**St. Denis, Ruth (b. Ruth Dennis, 20 January 1878, Newark, NJ; d. 21 July 1968, Los Angeles, CA)**

**Summary**

Ruth St. Denis is considered one of the founders of modern dance, even though the genre had not been named during her most active years from the turn of the century through the 1920s. Looking for an alternative to classical ballet and Broadway jazz, 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 repertory 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 visualizations 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 the founders of *bharata naytam* in India, 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.

**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 typically would develop her character or persona by synchronizing 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 Saddayakko at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris. She relied on her bodily abilities, utilized the Delsarte method of expressing emotions, and carefully translated melodic characteristics and structures into her dances. 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 systematized 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, yet she adjusted her performances to each situation. She capitalized 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 resplendently still on a pedestal, best evokes her distilled remote glamour, while her Nautch dances show how she identified with and commented upon the nautch dancer, as the British colonialists called female dancers in India. *The Tatler* and other reviews of her *Nautch* clearly approved of her ‘improvements’ on indigenous nautch dancers. When Denishawn was dancing, there were very few Asians in the United States, due to the Asian exclusion acts that had severely restricted Asian immigration, and American audiences considered her performances revelatory.

In addition, European 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 the Asia with the Denishawn dancers in 1925-1926. In India, Denishawn completed an amazing schedule of over one hundred performances within 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 had presented to European and American audiences. In fact, even as Ruth St. Denis performed her own version of the *Nautch* all over India, a historic controversy was raging over indigenous nautch 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. From this debate eventually emerged *bharata natyam*, amongst other revived forms of classical Indian dance, and Ruth St. Denis and the Denishawn tours arguably played a role in the revival.

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. Their informants across Asia were local celebrities who already had encountered western stages and were interested in modern approaches to performance. Ruth St. Denis benefited by learning her repertory from those who understood how to translate their own culture for outside audiences and adjusted their works accordingly.

**Legacy**

St. Denis’s deep commitment to dance as ‘the Good, the True and the Beautiful’ 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. 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.

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 the 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 organizations dedicated to sacred dance, belly dance, rave, and Sufi dancing.

**Uttara Coorlawala**

**Selected 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)

**Artist’s Writings**

St. Denis, R. (1939) *An Unfinished Life An Autobiography*, New York and London: Harper & Brothers.

**References and further reading**

Coorlawala, U.A. (1992) ‘Ruth St Denis In India,’ *Dance Chronicle* 15 (2): 123-52.

Desmond, J. (1991) ‘Dancing out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism in Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906,’ *SIGNS* 17 (1): 28-49.

Jowitt, D. (1988) ‘The Veil of Isis,’ in *Time and the Dancing Image*, New York: William Morrow.

Shawn, T. (1920) *Ruth St Denis, Pioneer & Prophet. Being A History Of Her Cycle Of Oriental Dances*, San Francisco: John Henry Nash.

Schlundt, C.L. (1971) *Into the Mystic with Miss Ruth,* New York: Dance Perspectives Foundation.

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Srinivasan, P. (2012) *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Terry, W. (1969) *Miss Ruth: The More Living Life of Ruth St. Denis*, New York: Dodd Mead & Company.

**Paratexts**

Ruth St. Denis in *Radha*

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-848a-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Ruth St. Dens in *Radha*

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-848d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Ruth St. Denis in *Nautch*

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-8537-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

[Archive footage of Ruth St. Denis performing in *Liebestraum* in 1949 at Jacob's Pillow.](http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/dance/ruth-st-denis-0)

[Archive footage of Ruth St. Denis performing "The Delirium of the Senses" from Radha in 1941 at Jacob's Pillow](http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/dance/ruth-st-denis)

Cynthia Gregory performing reconstruction of St. Denis’ *Brahms Waltz*

<http://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/dance/cynthia-gregory>