Liberating the Natural Movement: 
Dance and Dress Reform in the Self-Expression of 
Isadora Duncan (1877–1927)

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Abstract
By laying the foundation for a new dance that would release the inner spiritual impulse through unrestricted movement, Isadora Duncan sought to return to the understanding of the body as a medium for harmonious expression of natural rhythms. Such kinetic celebrations of female vitality required the adoption of garments that challenged the dominant conventions of women’s dress and represented a route to alternative practices that encouraged physical and personal freedom. This article builds a comprehensive view of Duncan’s progressive identity by considering the ways in which the dancer aligned herself with late nineteenth century dress reform movements and adopted references from classical antiquity in order to develop a distinctive style within the context of both everyday sartorial presentation and performative culture.
Introduction

In one of her earliest essays, *The Dance of the Future*, published in 1903, Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) addressed her approach to dance as a complex artistic and social practice. For Duncan, the new dance, which was to be understood as an eternal form of expression with the ability to bridge the past and the future, found its origins in harmonious rhythms of nature. Both inanimate motions of the wind and waves and animate gestures of humans and animals unfolded, according to Duncan, from natural rhythmic exchanges and encompassed as such an inherent aesthetic value. The primary function of the dance was to establish a unity of the soul and the body by celebrating movements developed in proportion to the individual human form. The concept of unrestricted corporeal gestures, which as the dancer later explained originated from the solar plexus, was placed in stark opposition to the codified techniques of classical ballet. Although there is evidence that Duncan had taken ballet lessons both as a child and later as a young woman, she repeatedly criticised not only the artificiality of the traditional ballet system and its disassociation with the laws of nature, but sought a way to express her views regarding the distorting effects imposed by the ballet costume on the human, in particular female, figure.

Duncan’s writings provided a theoretical framework for her own concept of art dance that she developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Concerned with the rigid formalism of classical ballet and the potential to cause adverse effects on the body, Duncan articulated a radical approach to dance and its social implications related to the perception of womanhood. By envisioning the dancer as a medium with the potential to convey ideas of social progress, Duncan evolved her persona, as observed by dance critic Deborah Jowitt, into an emblem of freedom. She sought to achieve liberation by rejecting the prevailing notions of dance together with the nineteenth century perceptions regarding the way in which women were expected to lead their lives and construct their sartorial appearances. Her ideas about the unrestricted body and reliance on free-form choreography were accompanied by a distinctive use of simplified, loose garments made of lightweight, drapable textiles (Figure 1). At a time when women’s fashions were governed by strict rules of etiquette and marked by multiple layers of clothing and various silhouette shaping garments, Duncan’s preferences for lightweight free-flowing tunics, based on models adopted from

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1 Isadora Duncan’s essay, *The Dance of the Future*, was first presented as a lecture at the Berlin Press Club in 1903.
classical antiquity, significantly challenged her path to public acceptance, while allowing her to play a major role in the development of modern dance and its elevation to a legitimate form of art.

Figure 1: 
Isadora Duncan in Munich, Germany, Atelier Elvira, 1904, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York, United States, b12134458.
American Reformers and Delsartean Physical Culture
In her transgression of performative boundaries, Duncan aligned herself with other anti–formalist dancers of the day such as Loïe Fuller (1862–1928), who increased the visibility of women in the public sphere and represented a prototype of the new, independent woman of the twentieth century. Fuller believed in the transformative potential of dance which was to be achieved through an inventive fusion of light and floating drapery and preceded Duncan in the abandonment of the corset. Growing up in Fresno, California, United States, during the 1880s and 1890s (Figure 2), Duncan might have been exposed to concerns regarding the restriction and unhealthiness of female attire expressed by promoters of health and dress reform movements that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Figure 2:
Isadora Duncan at Age 12 in Fresno, California, at the Time When She Was Touring Various Californian Towns with Her Siblings, Photographer Unknown, 1889, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York, United States, b14790262.

