

Isadora Duncan and fashion: classical revival and modernity

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¹ DUNCAN, Isadora, *El arte de la danza y otros escritos*, ed. José Antonio Sánchez, Akal, Madrid, 2003 (Fuentes de Arte, 19), p. 92.

In the early years of the twentieth century, against a background of profound social change, the dancer Isadora Duncan was one of the key figures in the art world who championed the renewal of artistic forms and the liberation from convention. In order to build the foundations of modern dance, Duncan looked to nature and to the Graeco-Roman classical past, with its timeless values and its expressions of genuine emotion that the dancer sought to reproduce through spontaneous movement. The return to classical models was a goal shared by many artists close to Isadora, like Maurice Denis and Antoine Bourdelle from France and Josep Clarà from Catalonia, with whom the dancer maintained a heartfelt friendship. Graeco-Latin reminiscences were also present in the decorative arts and fashion with the revival of the *Directoire* and *Empire* styles, and in the performing arts in the form of the influential *Ballets Russes* and the plays performed by the great actor Mounet-Sully at the Comédie Française. And at the turn of the twentieth century the notion of “total art” was also firmly on the agenda, with its convergence of the performance arts, painting, set design, illustration, decorative arts and particularly fashion, which played a decisive role in the transition from *Art Nouveau* to *Art Déco*.

In this artistic context, the dancer Isadora Duncan devoted herself body and soul to the search for the values of truth and beauty in modern dance. Nowhere was this desire more clearly reflected than in the highly original styles that she wore both on and off stage. With her forceful personality, Isadora challenged social conventions in every aspect of her life. The sincerity and simplicity of movement found their expression in a minimalist dress style, composed of a tunic or a semi-transparent veil over the dancer’s naked body. The admiration for the natural forms of the body was a fundamental aspect of Isadora’s ideology:

The beauty of the human form is not chance. One cannot change it by dress. [...] It is because the human form is not and cannot be at the mercy of fashion or the taste of an epoch that the beauty of woman is eternal.¹

2 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

3 LAFFON Juliette, PINET Hélène, CANTARUTTI Stéphanie (ed.), *Isadora Duncan (1877-1927): une sculpture vivante*, Musée Bourdelle, Paris, 2009, p. 308.

4 *Ibid.* p. 139.

5 See STEELE, Valerie (ed.), *Dance and Fashion*, Yale University Press, Fashion Institute of Technology, New Haven-New York, p. 23 ff.

6 See DOWNER, Lesley, *Madame Sadayakko: the geisha who bewitched the west*, Gotham books, New York, 2004.

7 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida*, Salvat, Barcelona, 1995, p. 83.

8 OSMA,Guillermo de, *Mariano Fortuny: his life and work*, Aurum Press, Londres, 1980, p. 132.

Isadora was highly critical of the artificiality of the dress of traditional ballet dancers, condemned to being “prisoners of the *maillot*”² and to repeating time and again the same mechanical gestures on the tips of their toes in anti-natural *pointe* shoes. The new free dance would transform dancers’ costumes, which would now be made out of flowing, undulating fabrics that allowed natural freedom of movement. Inspired by the iconography of ancient Greek ceramics and Greek and Roman sculpture, which she studied with passionate devotion at the British Museum, the Louvre and on her trips to Athens³, Isadora rejected the tutu, shoes, and traditional salmon-coloured stockings of ballet and adopted classical robes and veils over her bare legs and feet:

It never crossed my mind to wrap myself up in uncomfortable clothes or tie up my thighs and my throat, for isn’t it what I mean to do to melt body and soul into a single, unified image of beauty?⁴

Light tunics inspired by classical models attested to this idea of timeless, authentic beauty that the dancer hoped to grasp with her art. [Fig. 1]

But in fact Isadora Duncan was neither the first nor the only dancer to revolutionise the aesthetic paradigms⁵. The American Loïe Fuller (1862-1928) had already experimented with the symbiosis between costume and body movement, wearing wide flowing robes with open sleeves to which she added extensions that caused a “butterfly wing” effect as she moved. Another figure much admired by Duncan was the Japanese actress and dancer Sada Yacco⁶ (Sadayakko Kawakami 1871-1946), who was introduced to Europe by Loïe Fuller and caused an immediate sensation. Isadora discovered Sada Yacco on her first trip to Paris for the Universal Exhibition of 1900, and in her memoirs recalled how she eagerly attended Yacco’s performances night after night.⁷ Another of Isadora’s contemporaries, the American Ruth Saint Denis (1879-1968), distinguished herself by her desire to break with the conventions of traditional ballet, and adopted a style marked by excess and oriental exoticism, which actually was at odds with Duncan’s minimalist approach.

