

Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) America's Divine Dancer by Thom Hecht



Ruth St. Denis was an American dancer, choreographer, and pedagogue who has been described by Walter Terry as “one of the great women of all time” (v), and whose “enormous influence on the development of American modern dance” (Sherman and Schlundt, 305) was of a pioneering nature, mainly due to her spiritual approach to movement. There is no doubt that St. Denis was an innovative dancer who successfully combined her passion for dance with a keen interest in spiritual practices, a synergy that is reflected in her choreographic works as well as in her teaching philosophy. Over the span of her long career—first as a dancer, and later as a choreographer and teacher—St. Denis understood vividly how to nurture dance with spiritual elements, through which she cultivated her artistic image as the personification of a dancing saint, one who celebrates dance as a sensual and spiritual performance art

Growing Up: From Little Ruthie to Ruth St. Denis

In order to understand St. Denis's status as “America's divine dancer” (Terry) one must first become familiar with her childhood, which shaped her spiritual approach to life, and dance in particular. During her lifetime, St. Denis had many names, starting with “Little Ruthie Denis,” through “Miss Ruth” and “Ruth Saint Denis,” but it was finally the name Ruth St. Denis that made her famous in the dance world. While St. Denis has been described as a “divine” dancer, she was born on January 20, 1879 as “ordinary” Ruth Dennis in Newark, New Jersey. She spent most of her childhood on a farm in Somerville, New Jersey, where her fascination with spiritual aspects of “mother nature” was fostered. As she described in her biography, “When as a child running over the fields of our farm I felt the joy of life pulsing through me, when I felt the warm earth under my feet and the

great golden sun bathing my body, then I knew life as a magical reality” (1). Being in tune with nature, St. Denis developed her own spiritual practices from an early age onwards. For example, in her biography she describes how “[...] whenever the sun went down, I made a funny little bow, almost dropping to my knees” (6), a ritual that fostered her innate relation with nature. When her family moved to Brooklyn, New York, St. Denis—who had blossomed into a teenager—was suddenly exposed to a variety of literature, which instilled in her a desire to read about and engage in spiritual practices. For example, St. Denis learned about Buddhism, and the immediate context of spirituality inspired her to translate this energy into choreographic practices that merged spiritual rituals with dance and movement. She confesses that, “Without any question I was at that time a kind of dancing ritualist. The intensities of my spiritual life had found a focus of action in exactly the same way that another earnest young person would enter the church” (St. Denis, 57).

Her passion for Indian culture and rituals influenced her first public performance, *Incense*, which was presented at the Hudson Theatre in New York on March 22, 1906. Because spiritual rituals largely inspired her choreographic works, David Belasco, her agent, had billed her as Ruth St. Denis, a name that accompanied her from this time throughout the rest of her life. “St. Denis had turned her back on the popular-culture musical theater of the time in favor of more elite entertainment” (Ross 4), and the spiritual elements of her choreographies represented a way to distinguish herself from the typical showgirl movements, especially since her costume choices—for example, revealing a bare belly—were rather daring in the eyes of conservative audiences at the time.

Teaching Dance: Pioneering Modern Dance

St. Denis is not only known as a spiritual dancer and choreographer; her dance pedagogy was also informed by spiritual practices and paired with a sharp business sense. In 1914, St. Denis met [Ted Shawn](#), a dancer who admired St. Denis's solo performances, which he had first seen in 1911. The same year they met they began to collaborate artistically, a relationship that soon turned into romance. Ruth St. Denis married her dance partner Ted Shawn in 1914, and soon after their marriage, in 1915, their artistic synergy led the couple to open a dance school in Los Angeles, California. The Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts —aptly named to reflect their creative partnership— encapsulated a dual purpose: first, it served as an institution in which St. Denis and Shawn developed their choreographic and pedagogical ideas of modern dance; and second, it served as a source of income to support the newly founded company Denishawn Dancers, which later toured internationally. As Janice Ross notes, “The Denishawn schools were an important part of the major cultural empire known as Denishawn, which during the period of 1922 to 1925, franchised dance schools in a dozen American cities. As a means of identifying and training performers for the Denishawn company, these schools were also an efficient way to earn money to help support the tours of the performing group” (4). The Denishawn school's curriculum drew from a variety of dance styles, such as ballroom, classical ballet and oriental dance, which were supported by movement classes, such as yoga and Delsarte gymnastics, an eclectic mix which was later defines as the “Denishawn technique.” In addition, St. Denis complemented the physical aspect of the training with theoretical lectures, in which the students were encouraged to engage in spiritual practices to refine their artistry. Among the dance students of the Denishawn school

were [Martha Graham](#), [Doris Humphrey](#), and [Charles Weidman](#), who all three subsequently joined the Denishawn Dancers company. In the early 1930s, St. Denis and Shawn separated, both professionally and in private life, and the last rehearsal of Denishawn at [Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival](#) in Becket, Massachusetts in 1931 signaled the end of an era as both the school and the company ceased to exist. In 1938, St. Denis founded the dance program at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, which is considered to be among the first dance department established at an American university.¹

Performing Spirituality: Solo Works Repertoire

St. Denis's repertoire reflects her life-long interest in exoticism and spirituality. In particular, her early career showcased her signature solo works, some of which are included in the aptly named program *The Art of the Solo*, a collection of works by modern dance pioneers that demonstrates the importance of the solo for the modern dance world. Among her famous solo works are *Incense*, *The Cobras*, and *Radha*, which St. Denis performed from her late 20s into her 80s, signaling her lifelong commitment to marrying dance with spiritual practices, in particular Hindu rituals. *Incense* was a short solo based on a mesmerizing incense-burning ritual, in which St. Denis's fast movements embodied a woman in motion amidst ascending spirals of smoke; in *The Cobras*, set in an East Indian street, St. Denis embodied a snake-charmer, using her arms—with emerald rings on her fingers representing snakes' eyes—to captivate audiences. In *Radha*, St. Denis engages with Indian temple dance, exploring the “delirium of the senses,” which is evoked through an exotic costume and set design. St. Denis's repertoire addressed a select audience, which enjoyed the eclectic mixture of eroticism and sensuality that was rooted in her deep passion for spiritual

practices. In St. Denis's later life, this passion was manifested through her attempt to organize a "Society of Spiritual Arts, a Church of the Divine Dance, a Guild for the Creative Arts, and finally her own Temple Beautiful [...]" (Sherman and Schlundt 318).

St. Denis's drive to foster the divine and spiritual within the human accompanied her throughout life. In fact, she continued to perform, lecture, and teach well into the 1960s, until she passed away at the age of 89 on July 21, 1968. St. Denis's legacy affected the development of modern dance through her exploration of dance as an art form of spiritual expression, which drew from the world's diverse cultural and spiritual knowledge and traditions. She left her mark as a pioneer of modern dance who trained a generation of American dancers. In 1987, St. Denis was inducted into the C.V. Whitney Hall of Fame of the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga, New York, where her spiritual legacy as "America's divine dancer" (Terry) is archived for future generations.

¹ In 2008, Adelphi University celebrated its 70th anniversary, honoring St. Denis with an exhibition entitled "Ruth St. Denis: In Search of a Goddess."

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

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