

# **‘Fancy free: dancing figures and the art of Sydney Long’**

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**A talk given at the National Gallery of Australia, 6 September 2012, in conjunction with the exhibition *Sydney Long: spirit of the land***

**With thanks to the Cazneau family for permission to reproduce the photograph ‘Grecian dance’ for this talk.**

Sydney Long has been described many times as an artist working in the style of art nouveau, and it is easy to see the well-known characteristics of that art movement in his paintings and etchings – the sinuous, curving lines; the flat, decorative surfaces; the references to natural or organic forms and so on. But many of his works are populated by dancing figures, not always well developed in a drawing sense, but clearly figures moving and swaying in the landscape, often in a group and sometimes accompanied by the figure of a satyr of some kind and or by Pan, the ancient Greek god of shepherds and flocks, nature, hunting and rustic music, who is generally seen playing his reed pipes. Long seems to have had a penchant for these dancing figures.

And as an aside, I was surprised actually to find that when Long moved to London in 1910 he married a dancer, a Katherine (or Catherine) Brennan, who is said to have danced at Covent Garden, although I and my colleagues in London have not as yet been able to shed any more light on her career. She was most likely a corps de ballet dancer and programs of the time only mention principal dancers in cast lists.

However, in this talk today I want to introduce some of the dance movements that were ‘in the air’ around the time Sydney Long was painting his nymphs, satyrs and human figures dancing, playing music and otherwise disporting themselves in the landscape. Perhaps the discussion may help to explain Long’s interest in dancing figures, or at least give an insight into what was happening in a parallel artistic field.

I want to begin with *Spirit of the Bushfire*, a painting from the Ballarat Gallery executed by Long in 1900 in which a female figure seems to control a fire with the tips of her fingers and draws it around herself in a swirling mass. It is impossible not to want to make a connection here with the dancer Loïe Fuller. One of Fuller’s best known dances was a *Fire Dance (La danse du feu)*, which she originally made in 1896 in the United States and took to Paris in 1897 where it was a huge success. One of Fuller’s biographers describes it as follows:

*Loïe, wearing a white gown and carrying a large filmy scarf, performed on a glass plate, with the only light coming from underneath and overhead. Flames and smoke spread upward*

*through her billowing silks until, with a great burst of colour, the fire consumed the dancer and then flickered out.*

And what follows is a contemporary description of the *Fire Dance* that gives some idea of what it looked like to the audience of the day. Its source is an 1896 newspaper clipping in the Theatre Division of the New York Public Library:

*Powerful red lights were thrown on Ms Fuller as she danced above the glass plates in the stage, waving an enormous scarf. A great flood of fire seemed to envelop her, illuminating her drapery from beneath ... she seemed like a mass of living fire and her scarves — great tongues of flame. The dress worn in this dance is a simple full slip made of plain white thin material. But no sooner does she rest on the glass plate than her hem seems to catch fire. Up the flames creep ... the more she fans the gauze, the higher the flames leap and the redder they glow, until finally she snatches a gauze scarf from her neck, beats her draperies until her scarf too catches the glowing colour and in an instant nothing but inky blackness is left to tell the tale.*

Loïe Fuller was born just outside of Chicago in 1862 and was named Mary Louise Fuller. As a child her name was shortened to Louie, as a contraction of her second name, Louise. When she left the US to dance in Paris the French changed it to Loïe and she has been known as Loïe Fuller ever since. Eventually she became such a star in Paris that the French added 'La' to the name and she was referred to as La Loïe on many occasions.

She seems to have been theatrically precocious having allegedly at the age of two recited 'Mary had a little lamb' at a Sunday School gathering. She is also said to have delivered a temperance lecture when, aged 13, she appeared in a play the proceeds from which were donated to a Temperance Reform Club. She began her professional theatrical career as a child actress and began dancing in burlesque shows as a skirt dancer and in vaudeville and circus.

