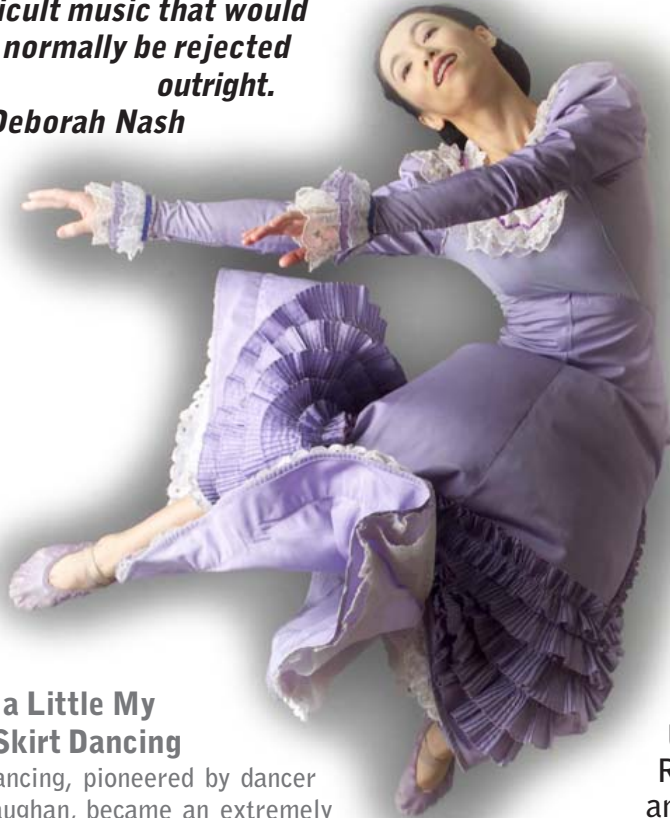


# The Roots of Modern Dance

***Modern dance is often about experiment; it is about pushing the limits (or not); it is often strangely dressed and bare-footed; it is definitely about discovering new ways of using music and sound in relation to movement. Dance has always been a way of integrating oneself into the music, and modern dance allows the watcher to appreciate strange or difficult music that would normally be rejected outright.***

**- Deborah Nash**



## Swish a Little My Way: Skirt Dancing

Skirt dancing, pioneered by dancer Kate Vaughan, became an extremely popular form of vaudeville entertainment in the 1870's. The dance consisted of kicking, hopping, gliding, posing and turning, similar to the ballet of the times. The skirt, which typically had over 12 yards of fabric, was the main theme in the dance, but proper arm styling was almost as important. This combination of ballet steps with acrobatic kicks showed just enough leg to keep Victorian male spectators interested. Prior to this innovation, dancers wore typical ballet costumes, which were much more restrictive and hampered free movement. Skirt dancing was thought to be refined, tasteful and tantalizing. Supposedly the motion of skirts rippled like the froth on the sea (due to the many layers of underskirts that Victorian ladies wore). Because it was less specialised and more lady-like than many dance forms, society ladies were able to learn the skirt dance as drawing room entertainment.

People have always danced as a way of expressing themselves. Like art and music, no translation is necessary, lending movement to music a particularly universal appeal. In the western hemisphere, dance, like everything else, went through a formal period. Classical ballet sought to literally lift dancers into the clouds, so as to metaphorically be closer to the gods, which is why they spent an inordinate amount of time up on their toes or leaping toward the rafters. Up to the 1870's, the only vehicle for the classical dancer was within grand stories on grand sets painstakingly demonstrating a formal set of strictly choreographed movements.

But as the nineteenth century dawned, the artistic community tired of constantly looking backwards to the balance and restraint of the Classical Era. The natural world became more important and immediate, in part due to the democratic values brought about by revolutions in France and America. Fueled by the liberating force of self-expression, a few pioneers began dancing from the inside out, making their expression and personal interpretation of dance infinitely more important than artificial sets and stilted movement. They threw away their toe shoes and danced barefoot instead. They joined vaudeville troupes and other dance companies, touring the country and often voyaging to Paris, where many became famous beyond their wildest expectations.

