

# Loïe Fuller (1862-1928)

by Jody Sperling

As her stage name, “La Loïe,” suggests, Loïe Fuller was a singular entity. One of the most celebrated performing artists of her era, Fuller crafted a new genre of performance, one that combined dance, fabric, music, and lighting design. She used these elements to materialize luminous, hypnotic spectacles of startling visual impact. Fuller is one of the “mothers” of modern dance. Her unprecedented success as an American performer in Europe—she was based in Paris after 1892—paved the way for the likes of [Isadora Duncan](#), Maud Allan, and [Ruth St. Denis](#). Many visual artists—Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Latrec, François-Raoul Larche, Pierre Roche, to name a few—were mesmerized by Fuller’s brilliant performances and depicted her in a multitude of media. Fuller’s serpentine swirls graced innumerable lithographed posters, drawings, paintings, sculptures, glasswork, jewelry, lamps, textiles, and many other objects. “La Loïe” became the embodiment of Art Nouveau, the abstract ideal of Symbolist artists and poets, and was influential in other artistic movements including Cubism and Futurism. Fuller’s influence also extended into the fields of stagecraft technology and cinema. In the 1890s, electric lighting was new and Fuller exploited its as yet untested potential. Many of the first motion pictures were of Fuller’s imitators, or so-called “serpentine” dancers. With her feature *The Lily of Life* (1921) and other experiments, Fuller herself turned to filmmaking as a creative outlet beyond the stage.

Although offstage she presented a rather frumpy, unfashionable appearance, and despite the fact that she never learned to speak French fluently, Fuller nonetheless moved in elite Parisian cultural circles and made it her business to cultivate important people. She was close to, among other notables, the eminent sculptor August Rodin, physicists Marie and Pierre Curie, the

glamorous Queen Marie of Romania, and the popular astronomer Camille Flammarion. Anatole France wrote the introduction to Fuller’s autobiography, and her encounter with Alexandre Dumas merits a separate chapter in it. Fuller was a tireless promoter of art (especially Rodin’s) and, through the cultivation and direction of wealthy collectors, indirectly influenced the founding of two American Museums, namely the San Francisco Legion of Honor Museum and the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington.

## Early Career

She was born Mary Louise Fuller on a severe winter’s day in Fullersburg, Illinois (now part of Chicago). Later, she wrote that the harsh weather at the time of her birth gave her a cold she could never shake. Her father, who held various professions, was reputedly an accomplished fiddle player and, for a time, operated a dance academy. Fuller got an early start as a performer. In her rather fanciful memoir, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer’s Life*, Fuller tells how she began her stage career as a small child with a Sunday school recitation of “Mary had a Little Lamb”(22). As a young woman, she went on to become an actress and a singer playing such roles as The Waif in a melodrama produced by William Cody (aka Buffalo Bill), and travesti (or “breeches”) roles as the title characters in the burlesques *Little Jack Sheppard* and *Aladdin, or The Wonderful Lamp*. By the 1880s, she had achieved modest theatrical success. Trying her hand as a producer, Fuller travelled to London in 1889 to mount and star in the play *Caprice*, which proved to be a critical and financial flop. Broke and unemployed, Fuller landed a role as an understudy at London’s Gaiety Theatre, home of the skirt dance.

This engagement turned out to be critical to her artistic development. The skirt dance

was the genesis for Fuller's novel genre. Originating at the Gaiety in the 1870s, the skirt dance was a popular music hall number in which a female dancer swayed to the music and made pleasing patterns with an ample skirt. In 1891, Fuller performed a kind of skirt dance in the play *Quack, M.D.* Portraying Imogene Twitter, a widow hypnotized by the mysterious Doctor Quack, she "[flitted] around the stage like a winged spirit" entrancing the audience who proclaimed upon seeing her: "It's a butterfly!" and "It's an orchid!" (31) Fuller continued working on her dance and studying the effects of lighting on fabric.