Just as another aside, skirt dancing appears to have originated in London in the late 1870s and was characterised by the dancer manipulating a long skirt to create a flowing movement. It was initially considered quite proper; however it developed to include elements popular dance styles and inevitably shocked some sections of the population (and no doubt delighted others). One of its most famous manifestations was in a performance to the popular tune *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay* in which the dancer did a high kicking version of the more ladylike version of the skirt dance.

But what brought Loïe Fuller fame and fortune was the way in which she developed her skirt dancing and took it to new heights. She created a new form of presentation by having coloured lights and projections play across the fabric of her skirts, which often were made of many yards of silken fabric. She took advantage of advances in electric lighting for the stage and she patented the device, a glass plate in the floor of the stage, which allowed her to be

lit from below as in her *Fire Dance*. Her dancing became not just the body in motion but the movement of light, colour and silk. She carefully choreographed her movements, repeating many small steps so that the silk took on various forms and shapes – ripples, billowing clouds, butterflies, flowers and so on. As she developed this technique further she invented wands made of bamboo that were connected to the silk costume. She also patented these wands.

And I'd like to show you an image of Fuller rehearsing in the garden of her London residence for a butterfly dance, which gives you a good idea of her wands and how they allowed her to elongate her movements and manipulate the masses of silken fabric beyond what was possible in the regular forms of skirt dancing. And I'm also showing a shot of her well-known *Serpentine Dance*, which we'll see more of in a moment. All this of course fitted beautifully with the growth of art nouveau, and also with theories of the symbolist artists and their ideas about the effects of light, sound and colour on the senses, the idea of synaesthesia.

And now I'm going to run this short YouTube clip. There is a little bit of controversy about when this film by the Lumière brothers was shot but most reliable sources give it as 1896. It is not the *Fire Dance* although some YouTube clips have it labelled as such. It is in fact Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*. There is also some discussion about whether or not the dancer is actually Fuller. Most think it isn't actually Fuller dancing but is, rather, one of her imitators, of which there were many. But it is a good example of the kind of performance for which Fuller was admired and feted. And I should add that the film was shot in black and white and each frame was hand-coloured by the Lumière Brothers, or their assistants, to give the effect that Fuller created onstage with her lighting projections. It is of course also silent.

It is hard to know just what Long knew of Fuller and her techniques and whether in fact his *Spirit of the bushfire* does allude to her activities. However, we do know that Loïe Fuller was admired by artists, poets and others in the arts in France. The symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé was a fan and wrote about her work, Toulouse-Lautrec painted her and Rodin was a good friend as were Alexandre Dumas and Sarah Bernhardt. So she clearly moved in the best artistic and literary circles. But perhaps more importantly from the point of view of our wondering whether Long may have known of her work, Fuller appeared in England in 1895 and references to her work featured in British art publications both before and after her appearances in England. For instance in 1893 the *London Sketch* included a drawing showing how Fuller lit her performances from underneath and from above. In addition I came across some designs, clearly made under the influence by Aubrey Beardsley, by an artist from Chicago called Will Bradley. They were reproduced in the British art publication *The Studio* in an 1894/95 issue and may well be related to Fuller's performances. We do know that artists working in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had little opportunity to see first-hand developments in the arts in Europe and relied on pictures and articles in journals and magazines, especially those from England, the mother country.

I have only touched the surface of Fuller's wide-spread fame and the interest that her activities generated to the extent that her work was discussed and referred to in influential art magazines. But the similarities between *Spirit of the bushfire* and her work seem so close that as I said in my opening remarks it is impossible not to want to make a connection between Long and Fuller. One day I feel sure someone will find the letter or diary entry or some source material that will make a definitive connection.