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Both medical and aesthetic arguments questioning the dominant attitudes toward the body and practices of conventional fashions that disabled movement and limited work and sport activities were supported by various organisations and individuals on both sides of the Atlantic. In order to address the issues of health and beauty in clothing, many intellectuals and artists, including physicians, educators, feminists, actors, dancers, and opera singers, attempted to find means to improve the constraining features of mainstream fashions and encourage the acceptance of a healthy body in its natural form. While some limited their suggestions for sartorial improvement solely to the abandonment of tight and heavy undergarments in order to maintain the fashionable appeal of contemporary styles, others encouraged the adoption of new forms of dress that would significantly challenge the rigid standards of nineteenth century fashion culture.\(^6\)

In light of rational and hygienic practices, American reformers viewed the healthy female body as the one that incarnated “the true principles of physiology and art”\(^7\) and placed a significant value on the notion of physical culture, which had the ability to accentuate ideas related to the body’s expressive and social implications. The increasing popularity of theories formulated by the French music and drama educator François Delsarte (1811–1871) established an interest in the relationship between bodily motions and spiritual functions. Initially envisioned as a system that assigned corresponding meanings to vocal and dramatic gestures, Delsarte’s theoretical principles of motion were based on training methods that were to serve professional orators and actors and encourage the development of their own movement vocabularies.\(^8\) Known as Aesthetic or Harmonic Gymnastics, American Delsartism\(^9\) was quickly adopted by many upper- and middle-class women interested in the improvement of health and enhancement of personal freedom. Further elaborated and popularised by Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1934), the technique developed into


\(^{9}\) Ruyter explained, “In any investigation of his [Delsarte’s] relevance to dance history, however, it is important to distinguish what was taught in France by F. Delsarte himself—in his courses and lectures on acting, voice production and aesthetics—and what came to be called American Delsartism. This latter was based on Delsarte’s theory but also included significant practical adaptations and extensions developed in the United States by Steele Mackaye (1842–1894) and Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1914 or later) and their followers.” Ibid., p. 62.
an expressive exercise programme that made a substantive contribution to the emerging field of the alternative dance art.\textsuperscript{10}

In addition to limited training in classical ballet and knowledge of social dances acquired from her sister, Elizabeth Duncan (1871–1948), Isadora Duncan’s theory of dance is considered to have been influenced by Delsartean principles of the body\textsuperscript{11} and, in particular, his elaboration of the importance of succession and fluidity of movement. During the second half of the nineteenth century, American reformers considered physical exercise of the highest importance for the achievement of a naturally beautiful body and called attention to classical antiquity in order to eschew the harmful effects of tight corsetry. Echoing their thoughts, Duncan addressed similar issues of dress reform by establishing a correlation between her understanding of the ideal body movement and images of sartorial constraint. In her 1905 essay \textit{The Dancer and Nature}, Duncan noted:

First draw me the form of a woman as it is in Nature. And now draw me the form of a woman in a modern corset and the satin slippers used by our modern dancers. Now do you not see that the movement that would conform to one figure would be perfectly impossible for the other? To the first all the rhythmic movements that run through Nature would be possible. They would find this form their natural medium for movement. To the second figure this movement would be impossible on account of the rhythm being broken, and stopped at the extremities.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Discourses of Liberation and the Hellenic Ideal}

Having considered “the ideal beauty of the human form and the ideal beauty of movement”\textsuperscript{13} to have been lost for centuries, Duncan linked her beliefs regarding the liberation of the body from restrictions imposed by late nineteenth century culture to Hellenic concepts. Duncan found the basis for her understanding of undulating movement within the eternal aesthetics of classical Greek art. Genevieve Stebbins, whose popular teaching methodology of artistic statue-posings and interpretations of

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{12} Duncan, 1928, op cit., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 90.
historical and international dances (including ancient Greek dance) might have made an important impact on Duncan in the early 1890s. Duncan believed that the art of ancient Greece expressed the highest standards of universal qualities of beauty and nature and modelled her movements in accordance to Greek imagery. Duncan’s interest in the study of ancient Greek art deepened after she travelled to Europe in 1899 and devoted herself to the perfection of a dancing vocabulary reliant on references adopted from classical sources. Her brother, Raymond Duncan (1874–1966), an eclectic artist, philosopher, craftsman and textile designer who was later known for his strong advocacy of the healthfulness of Greek dress, demonstrated a similar interest in the art of ancient Greece. Together, they visited numerous European museums, where the siblings focused on the study of vase paintings, statuary, and bas-reliefs. Raymond drew sketches, while Isadora attempted to identify and evoke the harmony and rhythm of movement that accompanied the depicted notions of the body and subsequently translate Hellenic discourses into her own theory of modern dance.

