

APPRECIATING  
dance

FOURTH EDITION

*A Guide to the World's Liveliest Art*

HARRIET R. LIHS



A Dance Horizons Book  
Princeton Book Company, Publishers

## ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

The dance is one of many human experiences that cannot be suppressed. Like music, the dance is a language which all human beings understand. . . . Dance, like every other artistic expression, presupposes a heightened, increased life response.

—Mary Wigman<sup>1</sup>

Art is the only way to run away without leaving home.

—Twyla Tharp<sup>2</sup>

What is dance? There are almost as many definitions of dance as there are people writing about dance. There is a great deal of disagreement on how broad this definition should be. Some definitions include practically all human movement, while Webster's *Dictionary* limits it to "rhythmic movement of the feet or body, ordinarily to music." Others assert that unless movement has symbolic meaning or expresses emotion, it is not dance. Still others claim that even animals can express emotions through movement, and therefore they dance.

Exploring the meaning of dance, as expressed in either choreography or the written word or both, has become a lifelong search for some individuals. The quotations in "A Sampling of Definitions of Dance" are examples of the conclusions of some 20<sup>th</sup> century writers and choreographers, and one child. While the comments highlight different aspects of dance, they have some commonalties. All of the authors believe dance to be a natural expression of the human condition and the human spirit, requiring some structured use of time, space and the body or bodies. The dancer/choreographer interprets both inner feeling and cultural realities, linking them to universal truth. In the same way a great playwright creates with words a picture of his day and age and the inner lives of specific characters, while remaining accessible to viewers from other cultures, the choreographer creates a work of art true to his own time and place but also transcending these limitations. Dance is truly a universal language.

## A SAMPLING OF DEFINITIONS OF DANCE

Movement is the essence of life, dance its ultimate expression . . . The artist creates out of the world that has made him in order to remake it according to the image of his inner world.

—Walter Sorell<sup>3</sup>

Movement in order to have power and beauty, must spring from the organic center of the body. It must be intensely human, or it will be gymnastics, and be mechanical and empty.

—José Limón<sup>4</sup>

What are we looking for? To attune our inmost feelings to the mood of the time.

—Mary Wigman<sup>5</sup>

The dance is love, it is only love, it alone, and that is enough . . . now, I would like to no longer dance to anything but the rhythm of my soul.

—Isadora Duncan<sup>6</sup>

I think that dance should primarily be entertainment. It's a visual theater and an oral theater . . . beautiful people, beautifully dressed, doing beautiful and meaningful things.

—Alvin Ailey<sup>7</sup>

What is dance! Dance is entertainment. Experiencing the movement. Feeling the beat. Following the rhythm. Balancing the steps. Practicing on stage. That's Dance.

—Rishit Sheth,  
P.S. 102 (Elementary School) Queens, NY<sup>8</sup>

I never think I am going to do something original. You just do what you want to do . . . our movements have to be performed in the composer's time. That's what makes ballet so exciting—the movement of bodies in time.

—George Balanchine<sup>9</sup>

The artist is . . . the bearer of a message, and it is his responsibility to tell it—in whatever medium it might be—intelligently, forcefully, and with his utmost artistic ability.

—Charles Weidman<sup>10</sup>

The dance is the mother of the arts. Music and poetry exist in time; painting in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still one and the same thing.

—Curt Sachs<sup>11</sup>

Serious and sustained reflection on a dance is inevitably hindered by a feature of all movement, namely its transitoriness . . . this would seem better regarded as a challenge to be met than as an insuperable difficulty.

—Betty Redfern<sup>12</sup>

Why not reclaim our distinctively human heritage as creatures who can generate their own ecstatic pleasures out of music, color, feasting, and dance?

—Barbara Ehrenreich<sup>13</sup>

Evidence of early dance, such as artifacts and cave paintings, indicates that among ancient peoples dance was one of the first arts, existing long before written language. Dance has served many purposes in human society, and its earliest purpose was probably for ritual. Dance was used to pray for favor from the gods, to portray their activities, and to connect spiritually with ancestors.

