

Skirting the Image: The Origins of Loie Fuller's Serpentine Dance

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Suddenly the stage is darkened and Loie Fuller appears in a white light which makes her radiant and a white robe that surrounds her like a cloud. She floats around the stage, now revealed, now concealed by the exquisite drapery which takes forms of its own . . . She is Diana dancing in the moonlight with a cloud to veil her from Acteon. She is a fairy flitting about with a cloak of thistledown. The surprised and delighted spectators do not know what to call her performance. It is not a skirt dance, although she dances and waves a skirt. It is unique, ethereal, delicious. As she vanishes, leaving only a flutter of her white robe on the stage, the theatre resounds with thunders of applause. Again she emerges from the darkness, her airy evolutions now tinted blue and purple and crimson and again the audience rise at her and insist upon seeing her pretty, piquant face before they can believe that the lovely apparition is really a woman.<sup>1</sup>

The Serpentine Dance, just described above by a reviewer from the *New York Spirit of the Times* in January of 1892, is America's first modern dance. In it, Fuller transformed the skirt dance, a wildly popular genre of the day, into something new. As the *Spirit* notes, the surprised spectators "do not know what to call her performance." Another contemporary review reports:

There is a new dance in town. Miss Loie Fuller Dances it. Nobody ever saw anything just like what Miss Fuller calls the `serpentine'.<sup>2</sup>

Hitherto, the skirt dance consisted of the graceful manipulation of a full skirt by the dancer. By adding substantially more fabric to the width of the skirt and introducing novel lighting effects, Fuller shifted the skirt dancer's emphasis from displays of pretty refinement or leg-revealing suggestion, and instead concentrated on creating abstract visual imagery.

The "steps" of Fuller's dance required the formation of a series of images—described by her as "a huge lily," "a rose falling to pieces," "a butterfly," and "breakers at the surf."<sup>3</sup> Whereas the skirt dance was a vehicle for a performer to display herself--her accomplishments, or her legs--the Serpentine dance called for the performer to be transformed, to be subsumed by the image. Here, Fuller literally receded into her skirts.

Throughout her long, prolific career she developed this disappearance—adding ever more fabric to her skirts, using wands to extend her manipulating capacity into space, concocting ever-more ingenious lighting effects—but the seeds of her later innovations are evident here in this her first dance. Remember, the *Spirit* writer states that the spectator cannot believe Fuller's "apparition" is "really a woman." That is, she appeared as neither human, nor as gendered. She appears as ghost, fairy, cloud, lily, sea surf, but not, it seems as simply a body.

The disembodied effects Fuller produced anticipated cinema. The Serpentine's huge white skirt served as a kind of moving screen, catching and deflecting rays from lights angled from all over the stage—the fabric literally created a "motion picture."<sup>4</sup>

In 1889, Fuller, already an accomplished actress, went to London to produce and star in a play at the Globe. When that venture failed, she appeared in various roles at several London theatres, including the Gaiety, home of the then-popular skirt dance. She is thought to have filled in for Letty Lind in the revue *Carmen-up-to-data* at the Gaiety.<sup>5</sup> Fuller is seen here costumed as a Gaiety Girl, c. 1891.

The original Gaiety Girl was Kate Vaughan, the "grandma" of skirt dancing. Trained as a ballet dancer, Vaughan traded tutu for skirt in the mid-1870s. She was a star performer at the Gaiety Theatre for many years and had a legion of followers, including Alice Lethbridge. J. E. Crawford Fritch credit Lethbridge with developing skirt dancing in interesting ways after Vaughan. Her special innovation was:

While dancing an ordinary waltz, she bent her body backwards until it was almost horizontal, and in this position, still making all the correct steps of the dance, she rotated the body around its own axis and at the same time described a large circle around the stage.

All this is said to have had a "curious and pleasing effect."<sup>6</sup>

An 1885 photograph of another English dancer, Mimi St. Cyr, costumed for a production at the Palace Theatre in London, shows her wielding a staple prop of the skirt dance—the tambourine. The "tambourine dance" emerged as a sub-genre of the skirt dance. It combined the manipulation of the skirt and tambourine with high-kicking, much to the dismay of one contemporary writer. He noted that due to the offending nature of the exertion, "few women have had even qualified success in the tambourine dance."<sup>7</sup>

Sylvia Grey and Letty Lind were featured dancers in the London Gaiety Company that crossed the Atlantic in 1888 to appear at the Standard Theatre in New York. Their appearance immediately set locals swirling their skirts. George Odell, an historian of the New York stage writes:

...a bevy of young and beautiful English girls introduced us to a new style of dancing in long, swishy skirts, that immediately caught our fancy and started a fashion, a craze, that lasted here for several years. Tights went out and the lovely skirt-dancing came in. Letty Lind and Sylvia Grey were the leaders in this fairy festival of dancing . . .<sup>8</sup>

