

DANCING ON PAPER

Pauline Chevalier – Why use drawing to dance? To create? To transmit a choreography? And how does one "visualize" a dance? During the first quarter of the 17th century, two engravers, Jacques Callot and Stefano Della Bella, engraved equestrian ballets. The various plates show rather precise representations of the riders, as well as completely abstract ones, only showing the geometric figures created by the riders. These abstractions have a real political power: they represent perfect symmetries. The power of a prince is represented not only by the number of riders and horses that can create such equestrian choreographies, but also through the perfect harmony of symmetry. If a rider goes out of this symmetry, it also means the potential collapse of the social body, of the political body, and thus there we have a representation of power. Then, if we push it a bit further, we have also a representation, or an image of the world. This is a time when people are theorizing a mathematization of Nature, and this type of representations are also visualizations of the symmetrical laws of Nature.

Visualization is not only a tool for composition. When one makes a small sketch, when one puts a diagram on paper, it helps fixing a thought. And at this point visualization can also become a tool for standardization. For example, in dance manuals and treatises. The first great notation system was the Feuillet notation, from the 1700s. There we have a system that is very precise. The dance floor is projected on the page, and the book becomes a tool for dancing. The path followed by the dancer is drawn on the page, and the different steps are noted on this path. As well as the heights, if the dancer raises a leg to the right, the height of leg. So here we have a system of notation that allowed the circulation of dances through Europe. Dance masters were able to share dances, also allowing the constitution of a repertoire. Another example: in the 1810s, a ballet master developed an abundant practice of drawing to represent "scenic paintings". We have a series of small sketches, sometimes collages. This is a collection held at the Museum-Library at the Paris Opera: drawings by Charles Didelot and André-Jean-Jacques Deshayes, who were two ballet masters who practiced a lot in Paris, in London, in Saint Petersburg. So there is quite a number of more or less elaborate notation systems that were developed, and then we also have unique, very personal inventions like those.

Another case that I like, Dubois, who in the *Principes d'Allemande*, in 1790 describes his ambition: "I have always tried to perfect dance in all its genres. I thought I saw that the Allemande lacked real principles. Today I am trying to draw up the rules. And you will see that my care was mainly to bring back this dance to the true graces, that is to say to those of Nature and to reinforce it by

there within the limits of the decency which only constitutes the taste of honest people " .

Normalization through notation also means moralization. And this normalization is effected by means of image and sign, which was even more blatant at the end of the 19th century and during the early 20th century, notably in social dance manuals of the 1920s - fox trot, tango manuals. These books which in appearance are intended to help dances circulate, also allow broad dissemination and copyright. Visualize dancing on paper is a tool with various purposes. These small diagrams which certainly transmit dances, they also transmit a way of thinking about the gesture and the body.

And this is what I'm looking for, as an art historian: I'm not only looking to observe works of art, but also to understand how images that are not intended to be artworks function as intermediaries, as material supports for both gesture and thought.

4 min 30 s