

## Section 2. Tango in France

The female tango dancer's costume

# Section 2. Tango in France

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### 2-1 The female tango dancer

There is no clear agreement on how tango reached France. Although stories and facts seem to have been mixed, according to Zalko (2001, 13) for instance, sailors are thought to be the ones who brought tango across the ocean and spread it in Europe by distributing music sheets in harbours, Marseille apparently being the first. Salas (1989, 122) also offers the opinion of other authors who claim, in contrast, that crew members spread it secretly. Apprill (1998, 55) asserts that singers came to record their songs in Paris because there were no studio in Buenos Aires. In any case, by the very end of the nineteenth century, tango did manage to reach France.

Paris was "the fashion place" and had long been an example that people from Buenos Aires liked to follow (Salas 1989, 121). According to Manigat (1991, 35), Argentina had been greatly influenced by Europe for decades, and more especially, by "the Paris of France" as Mansilla, author of *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1877), said in jest, inferring the similarities of Buenos Aires with Paris (quoted in Salas 1989, 121).

The French culture was inspiration for Argentina; its language and literature, as well as its political, social and philosophical ideas, were well known by the elite of Buenos Aires. France seemed to be the archetypal model of elevated culture. According to Zalko (2001, 7), tango only concretised the secret bond that linked Buenos Aires to Paris and reinforced the mysterious complicity between the two cities that had existed for generations.

Paris was a cultural centre where international exhibitions were organised, as in 1889, when the Eiffel Tower was built to celebrate the anniversary of the French Revolution, or in 1900, when the Parisian *métropolitain* was inaugurated (Bloch and Delort 1980, 81-107).

As already mentioned, tango was severely criticised before it became popular among people from the upper class. Likewise, it seems that it was the polemic environment in which tango was developing that actually made it so stylish among them.

Indeed, there was a huge competition among French magazines to get the latest scoop or to publish the hottest debate on tango's controversies. The main issue was to know whether tango should be accepted or not. It tended to become a scapegoat: should you face a problem in your family or witness a fight in the streets - it was tango's fault; some also claimed that the First World War was tango's fault (Salas 1989, 126).

It was even ill-considered by many Argentineans, who denied that it belonged to the national culture of their country and associated it with brothels and sordid places only (Savigliano 1994, quoted in Archetti 1996, 107). As quoted in Salas (1989, 130), Ibarguren [1] endeavoured to deny tango the very least Argentinean character, claiming it was only the result of a foreign mixture.

Nevertheless, some people did fight to introduce tango in France as a dance, despite all the controversies it had brought with it, and set up practice schools in Paris to make it available to everyone. In order to achieve this, however, the figures were changed and so was the female costume. There was nothing

provocative or shocking anymore, and little or nothing remained from what was said to be the traditional Argentinean tango.

The steps were codified and handbooks were written to teach how to dance the "French" tango. Most of the figures were taken off and some other dances' steps were introduced (Hess 1999, 40-45). Even with these transformations, common people still kept thinking of tango as something "forbidden". Its mere taboo aura was enough to seduce the crowd, mostly people from the upper and middle classes.

Following Savigliano (1994) and Zalko (2001)'s arguments, the exotic flavour that the French saw in tango played an important role in its dissemination. Exoticism evoked pampas and gauchos that Argentina had made its symbol, as an attempt to create its own identity. Tango suggested the intensity of emotions: desire and passion. Savigliano (1994) explained that this exotic flavour seduced the economically dominant members of the society and tango spread because it entered the capitalist system. According to her interpretation, it became a commercial product that Europeans used to colonise the "uncivilised" Argentina.

In this context, it became very trendy to dance tango in France, with Paris as the cornerstone. Tango made its first appearance in a film in 1900 (Hess 1999, 35), it was then dealt with in newspapers and was finally recognised by Giraudet, who was a respectable dance teacher in Paris. According to Hess (op. cit, 34-39), tango developed quickly because of the quest for exoticism which Parisians were fond of, and their need to constantly experience new things.

According to Zalko (2001), once accepted in public places, everything was "tangoed": tango became chocolate, dinner, breakfast, lunch, champagne, and tango clothes also sprang up very quickly. Tight skirts with side slit or culottes, for example, became popular, because of the necessity to lift the legs to dance, and bright orange was chosen to represent the "colour of tango" (Zalko op. cit, 81 or Deluy and Yurkievich 1988, 20).

## **2-2 The female tango costume in France**

It seems that tango was introduced in France in the right time to spread. Indeed, its influence over clothes was possible because fashion was continually changing. Additionally, as mentioned previously, women were in a mood for change, and tango, among other phenomena of exoticism, can be said to have contributed to the transformation of their clothes.

Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century, French women ordinarily wore long gowns made of refined fabrics (lace, silk or velvet, for instance), with puff sleeves and high necks. Low or even plunging necks and halters were popular, but mostly for evening dresses, which usually had no sleeves. It was important to have a very thin waist, which was obtained through laced up bodices that also emphasised their breasts and the curve of their back (Rowland-Warne 1992, 49).

According to pictures collected for this research, female tango dancers also adopted these tight-fitting bodices, and they seem to have remained prevalent. Corsets may have turned out to be useful for female tango dancers as leaning forward is important to be close to the partner. This way, the female tango dancer can feel where her partner's feet are heading and accompany them without any hesitation.

