Dance is movement of the body that is rhythmically and culturally patterned. Depending on the genre and intention, people dance in groups, pairs, or on their own. Dance can be a social part of devotional or ritual activity. It can also be choreographed and performed as art or entertainment. Meaning in dance is found in the stylistic and structural manipulation of the elements of space, rhythm, and dynamics, and the human body's physical control. As human behavior, dance draws on motoric, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and social capacities. It is cultural, providing a means for people sharing and communicating identity, beliefs, and social structures.

Dance has been a part of human activity since antiquity and may confer evolutionary advantages such as group unity and sexual selection. Before written language, dance enabled the communication of myths and stories between generations. Social, field, festival, and military dances, processions, and mummeries continued through the Middle Ages. European pre-classic dance forms included the pavane and galliard with their sequencing by the music's composers being based on contrast in tempo, time signature, and character. The classic form refers to pointes, skirts, and the five positions of the feet in ballet codified by Pierre Beauchamp in the court of Louis XIV.

Forerunners to modern dance were Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. At a time when women were disenfranchised, Duncan, Mary Wigman, and St. Denis discarded the conventions of Victorian costume, synthesized movement, and expression, and sought individuality. The pioneers of modern dance, intentionally challenging and defying the rules and codes of classical ballet, its patriarchy and romanticism, include Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Mary Wigman. Post-structuralism, cultural studies, and critical theory in the late 20th century have been dominant paradigms for researching dance. Cognitive neuroscience investigates processes of action observation using dance and dancers as models of expertise.

History

Prehistoric rock art depicts dancing figures in sites located in Africa, India, Australia, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Egypt. Anthropologists have noted the role of dance in communicating sociocultural patterns in rituals, in religion, and in marking stages of the life cycle as a source of social cohesion for the community, as models of moral values, and as symbols of harmony with the physical and spiritual environment.

What is the evolutionary role of dance? One idea is that dance enables humans to live in larger groups better able to defend themselves. Groups had an advantage in defense if their sounds were well synchronized, giving the possible impression of a very large animal. There may also be a sexual selection and reproductive advantage arising from the appearance of the ability to dance. Seasonal and ritual festivals involving different groups gathering together may have served a reproductive function.

Danced rituals with music and physical touch possibly held early human groups together and were of metaphysical or religious significance. Dance would also have served an important function before the...
development of written language. In oral traditions, it was a means of communicating myths and identity between groups and generations. Rhythm in movement and music serves a mnemonic purpose in such contexts.

*Mousikè* comes from the Greek word *mousa*, meaning muse. Thus, poetry, music, and dance as in the Greek chorus are inseparable in this early conception of music, and the lyrical poetry likely influenced music’s pattern and rhythm. In addition to the role of dance in religious rituals for acceptance by gods or spirits, dance was for amusement and entertainment. There were dances of a gymnastic kind, mimetic, theater (chorus), social, religious, and chamber dances. Gymnastic dances were military in nature; choruses made up of singers and dancers included poetic recitation, gesticulation, and mimetic action. Adult males and females did not dance together; localities had their own dance.

There are numerous references to dancing to a level of ecstasy. Much later, the church prohibited such group revelry. Humans enjoy rhythmic music, desiring to synchronize their bodies and motions with others. The rhythm can be auditory, visual, or internally generated. Dancers synchronize, reciprocate, alternate—all kinds of entrainment.

Scottish Highland dancers compete in Peoria, Illinois, on February 28, 2009. This form of dance, which originated in the mountains of Scotland to become the traditional solo dance of that country, requires the endurance and strength of an athlete combined with the artistry of a dancer. Highland culture was largely of the oral tradition, with song and traditions passed down to young protégées.

**Pre-Classic Dance Forms and Music**

Preclassic dance forms refer to the classic court dances—classic in form and highly stylized in the European court manner of the 16th century. Accompanying music was drawn from the classic time signatures and melodies of John Bull, William Byrde, Johann Sebastian Bach, Henry Purcell, Georg Philipp Telemann, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and so on. Music and dance changed with the secularization of the arts during the Renaissance. Tonal and rhythmic aspects of music changed from modes and the irregular rhythms of Latin prose as the basis of Gregorian chant to the development of a single melodic line developed with a definite rhythm accompaniment and a harmonic concept of music. Other influences
were printing and notation, enabling preservation of music and dance. Rules were developed for the proper steps for dances and the proper form for accompanying music. Composers grouped musical dance forms into particular orders, often to enhance contrast. This gave birth to the suite and, from the suite, the development of the sonata form. The preclassic dance forms, with tempo and time signature specified, include the pavane (slow, 4/4 or 2/2 time signature), galliard (quicker, 3/4), allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue, minuet, gavotte, bourée, rigaudon, passepied, chaconne, and passacaglia.

**Classical Ballet**

The codification and style of classical ballet date to the courts of Louis XIII and Louis XIV in 17th- and 18th-century France. The elements of ballet can be traced to the chorus of dancers and performers depicted in Egyptian art; singing, dancing, mimicry, and pantomime in early Greek art; and the place of dance rhythm in music.

