

A *VERY* Brief Overview of Dance History

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There are many histories and many people that make up dance in its entirety. None are better, just different; but all manage to employ the following principles: routine, practice, and discipline. Our bodies are filled with so many techniques with even more variables to the technique of movement. The body has no essence, it is disciplined to move, act, and react based on the culture that is given to it. Dance has this great ability to communicate and evoke emotions without even using words. Dance is, and has been, significant in the lives of all, whether it's sacred rituals, professional performances, or just dancing because it's fun. It can be found everywhere, in every culture, and for many it is a way of life.

The Primitive Period

There is evidence of dance that dates back to the Paleolithic period, seen through rock paintings depicting dance. "Through much research by leading historians and by studying current uses of dance in several primitive cultures, we know that in these cultures people used dance as a means of communication and as a way of life."ⁱ In many primitive societies rituals involving dance are performed at births, marriages, and deaths. Possibly some of the most significant rituals are those performed for means of fertility such as food and children. Our ancestors asked, for rain, sun, harvest, and healthy children. Many of these movements mimicked the nearby animals, the crazy forces of mother nature, and the hypothesized immortal lives of the Gods. Some of these rituals lasted many hours, even days, an inconceivable thought to the contemporary dance world.

There are cultures, still today, considered "primitive" The *Yanomamo* people found in Venezuela, Brazil, Guyana, and Colombia effectively use dance as a way of life. One example is the *amoamo*, a dance performed prior to a hunt "The men in the tribe do this ritual of song and dance to ensure good luck in capturing and killing animals for food and in anticipation of a feast."ⁱⁱ

The Ancient Period

The dances of the ancient civilizations began to acknowledge the aesthetic purposes of the art. They began to question the way the dance looked and what it meant; what the movements represented and how they may be interpreted. India, China, and Ancient Greece are among the first civilizations with recorded anecdotes of dance. Many used dance for religious purposes, and all required skill, grace, and stamina. Ancient Greece furthered the theatrical history of dance by using dance in dramas and Greek theatre.

The Medieval Period

Dance was prevalent in the medieval era, otherwise known as the Middle Ages, as well. The Islamic culture had a heavy influence in the interesting outcomes of dance. It was then that the familiar art of belly dancing came into play, as did many folk dances still performed today. Slowly the church became an influence and dance was quickly banned. Dance began to be seen as pagan activity. The ideals that the body was evil and one should strive for purity in thy soul redefined dance and its purpose. Religious followers believed the idea that heaven is above and

earth is below, and we should be celebrating the ethereal heavens not the earthly body. Since dance is a celebration through the body, many practicing religions denied the acceptance of dance. Sensuality also quickly became associated with dance, and any form of worship that approved dance was opposed to by the Christians of the medieval era. Unfortunately, at this time the black plague (Bubonic) wiped out part of the population and created an association with witchcraft. Soon the society connected dancing to witches and witches to the Plague and dance became known as the Dance of Death or the *Danse Macabre*. Because of this sudden obsession with death and its direct correlation with dancing, many of the pieces featured figures of death such as skeletons. Soon theatrical performances returned and dance was reborn.

The Renaissance Period

Dance was revived through folk dancing, court dancing, and the accompaniment of music. Dance was beginning to be seen as an actual art as opposed to a cultural pastime or ritualistic necessity. While folk dancing remained a popular expression among the working class, the high society combined these folk routines with their aristocratic steps of nobility creating the majestic court dances. Although, the court dances began as a symbolic gesture of royalty, dance soon revolutionized into what we know today as ballet, an aesthetic genre of dance that originated from music, literature, paintings, and sculptures. Before long, ballet became a professional art form and institutions were created to ensure proper aesthetic training.

The Contemporary Period

Eastern countries continued traditional performances while the Western civilizations developed new, invigorating genres. Contemporary and classical Ballet thrived and modern, tap, jazz and the newly popular genre of hip hop shortly infiltrated life as we know it. The twentieth century not only introduced science and technology but dance as entertainment and some of the greatest artists known to man. Throughout the centuries dance went through drastic metamorphic changes from traditional rituals, to banned pagan activity; noble pastimes to a working class voice; beauty and poise to an outlet for social and political messages. The history of dance is a rich explanation of the history of life.

ⁱ Ambrosio, Nora. Learning about Dance. Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 2003.