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| Fuller, Loie (1862-1928) |
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| Loie Fuller was a founding figure of modern dance. After an early career in American vaudeville, she moved to Paris where she created a new genre that drew on popular cabaret motifs combined with free-flowing, more natural movements performed in bare feet and flowing robes, and — crucially — the incorporation of technology. Gaining acclaim for her incorporation of electric lights, mechanical stagecraft and her oversized silk costumes — all her own design — she used her many patented inventions to transform herself onstage into whirling sculptures of coloured light and floating fabric. Known as the electricity fairy, Fuller was extremely popular with audiences, was often considered as a kind of magician, and became one of the most famous Americans in Europe. Midway through her, career Fuller assembled a troupe of young dancers — Les Ballets Loie Fuller — who toured the world performing with her. In her later years she experimented with cinema, becoming one of the first women filmmakers in the world. Prominent artists and writers such as Auguste Rodin, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Stéphane Mallarmé were particularly interested in Fuller, and used her as a subject for their sculpture, painting, and poetry. She was also a popular subject for early photographers. Her fame was so great and the French embraced her so thoroughly, that at the 1900 Paris World’s Fair, she was the sole performer to be granted her own theatre, designed for her by esteemed Art Nouveau architect, Henri Sauvage. |
| Summary  Loie Fuller was a founding figure of modern dance. After an early career in American vaudeville, she moved to Paris where she created a new genre that drew on popular cabaret motifs combined with free-flowing, more natural movements performed in bare feet and flowing robes, and — crucially — the incorporation of technology. Gaining acclaim for her incorporation of electric lights, mechanical stagecraft and her oversized silk costumes — all her own design — she used her many patented inventions to transform herself onstage into whirling sculptures of coloured light and floating fabric. Known as the electricity fairy, Fuller was extremely popular with audiences, was often considered as a kind of magician, and became one of the most famous Americans in Europe. Midway through her, career Fuller assembled a troupe of young dancers — Les Ballets Loie Fuller — who toured the world performing with her. In her later years she experimented with cinema, becoming one of the first women filmmakers in the world. Prominent artists and writers such as Auguste Rodin, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Stéphane Mallarmé were particularly interested in Fuller, and used her as a subject for their sculpture, painting, and poetry. She was also a popular subject for early photographers. Her fame was so great and the French embraced her so thoroughly, that at the 1900 Paris World’s Fair, she was the sole performer to be granted her own theatre, designed for her by esteemed Art Nouveau architect, Henri Sauvage. Early Career Born Mary-Louise Fuller, Fuller changed her name to Loie at the age of sixteen. She later moved with her mother to New York City to work in vaudeville and burlesque. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, she performed in light dramas and musicals, sometimes cross-dressing to play boys’ roles, and often playing soubrettes. In 1883, Fuller joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s traveling *Wild West Show*, playing Miss Pepper in a vignette called ‘The Prairie Waif’ as part of a series of open-air melodramas about life in the western United States.  Fuller appeared in a number of Orientalist entertainments complete with veiled dancing girls — a motif that she would transmute into the non-narrative, sculptural veil dances of her later years. In 1887, for example, Fuller appeared as the ‘singing slave girl’ Ustane in a production of H. Rider Haggard’s *She*. She also starred (cross-dressed) as Aladdin in *Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp*, a pantomime adaptation of the classic *Thousand and One Nights*. This production featured dreamlike scenery created with a magic lantern, a cabaret device that projected light images onto gauze fabric. Fuller’s later work in stage lighting was clearly highly influenced by this technique. *Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp* also featured a series of dance numbers incorporating veils, twinkling jewel-like lights, and a cloud of steam — permutations of which all found their way into Fuller’s later work.  In 1889, Fuller formed her first dance troupe, with whom she travelled to Bermuda, Haiti, Jamaica, and the Antilles, presenting light plays and operettas. That troupe disbanded and later that same year Fuller briefly lived in London where she worked at the famed Gaiety Theatre. Here, she performed the slightly racy ‘Skirt Dance,’ in which dancers would flip their skirts up over their heads, exposing their legs. While Fuller would eventually cease showing any part of her body onstage, the manipulation of large fabrics overhead became a key aspect of her choreography and can be attributed, in part, to her early work at the Gaiety. Contributions to Modernism Fuller did not achieve her great fame and success until she moved to Paris in 1892, and commenced in earnest her experiments with light and stage design. She first captivated audiences with her *danses lumineuses* [luminous dances] at the Folies Bergères, going on to enjoy a thirty-year career in Europe where she was known as the electric fairy, a living embodiment of the strange new power of electricity — a symbol of technology’s promise for the new, twentieth century and of American inventiveness and ingenuity. Unlike America’s two other leading modern dance pioneers, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, Fuller did not showcase the physical body. Instead, her work was highly technological, relying primarily upon her own (often patented) innovations in costume and stagecraft, and keeping herself nearly entirely covered, save for her hands and face.  