The aim of this position, as most beginners are taught, is to find a balance between one's own body and one's partner's. As tango dancing steps follow a special movement of the feet, in accordance with the music, it is essential to feel one's partner's body and movements.

It can be noticed that the corset of the French female tango dancers is merely underwear, to sustain the shape of the woman, while she was wearing a dress above. On the contrary, in Argentineans brothels, this more or less same corset was their only top.

More and more, women started to practice sport and their dresses had to adapt themselves to their new activities. Moreover, a great number of women was now working and had to find more practical clothes to

wear. This is why skirts started to open on the front first and then on the side, bringing slits in, to allow their legs to move more easily. However, the legs were still well-hidden thanks to the length of the dresses and the additional petticoats where the skirt was open (Fernoli & Spiess 1996, 261).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the line of dresses was changing, putting the waist higher. As a consequence, lingerie was modified to match the new features of the dresses and also became more refined with the introduction of camisoles, night gowns, and so on (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 261).

The general tendency for exoticism launched flowing fabrics and shapes, and shortened the length of the dresses to the ankles. To dance tango, lightweight fabrics were perfect to accentuate the sensuality of the movements, but fairly loose due to the modesty of the time, according to the pictures collected for this research.

Evening sheath gowns became very fashionable and they were not meant to be worn with corsets, which was revolutionary (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 262). However, they did not become very popular to dance tango because the narrowness of the skirt substantially reduced the movements of the legs.

After the First World War, the length of skirts was markedly shortened. Calves were the first to be uncovered, then the knees in the end of the 1920's, even for the evening dresses (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 276). In the 1930's, dance was everywhere, from jazz to tango, and more flexible clothes spread. Straights skirts with deep slits developed, as well as full skirts with square or boat necklines' bodices. Low backs were trendy and embroidery heavily covered evening gowns (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 288). Asymmetrical edges also spread widely, and the sporty style brought in the V-neck bodices and pleated skirts (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 290).

In the middle of the 1930's, low backs were replaced by plunging ones, almost disclosing the top of the bottom. Evening dresses came back to ankle length and flounces became very common. Synthetic fabrics competed with silk and others. Then with the Second World War, because of economic restrictions, women saved old fabrics to make new clothes and cut their skirts for practical reasons (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 307).

The post-war years restored skirts to calf-length and thin waists came back into fashion. Stilettoes became very trendy. In the 1960's, the famous mini-skirt was brought in and the synthetic fabrics formerly introduced were now mixed with velvet and embroidered ones. Americanism highly influenced the mentalities and fashion of the time, and trousers became indispensable. They even entered evening clothing, depending on the fabric (Fernoli & Spiess op. cit, 312).

In other words, the female tango costume in France was completely different from what was commonly seen in Buenos Aires at the beginning of tango as a dance. This can be accounted for both by its evolution in time and by the changes in mentalities. During the early twentieth century, the 1920's especially - that is to say, the main period during which tango spread in France [2] - there was a general mood for transformation and women took advantage of the situation to gain independence. This can be noticed in the change in the female tango costume, which transformed long dresses into opened skirts.

### **2-3 The role of women in society as expressed in tango**

It is interesting to observe that the nudity of tango dancers in Buenos Aires implied tragic vulnerability, whereas in France, the more women dared to wear a revealing costume, the more they were seen as emancipated and independent, and thus dangerous for men. The idea of the heartbreaker "femme fatale", often said to abandon her partner for another, leaving him in extreme misery, emerged during this period. This can be ascertained by the lyrics of Gardel [3]'s melancholic songs - among other singers (Savigliano 1994, quoted in Archetti 1996, 105).

Celia Esplugas's analysis of Savigliano's arguments [4] states that "Although in most tango lyrics the virile "compadrito" (the lower class, macho male) controls "la milonguita" (the woman of the tango environment), the female can also be portrayed as a rebellious figure who trespasses bourgeois gendered

boundaries to move up the social ladder. The "milonguitas" are portrayed by Savigliano as feminist role models whose "insurgency" drew female attention at the turn of the century."

Indeed, as much as in France, social unrest was increasing in Argentina and revolutionary ideas were circulating among women there as well. Leisure was not reserved to men anymore; women could go out and enjoy themselves too. According to accounts of the time, drugs like opium were popular among the bourgeoisie, and women were said to hide some cocaine in their cosmetic compact (Bernand, 1997, 252). This could be thought of as proof that women were more autonomous and that their constraints had been broken down.

The questioning of the role of women can also be observed in tango, as dancing tango is felt to be an original way to discover your own personality and sexuality, as well as the partner's. For the time of a dance, two people attempt to understand each other with the language of their bodies. Even though tango French created is not so erotic as it may have been in Buenos Aires, it is possible to compare tango dancing to a seduction game, whose strength lies in restraint. It seems to symbolise the emotions that a couple may go through in a relationship as well as determine an aesthetic ideal where each individual has his or her own role [5].

In the next subsection we will see how all these changes affected tango as it once again crossed the Atlantic, this time in the direction of Argentina.

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## Footnotes

[1] Carlos Ibarguren was one of the candidates for the presidential elections of 1916 and was defeated by Hipólito Yrigoyen.

[2] Deluy and Yurkievich (1988, 25-26).

[3] In conformity with Ferrer and Del Priore's work (1999, 39), Gardel was the absolute creator of tango as a song (from 1917).

[4] Article available online: [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_...](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_...)

[5] Apprill (1998, 156).