body moves when emotional. She was able to draw from the ideas of Delsarte, paying attention to how the body moves naturally to human emotion; her arms drawn up to the sky with peace and happiness, and arms low to the back when in defiance. Duncan said, “Oh, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new woman...” (Brown, 1998, p. 10). She advocates for women and for dance to be let free. She drew from the world of feminism, also defying expectations by ditching the corset and long dresses while dancing in a liberating Greek frock. Her dance was meant to encapsulate the emotions that all humans face throughout life. Kraus (1991) discusses in his book how “while she had no direct successors, she set the stage for the next great dance artists who were to emerge—Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn” (p. 119). Duncan was an individual dancer who found a different purpose for dance than was generally accepted. Duncan learning to understand the body and how it can be liberated by movement, inspired the next generation of dancers within the 20th century.

Because of the contributions of Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, dance as an art was transformed and the foundations of modern dance were established. Their influences were possible because of the contributions of the shifting cultures and movements, along with contributors to the arts like Dalcroze and Delsarte. They allowed for the progress of modern dance, and introduced a new age for dance, including the presence of Denishawn. With Fuller’s innovation in design and Duncan’s inventiveness within movement containing emotions rather than trained steps, they allowed dance to evolve into an expansive realm, where the art is limited to the imagination.

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