
Dance as Art and Entertainment

by
Kara Cross

Dance as Art

Dancing from Rebellion, Anger, Moral Indignation, and Joy

Dance as an art form is dance with a message or meaning. If the message is abstract in nature and open to interpretation it is considered art. If the message is obvious with a story, such as a myth with a beginning, middle, and end and not open to interpretation, it is considered entertainment.

Art dances of the Western world are abstract representations of the struggles and joys of life. Art dances can represent emotional trauma, war, interpersonal conflict, madness, loss, death, illness, political statements, and revolt against social/religious/political dogma, or more positive expressions, such as statements regarding love and bonding. Art dances in the Asian cultures tend to be moral stories designed to teach a moral lesson. Dance as an entertainment art can be found throughout the world. Entertainment dances are designed to be delightful and to share the pure joy of dance, beauty, and energy.

These abstract message dances are based on the human need for self-expression. This need is universal. The emotion may be joy, anger, rebellion, or a complex need to communicate a belief



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or idea. The **Butoh** of Japan is a dramatic dance art form based on rebellion against Japanese tradition, the emotional and sexual repressions of Japanese society, anger at the Japanese military mind, anger at the United States for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and pain and suffering from childhood trauma. This art form is designed to shock and bewilder the audience. Also from Japan, the **Kabuki** Theater was created as a form of political rebellion against the imbalance of power between the warrior and the commoner classes of the seventeenth century. In the United States, modern dance is an art form created in the early twentieth century by women who were rebelling against the restrictions and repressions of Victorian society and the rigidity of traditional **Ballet**. The **Sword Dance** of ancient **Egypt** is an artistic message done by slaves to their slave owners. It sent an extraordinary message to the slave lords: “You control my life, you hold the sword over my head, but you do not control my spirit.”

Not all art dances are born out of rage, fear, or a spirit of revolt; some are created to express the deep joy that comes from intimacy, love, and bonding. Art dances that express the deepest positive emotions are nevertheless still metaphorical in nature. They give messages and tell stories in an abstract form that is open to interpretation by the viewer.

Dance as Entertainment: Dancing for Enjoyment (*Dance Fulfilling a Need for Delight and Fun*)

Dances for entertainment are created and performed for the joy of entertaining. The basis for entertainment is to take the observer to another world, to delight, or to create an emotional state of being different from the way they felt when they walked into the theater. Entertainment dances come in many forms, such as story dances, exotic dances, folk dances, contests, recitals, and concerts. Let's look at each form in turn.

Story Dances

In the Western world, art dances or story dances, also known as classical ballets, tell stories of magic, nymphs, magicians, enchantment, fairies, princes, and queens. These stories are generally fairytales designed to take the viewer out of the everyday world into a place of magic and delight.

All cultures have dances for entertainment which are “story dances.” For example, in **Aboriginal** society of Australia, one particular dance for entertainment is the **Caribberie**, and is done by the males of the tribe during a social gathering. It is for entertainment and dances out stories of tribal history. An entertainment dance done by Aboriginal women is called **Dreamtime**, and is based on the religious beliefs that ancestral spirit beings sang the world into existence. It is believed that in order to come into contact with these ancestral beings you must be in an altered state of consciousness. The sleeping state is one such altered state. Dreams during the night are messages from the ancestors that give wisdom, warning, or other messages from beyond. The Dreamtime dance honors both the ancestors responsible for Dreamtime and the belief of Dreamtime itself.

Exotic Dances

Exotic dances are dances of a sexual nature, such as the American Striptease typically done by women for men, or the Chippendale style of male dance, done by men for women. The

striptease is a uniquely American entertainment dance that originated at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, exotic dance in America was based on the French exotic dance, which was done completely nude. The dancer entered the stage in an unclothed state and danced for the audience. History tells us that one female performer was late for work, and entered the backstage area just as her music was beginning. She had no time to disrobe, so she went on stage fully clothed and then slowly took off her clothes to the music. The male audience had never witnessed this before, and went, understandably, wild. Thus, the **American Striptease** was born.

Folk Dances

Folk dances, a group of culturally historical dances kept alive for posterity through performances for the public, can be social dances, but can also be done for pure entertainment. Dance contests are gatherings of dancers competing for a prize or honor, while student dancers do dance recitals to show the advances they have made in dance skills.

Dance Contests

The concept of contests for dancers is very old. Nearly every culture has some version of the dance contest, be it a communal dance form, where all participate but no prizes are given, or a highly structured event, where both professionals and nonprofessionals compete in front of an audience for money and gifts. Modern dance contests are found in theaters, in parks, on television, and embedded in film. In the United States it became a very popular form of entertainment for television audiences in the 1980s and continues today. Television shows such as “Dance Fever,” “Dance 360,” “So You Think You Can Dance,” and “Dancing with the Stars”



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have kept television producers rolling in revenue for many decades. This phenomenon is not limited to American culture; European and Asian versions of these shows can be found flooding the airways as well.

Dance Recitals

The recital is a nonprofessional performance of dancers in training. This is mostly a Western tradition. Recitals are done for a two-fold purpose: to entertain and to give the young dancers an audience to practice on. Dance recitals typically last an hour or more, and young dancers training in the performance arts (e.g., jazz, tap, ballet, acrobatics, modern, couples' social dances such as ballroom) perform in sequined costumes while parents and friends enjoy the show.

Dance Concerts

Dance concerts are professional or semi-professional productions. They are performances of dances such as jazz, tap, modern, ballet, couples' social dances, and ethnic dances. These performances typically last two hours and are mostly found in the Western world and in Asia. The performances are structured much like the West's music concerts, with two hours of performance separated by an intermission, and are most often performed by dance companies, professional groups who travel the world and perform their dances for paying audiences to earn a living. Dance concerts are considered to be both art and entertainment—the artistic portion is in the dance style itself (message dances), whereas the entertainment portion is in the format and the pure enjoyment that the audience experiences.

Art versus Entertainment

There is a fine line between art and entertainment. Esoteric philosophical battles take place in the world of art and entertainment as to what exactly is art versus entertainment. The intellectuals of the art world ask such questions as, “When does entertainment become art?” and “At what point does art merely serve to entertain?” The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this book and are not discussed here. Suffice it to say that for our purposes, dances that are choreographed to be messages with deep meanings are classified as art, whereas dances that are choreographed to simply take the observer to another place without deep meaning are classified as entertainment.