Soon, she auditioned for Rudolph Aronson of New York's Casino Theatre. He named her dance "The Serpentine" and hired her to perform it as an entr'act in the comedy *Uncle Celestin*. Fuller achieved critical success with her *Serpentine* performances at the Casino and—when a dispute with Aronson forced her to switch venues—at the Madison Square Theatre. However, Fuller's artistic achievements were soon dwarfed by legal troubles (among them, a copyright infringement suit against Minnie Renwood, the dancer Aronson hired to replace Fuller) and a scandal (she had unwittingly entered into a phony marriage with the bigamist and swindler Colonel William B. Hayes). Once her legal and personal matters were resolved, Fuller fled New York and settled in Paris where she became a sudden, and enduring, sensation at the Folies Bergère. Not until Josephine Baker's arrival three decades later would another American dancer make such a profound impression on the Parisian public.

### ***Artistic Development***

In fashioning her own performance style, Fuller altered the skirt dance in two important ways—she enlarged the costuming and she shone multi-colored lights on the skirts' folds. Fuller kept expanding her costumes: she sewed wands

inside the garments to extend their reach; did away with a waistline and hung the skirt at the neck; and used ever more abundant quantities of silk in construction—reputedly as many as 500 yards for the *Lily Dance*. The point of this expansion was to create an ever bigger screen for her shimmering lights and projections.

Fuller's lighting and theatrical effects, too, developed in complexity and wondrousness. She used instruments angled from all over the stage. Her signature lighting effect featured a light below the stage that shone upwards through a plate-glass cut-out in the floor. In the popular *Fire Dance*, this light created the illusion of flames rising to consume the dancer. Fuller's lamps were fitted with a revolving disc of gels, so that operators could shift myriad colors in fluid combinations. She supplemented these multi-hued effects with magic-lantern projections that cast images of all sorts—from the faces of presidents to photographs of the moon's surface—onto her billowing costumes. For her *Radium Dance* she even experimented with phosphorescent dyes, and her *Mirror Dance* focused reflections producing an infinite regression of dancing "Loïe's." Other works featured shadows dancing alongside live performers. In 1908, she founded a dancing school and toured extensively with her young disciples, known as "the muses."

### ***Absence and Imitation***

Unlike other dancers whose power lay in personal magnetism (Duncan), or in coquettish allure (Allan), or in spiritual inspiration (St. Denis), Fuller's power as a performer lay in the subordination of her physical presence to imaginary visions. This absence was noticeable right from the start. A review of Fuller's early *Serpentine* describes how the audience insisted upon seeing her face during the curtain call "before they could believe that the lovely

apparition was really a woman" (Locke, 93). Onstage, Fuller materialized as a fairy or ghost, butterfly or bat. The folds of her voluminous costumes assumed the forms of "a huge lily," "a rose falling to pieces" and "breakers on the surf" (Federal Reporter, 926). With her innovative lighting and projections, she could appear to be engulfed in seething flames or wafting in celestial environs. Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé famously described Fuller as "not a woman, but a metaphor" (Kermode). Hidden by a vast yardage of white silk, tinted by multi-hued iridescent rays, Fuller-the-woman subsided into the metaphorical forms of the audience's imagination.

Because Fuller's genre did not rely on her personal charisma, the form was particularly vulnerable to imitation. Throughout her career, Fuller was haunted by imitators. She lost the copyright infringement lawsuit filed against Renwood, the first of many imitators. In his ruling, the judge determined that copyright protections did not apply because Fuller's dance did not qualify as a "dramatic composition," as it had "no character," "no story," and "no emotion" (Federal Reporter, 926). With this decision, serpentine dancing (as the genre became known) became up for grabs. Over the years, Fuller had to compete with dozens of copycats. Her defense was perpetual innovation in theatrical effects. Any dancing girl could wave a silk scarf, but none could match Fuller's brilliant lighting effects.