In the theatrical and artistic scene of the first years of the century we should also mention the *Ballets Russes*, who came to Europe in 1909 under Serge Diaghilev. The performances staged by the young choreographer Michel Fokine and the costumes of Leon Bakst were characterised by a marked Orientalism that caused a furore in pre-war Paris, but also introduced the reinterpretation of Graeco-Latin models in the *ballets grecs Narcis* (1911) *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) and *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* (1912). These works bear witness to the influence of Isadora Duncan, whom Bakst and Fokine had seen on her tour of Russia in 1906.⁸

Fig. 1. Isadora Duncan in Glück's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 1904. Photograph by Atelier Elvira (Munich),
© Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arts du Spectacle, ASP 4-ICO PER-8426 (1).



9 For a fuller development of this question, see ARAGONÈS RIU, Núria, “El classicisme com a signe de modernitat en la indumentària al tombant del segle xx”, in *Lligams entre tradició i modernitat. Noves interpretacions al voltant del món clàssic*, ed. Grup de Recerca GRACMON, Universitat de Barcelona, pp. 9-29.

10 See DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida, op. cit.*, p. 81.

11 For example, the architect Edward William Godwin was named director of Liberty’s Department of Fashion in 1884. See ANSCOMBE, Isabelle, *Arts & Crafts Style*, Phaidon Press, London, 1996, p. 158. As a result of his affair with the famous dancer Ellen Terry, Godwin had a son, Edward Gordon-Craig, a leading figure in the scenic revolution of the *avant-garde* and Isadora Duncan’s great love.

12 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida, op. cit.*, p. 70.

13 See the illustrations reproduced in LAMBOURNE, Lionel, *The Aesthetic Movement*, Phaidon, Londres, 1996, p. 77 and p. 130.

14 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida, op. cit.*, p. 251.

15 See, for example, the dress “Joséphine”, 1907, silk satin and tulle, preserved at Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris, Collection UFAC.

This aesthetic revival of classical antiquity, for which French historians invented the term *anticomanie*⁹, permeated not just the fine arts, theatre and dance but the world of fashion as well, precisely at the time when *haute couture* was becoming established as an industry. We see this in several passages in Isadora’s memoirs which describe her street clothes: almost always she wore light dresses, usually white, in the *Empire* style, which complemented her Graeco-Roman sandals and Liberty hats.¹⁰ The firm founded by Arthur Lasenby Liberty in 1875 initially specialised in importing decorative arts from Japan, but soon became a reference point in the fashion world thanks to its associations with designers, architects and artists in the Arts & Crafts and *Art Nouveau* movements who were now turning their hands to clothing design.¹¹ The radical new fashions proposed by Liberty suited Isadora perfectly as she looked back to the past in search of modern and innovative styles. Liberty also worked with the famous writer and illustrator of children’s books Kate Greenaway (1846-1901), even making some of the costumes that appear in her drawings. In a very early episode reported in her memoirs, while she was probably still a teenager, Isadora described herself as wearing a Kate Greenaway white muslin dress and a straw hat¹². It is easy to picture the young dancer as one of the charming creatures wearing simple, diaphanous dresses with high waists and short sleeves in the neoclassical style which are so characteristic of Greenaway’s illustrations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹³

A few years later, around 1909, Isadora met Paul Poiret (1879-1944), the most influential designer of the moment and the man who brought the new air of modernity to Parisian artistic society:

And now, for the first time, I visited a fashionable dressmaker, and fell to the fatal lure of stuffs, colours, form—even hats. I, who had always worn a little white tunic, woolen in winter, linen in summer, succumbed to the enticement of ordering beautiful gowns, and wearing them. Only I had one excuse. The dressmaker was no ordinary one, but a genius—Paul Poiret, who could dress a woman in such a way as also to create a work of art.¹⁴