Louis XIII (1601–43) chose the court ballet as the means to announce and establish his authority as king: some works were allegorical and had a unified narrative structure. Cardinal Richelieu used ballet to consolidate the king's power, blending ancient myths and recent military victories. The proscenium stage was introduced during this time, distancing performers from audience; it also enabled more elaborate stage effects. Figure dances or horizontally patterned dances fell out of fashion, replaced by “perilous leaps” and turns.

French court ballet peaked during the reign of Louis XIV (1638–1715), becoming a professional art. Technical feats demanded a high level of training. The future of ballet in France was secured beyond Louis XIV's reign by the patent granted to the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661. The academy established scientific principles for ballet, trained dancers, and appraised new dances. Beauchamp codified ballet technique such as the five canonical positions of the feet. He also devised a system of dance notation that was published by and named after Raoul Auger Feuillet.

The distinctive characteristics of ballet—the pointe technique, tutu, illusion of weightlessness and effortlessness, and association of the female with sylphs and fairies—were achieved in the 19th century. Filippo Taglioni's *La Sylphide* (1832) was regarded as a masterpiece of romantic art. Gas lighting was the great technological achievement of the era (London, 1817; Paris, 1822), allowing subtle and diverse effects. It also further distanced the performers, who were lit, from the audience in darkness. Sergei Diaghilev's (1872–1929) *The Ballet Russes*, including dancers Anna Pavlova (1881–1931) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1890–1950), was a sensation in Paris in 1909. The then radical nature of Nijinsky's choreography and Igor Stravinsky's (1882–1971) music for *The Rite of Spring* caused a scandal. Nijinsky developed novel movements, replacing symmetry and lightness with heaviness and repetitive walking and stamping.

**Forerunners to Modern Dance**

Rebels Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller, and Ruth St. Denis expressed a freedom in their art that was rare in the oppressive, corseted, Victorian time. Duncan (1877–1927) rebelled against ballet and removed the need for narrative. She was influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Walt Whitman, and her work was inspired by nature. Duncan performed to the music of Christoph Willibald Gluck, Richard Wagner, Franz Schubert, and Frederic Chopin. Loïe Fuller (1862–1928) believed music ought to follow the dance, with the dancer directing the music rather than the music inspiring the dance. Ruth St. Denis (1877–1968) was inspired by the Orient—dance was sensuous, mystical, and a means of communication between souls. In 1920, Mary Wigman (1886–1973) established the school of
German modern dance in Dresden. She had studied with Émile Jacques Dalcroze (1865–1950) and Rudolf Laban (1879–1958). Classical ballet was abandoned in favor of an expression representing one’s own time.

Modern Dance

The beginning of modern dance stems from new movements and new subject matter reflecting the modern era. Existing rules were broken and the work was intentionally antiballet. The percussive, angular, distorted movements of early modern dance expressed tensions of contemporary life. Rather than entertainment, dance evolved as a serious, creative, and independent art form. All levels of physical space were used with a relationship to gravity that contrasted to danse verticale of the romantic ballet; for example, the torso became active, not rigid, and limbs were angled in contrast to the extended ballet line. Costumes and settings were simplified. Dance was performed to music written for it by a contemporary composer or to no music at all.

A formal approach to teaching dance composition was developed by Louis Horst, who was Martha Graham’s (1894–1991) adviser, critic, and music composer. Horst’s approach used art forms and styles from all periods except ballet, aiming to develop restraint in composition and to stimulate an intellectual approach to creating dance. The Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance was founded in New York in 1927. To Graham, the function of dance was to communicate experience by means of action and perceived by action. Graham’s dance technique came from movements created for choreography. Her style includes sharp, angular, and percussive movement; contraction and release involved the torso, stemming from observations of breathing. The Graham technique has become codified and systematized.

Hanya Holm (1893–1992), who had studied with Dalcroze, Laban, and Wigman, opened a school in the United States, connecting German and American modern dance. Space was optimized and improvisation was used as a teaching tool. Doris Humphrey (1895–1958) set out choreographic principles in The Art of Making Dances, published shortly after her death. Modern dance, or the language of kinesthetic, is likened to music being abstract with psychic overtones that give rise to emotions that are not easily described. To Humphrey, dance, like music, has tone, rhythm, melody, and harmony plus the kinesthetic appeal. For Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), dance is about movement for its own sake; there is no expressive content, and dance coexists with music. Cunningham developed “chance” choreography to avoid usual or expected movement sequences; he worked with composer John Cage (1912–92) and artist Jasper Johns. Contemporary dance choreographers very often develop new material in collaboration with their dancers by giving tasks that stimulate ideas and by improvising. Leading thinkers and companies include Pina Bausch (1940–2009), Trisha Brown, Siobhan Davies, Nacho Duato, William Forsythe, Emio Greco | PC, Deborah Hay, Bill T. Jones, Jiri Kylián, Wayne McGregor, Mark Morris, Lloyd Newson, Steve Paxton, Pilobolus, Meryl Tankard, and Twyla Tharp.