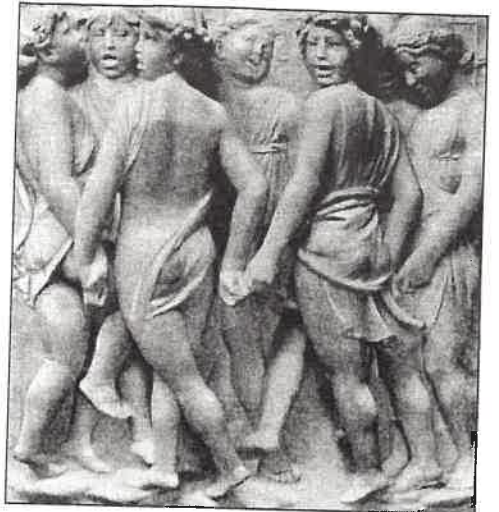
Dance was also used to train warriors, heal the sick and insure fertility of the fields. It was used to solidify a sense of community within groups of people and to commemorate important victories and seasonal events for the tribe and for the passages in the lives of individuals. It was important as a storytelling medium and as a way of preserving history, using costuming, chanting and other accompaniment as enhancement.

As time went on and human communities became more complex, there were those whose skill as dancers made them highly valued as performers. Powerful leaders, who had the desire to be both honored and entertained through dance, functioned as sponsors for the training of these artists and patrons for their performances. These court entertainments were the precursors of today's theatrical dance, a product of trained professionals with a sharp line of demarcation between performer and audience. In some postmodern works, this line becomes once again flexible and interactive.

Those who created dances throughout history, called choreographers, dealt with the same raw materials that choreographers deal with today, namely, the body or groups of bodies moving through space and time. Rudolf Von Laban (1879–1958), the movement theorist who gave us both Labanotation (see chapter 7) and Effort/Shape theory, rephrased this by stating that all movement is defined by the effort used, the time taken and the shapes made in space. How these raw materials are manipulated is determined by the purpose of the dance and the style the performer or choreographer wishes to achieve. In brief, the four raw materials Laban's theory embraces are the body, time, space, and effort.

### *The Body*

This basic building block answers the question, who is dancing? A dance may be a solo, duet, small group, or cast of hundreds. It may be a mixed group of genders and ages, trained and untrained bodies, or it may be very selective in any of these areas. What parts of the body are moving are also a consideration. Some dances concentrate on individual body parts very precisely, a technique known as isolations, while others engage in full-bodied movements.



DANCING BOYS.

From a relief by Luca della Robbia, Florence. It may depict dancing processions common during religious festivals in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe.

### *Time*

Time, for dancers, includes both the speed of the movement and the manipulation of rhythmic patterns. Like musicians, dancers divide time into repeated patterns known as measures. If the strongest emphasis (accent) is on the expected beat—the first beat of the measure—the timing of the movements will look and feel smooth. If, however, an unexpected beat or two is accented, the interesting rhythms developed are known as syncopation. These “off-beat” rhythms are derived from African drumming techniques, and form the basis of jazz music and jazz dance techniques. They are also prevalent in tap dancing, a skill that blends African rhythms and Irish step dancing (see chapter 6).

### *Space*

The use of space includes floor patterns, direction, level and shape. *Floor patterns*, as if visualized from above, can be straight, angled or curved, and can take up a great deal of space or a very small amount. *Direction* refers to the positioning of the dancer's bodies in the performing space, described from the dancer's point of view. For example, downstage is moving toward the audience, and stage right is moving toward the dancer's right side. *Level* refers to the height of the movements, with middle level being our normal walking level, high level elevated on the balls of the feet, toes or in the air, low level is low to the ground or in full contact with it. *Shape* refers to the use of space much like the background space in a painting or surrounding a sculpture, called negative space by artists. You may see in a given dance, for example, a lot of curved shapes or extended straight shapes carved out of this negative space.

### *Effort*

Also known as dynamics, effort refers to the amount of force expended in a given movement. Two movements in the same direction, made with the same body part at the same speed, will look and feel completely different if one is done with light effort and the other is done with a strong effort. Choreographers must be aware of this because the use of effort can radically change the meaning of a movement from the audience's point of view.

## APPRECIATING DANCE

In spite of the extended history of dance, this lively art has not always occupied a position of equality among the other arts. One reason for this has been the prevailing notion over time that dance is too closely linked to music to stand on its own as an independent art form. A second reason is the difficulty in preserving choreography. Many early dance masterpieces have



MARTHA GRAHAM

been lost, or preserved by oral handing-down, an inexact method at best. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have we developed accurate and complete methods of writing down movement. Also, the inventions of film and video have been a great boon in preserving dance performance.

Throughout the centuries world dance has evolved into a broad range of distinctive movement styles. These styles are constantly changing with new contributors adding to them. As society experiments with new ideas, so does this living art.

When watching dance, it is most helpful to know something about the culture and time period in which it developed and what purpose it served in that culture. Is it liturgical or recreational, theatrical or therapeutic? Often the dance itself will tell you a great deal about the culture in which it developed. For example, social dances with mixed couples are found only in cultures where men and women are free to select mates of their choice.