The great *couturier* proposed dresses without waists and released the female body from the unnatural restrictions imposed by corsets and other such garments. Though well-known for his Orientalist tastes, Poiret created several models of neoclassical inspiration which recalled the *Empire* styles of Joséphine Bonaparte.¹⁵ Examples can be found in the album *Les Robes de Paul Poiret* by the prolific illustrator Paul Iribe, which served as a luxury catalogue of the

16 POIRET Paul, *Vistiendo la época*, Parsifal Ediciones, Barcelona, 1989, p. 143.

17 Poiret describes the party in his memoirs, and mentions a dance which Isadora improvised to a Bach aria. POIRET Paul, *Vistiendo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

18 The photographs of the two dresses are reproduced in KODA, Harold and BOLTON, Andrew, *Poiret*, Yale University Press- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York- New Haven, 2007, pp. 74-75.

19 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

20 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida*, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

21 Photograph dated January 1913, preserved at the Musée Bourdelle (Paris), reproduced in LAFFON Juliette, PINET Hélène, CANTARUTTI Stéphanie (ed.), *Isadora Duncan...*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

22 Mariano Fortuny created the Delphos dress around 1907. He gave it this name because it was inspired in the garments of the Charioteer of Delphi, a sculpture from the Archaic period dated 450 BC. This is a finely pleated silk satin dress, with a natural drape falling from the shoulders. See OSMA, Guillermo de, *Mariano Fortuny, arte, ciencia y diseño*, Ollero y Ramos, Madrid, 2012, p. 140.

23 Isadora may have discovered Fortuny's creations on her visit to Venice between 1909 and 1910. See LAFFON Juliette, PINET Hélène, CANTARUTTI Stéphanie (ed.), *Isadora Duncan...*, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

1908 collection. Isadora maintained a close friendship with the dressmaker and occasionally gave him advice on aesthetic matters.¹⁶ The dancer also played a major role in the wonderful themed party organised by Poiret on 20 June 1912 at the Butard Pavilion, where the guests' costumes emulated those of the mythological figures in the ballets of Louis XIV.¹⁷ The Museum of the City of New York preserves a short greenish tunic, made by Poiret and inspired by the Greek male *chiton*, which may correspond to what Isadora wore that night. The museum has another dress by the French designer, made of ivory-coloured silk and embroidered with a fretwork motif on the bust and neckline, which belonged to Isadora.¹⁸ Poiret was one of the first *couturiers* to incorporate cosmetics and decoration in his *haute couture* brand, thus encompassing the design of all aspects of the modern woman's lifestyle. In fact he decorated a room in Duncan's house in Neuilly with black velvet curtains reflected on the walls in golden mirrors, a black carpet, and a divan with cushions of Oriental textures.¹⁹ The designer also appears to have designed dresses for Isadora's daughter Deirdre, with many adornments and embroidery.²⁰

In a photograph²¹ depicting the dancer with her two children in her arms, the little Deirdre may be wearing the famous Delphos tunic²² made by Mariano Fortuny i Madrazo (1871-1949). The dancer was a great admirer of the versatile Spanish artist who lived at the Palazzo degli Orfei in Venice, where he created his designs.²³ Several pictures show Isadora's adopted daughters dressed in Delphos gowns²⁴, and a drawing of 1917 signed by Georges Barbier, a great illustrator of modern fashion, shows Isadora in a dance pose wearing a fine pleated gown very like Fortuny's creation.²⁵ Although he was not part of the Parisian *haute couture*, Fortuny's innovative designs were immensely popular among the independent-minded ladies of European and American artistic society. What is more, dance and theatre were Fortuny's favourite contexts for experimentation in scenery, costumes and lighting. Before the invention of the Delphos gown, Fortuny had designed a silk scarf printed with Greek motifs known as the Knossos veil,²⁶ which adapted to the shape of the body and

24 Irma Duncan wore a Delphos gown to Isadora's wedding when she married the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin in 1922. The photograph is reproduced in OSMA, Guillermo de, *Mariano Fortuny, arte, ciencia...*, *op. cit.*,

p. 221. The Roger-Viollet collection in Paris preserves a photograph from around 1920 attributed to Boris Lipnitski in which Isadora's three adopted daughters appear (Lisa, Anna and Margot Duncan) all wearing Delphos dresses.

25 Plate reproduced in NUZZI, Cristina, *Fortuny nella Belle Époque*, Electa, Milan, 1984, p. 67.

26 OSMA, Guillermo de, *Mariano Fortuny, arte, ciencia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.



Fig. 2. Josep Clarà Ayats, "Isadora Duncan. Concert Colonne", 1913, lead pencil and pen with touches of watercolour on block paper, MNAC/MC 94132, © Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.