In any case we know at least that skirt dancing was a feature of Australian theatrical activities by the late 1890s if not earlier. Edward Pask in his book, *Enter the colonies, dancing: a history of dance in Australia 1835-1940*, reproduces a page from a Sydney magazine, which annoyingly he doesn't identify, and at the bottom of the page is a row of dancers who are shown 'practising the skirt dance'. In addition, the English dancer Letty Lind, who reputedly introduced skirt dancing to the world, was in Australia in the late 1880s. Pask also reproduces a photograph of another dancer, Mary Weir, who married the theatrical entrepreneur James Cassius Williamson and who appeared in many shows in Sydney in the late 1800s. So if Long attended the theatre in Sydney in the 1890s he would surely have seen examples of skirt dancing.

Now I'd like to move on to the kinds of figures in works like *Pan*, seen here, and *Fantasy* seen this time in an aquatint and drypoint from the Gallery's collection. Painting dancing figures in a landscape was not an uncommon procedure in the nineteenth century and here I am showing a painting by Camille Corot, dated 1850. Long admired Corot, as Anne Grey tells us, and more than likely would have known his works from reading British art magazines. And I was interested to read some curator's notes about this Corot painting, which suggest that even though the painting was presented as a bacchanal at the 1851 Paris Salon, the dancing figures may have been based on the artist's reverie of scenes recalled from the Opera. The curator goes on to suggest that the backdrop of trees resembles a stage curtain and imbues the whole scene with the atmosphere of a ballet. But I cannot be sure that Long would have seen this painting in reproduction and am showing it simply to suggest that painting dancing figures was not uncommon. Anne Grey also mentions in the catalogue, a painting by George Percy Jacomb-Hood called *Spring dance*, which also shows ladies dancing in a landscape.

But In terms of my talk today I want now to turn to a significant figure in the dance world, who now is probably better known than Loïe Fuller. She is Isadora Duncan and you see her on the screen in a pose from one of her best-known works, *La Marseillaise*. She was born in San Francisco and was 15 years younger than Fuller. Like Fuller, however, she appears to have been theatrically precocious. She began teaching at the age of five, when apparently she gathered together all the little girls in the neighbourhood and taught them to sway their arms to express the movement of the ocean waves. Early in her life she declared that her dancing was to be an encounter with life through the movements of the human body: waves, spirals, circles, the patterns and directions of motions inherent in the natural world.

On the left she is seen in a pose that even suggests a connection to Fuller and, in fact, early in her career Duncan was an admirer of Fuller's work and even performed briefly in a small dance company that Fuller headed. But Duncan's dance style had a larger movement vocabulary than Fuller's. In fact many have questioned whether or not Fuller should be called a dancer, whereas no one does that with Duncan even if they dislike what she did. Duncan walked, ran, strode, skipped, jumped, leapt, knelt, reclined, fell, spun, crouched and galloped. And I'll play you here another YouTube clip, which is a reconstruction of a Duncan dance by one of her followers.

The image on the left also indicates Duncan's interest in Grecian style costuming. Her use of a white Grecian-style tunic and bare feet allowed her freedom of movement and this was the basis of her dance performances. Her costuming and her lack of any corsets underneath her diaphanous costumes also had the great advantage, at least as far as some in the audience were concerned anyway, of showing her naked legs and the occasional glimpse of a breast. I'd like to read, as I did with Fuller, a contemporary review of Duncan's work. This one is from a French playwright who saw a Duncan performance in Paris in the first decade of the twentieth century. He wrote:

*... with the motion out of the very Parthenon itself, with splendid freedom of action, the young woman draws herself up to her full height and steps out into dance, limbs nude, strong, firm as Greek marble in the light, the folds of the tunic falling away as a background to the flexible, finely modelled knees; in the firm clear flesh, the head alert, the eyes insatiable, every pore exquisite.*

In her own writings about dance she had the following to say:

*The movements of the savage, who lived in freedom in constant touch with Nature, were unrestricted, natural and beautiful. Only the movements of the naked body can be perfectly natural.*

Duncan was a controversial figure and many saw her dancing as somewhat erotic and her nude and semi-nude projects, as well as her general lifestyle and her attitudes to free love shocked the public of her time. She was at one stage threatened with having her concerts cancelled in Paris if she dared to appear in transparent costumes. And on the screen now is a well-known drawing of her by Léon Bakst and I suspect that Bakst often had Isadora in mind when he was making his costume drawings for the many Ballets Russes productions that he designed.

