

HELLENIC MINISTRY OF CULTURE

GIFTS OF THE MUSES

Echoes of Music and Dance from Ancient Greece

‘ON DANCES’

Athenaeus, *Scholars at Dinner*

A primeval urge stimulates man to respond to music and song with bodily movements and to mark the rhythm by clapping his hands or tapping his feet. For the ancient Greeks dance was the quintessence of the union of rhythm and harmony. Greek dance comprised two elements: the *phores*, that is the movements, and the *schemata*, that is the gestures. From the appropriate combination of movements and gestures - fast or slow execution and strict or loose harmony between them - the various genres of dance arose. Aesthetic and moral qualities were ascribed to various rhythms, in part according to their actual relations with dances of a special character, such as the lively and lewd *kordax*, and in part according to the current social conventions.

The greater the ratio of long to short syllables, the more formal and respectable the rhythm was considered to be. From the imitation of speech, which is done in ‘schemata’, the art of dance derived. Plato in his *Laws* dedicates one book to music education and argues that in each dance the dancer should comply with the movements of the lovely dance and with his demeanour show himself to be a man who has been brought up with good laws. In the *Republic* and in the *Laws* too, he develops the theory of the positive power of music, in order to define the Classical forms of music and dance.

It seems that all the dances originated from Crete and Asia Minor, regions in which the earliest cult was that of the Mother Goddess, which is why the first performance of dance was attributed to Rhea, the Mother of the Gods. Embodied in Greek thought of the Classical period was the idea that each dance transported a specific past, which dated back to prehistoric times. Thanks to vase-painting and the other ancient works of art, we are able to proceed to the identification of various dances and their technique.

In Geometric and Archaic vase-painting, the chorography is organized either in linear arrangement or in a circle - open or closed. For the dances in procession, the young girls are in ‘Indian file’. However, for the more motional dances the dancers form a circle around the focal point of the cult statue, the altar or the musician (see cat. nos 99, 102, 117 and *Μουσών Δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 139).

Plato classifies dances into war, religious and peaceful, according to their character.

War dances. This is the earliest form of dance, aim of which was to prepare the Greeks for wars and contests. The most ancient dance is that ‘of the Curetes’, who, brandishing swords and stamping the ground with their jumps, evoked enthusiasm and bellicose wrath. The *pyrrhiche* dance was taught to the Cretan Curetes by Rhea and from Crete spread to the rest of Greece. It was named after Pyrrhos, son of Achilles, or the homonymous Cretan hero, even though others present it as a Lacedaemonian invention. In Sparta it constituted a preparatory exercise for war and everyone learnt ‘to dance *pyrrhiche*’ from the age of five. In Athens it appeared in the 6th century BC, in remembrance of the goddess Athena’s victory over the Giants. According to Plato,

the dance is a war mime which reenacts the various phases of the battle, when the *pyrrhichistes* shoots the arrow or throws the javelin or sinks the spear into the body of his adversary. To the accompaniment of the aulos or the lyre, the panoplied dancers, always men or ephebes or boys, performed some kind of parade, with turns to the side (*ekneusis*), with retreats (*hypaxis*), with leaps (*ekpedesis en hypsei*) and with lowerings (*tapeinosis*). The movements were executed with rhythmical steps and to the clamour of weapons (*Μουσών Δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 145). Ephebes were taught the *pyrrhiche* by the tutors-trainers, in the gymnasium and the palaestrai. We read in Plato that most of the women of Athens, if not of the entire Hellenic world, did not know how to dance the *pyrrhiche*, because they have nothing to do with the art of warfare. In the Gymnopaideiai at Sparta, held in honour of those who fell at Thermopylai, naked and unarmed men and boys, singing paeans, performed a mimetic dance, with rhythmical movement of the legs, so as to re-enact scenes from the palaestra and the pankration (a mixture of boxing and wrestling).

Religious dances. No ancient mysteries or religious rituals existed that were not accompanied by dance. Indeed, the founders of such mysteries adopted rhythm and dance as essential element for initiation. The religious dances were serene, serious and performed by the devotees, male and female, around the altar to the accompaniment of hymns.

The paean was chanted and danced in honour of Apollo at the Hyakinthia only by men. The *hyporchema* originated from Crete and was a combination of music, dance and mimetic movements to the accompaniment of musical instruments. It was performed by two groups, young boys who sang and young girls who danced. The former sang immobile or dancing a simple circular dance, while the latter performed a silent mimetic dance in explanation of the hymn being sung.

The ancient Greeks attributed the setting up of the *anamix* dance, the *geranos*, in which the two sexes danced together for the first time, to the hero Theseus (cat. nos 98, 118). Theseus performed this Delian dance when, on his return voyage to Athens, he stopped on Delos with the youths and maidens he had saved from the labyrinth of King Minos. The dancers, young men and women, danced forward and backward formations, imitating either the maze-like course of the hero Theseus through the labyrinth or, according to others, the undulating flight and turns of cranes (Gr. *geranoi*) in the sky.