Similar to figures observed from Greek art, Duncan adopted a physical appearance—that accompanied her movement vocabulary—and became an important component of her sartorial expression. In her autobiography My Life (1927), Duncan often indicated her preferences for “little white Greek tunics,” which she mentioned wearing as early as 1895 during her attempts to make her first professional appearances in Chicago. She soon moved to New York to join the commercial theatrical company of Augustin Daly (1838–1899) and in 1898 started creating her first solo programmes to the musical compositions of Ethelbert Nevin (1862–1901).

11 Ruyter, op cit., pp. 69-72.; Daly, op cit., p. 125.
14 In her autobiography My Life, which was originally published in 1927, Duncan used the phrase, little white (Greek) tunic, on several occasions. On p. 17 of the 2013 edition of My Life, Duncan used the exact words “little white Greek tunic;” on p. 62 she mentioned the “simplicity of my tunic;” on p. 120 she stated, “I would sit far into the night in my white tunic;” on p. 123 she mentioned “in my little white tunic;” on p. 128 “my tunic;” on p. 133 “in my Greek tunic;” on p. 135 “in my Greek tunic and sandals;” on p. 142 “my little white tunic;” on p. 156 “the little white tunic;” on p. 158 “my little white tunic;” on p. 181 “my tunic;” on p. 203 “in my simple Greek tunic;” on p. 209 she mentioned while referencing Paul Poiret, “I, who had always worn a little white tunic, woollen in winter, linen in summer.” Later, Duncan described her stage clothes as an embroidered tunic and a red tunic.
At the time of these early performances, Duncan’s construction of the body continued to follow certain conventional codes related to dancing attire, encompassing as such ballet slippers and pink coloured tights. This can be noticed on a series of cabinet cards captured by the renowned theatrical photographer Jacob Schloss (1856–1938) in 1899 in which the young dancer is dressed in a garment made from her mother’s lace curtains (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Isadora Duncan* in *New York, New York, United States in Various Poses, Dressed in Her Mother’s Lace Curtains*, Jacob Schloss, 1899, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York, United States, b12144860.
First Appearances in London, British Aestheticism, and Liberty’s

Even though her costumes of the late 1890s were already considered filmy and draping, Duncan’s radical strategies of dress continued to develop along with her radical approach to dance. Flowing draperies and bare feet celebrated and revealed the dancer’s body as she left the United States for Europe in 1899 and explored mythological images represented in literary works, painting, and music during her debut appearances at London’s New Gallery at 121 Regent Street. Duncan named these short dances the Dance Idylls programme. As part of this, she performed a recital based on Botticelli’s Primavera and enacted several figures represented in the painting as a realisation of “soft and marvellous” movements that emanated from the scene and indicated a message of love, spring, and procreation of life. Her costume was clearly inspired by the depiction of the spring goddess, Flora, and can be seen in photographs captured by her brother, Raymond (Figure 4). The dancer is shown in a long, draped dress made of several layers of lightweight gauze fabric with floral ornaments, her head and upper body wreathed in strings of rose blossoms. Her frolicsome and graceful movements translated the gestures of Venus. The whole performance represented, according to the local press, a scene that “might have happened in ancient Greece.”

Duncan’s early interest in the arts and the “simplicity of the dress” was linked to her upbringing in San Francisco where reproductions of great masterpieces appeared as a cultural signifier of artistic sensibility. American dress reformers of the 1880s and 1890s indicated a growing interest in the achievement of natural beauty through artistic forms of sartorial expression and often suggested the classical ideal as the most relevant standard for female beauty. Duncan, however, engaged in a more immediate contact with Aestheticism by joining the progressive cultural elite of London and finding support for her art among its prominent members. Encouraged by her enthusiasm for social reform, Duncan was further introduced to the art of Pre-Raphaelite painters through her friendship with Charles Hallé (1846–1914), the founder of the New Gallery and one of the first directors of the Grosvenor Gallery at 135–137 New Bond Street, London, a central place for social display of Aesthetic dress. Worn by artists, writers, patrons, and female members of artistic audiences involved in the activities of the Aesthetic movement, Aesthetic dress appeared as a

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19 Ibid., p. 94.
21 Daly, op cit., p. 92.
22 Duncan, 1928, op cit., p. 128.
23 Daly, op cit.
24 Cunningham, op cit., pp. 136–140.
socially motivated practice and supported similar issues of health, morality, and beauty represented by other dress reform movements.

