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# Dance in Ancient Egypt: A Visual Presentation

By  
Jean M. Leiper  
University of Calgary

The subject of dance in ancient Egypt has received little attention in recent years. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several renowned Egyptologists dealt with the topic in some depth, and in 1935, Lexova produced a comprehensive book about Egyptian dance, including drawings of what must be every artifact extant at the time. However, since 1935, several important panels of dance and related activities were found in the Tomb of Kheruef, but little has been written about them, nor has any recent publication included photographs, except in some books about Egyptian art.

For the most part, the early writers included acrobatics and other fringe activities under the umbrella of dance, particularly those representations performed by women. Certainly, the evidence of “dance” is depleted by the removal of these “gymnastic” type activities from the classifications, but it would be wiser to separate the two for clarification. While both appear to be used for entertainment purposes, it is less likely that acrobatics was a component of the dances used for religious celebration. Also it is probable that both men and women performed religious dances, but only women were exhibited in entertainment programs of dance and/or acrobatics.

The purposes of dance in the ancient Egyptian civilization can be grossly divided into two categories:

1. Religious dances, subdivided into funeral dances of several types, and dances for other religious celebrations.
2. Entertainment dances (which is the most likely time when the acrobatics might be classed as dance).

There is minimal evidence of war dance and mime dance. Also, artifacts of dances of the common people are almost non-existent to date, primarily because the sources of data are the tombs of royalty and government officials.

Religious dances have many forms and the depictions of participants show an equal variety. There is one relief of a Pharaoh dancing for a god, and another of a goddess dancing on a lotus flower, but these are single examples. It would seem likely that most of the dancers, whether for religious or entertainment purposes, were “professional” dancers.

The majority of the religious dances involved the cult of the after-life — ceremonies relative to the building of the tomb, its dedication, furnishing, and the focal point of the

actual interment. Other religious celebrations appear to be of lesser importance if only because there was usually some facet of government involved also.

Artifacts of entertainment dances usually show an audience in adjacent panels and also include musicians. Their dancers seem to be exclusively women and one depiction presents a small girl in training.

There is no evidence to suggest that people participated in dancing as recreation except for one portrayal of soldiers dancing, presumably in their free time. Lexova has included some of the carvings of childrens' games and the jumping women pictures from Beni-Hasan as dances, but purists would surely deny such a categorization.

An analysis of the type of movements included in Egyptian dance can only be speculative. Most artifacts that are unquestionably dance show much bending and unique arm positions which suggest more posing than flowing movement. One must be careful, however, that such conjecture is not simply the fault of static art and limited space. In spite of this caution the ceremonial dancers in the Tomb of Khereuf appear more active than the banquet dancers of other sources.

An investigation of ancient Egyptian dance can be a fascinating area for teachers of sport history to include in courses, but a visual presentation is necessary for justice to be done to the topic.