Subsuming her body beneath hundreds of yards of white Chinese silks, into which she sewed flexible rods, Fuller would loft fabric veils high over her head and away from her body, sculpting them into changing forms of Art Nouveau motifs like lilies, orchids, butterflies, or ocean waves. At the same time, Fuller’s patented rotating projectors beamed changing coloured lights onto her fabrics, turning her dancing body into a proto-cinema screen, which was sometimes patterned by stencils she designed herself including images of fish skeletons, cancer cells, or American presidents. Her stagecraft included a special pedestal lit from beneath, creating the illusion that Fuller was dancing suspended in mid-air, and her octagonal mirror room, in which myriad reflected images gave audiences the impression of watching dozens of identical Fullers dancing at once. She borrowed from shadow puppet techniques to create her playful *Ombres Gigantesques* or Gigantic Shadow performances, in which dancers hidden behind a screen were lit in such a way that they appeared to grow enormously tall or impossibly tiny.  Passionate about science, Fuller learned about radioactivity from Pierre and Marie Curie, and experimented with phosphorescent salts to paint her costumes, causing them to glow in the dark (unbeknownst to Fuller, the paints were toxic and sickened some of her assistants). Fuller befriended Thomas Edison, who showed her an early X-ray machine, and astronomer Camille Flammarion, who inducted her into the French Astronomical Society. Fuller’s fascination with light and shadow led her to experiment with cinema, and she made a number of films, working with pioneers such as Pathé, Gaumont, and the Lumière brothers. (Only one of these films survives, *The Lily of Life* (1921), with screenplay by Fuller’s close friend, Queen Marie of Rumania.)  Fuller’s work was distinctly modernist in its blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture. Borrowing themes and motifs from her vaudeville and cabaret background, she performed in popular venues like the Folies Bergères, where she was the first dancing woman considered modest and chaste enough for audiences of women and children. Despite her popularity, she danced to classical composers (Wagner and Debussy, for instance, with Debussy composing pieces specifically for Fuller) opposed to the popular songs of the time. Also highly modernist was Fuller’s gradual move away from overt narrative themes towards more abstract, visionary work. One of her most famous pieces, *Fire Dance*, for example, began as part of her 1895 *Salome*, a full-length, danced pantomime about the famous biblical dancing girl, but eventually Fuller performed the dance on its own. In the revised version, accompanied by Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*, Fuller seemed to dissolve into a flickering red flame. Stripped thus of context and story line, this new, more abstract *Fire Dance* was met with greater success, and Fuller gradually relied more and more upon non-figurative work. Legacy Fuller’s experiments in electronic stagecraft influenced modernist theorists and practitioners of theatre and stage design including Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, and Pavel Tchelitchev, while her multi-media productions and lavish use of coloured light and dazzling costumes inspired Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. Fuller’s merging of the mechanical and human onstage also echoed the principles of futurism, and Filippo Marinetti makes special mention of her in his *Manifesto of Futurist Dance*. At the same time, her reliance on enormous silk fabrics recalled more traditional, Orientalist veil dancers — women performers from colonial North Africa who gained popularity in France as erotic attractions — and she was often referred to as the modern Salome. However, Fuller’s veil dances never unveiled her body and were considered more enchanting than erotic.  Despite having choreographed at least 128 dance pieces and enjoying worldwide fame, Fuller faded into obscurity following her death in 1928. (Her companion of many years, French banking heiress Gabrielle Bloch tried with little success to keep Fuller’s company afloat.) Nevertheless, Fuller’s on-going influence on dance and modernist performance has made itself felt in the work of a variety of artists, including multi-media choreographer Alwin Nikolais, lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, puppet artist Hanne Tierney, and dancer and choreographer Jody Sperling, as well as in the popular club dance genre known as flagging. Selected List of Works: *Serpentine Dance* (1892)  *The Firmament* (1893)  *Dance of the Lily* (1895)  *Fire Dance* (1895)  *Mirror Dances* (1897)  *Ballet of Light* (1909)  *Ultraviolet Dances* (1911)  *Nocturnes* (1913)  *Black Moth* (1914)  *Dance of Steel* (1914)  *Fireworks* (1914)  *Night on Bald Mountain* (1915)  *Magic Veil* (1920)  *Chimeras* (1922)  *Shadow Dances* (1922)  *The Sea* (1925) |
| Further reading:  (Albright)  (Current and Current)  (Garelick)  (Kermode)  (Lista)  (Mallarmé)  (McCarren)  (Merwin)  (Sommer) |