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Looking Like a Woman, Dancing Like a Painting, Footing the Renaissance: Isadora Duncan and Botticelli's *Primavera*

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A print of Botticelli's painting *La Primavera* in the dancer Isadora Duncan's childhood home had a fundamental impact on her development of modern dance. This article explores Duncan's dance and costume based on *La Primavera* in conjunction with other neo-Renaissance dancers (Sacharoff and Sachetti) and Aby Warburg's interest in the Florentine nymph and moving draperies, arguing for the importance of studying the old masters, of looking like a woman, and embracing continued renascences.

Throughout her childhood, no matter where Isadora Duncan's relatively impoverished family lived on the American west coast, a print of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (1477–82) was given pride of place over the family bookshelf (*Fig. 1*).[1] As an adult, Isadora would recall how

> it came to me what a wonderful movement there was in that picture, and how each figure through that movement told the story of its new life. And then, as Mother played Mendelssohn's Spring Song, as if by the impulse of a gentle wind, the daisies in the grass would sway and the figures in the picture would move.[2]

Fig. 1: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, 1477–82, tempera on panel, 203 × 314 cm, Uffizi, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.

Looking, listening, dancing became for Duncan integrated activities as Botticelli's Renaissance image imprinted itself on her mind with its dance-like rhythms, supplemented by the maternal piano playing, and inviting a spontaneous response from the future performer and choreographer who would later declare her belief in 'the religion of the beauty of the human foot'.[3]

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[1] Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001), p. 18.

[2] Isadora Duncan, 'Fragments and Thoughts', in *The Art of the Dance*, ed. by Sheldon Cheney (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1928), pp. 128–29.

[3] Isadora Duncan, *The Dance* (New York: Forest Press, 1909), p. 11.

The dynamics of Botticelli's painting go against the direction of reading: Zephyrus' pursuit of the nymph Chloris transforms her into the goddess Flora. In a Neoplatonic reading, passionate love is changed by the Venus of Harmony through the sublimation of the Three Graces to a return to intellectual contemplation, symbolized by Mercury in his Orphic role as conductor of the Dead. Other interpretations see the painting as a calendar travelling through the figures from February (Zephyrus) through March (Chloris) to April (Flora), May (Venus), June, July, August (the Three Graces), and September (Mercury).[4] Yet Isadora was not much interested in the subtler nuances of Neoplatonism: for her, Botticelli's painting was about transformation, about the language of hands and feet, and the life-giving forces of spring. Over a twenty-year period, from the early 1890s until 1909, she performed her *Primavera* dance, in which — in a series of split versions of herself — she took the parts of all the eight figures in the painting, in sequence, modulating from male to female, from diagonal to vertical (Kurth, pp. 61–62). In this new manifestation of the popular Victorian form of the *tableau vivant*, Isadora unleashed her maenadic forces into an art form of danced pictures, shortly before the birth of the moving pictures. I am interested in the ways in which a nineteenth-century copy of a Renaissance painting, travelling as far west as San Francisco, had a formative impact on one of the founders of modern dance. Detached from its Florentine context, *La Primavera* became the pictorial manifestation of much of what Duncan would bring to dance, and the painting remained with her throughout her life as an important part of her identity and private mythology. As a static object denoting movement, it combines harmony and ecstasy in a peculiar way. As a silent object, whose central figure beats time, the painting suggests music, yet no musical instruments are depicted. The transparent garments suggest the strong presence of the naked, liberated body underneath, and the graceful language of hands and feet invite sensations of touch, movement, and rhythm. The painting celebrates the arrival of the nymph and the grace of the walking female foot, and contemporary celebrations of this motif in Wilhelm Jensen's novella *Gradiva* (1903) and Freud's subsequent exploration of the lure of the walking female foot as an object of desire contextualize Isadora's dance, as does Aby Warburg's obsession with the *ninfa* as an art historical motif.[5] I would suggest that the ambitious Isadora saw herself as that nymph, whose role was to revitalize modern dance and bring it back in touch with its ancient roots. Her view of herself as that harbinger of spring to an art form restrained by corsets, ballet shoes, and rigorous uniformity of bodily alignment pervades her writing and her performances, as she left the American West and moved eastwards to the epicentres of London, Paris, and Berlin.