### ***Harmonic Spectacle***

Fuller choreographed her lights as carefully as she choreographed her movement. In an 1896 interview, she explained that she arrayed her colored lights "as an artist arranges his colors on his palette." Her process involved drilling her entourage of technicians "with the exactitude of clockwork" ("La Loie," *The New York Times*). Fuller never stopped directing her crew,

even during her performances. As the *Toledo Blade* reported:

A tap of her high heel on the glass plate and her gown of pure white shows every color of the rainbow; another tap and it is yellow, then red, then green and so on until the scale of every tint and shade and combination known to man has been ran. (Locke, 23)

Fuller articulated a theory of dance as waves of motion, music, and light that were "properly harmonized." She proposed to "orchestrate" light in a way analogous to music. She suggested, for instance, that if she wanted a green theme for a "sylph" dance, then she would shine a green light to express the "melody" in conjunction with other lights of supporting hues (Charlot). This is the same way, she argued, that an orchestra would use several instruments to highlight the melodic line of a single instrument.

While Fuller was often described as a goddess of light, the importance of music to her work is not as well understood. Fuller employed an unusually wide range of composers for her work, including Berlioz, Brahms, Chopin, Debussy, Grieg, Mendelsohn, Milhous, Mozart, Offenbach, Pierné, Rameau, Rimsky-Korsakov, Saint-Saëns, Schubert, Scriabin, Strauss, and Wagner. Debussy's impressionist compositions were particularly well-suited to Fuller's imagist dances. Notably, Fuller also choreographed her own colorful version of Scriabin's *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*.

Scriabin and the painter Wassily Kandinsky, among others at the time, were interested in synaesthesia, in which one sense substitutes for another. In his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (originally published in 1912), Kandinsky expounded a theory of correspondences between colors

and musical sounds. For example, he wrote, a bold shade of yellow could “sound” like a “shrill bugle”(58). He believed that both color and sound created vibrations that resonated in the soul. Kandinsky’s idea that such vibrations lie at the core of artistic expression accords with Fuller’s conceptions about dance. In her autobiography, Fuller attempted to define dance and produced this chain of thought:

What is dance? It is motion.

What is motion? The expression of a sensation.

What is a sensation? The reaction in the human body produced by the impression or an idea perceived by the mind.

A sensation is the reverberation that the body receives when an impression strikes the mind.” (70)

She goes on to note that dance should express “all the sensations or emotions” that the human body can experience (70). Both Fuller and Kandinsky characterized sensations and emotions as “reverberations,” with one being the *impression* of the other. Whereas Kandinsky located the impact causing these reverberations in the “soul,” Fuller placed it in the “mind.”

If, as Kandinsky posits, the artist’s role is to stir vibrations, it’s hard to think of a better artistic medium than Fuller’s genre. Large swaths of silk veils are perfect for translating a dancer’s motion into rippling waves. Furthermore, swirling fabric can translate the reverberations of music into sculptural forms, so you can “see” the notes unfolding. And a harmony of colored lights—i.e. rays of differing *wavelengths*—can blend into the orchestration. The result of this confluence of waves in movement, music and color is multi-layered harmony. Towards the end of his book, Kandinsky envisions a new theater that would combine movements from music, visual art,

and dance. Whether he recognized it or not, Fuller’s performances fulfilled his synaesthetic aesthetic. Her art was not merely a visual spectacle, it was a *harmonic* one.

### ***Impressions***

Fuller’s dance continues to have resonance, as vibrations of fabric, color, motion, and music continue to stir vivid impressions. What is powerful and enduring about Fuller’s form of expression is the multiplicity of ways the audience can receive and interpret these impressions. As Rhonda Garelick describes in the closing passage of her book *Electric Salome*, Fuller’s performance served as a kind of projection screen for the fantasies of her spectators (222). This view helps us understand how Fuller’s art simultaneously absorbed and influenced many modern artistic movements, such as Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Cubism, and Futurism. The mutability of the work also helps explain how, despite her enormous influence during her lifetime, after her death her image almost “evaporated from the cultural consciousness” (Garelick, 223). After her death in 1928, Fuller’s troupe continued for a few years under the direction of her partner Gabrielle Bloch, but unlike Duncan and St. Denis, she has no chain of disciples leading to the present. That said, in the past two decades there has been a surging renewal of interest in Fuller, with a growing number of volumes, and performances, in tribute.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

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