

Report from the ICTM Ethnochoreology Sub-Study Group on Dance Iconography

"Can art historians and dance researchers contribute to each others' methodologies and foster the fullest understanding of dance images?" With this question in mind, members of the ethnochoreology sub-study group on dance iconography met with art historians for a two-day meeting (giornate di studio, or "study days") on 11 and 12 February 2004, generously hosted in a beautiful setting by the American Academy in Rome (Italy), and organized by member Barbara Sparti. Bringing together specialists from the fields of dance (ethnochoreologists, anthropologists, historians) and art (historians and a visual artist) was an important "premiere".

The seven dance presentations, while not firsts for the sub-study group, were nevertheless recent elaborations. Adrienne Kaeppler spoke on "The Hands Tell the Story: Depictions of Polynesian Dance from the Eighteenth Century with a Diversion into Nineteenth Century Paintings by John Singer Sargent", Judy Van Zile on "Issues in Interpreting the Diverse Visual Representations of Korean Dance", Placida Staro on "Dance as a Metaphor in Italian Representations: Raffigurazioni as opposed to Rappresentazioni in Images of Dance", László Felföldi on "Stereotypes in 19th-Century Hungarian Dance Icons", Barbara Sparti on "Who Are the Dancers in Lorenzetti's 'Buon Governo'?", Irene Loutzaki on "A Visual Play between Myth and History: the Folk Painter Theophilos Chatzimichael (1873-1934)", and Elsie Ivancich Dunin on "Dance Motifs on Tombstones in the Dubrovnik Area".

Challenges in getting participation from art historians and visual artists prevented as much art-specialist participation as was initially sought. (One of the chairpeople was a painter and contributed very interesting comments to the session "The Painter and the Image".) In some cases, art historians were reluctant to discuss dance in front of dance specialists; others were working on artists or periods that had not produced dance images; while still other interested specialists were unfortunately unable to participate (including an art historian from Korea). Nonetheless, four important presentations were made, interspersed within the various sessions.

The first was by Claudia Cieri Via, professor of Iconography and Iconology and Theory of Art at the University of Rome. Professor Cieri Via had broken her ankle two days before the conference and was, unfortunately for us, unable to attend. Her paper, "Old and New Rituals in Europe and America as seen by Aby Warburg", was clearly read by her former student and young colleague, Benedetta Cestelli Guidi, who also did her best to answer questions. Warburg, a contemporary of Kurt Sachs, and considered by many to be "the father" of an interdisciplinary approach to art history, was very interested in movement and collected photographs of dance in "master" paintings as well as photographs of native American dancers, to name only part of his collection. Alessandra Ugucconi, who is in charge of the articles on art history for the Rome based Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, gave a panoramic view of "Dance as an Attribute of Love, Harmony and Festive Events Through the Centuries". Nancy Heller, a new member of the Ethnochoreology Study Group, is an art historian from Philadelphia (USA) and a specialist and performer in Spanish

dance. Her presentation, "When is a Circle Dance Simply a Circle of Dancers? Spanish Dance and Matisse's 'The Dance', with Some Notes on Sargent's 'El Jaleo', was a bridge between the worlds of art history and dance, while, at the same time, specifically addressing the art historians through dance music and video clips, and all of us through comparative art works. Finally, Richard T. Neer, of the University of Chicago and a Fellow at the American Academy this year, talked about "Dancers and Metaphor in Greek Art of the 5th Century BCE". His use of the English translation of Homer's choros as "dance" (rather than "choral movement") came up for discussion, though, unfortunately, without enough time to inquire into other possible translations.

One of the interesting points that emerged from the conference was how the art historian (those presenting, or specialist authors of reference works) was inclined to identify specific dances--saltarello, tarentella, sardana--where the dance researcher would not, inasmuch as the image in question was about "dance" in general. Another query raised by members of the sub-study group (and not for the first time) was "How do we interpret images of the past in the present?".

Even though each speaker addressed dance images from her/his own research, there were many threads which tied the various presentations together. Several images were shown and re-shown in diverse contexts; and the use of "dance as metaphor" (and similar terms) was almost a refrain. Besides 15-minute question periods after each 30-minute presentation, there were two thematic half-hour discussion periods, as well as a final roundtable. Despite the two hours set aside for this, there was barely time to get to more than a couple of our pre-established questions.

There is no doubt that this first-of-a-kind bringing together of art historians and dance researchers was successful in many ways, but we are also aware of some of the ways to move ahead in this collaboration. Following the two-day conference at the American Academy, these were discussed at a sub-study group meeting on 13 February at the home of Barbara Sparti. One idea which is being pursued is that of organizing roundtables of two or three hours with a small number (three?) of dance specialists and the same number of art historians at art history conferences in the United States. Another idea is that of a meeting of sub-study group members with the same number of art historians and visual artists where participants would concentrate on a couple of dance images only (the same for all) with each person addressing the question: "What do YOU see in this image?"