Figure 4: Isadora Duncan’s Costume for Primavera, Raymond Duncan, 1900, in © Dorée Duncan, Carol Pratl, and Cynthia Splatt, *Life into Art: Isadora Duncan and Her World*, W. W. Norton, New York, New York, United States, 1993, p. 42.
With origins dating to the art and culture of Pre–Raphaelite artists and the sartorial expression of female members of the extended Pre–Raphaelite circle, these clothing practices embodied historical allusions to classical and medieval models and, as pointed out by Kimberly Wahl, acted as a performative aspect of Aestheticism. Aesthetic dress enabled the formation of artistic individual and group identities and was further disseminated by the Liberty Company, the designs of which played a significant role in the construction of Duncan’s appearance in a variety of contexts. Softly draped textiles, items of dress based on historical styles that appealed to artistically inclined women, and romantic outfits inspired by the pastoral countryside illustrations of Kate Greenaway (1846–1901), whose characters’ late eighteenth century and Regency fashions were converted by Liberty into designs for children’s clothing, can be found mentioned in Duncan’s descriptions of dress practices in which she referred to fabrics employed for her dancing costume as well as to clothing and headwear worn as her everyday wardrobe at the beginning of the twentieth century (Figure 5).

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26 Kimberly Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform*, University of New Hampshire Press, Durham, New Hampshire, United States, 2013, p. 70.


28 In her autobiography, Duncan recalls buying “a few yards of veiling at Liberty’s” for her first appearance at a dinner party in London organised by a woman for whom Duncan had performed previously in New York. Duncan mentions dancing in “sandals and bare feet,” which was an unconventional image as tights were at the time worn commonly by ballet dancers. Dancing in “sandals and bare feet” would significantly shock German audiences a few years later, but it did not seem to cause any negative response from upper-class English spectators. Furthermore, references to styles of the late 1790s and early 1800s that were marked by white high-waisted muslin dresses can be found in Duncan’s description of the attire she described, as follows: “I was dressed in a white muslin Kate Greenaway dress, a blue sash under the arms, a big straw hat on my head, and my hair in curls on my shoulders.” Duncan, *My Life*, 2013, pp. 40–43.
Departure from Conventional Clothing Practices

Since Duncan approached dance as “the foundation of a complete conception of life,” she articulated her ideas about the liberated body through unconventional clothing practices, frequently discarding sartorial norms and opting to wear her “little white Greek tunic,” bare feet, and sandals for public occasions other than her own dance performances. As previously mentioned, Loïe Fuller rejected the corset

30 Duncan, 1927, op cit., p. 17.
31 Duncan frequently wore a tunic for off-stage appearances; for example, on p. 135 of My Life (2013) Duncan described her stay in Bayreuth, “At Villa Wahnfried I met some young officers who invited me to ride with them in the mornings. I mounted in my Greek tunic and sandals, bareheaded, with my curls flying in the wind. I resembled Brünhilde.” After her December 1904 performance in St. Petersburg, Russia, she went to see a ballet performance at the opera and comments on p. 142, “I was still wearing my little white tunic and sandals and must have looked very odd in the midst of this gathering of all the wealth and aristocracy of St. Petersburg.”
before Duncan, but was nevertheless astonished by the flimsy attire in which Duncan appeared both on and off the stage. Impressed by her skills, Fuller attempted to help Duncan gain more attention in Europe. In her memoirs, Fuller described the garments worn by Duncan during their visit to the wife of the English ambassador in Vienna in 1902 with the following words:

On this day I came near going in alone and leaving my dancer [Duncan] in the carriage because of her personal appearance. She wore an Empire robe, grey, with a long train and a man’s hat, a soft felt hat with a flying veil. Thus gowned she appeared to so little advantage that I rather expected a rebuff.32