Dance and Music

Early accompaniments to dance included clapping, chanting, and the use of pipes, tambours, drums, and castanets. There is an intimate relationship between the form of the music (tempo, character, time signature) and the dance steps in preclassic forms such as pavane and galliard. Court dances and subsequently classical ballet sought union between music, dance, design, and poetry. In modern and contemporary dance, just as there is rarely a codified set of steps or narrative, often there is little or no musical accompaniment. Where music is present it may correlate or contrast aspects of the dance.
and may be contemporary or classical in form.

Dances and music from particular regions and countries were regular features of ballet works from the 19th century. The folk music and rhythms associated with folk dancing influenced composers such as Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) and Béla Bartók (1881–1945). Hollywood movies popularized the dance and music of tap, ballroom, jazz, and classical ballet. The Lindy Hop dates from a dance hall craze during the swing era; codified steps and an ordered structure are distinctive features. Other 20th-century forms of dance, many of which reflect African music and rhythms, include jitterbug, break dance, and hip-hop.

**Dance Notation and Analysis**

Benesh Movement Notation is used to notate classical ballet. It resembles a musical score consisting of a five-line stave. The five lines refer to parts of the body; body and limb positions are shown on the stave and recorded as a series of frames. Labanotation and Laban Movement Analysis can be applied to all kinds of human motions. A Structural Description records every aspect of motion. Effort-Shape Description records the energy of motion. Labanotation also uses a staff with three lines running vertically with left events noted on the left, and so on. The transfer of weight and gesture are recorded. Effort categories refer to motion factors and effort elements, namely, space: direct/indirect, weight: strong/light, time: sudden/sustained, and flow: bound/free.

The kinematics of a dancer can be recorded using motion capture. The three dimensions of movement can be subsequently visualized, manipulated, and overlaid on a software-rendered avatar.

**Dance Research**

Research in and about dance increased steadily as dance departments formed in universities. The different types of dance research reflect the various conceptions of dance, including as an educational form between education and fine arts, as Western fine arts practice, as a regional practice with global connections, and a global practice that displays and disrupts social and cultural markers and processes (nationalism, postcolonialism, sexuality, gender). Initially connected with physical education and an emphasis on doing, dance research is part of the humanities and rich in theory and analysis. Most recently, dance is researched through the lens of cultural studies and critical theory with analysis of ideology, subjectivity, social categorization, representation, and the production of cultural capital through aestheticized practices and disciplining of the body. Research draws on literary theory, film theory, Marxist analysis, and feminist theory. Anthropologists and dance scholars have written extensively on diverse cultural practices in dance. In many cultures, including Australian indigenous communities, music, dance, and visual art are inseparable.

Coming from somatic and art therapies is the field of dance therapy. Digital media in dance, as well as artifacts and scores, is a flourishing area of experimentation; the MotionBank online scores initiative is one example. Dancer health, including diet, body imagery, prevention of and recovery from injury, biomechanics, dance science, and medicine are other conjunctions of academic disciplines that have practical application to dancers, the dance profession, and dance communities. The *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science* exemplifies this kind of research.

**Dance and Cognitive (Neuro)Science**

The last decade has seen intensive research in cognitive science on action observation and the perception and action nexus. Dance performance and perception epitomize the coupling of perception and action and embodied cognition. In the 1980s, researchers identified “mirror neurons” in the cortex.
of macaque monkeys. The neurons were activated not only when the monkey performed an action such as grasping but also when observing a grasping action performed by the experimenter. An action observation network (AON) has subsequently been studied in humans with evidence of motor simulation when people observe goal-directed actions. The AON is affected by the amount of experience that the observer has had performing particular actions. Dancers expert in particular kinds of dance have been recruited as participants for experiments to further investigate the specialization of the human AON. For example, greater blood flow in the AON was observed in expert ballet dancers as they observed short videos of ballet compared with videos of capoeira. Similarly, greater blood flow in the AON was evident in expert capoeira dancers when they observed examples of capoeira compared with ballet. Neuroaesthetics applies the methods of cognitive neuroscience to the study of responses to art.

Investigation of the cognitive processes engaged in dance includes experiments on memory and expectation, creativity, emotional expression and recognition, gestural analysis, and audience response. The Watching Dance project in the United Kingdom on kinesthetic empathy investigated perception of dance from neural to audience levels of description. Interdisciplinary “Dance Engaging Science” workshops have brought together cognitive scientists, architects, choreographers, and dancers to collaboratively infuse scientific approaches with questions from the art form, drawing out research topics of mutual interest and application.

See Also: Aesthetic Response; Affect; Audience; Body Movements; Communicative Musicality; Continuous Response Measurement; Cooperation; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Cultural Meaning of Gender; Embodied Cognition; Emotion; Emotions, Aesthetic; Empathy; Entrainment; Ethnographic Studies; Evolution; Expertise; Expressivity; Gesture; Habitus; Improvisation; Indigenous Music; Intentionality; Mirror Neurons; Movement; Multimodality; Music Cognition; Notation; Perception; Performance; Performativity; Religion; Rhythm; Rituals; Semiotics; Synchronization; Theater

Further Readings


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