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The Formation of the Dance System in the Italian Renaissance and the Origins of Classical Ballet: A Humanistic Aesthetic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Research on Renaissance art has largely focused on static artistic forms such as painting, sculpture, and literature, while dance, as a dynamic artistic medium, has often been marginalized by scholars and regarded merely as courtly entertainment or an auxiliary component of festive performances. Based on the broader intellectual context of fifteenth-century Italian humanism, this paper develops a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing urban-state social structures, humanist textual innovation, and bodily aesthetics. It advances the central argument that the Italian Renaissance fundamentally reshaped dance aesthetics through the integration of classical ideals of moderation, theories of bodily rhetoric, and the Pythagorean conception of a mathematically ordered universe. At the same time, driven by the humanist movement of textual compilation, a standardized and systematic framework of dance theory was established. This comprehensive dance paradigm, which emerged in Renaissance Italy, spread across Europe and provided the common aesthetic and technical foundations for early modern European court dance and classical ballet. Renaissance dance was never merely a form of entertainment, but a visualized bodily medium carrying the ideal of the universal man, urban-state political order, and classical cosmic cognition. Moving beyond the limitations of a purely technical history of dance, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach integrating social culture, aesthetic thought, and artistic institutions. It demonstrates how Renaissance aesthetics reshaped the standards for evaluating dance, generated systematic theoretical frameworks, and exerted a lasting influence on the development of ballet, thereby addressing the relative neglect of the historical continuity between Renaissance dance and classical ballet in existing scholarship.

KEYWORDS

Italian renaissance; Humanism; Dance aesthetics; Court dance; Classical ballet; Civic festival; Bodily aesthetics

1 Introduction

The humanist revolution sweeping Italy from the 14th to the 16th century reshaped the overall European cognitive system of art (Burckhardt, 1995). For the first time, the human body and physical appearance were freed from the constraints of medieval asceticism and gained independent aesthetic value. Among the various forms of humanist artistic practice, dance developed rapidly within two principal settings—courtly social life and civic public festivities—gradually establishing a distinctive set of aesthetic principles, movement conventions, and written theoretical norms that differentiated it from the spontaneity of folk dance traditions. The comprehensive dance system that developed during the Italian Renaissance was far more than an accumulation of isolated dance steps; it was a systematic artistic discipline rooted in a coherent framework of humanistic philosophy. Its aesthetic principles, choreographic organization, and genre classifications directly laid the foundations for the early development of classical ballet, making it an indispensable precursor to the ballet tradition.

Existing research has two major limitations. First, most studies of Renaissance culture mention festive dance only in passing and remain at the level of describing it as a social phenomenon. They fail to examine the complete humanistic aesthetic logic behind dance and overlook its foundational role in the later development of ballet. Second, conventional studies on the origins of ballet tend to focus on its refinement within the French court during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, overlooking the transmission of aesthetic principles and dance traditions from fifteenth-century Italian humanistic dance to ballet. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to the Renaissance ideals of proportion, restraint, and rhetorical embodiment, which constitute fundamental aesthetic principles at the core of the ballet tradition (Nevile, 2004).

To fill the above research gaps, this paper abandons the single technical sorting thinking and carries out progressive analysis from three dimensions: aesthetic innovation, disciplinary institutionalization and cross-cultural inheritance of ballet. It independently integrates bodily aesthetics, civic ritual logic and textualized choreographic theories of the Renaissance to construct a unique argument framework and systematically expounds how Italian humanism built a mature dance system and continuously supplied aesthetic connotation and choreographic logic for classical ballet.

2 The Dual Social Spaces of Dance Development

The distinctive political landscape of fragmented Italian city-states and the widespread diffusion of humanist education provided the social foundations for the formation of dance aesthetics and theory. These conditions fostered the development of two major dance traditions: elite court dance and public festival dance. Both traditions laid the foundations for the performance conventions and narrative structures of later ballet.

