

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN DANCE

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Overview Latin America is known for its dances, both folkloric and ballroom, which exert a deep and highly diverse influence on dance forms and practices throughout the world. In Latin America, dance was originally used as a vital part of religious practices, particularly those that incorporated shamanistic rituals with transformation and animal spirits. Later, during colonial times, dance was used as in Europe in conjunction with social events. The use of dance in conjunction with religion persisted as well, and many dances were developed in conjunction with religious ceremonies, especially Caranaval. In the 19th and 20th centuries, formalized dances were developed for social dancing, which also incorporated competitions. Dance establishes ties to unique subcultures and is incorporated in everyday life, and is vibrant, relevant, and constantly evolving.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Mesoamerica

Masked Dances: Early dances were included in shamanistic rituals, with dancers wearing masks that represented animals such as in the Yaqui Baile de Venado (Yaqui - deer dance) and the Maya Baile de Nagual (Deer Dance).

Totonac Voladores (Flying Pole ceremony): As a part of a religious ceremony, young men ascended a tall pole where they suspended themselves with ropes tied around one leg and hung upside-down from a platform. They twirled around the pole. In other variations of the dance, they plunged 80 feet to soar like birds.

Owl Dance: In Mayan culture, the Owl is a symbol of death and a messenger of the underworld. In the Owl Dance, the dancer wears a feathered cloak and paints his face to represent the knowledge that comes from the “inframundo” (underworld).

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Mesoamerica

Animal Spirit Dances (Toltec and Aztec): As in the case of the masked dancers of the Yaqui and the Maya, Toltec and Aztec dancers wore elaborate costumes of animal skins, spectacular accessories, feathers, showy headdresses. To intensify the experience, the dancers often held rattles (maracas, for example) in their hands and put on rattles made of nutshells on their ankles.

South America

Qhapaq Ch'uncho (Peru): This dance reenacts encounters and skirmishes between the Antisuyo rain forest peoples and the Incas. The dance costumes include macaw feathers to symbolize the rain forest.

Ukuku (Peru): The main dancer wears a stringy coat that represents an animal's pelt. He is a trickster figure, and dances randomly and out of sync with very tightly choreographed dancers.

Huayno (Peru and Bolivia): This is an Andean dance which has become very popular. The male dancer invites the woman to dance by either offering his right arm or placing his handkerchief on her arm. The dance enacts courtship, and the music that accompanies the Huayno brings together typical Andean instruments, including the quena (flute), siku (panpipe), harp, accordion, charango, and guitar.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

MesoAmerica Folkloric Dance

Jarabe Tapatío (Mexican Hat Dance): Perhaps the most famous Mexican folkloric dance, the Jarabe Tapatío is danced to music performed by mariachis. Like many folkloric dances, the dancers enact courtship and contains elements that made it controversial in its early years in the late 19th century. The man wears the traditional charro outfit, while the woman wears a heavily embroidered blouse and a voluminous and also heavily decorated skirt, which she moves with wide, rhythmic sweeping motions.

Son Jarocho (Veracruz, Mexico): “Jarocho” refers to the culture and people of the Veracruz coastal area of southeastern Mexico. The “son” (meaning “sound”) is the music, and in this case, it is known for its energetic, intense, complex rhythms. Perhaps the best known *son jarocho* is “La Bamba” and also “Cascabel” (rattlesnake). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCBhicHcFvY>

Danza de los Viejitos: (Dance of the Old Men) is a traditional dance in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. It harkens back to Prehispanic times, and it is related to rituals to honor “old man” God and its execution is very humorous as the dancers enact the parts of the elderly people and in doing so, ironize their own helplessness. The performance involves a kind of tap dance, with rhythms that relate to conquest.

La Danza de los Quetzales (Mexico) : The dancers wear enormous headdresses of feathers, and they carry hand-held rattles. The music includes drums and flute. The meaning of the dance has to do with encantations and transformation.

La Danza Huehues (Mexico): Also known as Danza de los Viejitos: This is a humorous dance that uses the more serious religious dances as a point of departure. The main dancer is the “Diablo” or devil, who is a picaresque trickster figure. There is also the “Huehuentzi” (the oldest”) who wears a beard and a mask. The men wear black pants with a vest or jacket, masks, boots, tie, handkerchief, gloves.

La Danza de los Chinelos (masks / disguises): Originating in the state of Morelos, the Danza de los Chinelos is characterized by elaborate sequined, feathered, and fringed headdresses and brightly colored wooden masks. The costumes are very striking for their highly sequined and embroidered costumes and headdresses that feature appliques (similar to Molasses from Panama). The dance is typically performed during Carnival.

Arrieros (Mexico): A tribute to history in which dancers enact the drovers who guided mule trains with their merchandise and silver. The mule-droivers worked in central Mexico and followed the Camino Real from the highlands to the coast during the 16th through the middle of the 20th century. The dancers wear white shirts, white pants, and highly embroidered scarves, belts, and vests.

Jarana Yucateca (Yucatan Peninsula): Easily identified by its 6/8 meter, the Jarana Yucateca features dancers in traditional Yucatecan embroidered loose blouses (huipil) and long white (and also highly embroidered) skirts. The men wear white shirts, Panama hats, and white pants. The dance is colonial in origin and celebrates mestizo culture. The music, descending from colonial “sones,” is renowned for being vibrant, joyous, raucous, with brass instruments such as trumpets, trombones, and cymbals.