By advocating comfort and mobility in clothing, Duncan disassociated herself from the rigid principles of mainstream fashions and presented an idiosyncratic mode of dress through which she asserted her notions of universality and timelessness of the natural human body. In addition to physical restrictiveness, the dancer frequently confronted the fashion system with its susceptibility toward perpetual innovation. She believed that fashion’s forward-looking and ephemeral character was unable to affect the ideal beauty of women to which she referred as eternal and unresponsive to changes imposed by fashion. Duncan explained these thoughts in her essay Movement is Life in 1909:

The beauty of the human form is not chance. One cannot change it by dress. The Chinese women deformed their feet with tiny shoes; women of the time of Louis XIV deformed their bodies with corsets; but the ideal of the human body must forever remain the same. The Venus of Milo stands on her pedestal in the Louvre for an ideal; women pass before her, hurt and deformed by the dress of ridiculous fashions; she remains forever the same, for she is beauty, life, truth.33

33 Duncan, 1928, op cit., p. 79.
Reinterpretation of Classical Garments
Preferences for Grecian bodies led Duncan toward the adoption of everyday Neoclassical dress forms to which she referred as “Directoire.” Using the term as early as 1902 during the family’s first visit to Greece, Duncan described the contrast between this type of clothing and fashionable dress styles worn by her sister-in-law, Sarah Whiteford. By portraying contemporary fashions as “degenerate,” she discussed her decision to abandon her own clothing in favour of an even more profound return to ideal Hellenic originals (Figure 6), such as “tunics, and chlamys and peplum.”

Figure 6:

34 Duncan’s brother, Augustin Duncan (1873-1954), married 16-year-old Sarah Whiteford in 1899, just before the family departed the United States for London.
35 Duncan, 2013, op cit., p. 105.
Although her approach to dance was often referred to as Greek, Duncan did not strive to reconstruct Greek dances. She clearly described her relationship to the discourses of ancient Greece solely as inspirational, highlighting that the references adopted from classical art enabled her to interpret universal and natural gestures.\[^{36}\] On a similar note, Duncan’s temporal turns toward ancient dress forms represented only an approximation of the Hellenic originals, namely costumes she could have perceived through her study of classical artworks (Figure 7). Having in mind that historical revivals, as argued by art historian Deborah Cherry, could be characterised by a variety of meanings, possibilities, and strategies and therefore expressed through a return of a style or through the reappearance of a particular form or even survival of an object,\[^{37}\] Duncan’s version of ancient Greek dress encapsulated a modern interpretation that translated her beliefs regarding the importance of physical freedom.

![Isadora Duncan at the Parthenon Theatre in Athens, Greece](image)

Figure 7: *Isadora Duncan at the Parthenon Theatre in Athens, Greece*, Raymond Duncan, 1904, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York, United States, b14790259.

\[^{36}\] Duncan, 1928, op cit., p. 103.

The potential of revivalism to communicate self-performance allowed Duncan to conjure her quotations of historical styles through the use of lightweight Chinese or Liberty silks and her distinctive adaption of classical draping. As described by Harold Koda in his study of ancient Greek dress and its later historical and contemporary innovations, the dancer’s interpretations of the classical chiton38 comprised pieces of silk joined through knots or safety pins and fastened by cords or elastic bands around the shoulders and waist.39 Since the form of many Grecian garments required a particular system of pleating,40 the dance costumes were further enhanced using a technique that was described by the dancer’s pupil and adoptive daughter, Irma Duncan (1897–1977), as follows:

To achieve the same pleated effect observed on Greek statuary, we started out by sprinkling the tunics with water. Two girls then got hold of the ends, folding one tiny pleat upon the other, and then gave the whole thing a twist, held together by a ribbon. This had to be repeated after each performance, so the tunics would be in proper shape for the next one. With so many tunics involved, it was a laborious and patience-demanding process. Isadora herself taught us this trick.41