Later Duncan took six young girls under her wing and eventually adopted them. They danced together under her guidance, also freely in bare feet and Grecian style tunics and often out of doors. They became known as the Isadorables and perhaps you can see in the images on the screen now the kind of dance that she promoted and its similarities to what Long was painting in his landscapes. I only recently came across an account of how one of

the Isadorables, Theresa, first met Duncan. As a nine year old she was dancing in a show to celebrate the electrification of a theatre in Dresden when, to her later embarrassment, she stopped thunderstruck in the middle of the performance when she noticed a lady sitting in one of the boxes who she said looked like an angel, like the statue of Demeter in the park near her home. And yes, it was Duncan, who turned up on the doorstep of Theresa's home the next day. This is what Theresa recalled about 75 years later:

*There amid the snow drifts, in golden sandals and a Greek dress stood Demeter. May I come in asked Demeter in broken German? The door to the parlor was thrown wide, and she reclined grandly, Greek fashion, golden feet up on the stuffy red sofa. What did she want? Theresa, of course, to come and live with her and other specially chosen little girls to be a dancer.*

The kind of 'free' dancing that Duncan and her Isadorables were performing had something in common with another movement in the dance world in the early part of the twentieth century that continued in Australia throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. Across Australia dancing schools began implementing exercises based on what was perceived of as the style of ancient Greek dance. These photos show students of the school of Mischa Burlakov and Louise Lightfoot in Sydney dancing freely outdoors in Grecian style costumes. And I'd like to draw your attention to one of the dancers, Moya Beaver. She appears in both the photographs above, which come from her personal collection at the National Library and her name will come up again shortly. But back to the dance style. A lecturer at Sydney Teachers College wrote that this kind of training was 'useful to the student who wishes to conform to the stage conventions of the day, generally with a professional aim'. He was giving something of a backhanded compliment here because he was comparing this kind of 'Greek dancing' with a more specific form of music and movement, that is Dalcroze Eurhythmics formulated by Swiss educator Emile Jacques-Dalcroze in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. It too was taken up in Australia by educators who trained with Dalcroze and his associates, and was taught in specialised schools and in some academic establishments, including Frensham School at Mittagong. An image by Harold Cazneaux is especially interesting in this regard. Cazneaux titled this image 'Grecian Dance' and, when it was published in *The Home* in the 1920s, it was with further identified with a caption as being a photograph of the pupils of the teacher Mary Whidborne. Thanks to the work of a Dalcroze expert, Joan Pope, who took up and expanded upon an article I wrote that was inspired by the Cazneaux photograph, I can tell you that Mary Whidborne was an esteemed teacher of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, and in fact taught it at Frensham for a number of years. The dancers in the Cazneaux shot, Joan Pope tells me, are engaged in what a teacher of Dalcroze Eurhythmics would recognise, amongst other things, as an exercise to show the change of strength and weight in a musical crescendo changing from a soft pianissimo to louder forte.

Finally, while the vogue for so-called Greek dancing may not always be what the untrained eye sees (and I, without Dalcroze training, certainly did not initially recognise the Cazneaux shot as being so different in a dance sense from the others) it is clear that there were many dance styles 'in the air' in the late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. They give Sydney Long's dancing figures a certain credibility, or at least a reason for being there in his art works. And, as part of the fashion for free dancing, even the vogue for pan pipes was kept alive as you can see in this image of Moya Beaver, who is the dancer I pointed out to you in the photographs we saw earlier.

Thank you.

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