The English invasion inspired Americans, such as Amelia Glover, a much-touted homegrown skirt dancer. One writer compared her favorably with the popular Spanish dancers Otero and Carmencita, calling Glover "a fairy," "as light and graceful as a bit of thistle-down," and "in some ways the greatest of American dancers."<sup>9</sup>

The problem, and the allure, of skirt dancing was what Fitch calls its "fatal facility."<sup>10</sup> Not all Americans were as thistle-down-like as Glover. A skirt could just as easily be used to hide amateurish dancing as to display skill and refinement. Its popularity was due to the fact that anyone could do it—music hall performers, young girls, and social elites, alike. Everyone was swept up in skirts. One contemporary observer of the fad asks, "[w]ho thought that when the Gaiety girls first came here their dance would be taken up by the beau monde and made the fashionable amusement of the selectest circles?"<sup>11</sup> Another article lists society notables, including "Mrs. Cooper Hewitt," who have been seen taking lessons.<sup>12</sup> Commenting on the trend toward "philanthropic" appearances by society skirt dancers, Fitch quotes an anonymous source as saying that "charity uncovered a multitude of shins."<sup>13</sup>

In comparing photographs of the skirt dancers with Fuller in her Serpentine Dance, the first thing we notice is that Fuller's costume consists of much more fabric. One reviewer said that "in the limelight it seemed as though the great skirt had a million folds and every one a yard." When the author asked the dancer the width of her skirt, she replied that she wouldn't answer that question for "a whole month's salary."<sup>14</sup>

One can notice the similarity of the poses between the skirt dancers and Fuller. Here, Edith Raynor, featured with the Gaiety company that came to New York in 1889, wears the accordion-pleated skirt favored by skirt dancers. As you can see by comparison, Fuller's costume used sheer silk. Also, note the difference in the bodices. In Raynor's costume, the bodice is corsetted, fitted to display and hold in her torso. Fuller's costume, on the other hand, hides the shape of her body beneath volumes of folded drapery.

Fuller returned from London to the US in the fall of 1891, the height of the skirt dance craze. The story she tells in her memoirs is that what became the Serpentine began as a hypnotized scene in the play *Quack MD*. The act was essentially a modified skirt dance in which Fuller portrayed a young widow hypnotized by a doctor. By waving a gauzy skirt around she "endeavored to make [her]self as light as possible in order to give the impression of a fluttering figure obedient to the doctor's orders."<sup>15</sup>

In her autobiography, Fuller rather fancifully describes how she mysteriously received the costume for this number, a voluminous robe made of fine India silk, in a casket delivered to her room. Throughout her career, Fuller told many different versions of this story, sowing inaccuracies and mystery. Usually, a Hindu figure was involved. In perhaps the first and least far-fetched version, found in 1892 interview, she says the dance was inspired by Indian nautch dancers that she saw in the Paris Exposition of 1889.

Whether or not Fuller saw nautch dancers in Paris, she had prior exposure "nautch" dance numbers. One of these was included in the play *Arabian Nights* in which she starred in at the Standard Theatre 1887.<sup>16</sup> Nautch is a vague, Westernized term that

was used to describe much Indian dance from the 18th century through the 1920s. The term "nautch girl" generally indicated a female performer associated with a certain class of performing courtesans. The main constant of the nautch numbers presented in Western theaters was, of course, a big skirt.

*Quack MD* failed to make a hit in New York. But Fuller continued working on the dance, and made important discoveries about the visual possibilities of the interaction of fabric and light. In late 1891, Fuller auditioned her dance for Rudolph Aronson of the Casino Theatre. In her autobiography, she describes a scene in which she performed for him in the dark theater, illuminated by only a single gas jet which she approached and retreated, first dancing "very gently in the obscurity," then emerging into the light.<sup>17</sup> Aronson called her dance the Serpentine and gave it music—Ernest Gillet's *Loin du Bal*, a popular waltz tune. In the winter of 1891–1892, the dance went on tour as an entr'act of *Uncle Celestin*, a translation of a French musical comedy. (One other side-feature in the play, was Miss Mabel Stephenson, a "bird warbler" whose imitations were much celebrated.) When the play came to New York, the Serpentine Dance got rave reviews. *The Post* commented that Fuller's act alone would fill the Casino Theatre for some time and observed that the "breathless silence" of the audience was "deserved by [the dance's] novelty and beauty."<sup>18</sup> Another reviewer describes that when "at last, whirling [Fuller] sank upon the stage, and the voluminous skirt encircled and embraced her . . . the audience was crying 'Brava.'"<sup>19</sup>

Watercolors depicting Fuller in this dance show a figure receding into the background, with the gesture or shape of the movement standing out. On the other hand, one poster, made after a photograph, plays up the suggestiveness of the dance. There was one section of the dance in which Fuller was illuminated from the upstage corners. In her notes, she refers to this as the "Spider" or "Transparent" movement. At that point, one witness observed, "folds of silk no longer conceal[ed] the plump limbs and well rounded-body of the dancer."<sup>20</sup> Another reviewer commented that this was the "one indiscreet" moment in the dance.<sup>21</sup> So the body was not completely absent from the Serpentine, but literally lurked and teased under the costume's surface. In the "Spider" movement, a trick of lighting almost strips Fuller naked. Later, at the dance's end, Fuller's body literally disappears—again another trick—leaving her empty costume alone on stage.