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[4] For an outline of the many different interpretations of Botticelli's painting, see Horst Bredekamp, *Sandro Botticelli, La Primavera: Florenz als Garten der Venus* (Hamburg: Wagenbach, 2009).

[5] See Wilhelm Jensen, *Gradiva: Ein pompejanisches Phantasiestück* (Dresden: Reissner, 1903); and Sigmund Freud, *Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva*, trans. by Helen M. Downey (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Classics, 1993).

The family copy of Botticelli's painting may have been an Arundel Society chromolithograph, released in 1888, some eighteen years after the chromolithograph of *The Birth of Venus*, which coincided with Walter Pater's essay on Botticelli and the craze for the artist it generated.[6] More likely it was an Alinari photograph, or a line engraving, which began to proliferate at about the same time. Isadora's monogram (*Fig. 2*) clearly springs from the flowered ground of Botticelli's painting, which contains more than five hundred different species of flowers, trees, and grasses.[7] The association of women with flowers, from Proserpine to Baudelaire, has powerful symbolic value: a creature transformed into a flower, a fast-fading rose, or a nymph deflowered. Isadora is herself that flower, the generator of a pagan revival of ancient dance, just as Botticelli's painting has often been seen as the very embodiment of the Renaissance with its fusion of the pagan and the Christian, the naked and the clothed, the very breath of the *Rinascimento.*

Fig. 2: Isadora Duncan's monogram, *Isadora Duncan Dance Foundation* <https://isadoraduncan.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Prospectus.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2022].

At the turn of the century Duncan's performances took place in the New Gallery in London, to the accompaniment of sixteenth-century lute music, preceded by lectures by leading artists and scholars. The archaeologist Jane Harrison read from Theocritus, Andrew Lang lectured on myth, and William Blake Richmond, himself a neo-Botticelli-ite, lectured on the *Primavera* before la Duncan turned into a living frieze, impersonating the figures in the painting, but perhaps, most of all, conveying a sense of the dynamic figure of spring to the audience.[8] Not quite *Le Sacre du Printemps*, but according to the critic of the *Ludgate* her dance had a sinister component:

> Her dancing is something quite exceptional, and can only be appreciated by persons of culture. I could give quite a long list of things one ought to know before one can understand the full meaning of these 'dance idylls'; ancient Greek art, Florentine art, and all the pictures of Boticelli [*sic*] [...]. Sir William Richmond gave a short lecture on Boticelli [*sic*] and the Primavera, and Miss Duncan then gave a dance suggested by

[6] Walter Pater's 'A Fragment on Sandro Botticelli' was first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, August 1870, pp. 155–60, and subsequently included in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).

[7] See Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera: A Botanical Interpretation including Astrology, Alchemy and the Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 1983).

[8] 'Our Causerie', *Ludgate*, August 1900, pp. 388–96 (p. 393).

> the picture, a very gentle movement, with the gestures and attitudes familiar to us in the paintings of the time. In a dance founded on La Bella Simonetta, the young dancer gave the impression of the joy felt at the sight of the rose, the pleasure of placing it in the garland, and the sorrow felt when its beauty is fled. ('Our Causerie', p. 393)

Isadora responded creatively to the myth, propagated by Walter Pater, Aby Warburg, and Emil Jacobsen of the beautiful Simonetta Vespucci, dead from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-two in 1476, as a model whose haunting presence runs through several of Botticelli's paintings.[9] The merging of self and Florentine myth is intricate: the floral harbinger of spring is also toying with the ephemerality of the very youth she evokes, almost in premonition of Duncan's own early death in 1927 when the entanglement of her trademark floating garments with the wheels of a car brought her life to a sudden end. We have evidence of her Flora outfit in both image (*Fig. 3*) and in the words of a contemporary critic:

Fig. 3: *Isadora Duncan Dancing in Primavera*, 1900, photograph, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

[9] See Monika A. Schmitter, 'Botticelli's Images of Simonetta Vespucci: Between Portrait and Ideal', *Rutgers Art Review*, 15 (1995), 33–57 <https://rar.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Volume-15.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2022].