Whereas classical dress was marked by a similarity of styles worn by men and women, a shorter version of the chiton, known as chitoniskos, appeared as an exclusive item of men’s clothing. Female members of the Greek society wore modest floor-length gowns and the rare chitoniskos depicted as women’s attire were most commonly associated with the hunting goddess Artemis and mythological Amazon warriors. As can be seen on various photographs of Duncan and her pupils, the dancer’s ideological implications of the body were

38 Harold Koda stated that women’s apparel in ancient Greece fell into three general garment types: the chiton, the peplos, and the himation. Koda wrote, “Structurally, the most elemental dress type is the chiton, which is constructed in several ways. The most commonly represented is accomplished by stitching two rectangular pieces of fabric together along either side seam, from top to bottom, forming a cylinder with its top edge and hem unstitched. The top edges are then sewn, pinned, or buttoned together at two or more points to form shoulder seams, with reserve openings for the head and arms.” Koda, op cit., p. 21.
39 Koda, op cit., p. 27.
frequently accompanied by revealing interpretations of short chitons characterised by a distinctive Empire waistline (Figure 8).\(^2\)

Figure 8:


\(^2\) Koda, op cit.
In addition, departures from original Greek attire, characteristic for historical revivalism, are noticeable in Duncan’s approach to dress as combinations of elements adopted from different cultures. Duncan’s triumphant pose captured at the Parthenon by the pictorialist photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973) shows an attire comprised of both Greek and Roman elements (Figure 9). The dancer is depicted draped in a Grecian himation, a cloak typically pinned on one shoulder, worn over a garment with wide sleeves more closely related to Roman dress or clothing cultures of the Near and Middle East.\footnote{Koda, op cit., p. 15.}

Figure 9: Isadora Duncan at the Parthenon, Athens, Greece, Edward Steichen, 1920, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York, United States, b14757971.
Sartorial Articulation of a Progressive Individual and Social Identity

Duncan asserted, “I took off my clothes to dance because I felt the rhythm and freedom of my body better that way;” however in doing so, she created a sensation among turn-of-the-century audiences accustomed to the attire of classical ballerinas and vaudevillian dancers. During her performances as one of the three Graces in Tannhäuser at the Bayreuth festival in the summer of 1904, Duncan’s filmy costume and bare legs created a discussion about the morality of her revealing appearance. When requested by her hostess Cosima Wagner (1837–1930) to cover her body with a long white chemise, Duncan decidedly refused and noted in her biography “I would dress and dance exactly my way, or not at all.” Moreover, she condemned the salmon-coloured tights worn by ballet dancers as “vulgar and indecent” in comparison to the beauty and innocence of the naked human body.

The naked body, to which Duncan often referred in her writings, should, however, be understood, as discussed by Ann Daly, in terms of a body which is not completely nude, but one that, in the spirit of Greek statuary, has the ability to reveal its moral and noble form while covered in modest veiling. Seeing Duncan dance as an art that symbolised the freedom of women, she did not aim to “suggest anything vulgar.” For Duncan, concealment was “vulgar,” while the body itself represented a temple of art. In Duncan’s words, “nudeness” was considered to epitomise truth and beauty and, therefore, lacked the ability to appear as “vulgar” or “immoral.” Duncan addressed the criticism of the public and wrote:

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44 Duncan, 1928, op cit., p. 129.
45 Duncan, 2013, op cit., p. 136.
46 Daly, op cit., p. 31.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
They say I mismanaged my garments. A mere disarrangement of a garment means nothing. Why should I care what part of my body I reveal? Why is one part more evil than another? Is not all body and soul an instrument through which the artist expresses his inner message of beauty? ...It has never dawned on me to swathe myself in hampering garments or to bind my limbs and drape my throat, for am I not striving to fuse soul and body in one unified image of beauty?31

To her supporters, Duncan’s performative practices represented grace and nobility of the natural whereas her approach to dance and the theory of a liberated body embraced a desire for progress and social change. Duncan was, therefore, often perceived in America as a pioneer of the new art and the new understanding of life that accompanied the twentieth century and its transforming ideas of modern womanhood. Moreover, her references to ancient Greek ideals could be recognised, as argued by Ann Daly, as a rhetorical strategy employed to elevate the aesthetic and social value of the dance.32 By relying on the unquestioned authority of classical antiquity, Duncan acquired cultural legitimacy for dance as a marginal late nineteenth century practice and turned her progressive sartorial expression into an emblem of cultural subversion.

