

The female tango dancer's costume

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Introduction

What is *tango*? Following the definitions of several dictionaries, tango is a dance, music and song style. A question that immediately follows is, where and when was tango born? Although the lack of historical evidence prevents researchers from asserting the exact date of birth of tango as a dance - the only aspect to be considered in this essay - it assuredly developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A similar absence of clear evidence prevents researchers from claiming where tango first developed. However, for the purposes of the present essay, I shall consider that tango's native place is, if there is any, Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina.

An interesting issue related to this particular dance is the expanding notoriety that it had, and still has, in Europe and in France especially. Moreover, on this aspect, the following questions can be formulated: how did tango develop in Argentina and then arrive in France? Have tango costumes played an important role in its evolution? In particular, what role has the female tango costume had on its development? Throughout this essay, we will propose and discuss possible answers to these subtle questions.

The first part of the paper will deal with the very beginning of tango as a dance in Buenos Aires. The historical reasons that made people from diverse countries encounter and mix in Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth century will be examined. This essay will focus on the rejection of tango in Argentina and the image of the female tango dancer along with her costume. It will eventually reveal the influence of the

image of women in society on the female tango costume.

With respect to the chronology of tango, the second part of this essay will study the French female tango dancers and their costumes, putting forward the polemics brought to Europe, and in particular, to France, by tango at the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the structure of the first part, an interpretation will be provided regarding the link between the evolution of the female tango costume and the modification of the female status, corresponding to the social events that took place at that period.

Over the decades, the mores have changed, both in Europe and in Argentina, and so has tango. The third section will concentrate on the evolution of tango back to its native city, Buenos Aires, and the impact of modernity over the female tango costume. In addition, special attention will be paid to the female tango shoes, a key element of the female tango costume.

Throughout this essay, three conclusions have been raised. First, pictures and texts infer that there was no typical costume to dance tango, either for men or women, which was confirmed by oral evidence (tango teachers I met for this research). As a consequence, the centre of this essay will not be the typical female tango costume but the style female tango dancers followed to dress up. Second, it was interesting to note that the evolution of the social condition of women highly influenced the female tango costume. Indeed, as women fought for emancipation, either in France or in Argentina, they gained freedom both in the social environment and on the tango dance floor. Third, it turned out to be necessary to pay attention to the female tango shoes, as they constitute a key element of the female tango costume. Female tango shoes are practically the only recurring items in the female tango costume.

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