> The robe appears to consist of several gauze slips worn one over another. The upper one has angel sleeves, and is dim, pale green in colour, painted here and there with delicate flowers. [...] Very Botticelli-like is the long, dark hair crowned with roses, and falling in curls to the waist. Ropes of roses wind about her body and the feet are clod in gold sandals. (Quoted in Kurth, p. 62)

Duncan's bodily engagement with the Renaissance, imitating movement, gestures, and costume of Botticelli's figures was part of a much broader revival of the Renaissance, a lived consumption of the past which found many other modes of expressions. In Florence the fashion for fancy dress parties in Renaissance costumes was extensive; in London Isadora's compatriot, the society hostess and painter Hazel Lavery, appeared twice as a moving picture in a Flora costume (*Fig. 4*) at charitable events in order to raise money for the poor — the fashionable frailty of the model and the delicate fabric of the dress in strange contrast to the hearty East End street kitchens they were supporting.[10] The Russian dancer Alexander Sacharoff was performing his neo-Renaissance dance studies in a pageboy haircut, wearing quattrocento costumes (*Fig. 5*) to the tunes of Orlando di Lasso and Frescobaldi, while confessing that his first encounter with Botticelli's *Primavera* had been of formative influence, an ecstatic moment of suddenly understanding movement.[11] The Austrian-Italian dancer Rita Sacchetto, having encountered Duncan's *Primavera* dance in Munich in 1902, decided to become a dancer and began her series of *Tanzbilder* in 1905, a genre merging the *tableau vivant* with dance in a restaging of famous paintings, among them Botticelli's *Primavera*. As Mary Simonson points out, Sacchetto was more concerned with conveying the spirit of the old master paintings than in actually imitating them.[12] Often using a large pictorial frame and stepping out of it in the course of her performance, Sacchetto deliberately broke the illusion of art with the idea that she was actually completing, or restaging, famous paintings in modernity. Her 'Botticelli pantomime' appears to have been a further spin on Duncan's, as she — together with assistant dancers — narrated the story of Simonetta's death by consumption, mourned by Lorenzo de' Medici (danced by Sacchetto herself) (Simonson, pp. 114–15).

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[10] For Florentine fancy dress parties, see Bernd Roeck, *Florence 1900: The Quest for Arcadia*, trans. by Stewart Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 215. For Lavery's dress (1913), see *Botticelli Reimagined*, ed. by Mark Evans and Stefan Weppelmann (London: V & A Publishing, 2016), p. 190. See also Kimberly Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013).

[11] See Franke Dytor, 'Decadent Historicism on Stage: Trans History and Alexander Sacharoff's Renaissance Dances', *Volupté*, 4.2 (2021), 38–63 <https://journals.gold.ac.uk/index.php/volupte/article/view/1587> [accessed 26 October 2022].

[12] Mary Simonson, *Body Knowledge: Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 107.


THE SPHERE

FAMOUS PICTURES Personated by LIVING PEOPLE.

MRS. JOHN LAVERY AS "PRIMAVERA," FROM BOTTICELLI'S FAMOUS PICTURE

Fig. 4: 'Lady Hazel Lavery as "Primavera" from Botticelli's Famous Picture', *Sphere*, 20 December 1913, p. 299. Private collection.

