

Unnatural Acts: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American dance was undergoing a period of profound transformation. New forms of dance were emerging, new technologies were being developed, and new audiences were being reached. At the same time, the country was grappling with a number of social and political upheavals, including the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

These changes had a profound impact on dance. Dance became a more visible and popular form of entertainment, and it began to play a more important role in American culture. It also became a more contested terrain, as different groups sought to use dance to express their own identities and values.



Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890–1920 (Unnatural Acts)

by Linda J. Tomko

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One of the most significant changes in American dance during this period was the rise of modern dance. Modern dance was a new form of dance that rejected the traditional ballet aesthetic in favor of a more natural and expressive style. It was pioneered by dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn, and it quickly gained popularity among both dancers and audiences.

Modern dance was often seen as a challenge to traditional gender roles. Duncan, in particular, was known for her free-flowing, improvisational style of dance, which was considered to be very unfeminine by many. Other modern dancers, such as St. Denis and Shawn, also experimented with gender roles in their work.

Another significant change in American dance during this period was the rise of African American dance. African American dance had a long and rich history in the United States, but it was not until the late 19th century that it began to gain mainstream popularity. This was due in part to the work of vaudeville performers such as Bill Robinson and Florence Mills, who introduced African American dance to white audiences.

African American dance was often seen as a challenge to prevailing racial stereotypes. Robinson, in particular, was known for his elegant and sophisticated style of dance, which challenged the stereotype of the African American as a buffoon. Other African American dancers, such as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, also used their work to challenge racial stereotypes.

In addition to the rise of modern dance and African American dance, the late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw the rise of ballroom dancing.

Ballroom dancing was a popular form of dance among the upper classes, and it was often seen as a way to display one's social status. However, ballroom dancing was also seen as a challenge to traditional gender roles. Women were often expected to be passive and submissive in ballroom dancing, while men were expected to be active and dominant.

Some women, such as Vernon Castle, challenged these traditional gender roles by becoming professional ballroom dancers. Castle was known for her athletic and energetic style of dance, which was a challenge to the prevailing notion that women should be delicate and graceful. Other women, such as Irene Castle, also used their work to challenge gender roles in ballroom dancing.

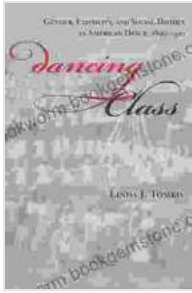
One of the most significant aspects of dance during this period was its role as a site of social resistance. Dance was often used as a way to express dissent or to challenge the status quo. For example, African American dancers used dance to challenge racial stereotypes, while women used dance to challenge gender roles. Dance was also used as a way to build community and to create new social identities.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of great change and upheaval in American society. Dance was both a reflection of these changes and a force for change in its own right. It was a time of great creativity and innovation, and it was a time when dance began to play a more important role in American culture.

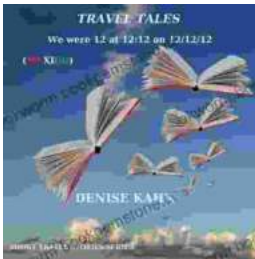
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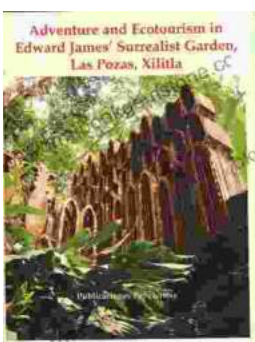


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