27 BRANDSTETTER, Gabriele, *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image and Space in the Historical Avant-gardes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 105.

28 "Subtiles élégances vues au théâtre", *Vogue* (French version), vol. 2, n° 7, 1 April 1921, ed. Condé Nast, New York- Paris, p. 42.

29 CLARÀ, Josep, the agendas of the Clarà archives preserved at the MNAC: *Agendes 1910-1913* (1. 1913 99674).

allowed the dancers great freedom of movement. It is no surprise that Isadora became a dedicated follower of his creations, which she wore both on and off the stage.²⁷

Isadora became a fashion icon, and set trends not just on the stage but when she attended the theatre as a spectator as well. An article in the fashion magazine *Vogue*, for example, described in detail the dress she wore to the premiere of *Ballets Suédois* at the Theatre des Champs Elysées: black and sleeveless with a black tulle butterfly attached to one shoulder, her hair cut loose, and a muslin tiara.²⁸ The sculptor Josep Clarà (1878-1958) wrote a fascinating description in his personal diary of Isadora's dress when they attended the Concert Colonne at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris on March 30, 1913:

Elle était ravissante habillée dans des gazes légères bleues, ses pieds chaussés de sandales, sa tête couverte par une riche coiffe de soie avec, sur le front, deux grosses pierres précieuses. Au cou un collier de pierres égyptiennes et sur l'épaule pour agraffer sa robe elle portait un beau camé ancien.²⁹

Fig. 3. Isadora Duncan in her pavilion at Bellevue, press photograph: Agence Meurisse (Paris), 1919, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EI-13 (2608).



30 CLARÀ, Josep, “Isadora Duncan. Concert Colonne”, 1913, drawing in lead pencil and pen with touches of watercolour on block paper. MNAC/MC 94432.

31 Isadora mentions an embroidered shawl with Chinese motifs in *Mi Vida*, *op. cit.*, p. 234. A well-known photograph by Edward Steichen (published in *Camera Work*, nº 42-43, April-July 1913) shows Isadora lying on a divan with large printed cushions, wearing a tunic embroidered with Chinese motifs.

32 Irma Duncan Collection, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (New York).

33 This dress was on display at the Georgia Museum of Art. See the catalogue published by JOHNSON Kim Marie et al., *Isadora Duncan. Muse of Modernism*, Athens, Georgia Museum of Art, 1998, p. 13.

34 DUNCAN, Isadora, *Mi vida*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

The sculptor, sitting in the same box as Isadora, produced a delicate portrait of her wearing a silk headdress in a neoclassical style and a blue gown, tied with a clasp that left much of the back uncovered.³⁰ [Fig. 2] As Clara himself says, Isadora looked like goddess and caused a sensation at the theatre.

Isadora’s strong creative personality meant that she did not settle for wearing the designs of other artists. She combined pieces of cloth and shawls, often decorated with Chinese embroidery³¹, which she wore in a variety of ways [Fig. 3] and also designed her own dance costumes. In fact, the Archive of Irma Duncan³² preserves a number of notes made by Isadora with instructions for making a long gown and a red silk stole.³³

In her memoirs, Isadora also claimed to have created a precursor of the swimsuit during a trip to Abbazia in Croatia with her sister around 1900:

It was then that I inaugurated a bathing costume which has since become popular — a light blue tunic of finest crêpe de chine, low necked, with little shoulder straps, skirt just above the knees, with bare legs and feet. As the custom of the ladies of that epoch was to enter the water severely garbed in black, with skirt between the knees and ankle, black stockings and black swimming shoes, you can well imagine the sensation I created.³⁴

So Isadora Duncan was a pioneering figure in both the artistic and aesthetic domains. For her, the revolution in dance required a revolution in dress, not just on stage but in all the facets of her life. Dress was another means through which she reaffirmed her ideology and expressed her creativity, often challenging established tradition. And in fact, as fate would have it, her tragic death was caused by a piece of clothing: her long scarf accidentally caught in the wheel of her convertible on the coastal road in Nice, strangling her instantaneously. That fateful day in 1927 marked the end of a life entirely dedicated to art, and at the same time, the beginning of the creation of a legend. ●