

Art and Entertainment

Dance

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Dance is “rhythmic and expressive body movement usually coordinated into a pattern and performed with music”. Dance is perhaps the oldest of the arts, reflecting man’s age-old need to communicate joy or grief by using the most immediate instruments at his disposal. Almost all-important occasions, such as birth, death, marriage, war, new leader, etc in the life of a primitive man were celebrated by dancing. Dance steps are created from man’s basic movements like walking, running, jumping, hopping, skipping, etc. Combinations of these have become traditional dance steps and have been used often in a stylized manner, for folk and ethnic dances, social or ballroom dances, ballet, and modern expressive dances.

The point in time where people started to dance is very hazy. Indeed, there are people who believe that man has danced since before sapiens was a species. This is true in the fact that before he had the power of speech, ancient man conveyed thoughts, wishes, and emotions through actions. The first recorded dancing is among the ancient civilizations of the Middle East and India and among the Aboriginal people of America, Australia, and Africa. However, there are limitless types of dances performed in the world today by different societies and cultures but this article focuses on Asian Dancing. Asian classical

dances often narrate stories based on mythology, historical events, and legends. There are many different Asian Countries with their unique social and cultural dance out of which Indian classical dance, Japanese “Folk dance” Chinese “Peking Opera” and Indonesian “Court dance” stand out.

Indian Classical Dance has its origins in the Natya Shastra. Legend has it that the Gods were 'enacting' their victory over the Asuras, which means “evil” before Lord Brahma who was the Supreme Creator. So realistic was this performance that the Asuras mistook this to be a renewed attack and retaliated. Lord Brahma had to intervene and decreed that such performances should only be held on Earth. Lord Brahma, then enlightened Bharata Muni with all this knowledge on Dance and Drama, who then compiled it as the Natya Shastra. Indian classical dancing itself has various types. Firstly we have “Bharatanatyam” This classical Indian dance form is from Tamil Nadu in south India. It takes its name from two sources, Natya Shastra, which is the oldest treatise on the arts, and its author, the sage Bharata. Bharat Natyam was performed by Devadasis, “who were the slaves of the God”, in the temples. These were abandoned girls raised by the priests for their own pleasure and were dedicated to the temple. It remained confined to the temple till the early 20th century, when dancers like Balasaraswati and Rukamani Devi Arundale brought it out of the temple, to the stage and gave it respectability. The Bharat

Natyam dancers dress in specially designed colourful silk costumes and wear elaborate jewellery including head ornaments, necklaces and bangles.

Another form of Indian classical dance is Kuchipudi. This is a more recent dance form, which is also from south India. It originated in the 17th century in the village of Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh. It is a mixture of the sacred and temporal emotions. The movements are also faster than Bharat Natyam. One of the popular themes of the dance drama of Kuchipudi is the story of Krishna and Satyabhama.

Kathakali is another type of Indian classical dance. This is a very elaborate classical dance drama originating in Kerala in South India. It is enacted by an all male cast who wear huge painted masks and voluminous skirts. But what is unique about Kathakali is the make-up, which is the most intricate used by any dance form in the world. The make-up and costume themselves may take hours to put on and often Kathakali performances go on for ten to twelve hours at a stretch, usually outdoors. The music is dominated by the drums and cymbals. The singers sing tales from the puranas and the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The characters all look alike, but there are subtle differences in the masks and their colours. Long fingernails endow the Kathakali mudras with great effectiveness. The characters move gracefully, jump around and roar as per the dictates of the story they are enacting. Though it may appear

easy, it is one of the most difficult forms of dance to master and often takes years of rigorous practice to perform on stage.

Kathak is another very important type of Indian classical dance. This dance form was popular in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan in the old days, where the courts of the kings and emperors had harem dancers. It has imbibed an exciting combination of both the Hindu and Muslim styles and is a very entertaining dance form of the North. The word 'kathak' means a storyteller, who in the olden days was also an actor, singer and dancer. Complicated and quick footwork and rapid whirls characterize this dance form. Long strings of ankle bells are used for rhythm. So complicated are the steps that accomplished dancers are known to just tinkle a single bell while dancing. Balance and control are the key requirements for this extremely intricate dance form. Music here is mostly devotional padas and love poems in either Persian or Urdu. The dance dramas of this form usually chronicle unrequited love.

Japan is another Asian country, which is rich in folk dances many of which are religious type. Japan possesses two major forms of dance-drama, no and kabuki. "no" is about 500 years old and is an extremely slow-paced dance and opera form full of symbolic meanings. Kabuki, developed in the 17th century, is a more popular form in which many theatrical devices are used.

Peking opera is the best-known genre of Chinese dance-drama. Developed in the mid-19th century from earlier varieties of Chinese opera, it

includes spectacular acrobatics as an important part of the action. In the 1950s the Chinese government began promoting productions based on European ballet and emphasizing themes relevant to China's contemporary political and social environment.

In Indonesia, especially in Java, graceful female dancers formerly entertained royalty with refined forms of court dance; they lived at court, and their dances were not seen by the public. In Bali, masked dramas with kings and clowns, war dances, and spirit-possession dances remain a part of village life.

However, the modern world will foster more borrowing of dances among different countries, as well as the creation of new dance forms based on mixtures of various national styles. Modern people have lost the dances of the past because no method existed to preserve them. Today, with film, videotape, and dance notation systems such as Labanotation, Effort/Shape, and Benesh notation, the dances of contemporary cultures can be preserved for subsequent generations and therefore, we can say that this form of art will keep on developing and entertaining as time goes on.

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