## The Innovators – Modern Dance Comes Into Its Own

At the forefront of the modern dance movement in the United States were Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis. All began as skirt dancers (see sidebar) and each rebelled against the rigid formalism, artifice, and superficiality of both classical ballet and show dancing.

Loie Fuller, born in Chicago in 1862, used dance to imitate natural phenomena like butterflies, flowers or flames. She combined her theatrical bent with a love of science, experimenting with new types of costume design and stage lighting and inventing chemicals and luminescent salts for innovative sets. She moved to Paris in the 1890's and performed with the Folies Bergeres where she was an instant success, praised not only for her dancing but also for illusionistic effects that remain unique in the history of dance theater. Not surprisingly, Fuller was a close friend of scientist Marie Curie and a member of the French Astronomical Society.

An innovator, pioneer, and liberator of expressive movement, Isadora Duncan was inspired by the drama of ancient Greece. She danced barefoot to Beethoven, Wagner, and Gluck, difficult music not originally written to be danced to. Her costume, a revealing adaptation of the Greek tunic, was complemented by several colored scarves draped from her shoulders. Duncan denounced ballet and called for its abolition, accusing it of "deforming a woman's body," encouraging natural breathing and downplaying the importance of scenery in favor of focusing on the movement of the dancers themselves. She had little success in the United States when she first created dances based on Greek classical art. But in turn of the century Europe, she triumphed, forming a school in Germany which led to her own dance group, the Isadorables.

The pictorial effects achieved by Ruth St. Denis had a different source: The ritualistic dance of Asian religion. She relied on elaborate costumes and sinuous improvised movements to suggest the dances of India and Egypt and to evoke mystical feelings. With Ted Shawn, who became her partner and husband in 1914, St. Denis enlarged her repertoire to include dances of Native Americans and other ethnic groups. In 1915 St. Denis and Shawn formed the Denishawn company, which increased the popularity of modern dance throughout the United States and abroad.

Coming out of the Denishawn tradition, and fully embracing the artistic currents of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Americana, **Martha Graham** went on to become the driving force of modern dance. With a lifetime literally spanning the entire century, she danced well into her 70's and choreographed into her 90's, creating a body of 181 ballets and codifying what is known world-wide as The Martha Graham Technique. Graham's dances are known for exposing the depths of human emotion through movements that are sharp, angular, percussive, and direct.



Martha Graham Dance Company / Appalachian Spring / Gary Galbraith (Preacher) / Photo by John Deane©

### Dance Moves with the Times

The Harlem Renaissance, that vibrant outpouring of African American creativity headed by poet Langston Hughes had an undeniable impact on dance in the 1920s. Even though the dance styles and meeting of the minds were separated by issues of race, it is not coincidental that the great African American dancer, Josephine Baker, thrilled Paris audiences as Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller had done a few years before.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, war and civil conflict dominated the landscape and became fodder for artistic cannons. Interestingly, many labor unions, who were fighting for job security, a five-day work week and better working conditions, also had their own dance groups, such as the Revolutionary Dance Community. The Socialist movement in dance led to groups like the Worker's Dance League and politically driven works. The Needle Trade Worker's Dance Troupe performed "Practice for the Picket Line" by Edith Segal, another activist dancer. In this production, two lines of dancers face each other and perform combat moves. The Red Dancers performed dances on racial issues like "Black and White," also written by Segal.

After World War II, modern dance withdrew even further into esoteric concepts, abandoning sets and costumes, and sometimes even music in an effort to explore uncharted territory. Dancers created whole works based on tying a tie or performing other mundane activities to the sound of a ticking metronome. Composer John Cage wrote a dance using conch shells partially filled with water, which glugged when they were tipped.