Having in mind that her stage costumes and daily attire represented an equally significant challenge to the conventional female dress norms (Figure 10), Duncan’s sartorial appearance may be examined within the dialectic between the dominant and oppositional clothing discourses as analysed by the cultural sociologist Diana Crane. By understanding the symbolic boundaries of clothing as a form of non-verbal resistance, Crane discussed the conservative agenda of nineteenth century fashion and differentiated various aspects of clothing behaviour as either marginal or hegemonic. Since nineteenth century clothing discourses incorporated the behaviour of groups who perpetuated conformity with the prevailing notions of status and gender roles as well as groups who expressed social tensions by introducing new approaches to clothing, sartorial opposition could be administered through alternative forms of dress that occupied a distinctive position within the public space of fashion.33

31 Ibid. Ellipses added by the author of this article.
32 Daly, op cit., pp. 10–16.
Figure 10:
Emerging into previously established discourses of health and dress reform movements, Duncan’s strategies of dress managed to carry a distinctive notion of individuality that nevertheless bridged universal ideas of social progress and social identification with the female collective. Her marginal position within the dress culture of the early twentieth century and her inclusion of classical elements managed to leave considerable impression on other artists, more specifically on Michel Fokine (1880–1942) whose ideas initiated a transformation of the Russian ballet. According to the memoirs of prima ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska (1872–1971), Duncan’s January 1905 appearance in St. Petersburg, Russia, encouraged the choreographer to adopt her preferences for the music of Chopin and Schumann and in his aspirations to achieve free expression of emotion, Fokine proceeded to study similar sources of ancient Greek art and movement.\(^54\) The later fusion of classical and oriental elements in the choreography and costume design of the Ballets Russes created a sensation in Paris, and in 1909 the future of Parisian fashion seemed to be attained, as Valerie Steele observed, “through visiting the long ago and far away.”\(^55\)

**Enthusiasm for the Work of Avant Garde Designers**

Historical revival of dress forms appropriated from classical antiquity enabled the fashion system to recall its “passion for things Antique”\(^56\) and develop a new taste for Directoire, Empire, and Regency periods that allowed women to abandon the S-curve corset and embrace the raised waistline as a signature element of the Neoclassical silhouette. Citations of classicising Directoire models were particularly promoted by the French couturier Paul Poiret (1879–1944) whose revolutionary designs introduced in 1906 a narrow line that moved away from the conventional traditions of dressmaking.\(^57\) With his abandonment of the corseted figure and introduction of relaxed clothing styles, Poiret’s radically simplified garments correlated with Duncan’s concept of the body and in her autobiography she recalled her enthusiasm for his creations:

\(^{54}\) Irma Duncan, 1966, op cit., p. 70.


\(^{56}\) François Boucher, op cit., p. 337.

And now, for the first time, I visited a fashionable dressmaker, and fell to the fatal lure of stuffs, colours, form—even hats, I, who had always worn a little white tunic, woollen in winter, linen in summer, succumbed to the enticement of ordering beautiful gowns, and wearing them. Only I had one excuse. The dressmaker was no ordinary one, but a genius—Paul Poiret, who could dress a woman in such a way as also to create a work of art.38

Poiret credited Isadora Duncan as his inspiration,39 transformed a part of her studio with extraordinary decorations comprising of black velvets, golden mirrors, and Oriental textures and was known to have made an elaborate embroidered dress for the dancer’s young daughter Deirdre (1906-1913)40 who referred to the garment as her “robe de fête.” 61 Paul Poiret's Empire-waisted evening gown attributed to Duncan, circa 1912, is preserved in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York.42 Made of yellow and ivory silk chiffon and decorated with an intersecting meander motif across the draped bodice, the dress evokes a classical Greek style, but rather than fully complying with historical modes of construction, represents a new approach to modern dress that marked the couturier’s departure from the rigidity of nineteenth century fashions.