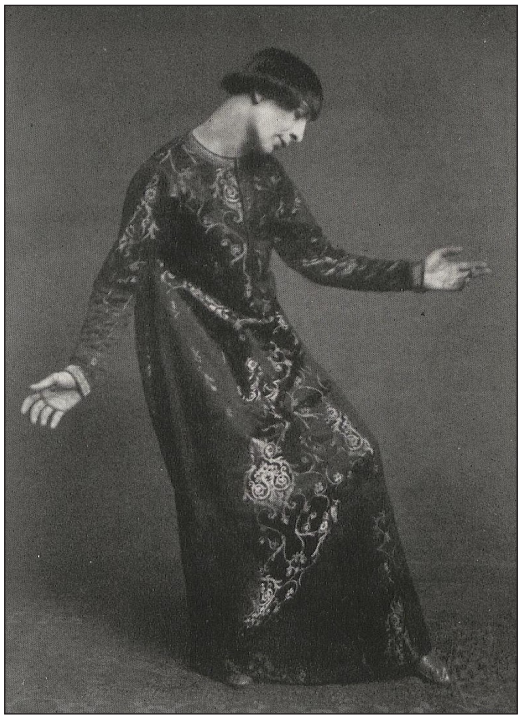

Fig. 5: Alexander Sacharoff, *Tanzstudie*, 1912, photograph. Wikimedia Commons.

The creative revival of Renaissance art, myth, and fashion at the *fin de siècle* through bodily experience, gesture, and pathos coexists with developments in art history. In November 1903 Duncan had Aby Warburg in the audience for one of her *Primavera* performances. In a letter to his wife, a woman who wore reform dress,[13] Warburg conveyed his impressions: a little disappointed at the decency of Duncan's appearance, he noticed how she was jumping around like a rabbit with a pathetic facial expression to counterbalance her naked legs, and concluded that she ought to dance as part of an ensemble rather than appear solitary against cardboard stage sets.[14] Warburg's presence in the audience was hardly surprising: in his doctoral treatise on Botticelli (1893) he had studied fluttering draperies as a means of psychological characterization, indicating both physical and emotional movement.[15] His notions of 'bewegtes Beiwerk' ('accessories in motion') and 'bewegtes Leben' ('life in movement') explored the interrelationship between the body and the soul, between inner and outer movement.[16] In dialogue with his Dutch friend André Jolles, Warburg had since 1900 been in pursuit of the motif of the *ninfa*, the walking barefooted young woman, first spotted in Ghirlandaio's serving maid who enters the scene of the birth of John the Baptist in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Santa Maria Novella (*Fig. 6*), a survival from a pagan form in a Christian context.[17] Movement is indicated through the fluttering draperies and the legs. Duncan was not alone in celebrating the beauty of the human foot: the transferral of energy from the earth to the walking nymph suggested a profound exchange between nature and art, a coherence between a natural paganism and the fresh impetus of the Renaissance. With Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* of the late 1920s an art print of the *ninfa* from Ghirlandaio's fresco was installed as a crucial mnemonic device, a solitary image sparking off a cluster of associated images and motifs,[18] a symphonic polyphony of forms described by Ernst Gombrich: 'in this

[13] E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography, with a Memoir on the Story of the Library by F. Saxl* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), p. 109.

[14] 'Den Abend voher habe ich übringens mit Mayern die Duncan tanzen gesehen; sehr netter Anfang einer Erfrischung der Balletmimik, aber nicht grosses, sondern nur sehr was feines, gesucht anständiges; eigentlich zu anständiges; denn richtig im Stil ist sie wenn sie vergügt wird und wie ein vergnügtes kanninchenfräulerin herumhoppelt: bei den ernsteren sachen revocirt sie sich [?] immer offiziell durch einen schmerzlichen Gesichtausdruck oben ihre neckten Beine da unten. Ausserdem müsste sie doch mit mehreren zusammen mimen, dieses alleinige Herumgerasse gegen Papcoulissen ist doch zu dum.' London, Warburg Institute Archives, General Correspondence, Aby Warburg to Mary Hertz, 17 November 1903 <http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=2980> [accessed 26 October 2022].

