|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **About you** | **[Salutation]** | Uttara | Asha | Coorlawala |
| [Enter your biography] | | | |
| Barnard College, Columbia University | Alvin Ailey American Dance and Fordham University | | | |

|  |
| --- |
| **Your article** |
| St. Denis, Ruth (1878-1968) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Ruth St. Denis is considered one of the founders of modern dance, even though the genre had not been named as such during her most active years, which spanned from the turn of the century through the 1920s. Looking for an alternative to classical ballet and Broadway glitter, St. Denis created works inspired by images of Oriental dance and informed by her Delsarte training. In 1906 she created an impressionistic version of the Indian goddess in her solo *Radha*, and the success of the dance launched her solo career in Europe. There she toured extensively from 1906 to 1909 with a repertoire of Indian-themed works.After her return to the U.S., she added works based on other cultures, including Egypt and Japan, to her repertory. In 1914 she met Ted Shawn, and the two founded Denishawn, a company and school that expanded St. Denis’s repertory to include musical visualisations and widely disseminated her methods and ideas. In addition to extensive tours across the U.S., Denishawn toured South and East Asia in 1925-1926, where the company acquired more repertory from local dance celebrities who were willing to experiment with their own forms. St. Denis influenced her contemporaries in Europe and subsequent generations of modern dancers in the U.S. Indeed, the generation of the 1930s that named modern dance included many artists who had come from Denishawn, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. |
| Ruth St. Denis is considered one of the founders of modern dance, even though the genre had not been named as such during her most active years, which spanned from the turn of the century through the 1920s. Looking for an alternative to classical ballet and Broadway glitter, St. Denis created works inspired by images of Oriental dance and informed by her Delsarte training. In 1906 she created an impressionistic version of the Indian goddess in her solo *Radha*, and the success of the dance launched her solo career in Europe. There she toured extensively from 1906 to 1909 with a repertoire of Indian-themed works.After her return to the U.S., she added works based on other cultures, including Egypt and Japan, to her repertory. In 1914 she met Ted Shawn, and the two founded Denishawn, a company and school that expanded St. Denis’s repertory to include musical visualisations and widely disseminated her methods and ideas. In addition to extensive tours across the U.S., Denishawn toured South and East Asia in 1925-1926, where the company acquired more repertory from local dance celebrities who were willing to experiment with their own forms. St. Denis influenced her contemporaries in Europe and subsequent generations of modern dancers in the U.S. Indeed, the generation of the 1930s that named modern dance included many artists who had come from Denishawn, including Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Denishawn was disbanded 1931, but Ruth St. Denis went on to found the Society of Spiritual Arts and the New York School of Natya with La Meri in 1938. She presented recitals until she was 87.  Fig. 1: Ruth St. Denis  <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-848a-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Like Delsarte, Isadora Duncan and many others, Ruth St. Denis built her dances on the assumption of the universality of ‘natural movement.’ She derived inspiration from empathetic explorations of Tantrism, Vedanta Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Bhakti, Sufi and Christian Science. Having settled on her inspirational kernel, St. Denis would typically develop her character or persona by synchronising costume, décor, and movement. In portraying cultural nuances of time and place, she may well have deployed what she had learned from working with director David Belasco on Broadway and from watching other artists in Europe, such as Sada Yacco at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. St. Denis carefully translated melodic characteristics and structures into her dances, and personalised the phrasing and flow in her performances. As she performed, travelled, taught, and collaborated with Ted Shawn, she fostered the idea of dance as a kind of language with symbolic images and vocabularies assembled in accordance with rules as in musical composition. This notion of style as systematised preferences St. Denis and Shawn would pass along to their students, who went on to become pioneers in modern dance of their own styles.  