During the same period, references to original Greek garments and introduction of a columnar silhouette became apparent in the work of the eclectic artist Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949) whose experience in theatre design and painting sparked an interest in classical and regional dress, encouraging him towards research of printing and draping processes. Inspired by the Charioteer of Delphi,43 Fortuny collaborated with his wife, Henriette Negrin (1877-1965), a Parisian textile artist and clothing designer, in order to develop his own interpretation of the ancient pleating technique and produce garments made of fine corrugated silk taffeta. The subtle colour and

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39 Daly, op cit., p. 251.
40 Deirdre Duncan (1906-1913) was the biological daughter of Isadora Duncan (not one of the adoptive daughters who were originally Duncan’s pupils), who was killed in a car accident together with her younger brother, Patrick Duncan (1910-1913).
41 Duncan, 2013, op cit., p. 238.
42 Museum of the City of New York, New York, New York, United States, Accession #62.119.3. See Koda and Bolton, op cit., p. 74.
43 The Charioteer of Delphi is an Ancient Greek bronze sculpture, circa 475 BC, representing a life-size statue of a chariot driver dressed in a typical long tunic or chiton. The sculpture was found in 1896 near the temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece.
loose form of the accordingly named Delphos gown found support among female members of fashionable artistic circles including Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), Eleonora Duse (1858–1924), and Isadora Duncan who probably acquired her first Delphos dress in 1909 or 1910.\(^6\) Although soft and elastic with the ability to adapt to the natural lines of the body, Duncan never considered the design suitable for her stage performances.\(^6\) She was, however, seen wearing the garment on numerous domestic and public occasions. Again, a very rare children’s model was known to have been constructed for her young daughter Deirdre\(^6\) and in August 1919, Duncan’s adoptive daughters acquired the dress in different colours during their visit to the renowned Fortuny shop in Venice (Figure 11).

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\(^{64}\) Duncan, Pratl, and Splatt, op cit., p. 109.

\(^{65}\) Irma Duncan, 1966, op cit., p. 189.

\(^{66}\) Duncan, Pratl, and Splatt, op cit., p. 109.
Despite Duncan’s interest in creations of avant garde designers, visual evidence supports a continuation of her preferences for garments intrinsic to her personal style and the distinctive use of historical references. During the years that followed the First World War, upon her return to Europe from the United States, Duncan could still be seen in combinations of garments resembling stylistic idioms of past clothing cultures, thus highlighting her continuous revision of historical precedents and the marginality of her position within the emerging twentieth century dress practices. Photographs captured upon her return to her former home in Bellevue, Meudon, France illustrate her use of more modest floor-length tunics and large rectangular shawls draped as classical himations (Figure 12).

Figure 12:
Conclusion
It could be argued, therefore, that Duncan’s Neoclassicism encompassed a complex dual temporality that could be seen as similar to the position occupied by Aesthetic dress within the context of nineteenth century fashion culture, appearing both as a product of modernity’s search for novelty as well as reactive anti-modernist stance. Having moved away from dominant conventions, Duncan explored an experimental, modern style of performance and superseded traditional concepts of femininity and the body. Her clothing appeared as a negotiation between her vision of dance understood as an aesthetic and a socially structured programme, a celebration of individualised natural movement accompanied by a progressive, revolutionary break with acceptable cultural norms and constrictive attitudes to dress. At the same time, while highlighting the importance of the body as a social entity, Duncan adopted antithetical codes that evoked past cultural systems as ideal models with the ability to highlight timelessness of corporeal movements and universality of accompanying forms of sartorial display. In this sense, Duncan’s theory of modern dance and her understanding of the fashion system moved away from the rapidly alienising, materialist world of the twentieth century in order to search for a unique vision of a romantic unity of essential human experience and artistic achievement.

Wahl, op cit., p. xxv.
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Alicia Mihalić earned a Master’s degree in Theory and Culture of Fashion from The University of Zagreb, Croatia. She is currently employed as an Assistant Lecturer at the same graduate study programme and is responsible for courses related to history and ethnology of dress and textiles. Her research focuses on the intersection of costume history, fashion theory, and material culture studies, and establishes connections between dress and its socio-cultural representation in painting, photography, and film. She is mainly interested in the phenomenon of nostalgia, trend mechanisms, and the revival of former dress styles throughout the nineteenth century as well as the development of marginal clothing discourses during the second half of the same period.