[15] Aby Warburg, *Sandro Botticellis 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling': Eine Untersuchung über die Vorstellungen von der Antike in der italienischen Frührenaissance* (Hamburg: Voss, 1893).

[16] See also Gerhard Wolf's discussion of the 'bewegtes Beiwerk' in *Botticelli Reimagined*, ed. by Evans and Weppelmann, pp. 102–04.

[17] See the 'Ninfa fiorentina' document (118), Warburg Institute Archives; and Roeck, pp. 214–27.

[18] Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. by Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2004); and Sigrid Weigel, 'Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy: The System Figuré in Warburg's *Mnemosyne* Project within the History of Cartographic and Encyclopaedic Knowledge', *Images Re-vues: Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, Hors-série 4 (2013) <https://doi.org/10.4000/imagesrevues.2934>.

philosophy the image fulfilled the same role in the collective mind as the "engram" fulfilled in the nervous system of the individual. It represents an "energy charge" that becomes effective through contact' (p. 287).

Fig. 6: Domenico Ghirlandaio, Servant maid, detail from a fresco depicting the birth of John the Baptist, 1480s, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Wikimedia Commons.

For Isadora Duncan the 'energy charge' of Botticelli's *Primavera* was indisputable: her continued looking at the quintessential image of movement from her childhood, and her mnemonic interioralization of it, resulted in a range of different dances and a private mythology in which she played the key roles of Flora and Venus, *ninfa* and goddess. As the academic line-up of archaeologists, mythographers, and academic painters (Harrison, Lang, and Blake Richmond) preceding her New Gallery performances suggested, a complex historical layering was taking place: in her desire to revive the dance of ancient Greece, Duncan was instinctively responding to its subdued presence in Botticelli's painting. Like Heinrich Heine's pagan gods in exile, the grace and beauty

of ancient sculpture could not be suppressed. Mediated through Renaissance painting it proved itself a strong survivor, and in the age of the moving picture the danced painting returned Pygmalion's Galatea to modernity. Current studies in intermediality, in the ways in which 'one medium appears in some way in another medium', or the 'variety of medial intersections, passages across various thresholds, and movements in time and space' (Simonson, pp. 17, 17–18), alert us to the continued cross-pollination between the arts, to the need to be, in Pater's words, 'for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions'.[19] Warburg may not have enjoyed his encounter with the ancient *ninfa* in the flesh on the modern stage, but Duncan's dance makes us think about the grace, gestures, rhythms of both Botticelli and ancient art in new ways. The embodied enthusiasm with which she embraced the arts alerts us to the importance of continued renascences, of the continued presence of the past, and the importance of looking like a woman.

The *Primavera* print — a product of the age of mechanical reproduction — was eventually upstaged by the original. In her autobiography Duncan recounted her museum experience in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence as one revealing her true mission in life:

> I sat for hours before this picture. I was enamoured of it. A nice old guardian brought me a stool, and viewed my adoration with kindly interest. I sat there until I actually saw the flowers growing, the naked feet dancing, the bodies swaying; until the messenger of joy came to me and I thought: 'I will dance this picture and give to others this message of love, spring, procreation of life which had been given to me with such anguish. I will give to them, through the dance, such ecstasy.'[20]

The passage contains echoes of her early response to the cheap print in her childhood home quoted at the beginning of this article. In the museum the intimate encounter with Botticelli becomes akin to the poet's encounter with his muse, as static looking conjures up imaginary movement. The desire to convey the ecstasy of her own enjoyment of Botticelli's art to the world through dance left her literally beside herself, looking like a woman, dancing like a painting, footing the Renaissance.

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[19] Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. by Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 186–90 (p. 189).

[20] Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (London: Gollancz, 1968), p. 123.