

THE ART OF THE DANCE

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NEW YORK · THEATRE ARTS BOOKS

THE DANCER AND NATURE

IN NO country is the soul made so sensible of Beauty and of Wisdom as in Greece. Gazing at the sky one knows why Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, was called "the Blue-Eyed One," and why learning and beauty are always joined in her service. And one feels also why Greece has been the land of great philosophers, lovers of wisdom, and why the greatest of these has called the highest beauty the highest wisdom. . . .

Does the recognition of Beauty as the highest Idea belong wholly to the province of Man's Intellect? . . . Or do you think that a woman might also attain to a knowledge of the highest beauty? Considering women in our country as they are today, does it not seem that very few among them have a true feeling and love for beauty as an Idea? Does it not seem they have recognition of that which is trifling and pretty only, but are blind to true beauty?

At the words "true beauty" there comes before my eyes a procession of figures, women's figures, draped lightly in noble draperies. They go two and two, and the harmony of their bodies swaying to their steps is like music. . . .

One might well be led to believe that women are incapable of knowing beauty as an Idea, but I think this only seems so, not because they are incapable of perceiving but only because they are at present blind to the chief means in their power of understanding True Beauty. Through the eyes beauty most readily finds a way to the soul, but

there is another way for women—perhaps an easier way—and that is through the knowledge of their own bodies.

The human body has through all ages itself been the symbol of highest beauty. I see a young goatherd sitting surrounded by his flock, and before him, rose-tipped of the sun, stands the Goddess of Cyprus, and she smiles as she reaches her hand for the prize which she knows to be hers. That exquisitely poised head, those shoulders gently sloping, those breasts firm and round, the ample waist with its free lines, curving to the hips, down to the knees and feet—all one perfect whole.

The artist without this first consciousness of proportion and line of the human form could have had no consciousness of the beauty surrounding him. When his ideal of the human form is a noble one, then his conception of all line and form in Nature is noblest: the knowledge of sky and earth forms—and from this the conception of line and form of architecture, painting and sculpture. All art—does it not come originally from the first human consciousness of the nobility of the lines of the human body?

How shall woman attain a knowledge of this beauty? Shall she find this knowledge in the gymnasium examining her muscles, in the museum regarding the sculptured forms, or by the continual contemplation of beautiful objects, and the reflection of them in the mind? These are all ways, but the chief thing is, she must *live* this beauty, and her body must be the living exponent of it.

Not by the thought or contemplation of beauty only, but by the living of it, will woman learn. And as form and movement are inseparable, I might say that she will learn by that movement which is in accordance with the beautiful form.

And how shall one name that movement which is in accord with the most beautiful human form? There is a name, the name of one of the oldest of the arts—time-honored as one of the nine Muses—but it is a name that has fallen into such disrepute in our day that it has come

to mean just the opposite of this definition. I would name it the Dance. Woman is to learn beauty of form and movement through the dance.

I believe here is a wonderful undiscovered inheritance for coming womanhood, the old dance which is to become the new. She shall be sculpture not in clay or marble but in her own body which she shall endeavor to bring to the highest state of plastic beauty; she shall be painter, but, as part of a great picture, she shall mingle in many groups of new changing light and color. With the movement of her body she shall find the secret of perfect proportion of line and curve. The art of the dance she will hold as a great well-spring of new life for sculpture, painting and architecture.

Before woman can reach high things in the art of the dance, dancing must exist as an art for her to practice, which at the present day in our country it certainly does not.

Where are we to look for the great fountain-head of movement? Woman is not a thing apart and separate from all other life organic and inorganic. She is but a link in the chain, and her movement must be one with the great movement which runs through the universe; and therefore the fountain-head for the art of the dance will be the study of the movements of Nature.

With the strengthening of the breeze over the seas, the waters form in long undulations. Of all movement which gives us delight and satisfies the soul's sense of movement, that of the waves of the sea seems to me the finest. This great wave movement runs through all Nature, for when we look over the waters to the long line of hills on the shore, they seem also to have the great undulating movement of the sea; and all movements in Nature seem to me to have as their ground-plan the law of wave movement.

Yesterday we were speaking of the movement in Nature, saying that the wave movement was the great foundation. The idea continu-

ally presents itself to me, and I see waves rising through all things. Looking through the trees they seem also to be a pattern conforming to lines of waves. We might think of them from another standpoint: that all energy expresses itself through this wave movement. For does not sound travel in waves, and light also? And when we come to the movements of organic nature, it would seem that all free natural movements conform to the law of wave movement: the flight of birds, for instance, or the bounding of animals. It is the alternate attraction and resistance of the law of gravity that causes this wave movement.

I see dance motifs in all things about me. All true dance movements possible to the human body exist primarily in Nature. What is "true dance" in opposition to what might be named the false dance? The true dance is appropriate to the most beautiful human form; the false dance is the opposite of this definition—that is, that movement which conforms to a deformed human body. First draw me the form of a woman as it is in Nature. And now draw me the form of a woman in a modern corset and the satin slippers used by our modern dancers. Now do you not see that the movement that would conform to one figure would be perfectly impossible for the other? To the first all the rhythmic movements that run through Nature would be possible. They would find this form their natural medium for movement. To the second figure these movements would be impossible on account of the rhythm being broken, and stopped at the extremities.

