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| Modern Ballroom Dancing |
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| Twentieth century modern ballroom dancing differed from social dancing of the nineteenth century in its shift in focus from group cohesion to individual personal style. This emphasis on personal expression paralleled Progressive Era values that emphasised free will and individual action as a means to social progress. Through the use of the closed hold, many modern dances (including the one-step, the Castle Walk, the maxixe, the tango, and the foxtrot) brought partners into closer proximity for extended periods of time. The resulting physical contact of partners combined with the unpredictability of movement inspired by the accompanying ragtime evoked public controversy over the propriety and decency of modern dances.  From the 1910s through the 1950s, these dances were standardised by an American modern ballroom dance industry capitalising on new means of mass production and distribution to sell ‘refined’ versions of these dances (all of which were of lower class origin) for consumption by upwardly mobile clientele. The codification of modern dances for mass dissemination, however, eliminated many of their defining modern features, particularly personal expression through improvisation. Modern ballroom dances as interpreted by the English became the basis for ballroom dance competitions exported internationally by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing throughout the twentieth century. |
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The waltz evoked a similar public outrage to that inspired by modern dances a century later, primarily because of its use of the closed hold (bringing men and women into contact at the chests). Most European and American social dances performed in the nineteenth century, however, were group dances in which men and women maintained greater distances from each other, and followed predetermined step sequences and spatial pathways choreographed or called by a dancing master. The steps often relied on techniques descended from ballet, requiring extensive space and formal instruction. In contrast, modern dances of the early twentieth century were simple enough to be learned without formal instruction, encouraged improvisation, focused on the individual couple more than the group, relied less on turnout and ballet vocabulary, brought the couple into close physical contact, and could be executed in smaller spaces.  Ragtime dances were the first modern ballroom dances of the twentieth century, although the label ‘modern dancing’ was generally not applied to ragtime dances prior to the dance’s move from its original African-American communities into white society. Popularity of modern dances and their spread to the middle and upper classes was accelerated through their promotion by celebrity exhibition ballroom dance teams who revised and standardised modern dances to be more acceptable to upwardly mobile audiences. The most successful of these teams was Vernon and Irene Castle who, after returning in 1912 from their successful engagement performing the latest ragtime dances for French audiences, became the most prominent proponents of modern dancing in America. They toured extensively throughout the United States, and their restrained style sanctioning these modern dances was deemed acceptable for polite society. Other popular exhibition ballroom dance teams of the period included Maurice Mauvet and Florence Walton, Mae Murray and Clifton Webb, and Joan Sawyer and Wallace McCutcheon. Celebrity dancers were often aligned with modern consumer goods through the nascent advertising industry, whose methods to sell newly developed products (thanks to industrial mechanisation) were adopted by the emerging modern ballroom dance industry. This newly developed business model — focused on the sale of social dancing and its related products (including clothing, sheet music, and dance manuals) — responded to and was enabled by modern technologies including railroads, record players, and mechanised forms of clothing production.  The success of modern ballroom dancing was facilitated by the emergence of new public spaces that responded to Progressive Era social values of individualism and social mobility. Not only did the intimate physical spaces of cabarets (for example) encourage the smaller, closer, and more individualised steps characterising modern dances, but the proximity of patrons and performers (who often stood up to dance from a table in the audience) reinforced newfound beliefs in the possibility of self-improvement and social mobility. Women in particular expressed new social freedoms through their embrace of the modern dances. Following the lead of Irene Castle (who advocated for women to reject corsets), women began to wear less restrictive clothing and cut their hair short in imitation of her ‘Castle bob.’ Afternoon tea dances (often called tango teas), which women attended without male escorts, also reflected and promoted the rising social and public freedoms modern women enjoyed.  The one-step is often considered the quintessential modern dance; the simplicity of its structure (one step for every beat of music) resulted in individual expression that, in many ways, defined modern ballroom dancing. The one-step, which evolved from both the two-step and the simplified waltz known as the Boston, was often the basis for other ragtime dances such as the Turkey Trot (named because of brief episodes of waddling and arm flapping), while exhibition ballroom dance teams introduced their own versions of the one-step such as the Castle Walk. The foxtrot, which emerged in 1914 through blending elements of both the one-step and its predecessor the two-step, was a significant modern dance of the period.  