In the *partheneia*, characteristic dance of the Dorian cities, there was a synoptic reference to religious rituals, while the main emphasis was placed on the actual participants in the dance, on their songs and their virginal (Gr. *parthena* = virgin) sentiments. Sweet and beautiful girls dancing hand in hand or separately, sometimes lightly covered with a veil or shawl, while the wavy folds of their garments add to the charm of the choreography, are frequently encountered in Greek art. Dance with 'wrist hold' is the most common female dance in Geometric or Archaic representations (cat. no. 117). At Argos, maidens with flowers (*anthe*) danced the *antheia* in honour of Hera. The 'dance of the Hours' (cat. no. 137) was performed by girls in imitation of the mythical dances of the Hours, who danced with the arms interlocked.

A solo dance was that of the '*peplophoroi* women' who danced at the festivals of Demeter, in remembrance of her, covered with a peplos just as the goddess was when she was seeking for her daughter Kore. The *peplophoroi* dances emanated an air of grace and good taste, but they also had their cultic significance (cat. nos 128, 130). In

the festive procession in honour of fertility deities - Athena, Artemis Karyatis, Apollo Karneios, Demeter - lovely young girls from noble families danced the *kalathiskos*, with a basket (*kalathiskos*) containing sacred objects, like a hat on the head (cat. no. 130).

A variation of this dance was that of the Karyatides, girls from Karyes in Laconia, in honour of Artemis Karyatis. The dance started from Laconia and spread to various places in Greece. In it the female dancers apparently glided airily on the ground with tiny steps. The Dionysiac dances were religious dances but orgiastic (see cat. no. 125 and *Μουσών Δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 151). Men and women with loosened hair and wreathed with ivy, gyrated forwards or backwards, shaking their head vehemently. In the dance of the 'joined hands' the dancers raised the arms bent and clasped hands above the head.

Peaceful dances. These included the theatrical dances and the dances in private life which frequently accompanied major junctures in the life cycle. The theatrical dances are distinguished according to the three genres of dramatic poetry. In tragedy there was the *emmeleia*. In comedy there were the *kordax* and the *komos*, vigorous dances with twirls, jumps and many immodest gestures. The most characteristic dance of the satyr play was the *sikinnis*, which was performed by the Sikinnistai, Satyrs and Silenoi, to the accompaniment of mirthful and mocking songs reminiscent of shrieks and whistles (*Μουσών Δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 120).

At the symposia some hosts hired professional dancers to entertain their guests. Usually they were dancing girls (*orchestrides*), who performed various acrobatic tricks or mimetic dances, whilst simultaneously playing clappers (cat. nos 75,135). Professional female dancers, in a display of great accomplishment, sometimes performed the *pyrrhiche*, solo or in group, at symposia (cat. no. 113). This was the only occasion for the appearance of female *pyrrhichistriaí*, who were courtesans (*hetairai*) as is seen in Attic vase-painting. The female *pyrrhiche* dancers made the same moves as their male counterparts, but in a more dancing manner. Also depicted in symposium scenes is the *oklasma* a dance of Oriental provenance (cat. no. 114).

Already in the *Iliad*, in the description of Achilles' Shield, there is reference to a wedding procession in which *hymenaios* songs were heard, while young men danced to the accompaniment of aulos or lyre, as in the Classical iconography, before and after the appearance of the newly-married couple. Dances were performed at various moments in the marriage ceremony: dance processions during the ritual bath of the bride and when the bride and groom were led to their new home, other dances at the wedding feasts that followed and the *krousithyron* when they reached the door of their bedchamber. At dawn the *hymenaios* or the *epidialamion egertikon* was danced for the couple to awake them after consummation of the marriage.

Mourning dances were rhythmical steps of the lamenters, who with their hands above the head or with one hand on the head and the odier raised, sang dirges for the dead during the carrying of the bier. Special dances accompanied special occasions. The *anthema*, a fast and merry dance was performed at the beginning of spring by dancers divided into two groups. The *epilenios orchesis* was a gleeful dance imitating stages of the vintage. The *hormos* was a kind of *syrtos* which, according to Lucian, was danced by virgins and ephebes in a chain.

Dance in one form or another served to consolidate social ties. There was no one who did not consider it by definition a bounty, even if he disapproved of certain genres.

Plato, *Laws* 7. Lucian, 5, *On Dance*. Athenaeus, *Scholars at Dinner*, *On dances*. Lawler 1964. Delavaud- Roux 1993. Delavoud-Roux 1994.

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