Theatrical dances in which women participate equally with men indicate a more liberal attitude toward women than cultures where all the women's parts are played by men. Similarly, cultures in which both men and women perform the same steps are less rigid about sex roles than cultures that specify "women's steps" and "men's steps." The more you watch dance with a critical eye, the more cultural clues you pick up from your observation. Anthropologist Alan Merriam takes this idea a step farther by stating that "dance is culture and culture is dance . . . the entity of dance is not separable from the anthropological concept of culture."<sup>14</sup>

As the individual dance viewer, you will add your own viewpoint to the experience. In the arts, this is known as your personal aesthetic—your likes and dislikes—which develops as a result of many experiences in your life. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all develop a personal aesthetic, and it continues to change throughout our lives. You can prove this to yourself by listening to the comments of audience members during the intermission of a live performance. Usually this reveals a broad range of aesthetic opinions, to the point where you may wonder if everyone is watching the same performance!

Here are some influences on your personal aesthetic as it pertains to watching a live performance, such as a play, a dance concert or musical offering.

1. **Your emotional state when you are attending the performance will affect your receptiveness to it.** For example, are you in a relaxed, comfortable situation when watching the performance? Was the performance an outing you planned and looked forward to, or was it forced upon you?
2. **Connecting with the performers.** If the performers are doing their job well, you will see their humanity behind the movements or lyrics. It can be helpful for them to resemble yourself and people you associate with to make this connection: age, gender, race and costuming can reinforce this sense of identification. However, you may find yourself connecting with performers from a completely different culture than your own, and leave the theater feeling you truly know

*Subjective*

these people well; if so, you have just seen a performance done from the heart, which reaches people beyond the boundaries of language and local customs.

3. **Family.** While still an infant you may be introduced to the performing arts by parents, grandparents, older siblings and other family members. If music is played in the home, that type of music becomes an integral part of childhood experience. Family members may encourage or discourage the child from moving to the music by their own actions, for example by dancing with the child.

4. **Peers.** As children mature, they begin to select close friends, most often of a similar age and socioeconomic background. Often similar aesthetic preferences can jump-start a friendship for example several people who all like a certain type of music or social dance begin attend these events together. On the other hand, a close friend may be the person who interests you in a new performing art, expanding your personal aesthetic. In a long-lasting friendship, both of these situations may be operative.

5. **Nationality and religion.** In spite of the availability of many international offerings on the internet, the country you live in, the region of that country, and whether you live in a rural or urban area continues to influence your aesthetic choices. So does religion, especially if the performing art in question is dealing with serious social issues. Modern and postmodern choreographers, for example, have been particularly interested in creating realistic pieces about war, alienation, racism, sexism, family violence and alternative lifestyles. (see chapters 5 and 8). For adults, the choice on whether these works are offensive or useful should be their own in a democratic society. In many countries with totalitarian governments or state-mandated religions, these choices are not available to their citizens.

Your personal aesthetic is the final judge of what you will choose to watch and truly appreciate. The more types of dance you explore and the more you learn about them, the more diverse and satisfying your personal choices will become.



JODY OBERFELDER DANCE PROJECTS  
in *Physically Inclined*, choreography by Oberfelder.

## SUGGESTED READING

- Brown, Jean Morrison, Naomi Mindlin and Charles H. Woodford, eds. *The Vision of Modern Dance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1998.
- De Mille, Agnes. *The Book of the Dance*. New York: Golden Press, 1963.
- Dils, Ann and Ann Cooper Albright, eds. *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Erenreich, Barbara. *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006.
- Kaepler, Adrienne Lois. "Dance as Myth—Myth as Dance: A Challenge to Traditional Viewpoints." *Dance as Cultural Heritage*, ed. Betty True Jones, vol. 1, 5–8. New York: Congress on Research in Dance, 1983. *Dance Research Annual*: 14 .
- Kealiinohomoku, Joann W. "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance." *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*. Vol. 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1980): 83–97.
- Preston-Dunlop, Valerie, compiler. *Dance Words*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995. *Choreography and Dance Studies*, vol. 8.
- Redfern, Betty. *Dance, Art and Aesthetics*. London: Dance Books, 1983.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. *The Anthropology of Dance*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- Sorell, Walter. *The Dance Through the Ages*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1967.
- Williams, Drid. *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991.
- , ed. *Anthropology and Human Movement: Searching for Origins*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000.