We cannot take movements for the second figure from Nature, but must on the contrary go according to set geometrical figures based on straight lines; and that is exactly what the school of dance of our day has done. They have invented a movement which conforms admirably to the human figure of the second illustration, but which would be impossible to the figure as drawn in our first sketch. Therefore it is only those movements which would be natural to the first figure that I call the true dance.

What I name as "deformed" is by many people held to be an evolution in form to something higher, and the dance which would be appropriate to woman's natural form would be held by them as primitive and uncultivated. Whereas they would name the dance which is appropriate to the form much improved, compressed in corsets and shoes, as the dance appropriate to the culture of the present day. How would one answer these people?

That man's culture is the making use of Nature's forces in channels harmonious to those forces, and never the going directly against Nature and all art intimately connected with Nature at its roots; that the painter, the poet, the sculptor and the dramatist do but fix for us through their work according to their ability to observe in Nature; that Nature always has been and must be the great source of all art; and that there is a complete separation of the dancer's movement from the movement of Nature. . . .

Probably 1905.

MOVEMENT IS LIFE

STUDY the movement of the earth, the movement of plants and trees, of animals, the movement of winds and waves—and then study the movements of a child. You will find that the movement of all natural things works within harmonious expression. And this is true in the first years of a child's life; but very soon the movement is imposed from without by wrong theories of education, and the child soon loses its natural spontaneous life, and its power of expressing that in movement.

I notice that a baby of three or four coming to my school is responsive to the exaltation of beautiful music, whereas a child of eight or nine is already under the influence of a conventional and mechanical conception of life imposed upon it by the pedagogues. The child of nine has already entered into the prison of conventional and mechanical movement, in which it will remain and suffer its entire life, until advancing age brings on paralysis of bodily expression.

When asked for the pedagogic program of my school, I reply: "Let us first teach little children to breathe, to vibrate, to feel, and to become one with the general harmony and movement of nature. Let us first produce a beautiful human being, a dancing child." Nietzsche has said that he cannot believe in a god that cannot dance. He has also said, "Let that day be considered lost on which we have not danced."

But he did not mean the execution of pirouettes. He meant the exaltation of life in movement.

The harmony of music exists equally with the harmony of movement in nature.

Man has not invented the harmony of music. It is one of the underlying principles of life. Neither could the harmony of movement be invented: it is essential to draw one's conception of it from Nature herself, and to seek the rhythm of human movement from the rhythm of water in motion, from the blowing of the winds on the world, in all the earth's movements, in the motions of animals, fish, birds, reptiles, and even in primitive man, whose body still moved in harmony with nature.

With the first conception of a conscience, man became self-conscious, lost the natural movements of the body; today in the light of intelligence gained through years of civilization, it is essential that he consciously seek what he has unconsciously lost.

All the movements of the earth follow the lines of wave motion. Both sound and light travel in waves. The motion of water, winds, trees and plants progresses in waves. The flight of a bird and the movements of all animals follow lines like undulating waves. If then one seeks a point of physical beginning for the movement of the human body, there is a clue in the undulating motion of the wave. It is one of the elemental facts of nature, and out of such elementals the child, the dancer, absorbs something basic to dancing.

The human being too is a source. Dancing expresses in a different language, different from nature, the beauty of the body; and the body grows more beautiful with dancing. All the conscious art of mankind has grown out of the discovery of the natural beauty of the human body. Men tried to reproduce it in sand or on a wall, and painting thus was born. From our understanding of the harmonies and proportions of the members of the body sprang architecture. From the wish to glorify the body sculpture was created.

The beauty of the human form is not chance. One cannot change

it by dress. The Chinese women deformed their feet with tiny shoes; women of the time of Louis XIV deformed their bodies with corsets; but the ideal of the human body must forever remain the same. The Venus of Milo stands on her pedestal in the Louvre for an ideal; women pass before her, hurt and deformed by the dress of ridiculous fashions; she remains forever the same, for she is beauty, life, truth.

It is because the human form is not and cannot be at the mercy of fashion or the taste of an epoch that the beauty of woman is eternal. It is the guide of human evolution toward the goal of the human race, toward the ideal of the future which dreams of becoming God.

The architect, the sculptor, the painter, the musician, the poet, all understand how the idealization of the human form and the consciousness of its divinity are at the root of all art created by man. A single artist has lost this divinity, an artist who above all should be the first to desire it—the dancer.

Dancing, indeed, through a long era lacked all sense of elemental natural movement. It tried to afford the sense of gravity overcome—a denial of nature. Its movements were not living, flowing, undulating, giving rise inevitably to other movements. All freedom and spontaneity were lost in a maze of intricate artifice. The dancer had to be dressed up artificially to be in keeping with its unnatural character.

Then when I opened the door to nature again, revealing a different kind of dance, some people explained it all by saying, “See, it is *natural* dancing.” But with its freedom, its accordance with natural movement, there was always design too—even in nature you find sure, even rigid design. “Natural” dancing should mean only that the dance never goes against nature, not that anything is left to chance.

Nature must be the source of all art, and dance must make use of nature’s forces in harmony and rhythm, but the dancer’s movement will always be separate from any movement in nature.

Probably 1909.