At this same meeting of the sub-study group, plans for publication of some of the sub-study group's presentations (from Urbino, Bamberg and Rome) were discussed, as well as of a separate volume dedicated to "Imaging Dance" (based on the title of a parallel book, "Imaging Sound", by Bonnie Wade). More will be reported on this at the Ethnochoreology meeting in July in Monghidoro. A special presentation of a work in progress on dance and movement in Ottoman miniatures was given by Arzu Öztürkman who was the organizer of the Ethnochoreology symposium in Istanbul in 1998. Arzu's informal presentation to the sub-study group was extremely

interesting and it was wonderful, after her long illness, to have her participating energetically in the study-days with questions and comments.

To conclude this report, I wish to quote from a most enthusiastic "testimonial" given to me/us by a previously unknown observer at the study-days:

"My compliments for the organisation of this conference on dance images and their reading. Though not an expert in the field, I am glad to have joined your enchanting two day tour across time and space, observing and studying dance traditions and rituals and their representation. As a painter, I was struck by the wonderful wealth of pictures that were shown in relation to dance, ranging from 18th century engravings of Polynesian dances to Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes, from Guido Reni's "Trionfo dell'Aurora" to ancient Greek vases, from modern Greek paintings to the most celebrated works by Sargent, Matisse, Picasso.

As a person who has an interest in contemporary dance and occasionally writes comments on performances held in Rome, I loved the reference to the meaning of gestures, the role of symbolism, the subtleties of an art (dance) that is as ancient and varied as human civilisation...

Certainly, to me some questions remain unanswered (and probably unanswerable): How close is reality to the image that depicts/represents it?...Are the "distortions" due to the artist's eye a plus or a minus in the narration of (festive) events and dance? Luckily, people like you will continue to study these and other issues, to produce clever, reasoned and fascinating answers and to open the ground for new questions.

Sincerely yours,
Giorgio Merlonghi"

And responding to my thanks for the courteous organization of the American Academy, which included coffee breaks, a final wine and cheese reception, lunch for the participants, audio-visual equipment and technicians, distribution of programs and presenters' CVs, the director of the Academy, Professor Lester Little, who had not been in Rome and hence unable to attend our meeting, answered:

"I have had very enthusiastic reports already so I am the one to thank as well as congratulate you. I am very sorry to have missed this truly remarkable addition to our program".

Barbara Sparti,
Rome, Italy

The Ethnochoreology Sub-Study Group on Iconography meeting

- > organized by chair Barbara Sparti was held in Urbino
- > Italy 31 July - 2 August, thanks also to the support of the
- > Fondazione Italiana di Musica Antica and the city of Urbino which
- > offered us our meeting room and audiovisual equipment. Though three
- > members unfortunately were
- > unable to attend, there were still seven members and a visitor
- > participating. The agenda was a full one. The first presentation was
- > by Mariagrazia Carlone, a colleague from the ICTM Study Group on

>Musical Iconography, who was invited to present a data base project
>designed for musical images
> to see if it also could be used to catalogue dance images. This
>presentation was
> preceded by a review (thanks to a letter and material sent to me
>by Bill Reynolds) of the past work of our own sub-study group in
> investigating electronic cataloguing. In addition Placida
> Staro reported on a project begun in the 1980s in Italy for cataloguing
> dance
> images. The discussion of the difficulties of classifying images of
> dance--world wide--which would not be too generic or too specific to
> one cultural area continued into the afternoon. There will be one
> \"pilot\" project to apply dance image(s) to Mariagrazia\'s data base.
> Six presentations followed over the three days which raised
> questions about \"imaging\" (\"raffigurazioni\") as opposed to
> \"imaginings\" (\"rappresentazioni\") in images of dance focusing on
> 18th- and 19th-century Italy, 17th-century Bolognese etchings, on
> hands and arms in Polynesian and Spanish dance in
> western photographs and paintings, on dance motifs on tombstones
> found within the borders of the prior Republic of Dubrovnik, on the
> relation between temple
> reliefs of Apsaras and Khmer and Thai classical dance, and, in the
> Southeast Asian Malay-Muslim islands, of the Islamic arabesque artistic
> designs and local dance. The last presentation dealt with
> photographing dance events today. The presentations were, except for
> one,
> all works in progress in various stages of evolution. Presenters and
> listeners profited by having ample time to pose questions, and to
> hold extensive and critical discussion during and following each
> presentation.
> The sub-study group\'s plans for the future include: a
> proposed roundtable on \"Using Iconography in Dance Research in the
> 21st Century\" for the next (July 2002) Ethnochoreology Study Group
> meeting in Hungary based on the presentations in Urbino. At the same
> Symposium the sub-study group\'s finalized \"Guidelines for Reading
> Dance Images\" will be
> distributed. The sub-study group will propose \"Iconography\" as
> one of the themes for the 2004 Symposium, after which it plans to
> create a volume of essays dedicated to the reading and analyzing of
> dance images which can also be used as examples for students and
> researchers
> approaching iconography for the first time.

> Barbara Sparti

30 August 2001

Barbara Sparti