Shortly after her successful opening at the Casino Theatre in February 1892, Fuller had a dispute with Aronson over billing and pay. She was upset that her name did not appear on the posters advertising the Serpentine Dance which were plastered all over the city; Fuller had expressly agreed to a lower salary in exchange for full billing. After the falling out (which included an incident in which Fuller did not appear in a scheduled performance and a disappointed spectator pulled a gun on the management), Fuller moved her dance to the Madison Square Theatre, performing between acts of the farce *A Trip to Chinatown*, while Aronson hired Minnie (Renwood) Bemis to fill in at the Casino.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, Fuller took legal action—she sued the New York Concert Company, which operated the Casino Theater (charging that by continuing to use the poster of her image, they were defrauding the public and her)—and she sued Minnie

Renwood for copyright infringement. In order to file suit against Renwood, Fuller had to provide a written description of her dance. The records indicate the sequence of images (in broad terms and at times cryptically) for a dance in three tableaux. I believe Fuller was purposefully vague about the steps so as not to further enlighten her imitators. There are no musical indications, lighting color choices are omitted, some directions are impossible to follow. In recreating the dance, I also kept in mind that Fuller was performing the Serpentine several times a day for months and she was constantly modifying it. There may have also been an improvisatory aspect to it. In any case, these court documents provided the groundwork for the recreation that you'll see on video later.

Fuller lost the copyright infringement case. In his ruling, the judge stated that:

A stage dance illustrating the poetry of motion by a series of graceful movements, combined with an attractive arrangement of drapery, lights, and shadows, but telling no story, portraying no character, and depicting no emotion, is not a 'dramatic composition,' within the meaning of the copyright act.

The implications of his ruling were enormous. Fuller had created a radical and abstract art, one in which the visual effect was primary. By insisting that a "dramatic composition" had to have character, emotion, and story, the judge failed to comprehend the development of an expression that was visually based. As he termed it, Fuller's movements were "merely mechanical" and thus were not the subject of copyright.<sup>23</sup> So anyone (including me a century later) could reproduce them without consequence.

Soon after her legal defeats, Fuller went to Europe, where she achieved unprecedented success, despite the fact that imitators *preceded* her there. In Paris, she made a name for herself—La Loïe—and, unlike in New York, her posters boasted that name. The Serpentine had become a genre of dance, one that La Loïe had originated but had outgrown. There were by now as many "serpentine dancers" as "skirt dancers"—all chasing after Fuller, some, like Ida Fuller, even borrowing her name.

Imitation *is* the sincerest form of flattery. One of Fuller's critics noted that "[t]he best proof of the Serpentine Dance lay in the fact that within a week of its first production every farce-comedy company in the land had a shapely young woman reproducing it." Precisely because Fuller allowed herself to be transformed so completely in her work, many failed to recognize the persona behind the drapery.

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Archival Materials:

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Spirit of the Times*, 16 January 1892; in Robinson Locke scrapbook

<sup>2</sup> clipping, Maude Madison scrapbook, probably *New York World*, ? February 1892

<sup>3</sup> *Federal Reporter*, vol. 50, p.926–927

<sup>4</sup> Sommer, "Loïe Fuller", p.54

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p.55

<sup>6</sup> Flitch, p.75

<sup>7</sup> unidentified clipping, Madison scrapbook, dated 29 May 1892

<sup>8</sup> Odell, vol. 15, p.38

<sup>9</sup> unidentified, undated clipping, Glover clippings file

<sup>10</sup> Flitch, p.78

<sup>11</sup> unidentified, undated clipping, Madison scrapbook

<sup>12</sup> unidentified, undated clipping, Madison scrapbook

<sup>13</sup> Flitch, p.77

<sup>14</sup> clipping, Madison scrapbook, probably *New York World*, February 1892

<sup>15</sup> Fuller, 31

<sup>16</sup> Sommer, "Loïe Fuller", p.55

<sup>17</sup> Fuller, p.37

<sup>18</sup> *New York Post*, 16 February 1892

<sup>19</sup> clipping, Madison scrapbook, probably *New York World*, February 1892

<sup>20</sup> unidentified clipping, Madison scrapbook, dated 29 May 1892

<sup>21</sup> clipping, Madison scrapbook, probably *New York World*, February 1892

<sup>22</sup> *New York Sun*, 25 February 1892

<sup>23</sup> *Federal Reporter*, p.926