Las Vaquerias (Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico): A popular festival dance that dates back to the colonial era in cattle-raising areas of the Yucatan. The dance is usually performed during the Patron Saint day parades in villages. In the festivals, women and men dress in typical Yucatecan embroidered dresses. The performances are punctuated by someone in the crowd who shouts “Bomba!” upon which the dancing stops, and one dancer must recite a verse to his partner.

South America and Caribbean Folkloric Dance

Bomba (Ecuador): The full name of the dance is the “Bomba del Valle del Chota (Ecuador).” The result of blended African, Spanish, and indigenous influences, the dance is very sensual and flirtatious, in which the woman dances around her partner, who is bent on seduction. She wears loose, wide skirts, and balances a bottle of spirits on her head as she dances. The dance evokes a great deal from the time of slavery.

Cumbia (Colombia): Originating in Colombia, the cumbia has become very successful and has penetrated almost all of South America. The music fuses indigenous PreHispanic melodies with African rhythms and Spanish forms. The

dance features women with wide, flowing skirts, usually red and white, while the man wears a white shirt, white pants, with a red bandanna and a red belt.

Galerón (Colombia): The Galerón Llanero derives from plains areas between Venezuela and Colombia, and is a very joyous dance which involves intricate footwork reminiscent of Spanish flamenco. In the dance, the man pursues the woman and attempts to tie her with his bandanna, as she flirtatiously stays just outside his reach. The main instruments in the music are the harp, the cuatro, and maracas. When performed, there are generally six couples.

La Cueca (Bolivia, Chile, Argentina): Found in many parts of South America, the “cueca” enacts courtship, flirtatious evasions, and contains elements of the Spanish fandango. In Chile, the cueca has become the national dance, and there are competitions for all age groups, beginning with very young children. The cueca became quite popular in the early 19th century, and in Chile, the outfits are traditional Chilean dress, where the colors blue, red and white predominate. The woman wears a flowered dress, and the man wears the “huaso” black hat, white shirt, flannel poncho, riding pants and boots. The man and woman face each other, hold their handkerchiefs in the air and move with each other. They do not touch, but waive the white handkerchief as they dance with each other.

Guaranía (Paraguay): A dance performed with the “Guaranía” form of music, the women and men wear traditional Paraguayan outfits which feature wide skirts, hand-tatted lace and crochet panels (nanduti). The music is a derivation of polka, with harp, guitar, and bass guitar. The men typically wear white hats, white pants, red shirts, and blue belts.

20TH CENTURY (Modern)

Bachata (Domenican Republic): Emerging in the first half of the 20th century, the Bachata is danced to music that blends European, African, and indigenous musical traditions. It is similar to the Cuban bolero, and featured highly stylized choreography. The bachata has become very popular in many communities, with “sensual bachata” and the rise of bachata competitions.

Cha Cha Cha (Cuba): A highly energetic and stylized dance of Cuban origin which is performed to a very characteristic rhythm, the Cha Cha Chai s stunningly popular with dance clubs, proms, and competitions.

Mambo (Cuba): An Afro-Latin dance which originated in Cuba with Arsenio Rodriguez, a composer and musician. The dance was invented by Perez Prado, and became very popular in the 1940s and 50s in Havana, Mexico City, and New York City. At first, the dance form was very improvisatory, but later became standardized in order to penetrate markets and appeal to ballroom dancing constituencies.

Merengue (Dominican Republic): The official dance of the Dominican Republic, the merengue is a ballroom dance in which two dancers hold hands and perform a series of rapid moves, maintaining a closed position.

Salsa (Caribbean): With possible origins as the Cuban son, the current salsa is extremely popular, and has penetrated virtually all of Latin America. It is a social dance, and the movements are very easy to learn, which makes it ideal for gatherings, parties, and contests. The salsa is a relatively new genre, as it originated in the 1970s in New York, mainly as a hybrid fusion of son, cha cha cha, and mambo.

Samba (Brazil): Danced to music in a quick 2/4 time, the samba is an energetic African-Brazilian dance form that evolved from African rhythms and movements. The samba originated in Rio de Janeiro in the early 20th century. It is often danced during Carnival, and the dancers wear dramatic costumes with elaborate headdresses, beaded dresses, and brightly colored feathers.

Tango (Argentina): Originating in the late 19th century in Argentina, the tango achieved extreme popularity in the early 20th century where it was danced in tango-themed dance clubs in Argentina and Uruguay. The dance is a fusion of Spanish and African slave traditions, and it originated in the working-class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. There are many different types of tango, but all have the typical accordion and small concertina (bandoneon), which are used for melody as well as the characteristic tango rhythmic stylings.

Discussion/Questions

1. The Spaniards who saw the indigenous peoples dancing witnessed nothing like anything they had seen before. It wasn't just the costumes, which were, in their own way, very different. It was the way the dancers wore masks and painted their faces and bodies to transform themselves in truly frightening representations of animal spirits and gods. What was different about the indigenous peoples' way of dancing in comparison with the dancing of the Europeans?
2. What was the purpose of using animal masks and skins in PreHispanic dance?
3. Describe the influence of three different dance forms that became popular during colonial times.
4. Select three modern dance forms and discuss their similarities and differences.

Readings

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