Ruth St. Denis and her audiences assumed that committed artists could steep their imaginations in the art of another culture and abstract its essence as well as, or better than, indigenous or native dancers. With long, curving, art deco lines, elaborate costumes and an imperious stage presence, she encapsulated a variety of personae. She capitalised on the demand for the Oriental Other even as she embraced her own selective and constructed vision of this Orient. Perhaps her identification with Kwan-yin in *White Jade*, standing resplendent on a pedestal, best evokes her distilled remote glamour, while *Incense* is especially remembered for the way she ripples her arms into suggestions of wafting incense trails. (Undulating arms are described in ­­­­­­Stebbins' 1885 book on practical excercises based on Delsarte's work and titled *The Delsarte System of Expression*.) Her *Nautch* dances show how she identified with and commented on the *nautch* dancer. Indeed, in a film of this dance, St. Denis's presence and manner of performance made it clear that she was not the role she played. *The Tatler* and other reviews of her *Nautch* observed that St. Denis' ‘improved' Nautch was clearly preferable to that by any indigenous *nautch* dancers. When Denishawn was dancing, there were very few South Asians in the United States, due to the Asian exclusion acts that had prohibited Asian immigration, and American audiences considered her performances revelatory.  Colonialism had cleared the way for American dancers to travel to Asia, learn indigenous forms, and command a niche in the performance market upon return. Ruth St. Denis toured Asia with the Denishawn dancers in 1925-26. In India, Denishawn completed a schedule of over one hundred performances within a period of four months. Her *Nautch* and *Black and Gold Saree* were crowd pleasers, although perhaps not for the same reasons as in the U.S. and Europe. Her tall, pale beauty presented as exotic a spectacle to Indian audiences as her representations of Indianness were exotic to European and American audiences. In fact, even as Ruth St. Denis performed her own version of the *Nautch* all over India, an historic controversy was raging over indigenous dancers in the local newspapers. The issue was whether professional dancers should be allowed to continue to perform in public venues as their reputations as pure artists were tainted by their liaisons with sponsor-patrons. The arguments for and against the dance were fuelled by nationalistic politics and cultural clashes of Victorian, and locally complex views of purity. Later, Ruth St. Denis espousal of ‘Indian dances’ in her performances in Europe and all over the United States stimulated the demand for the more authentic Indian dance, and hence indirectly stimulated Indian dancers Ted Shawn, La Meri, and Matteo who would take Indian dance to university programs.  According to their souvenir programme of the Orient tour, the Denishawn company not only performed but also acquired art dances from China, Japan, India, Burma and Java that they then went on to perform across the United States. They learned from local celebrities who had already encountered western stages and were interested in modern approaches to performance. Ruth St. Denis benefitted by learning her repertory from those who understood how to translate their own culture for outside audiences and adjusted their works pragmatically. Legacy St. Denis’s deep commitment to dance as ‘the Good, the True and the Beautiful’ (described by Ted Shawn in his book on Delsarte, *Every Little Movement* p. 23) seems to have evolved as she performed, travelled, and aged. For her, dance was universal to the extent it embodied the capacity for mystical experience and acknowledged lustily the limits of embodiment. In retrospect, Ruth St. Denis’s real contribution to dance in a global context may well reside in her reframing of dance as a spiritual activity that strengthens the bodies and minds of its practitioners and uplifts the spirits of its spectators (as does the Nataraja in Coomaraswamy's writing *The Dance of Shiva*). Her vision of the transcendent power of dance as a distilled abstraction of life became part of the eclectic philosophies that informed subsequent generations of modern dancers.  Fig. 2: St. Denis in *Radha*  <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-848d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>  Following Denishawn, more artists went on to train in diverse dance cultures, and to educate audiences about Asian theatrical genres. This in turn spurred on discourses of authenticity later in the twentieth century. Even though the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 has radically shifted the demographics of U.S. culture, St. Denis’s influence has not dissipated. On the contrary, late twentieth-century transcultural dance genres like tribal-fusion and voguing emulate her style with tongue-in-cheek movements and visual commentary. Ruth St. Denis’s legacy continues through numerous local organisations dedicated to sacred dance, belly dance, rave, and Sufi dancing. Selected List of Works: *Radha* (1906)  *Egypta* (1910)  *Nautch Dance* (1919, aka *Street Nautch Dance*)  *Brahms Waltz* (1922)  *Liebestraum* (1922)  *The Spirit of the Sea* (1923)  *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* (1923)  *Ishtar of the Seven Gates* (1923)  *Valse a la Loie* (1924)  *White Jade* (1926)  *A Javanese Court Dance* (1926)  *Angkor-Vat* (1930)  *Babylon* (1937) Writing *An Unfinished Life An Autobiography* (1939) |
| Further reading:  (Coorlawala)  (Jowitt)  (Schlundt, Into the Mystic with Miss Ruth)  (Schlundt, The Professional Appearances of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn)  (Shelton)  (Srinivasan) |