The popularity of modern dances was met with considerable resistance by social, religious, and political leaders, whose frequent banning of modern dances only hastened their rapid spread across the United States and Europe. At the centre of this controversy was the tango, particularly perceived as sexually charged due to its origins in the lower classes of Argentina and Uruguay. Although some tango steps such as the corté (a backward step for the man which brought the woman into a lunge between his legs) were inspired by the South American dance, tango danced in North America at the height of the 1913 tango craze shared more in common with other modern ballroom dances than it did with the style danced in Buenos Aires. Likewise the Brazilian maxixe, sometimes referred to as the Brazilian tango, was standardised and popularised by North American ballroom dance teams during the modern dance craze. Thus, although most modern ballroom dances were North American in origin, Latin American dances such as the tango and maxixe were also considered modern, and their lower class (and often black) origins resulted in similar aesthetic values and scandalous appeal, especially when filtered through the emerging ballroom dance industry.  The height of the modern ballroom dance craze lasted from 1912 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 (its legacy, however, extended throughout the first half of the twentieth century). Dance crazes of the 1920s and 1930s such as the Charleston and the lindy hop, although rarely referred to as modern ballroom dances, shared many defining features of modern dance — focus on individual personal expression, improvisational freedom, and unpredictable spatial alignments. The mambo craze of the 1950s is often considered a modern ballroom dance in these terms, although its innovators considered the mambo distinct from ballroom dances practiced contemporaneously at venues such as New York’s Roseland Ballroom. Even after their initial popularity waned, modern ballroom dances continued to enjoy widespread practice in the United States as a result of their codification and sale in the modern ballroom dance industry, which, from the 1920s to the 1950s, was spearheaded by the business-savvy Arthur Murray. Ironically, the standardisation of these dances for mass sale through modern innovations such as mail order, franchised dance studios and television eliminated many of their defining features, particularly improvisation and individual innovation.  Although the modern dance craze of 1912-1914 was similar in North America and Europe, subsequent development of ballroom dancing in England diverged from that in the U.S. In the early 1920s, English dance teachers convened to standardise modern ballroom dances, leading to the creation of the ballroom branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) in 1924. The society codified and regulated English style modern dances, including the waltz, foxtrot, tango, and quickstep. Key figures in the creation of the English style included Alex Moore, Philip J. S. Richardson, and Josephine Bradley. When new Latin dances such as rumba, samba, and cha-cha-cha were later added to the society’s accepted dances, they were not labelled modern dances. Instead, they considered modern dances as those which had been popularised and codified prior to the 1930s, which were all dances where the couple never released their closed embrace. Thus, the ISTD promoted two categories of ballroom dancing: the modern dances (which included the tango) and the Latin dances. Although Latin dances may not be considered ‘modern,’ their codification and dissemination by the modern ballroom dance industry followed similar patterns. The ISTD and other English dance societies disseminated the English style of modern ballroom dancing to Europe, Japan, and former English colonies (South Africa and Australia, for example), all of which participated in society-sanctioned dance competitions. The ISTD did not make inroads into the North American ballroom dance industry until the 1970s when their competition system was finally welcomed to revitalise an American ballroom dance industry faltering due to waning interest in partner dancing in favour of improvised solo social dancing.  Image: Tango.jpg  Figure 1 Irene and Vernon Castle performing the Tango. From:  Castle, Vernon and Irene. *Modern Dancing*. New York: World Syndicate Company, 1914. P. 36.  <http://memory.loc.gov/musdi/240/0030.jpg>  The English-style modern dances remain the basis for international ballroom dance competitions in the twenty-first century (the modern category of ballroom dance competitions was renamed ‘standard’ in the 1990s). The aesthetic priorities and social values of the modern dances were so diluted through an increased focus on competition dancing that twenty-first century ballroom dancing shares little in common with its predecessors. The legacy of early modern ballroom dancing is evident, however, in many other partner dance crazes of the early twenty-first century, including salsa, bachata, west coast swing, and revivals of lindy hop, tango, and blues. |
| Further reading:  (Ragtime Dance)  (Ragtime Dance — Castle Walk)  (Castle and Castle)  (Mouvet) |