**Modern Ballroom Dancing**

**Summary**

Modern ballroom dancing of the early twentieth century differed from social dancing of the nineteenth century in its departure from group cohesion to instead highlight individual personal style. This increased emphasis on personal expression paralleled Progressive Era values that emphasized free will and individual action as means to social progress. Modern dances (such as the one-step, the Castle Walk, the maxixe, the tango, and the foxtrot) also brought partners into much closer proximity for extended periods of time through use of the closed hold. The resulting physical contact of partners combined with the unpredictability of movement inspired by ragtime music to which the modern dances were commonly performed evoked considerable public controversy over the propriety and decency of modern dances.

From the 1910s through the 1950s, these dances were standardized by an American modern ballroom dance industry that capitalized 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 its upwardly mobile clientele. Ironically, the codification of modern dances for mass dissemination 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 that were exported internationally by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing throughout the twentieth century.

**Beginnings**

The waltz, which became popular internationally in the early nineteenth century, is sometimes identified as the first modern ballroom dance due to its use of the closed hold (bringing men and women into contact at the chests), evoking a similar public outrage to that inspired by the modern dances a century later. Most European and American social dances performed in the nineteenth century, however, were group dances in which men and women not only maintained greater distances from each other, but followed predetermined step sequences and spatial pathways choreographed or called by a dancing master. The steps often relied on technique descended from ballet, requiring both extensive space and formal instruction. In contrast, modern dances of the early twentieth century were often 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 Era**

Ragtime dances were the first modern ballroom dances of the twentieth century, breaking with previous social dance tradition in all the aforementioned ways, although the label ‘modern dancing’ was not always applied to ragtime dances until they moved from their African-American communities of origin into white society. Popularity of the modern dances and their spread to middle and upper classes was accelerated through their promotion by celebrity exhibition ballroom dance teams who revised and standardized 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; their restrained style sanctioning the modern dances as 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 products created through industrial mechanization were likewise adopted by the emerging modern ballroom dance industry. This new network of business focused on the sale of social dancing and related products (i.e., clothing, music, dance manuals) both responded to and was enabled by modern technologies such as railroads, record players, and mechanized clothing production.

The success of modern ballroom dancing was also facilitated by the emergence of new public spaces such as cabarets that responded to Progressive Era social values of individualism and social mobility. Not only did the intimate physical spaces of cabarets encourage the smaller, closer, and more individualized steps that characterized the 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 Dances**

The one-step could be considered the quintessential modern dance, the simplicity of its structure (one step for every beat of music) inviting the kind of individual expression that 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, which was so-named because of brief episodes of waddling and arm flapping. 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 also a significant modern dance of the period.

**Latin Influences**

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 the controversy over the propriety of the modern dances was the tango, perceived as more 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 tango craze in 1913 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 standardized and popularized 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, their lower class (and often black) origins resulting in similar aesthetic values and scandalous appeal, especially as filtered through the emerging ballroom dance industry.

**Mid-Twentieth Century**

The height of the modern ballroom dance craze lasted from 1912 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, although its legacy 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 of the defining modern features such as focus on individual personal expression, improvisational freedom, and unpredictable spatial alignments. Even the mambo craze of the 1950s might be considered a modern ballroom dance by these terms, although its innovators considered the mambo to be quite 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 business-savvy Arthur Murray. Ironically, the standardization of these dances for mass sale through modern innovations such as mail-order, franchised dance studios, and television eliminated many of their defining modern features, especially improvisation and individual innovation.

**English Style**

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 standardize the modern ballroom dances, leading to creation of the ballroom branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) in 1924. The society codified and regulated the English style modern dances, including the waltz, foxtrot, tango, and quickstep (which was first called the quicktime foxtrot and Charleston). 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, these were not labeled ‘modern dances’. They considered modern dances those which had been popularized and codified prior to the 1930s and were all dances in which the couple never releases 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 called ‘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 (e.g., South Africa, Australia), 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 revitalize an American ballroom dance industry faltering due to waning interest in partner dancing in favor of improvised solo social dancing.

**Legacies**

The English-style modern dances remain the basis for international ballroom dance competitions into the twenty-first century, although 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 the increased focus on competition dancing that twenty-first century ballroom dancing shares little in common with its predecessor at the turn of the previous century. 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.

**References and Further Reading**

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