2.1 Aristocratic Courts: Ritual Dance Under Humanist Education

Renaissance elites regarded the cultivation of a well-rounded individual as the central goal of education. Within the educational ideal of the "universal man," bodily deportment and courtly dance were valued alongside literature, painting, and horsemanship as indispensable components of aristocratic education. The academies established by humanist educators abandoned the ascetic discipline of the body characteristic of the Middle Ages and instead promoted balanced and restrained bodily expression, viewing graceful movement as a visible manifestation of inner virtue.

Courtly partner dances and small-group dances were governed by strict movement conventions. They rejected exaggerated leaps and excessive bodily display, emphasizing balanced body lines and measured rhythmic movement. This aesthetic ideal of restraint was fully inherited by classical ballet and became one of the earliest intellectual foundations of the principle of control that lies at the core of ballet training. Aristocratic balls developed standardized patterns of interaction between dance partners, characterized by orderly eye contact, measured advances and retreats, and carefully organized circular formations. These forms of partner interaction and geometric spatial organization were later transformed into the fundamental choreographic principles of early ballet *pas de deux* and ensemble dances. The emphasis on restraint and elegance in courtly dance shaped the aristocratic aesthetic that later became a defining feature of ballet.

2.2 Civic Festivals: The Emergence of Narrative Dance

Florence, Milan, and Ferrara regularly hosted carnivals, princely entries, and aristocratic wedding celebrations. Large-scale processional dances and masked narrative performances became central elements of these ceremonial events. Festival dances were no longer confined to simple ritual interactions but increasingly incorporated narratives drawn from mythology, civic history, and moral allegories. Combined with large-scale geometric group formations and character-based masked performances, these dances developed structural features that anticipated the emergence of early *ballet de cour* and narrative ballet.

City rulers sponsored large-scale narrative dances that used orderly squares, circles, and triangular formations to visually represent civic stability and political order, while mythological themes conveyed a classical humanist vision of the universe. These festival performances, characterized by coherent plots, hierarchical group choreography, and clearly differentiated roles, established a mode of narrative bodily expression that provided an early model for the development of story ballet. Courtly ritual dance provided the aesthetic framework for movement, while festival narrative dance contributed dramatic and structural principles. Together, they formed the complete artistic configuration of Renaissance dance and laid the foundations for two major trajectories in the development of ballet: formal classical ensemble dance and narrative ballet.

3 The Reconfiguration of Dance Aesthetics and the Foundations of Ballet

Integrating Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, Ciceronian oratorical rhetoric and Pythagorean-Platonic cosmology, Italian humanism constructed a tripartite bodily aesthetic system, which overturned medieval negative views on physical performance and established universal creation and evaluation criteria for dance. This aesthetic system dominated the whole developmental process of classical ballet.

3.1 Aesthetics of Moderation: The Origin of Ballet's Body Control

Medieval religious culture regarded physical indulgence as original sin and suppressed all forms of dance performance. Reviving Aristotle's ethics of the mean, Renaissance humanists proposed that all refined arts should maintain a moderate and restrained expressive boundary. Translated into choreographic norms, this principle limited movement range and bodily movement, eliminating chaotic folk movement vocabularies.

Dance training required stable torsos and extended yet restrained limbs with uniform rhythms. This aesthetic demand evolved into the core training standard of classical ballet - bodily control. Core ballet training such as core contraction, upright spine and restrained limb extension all originated from Renaissance moderate aesthetics. Meanwhile, humanist theories correlated restrained postures with rational morality, endowing ballet with an elite temperament different from the more expressive modes of folk dance and modern dance.

3.2 Bodily Rhetoric: The Origins of Ballet's Narrative Movement Language

Renaissance humanists applied the principles of classical rhetorical theory to bodily expression, developing an aesthetic conception of the expressive body. They regarded dance as a form of silent visual oratory and constructed a coherent logic of bodily narration. A complete dance was conceived in much the same way as a formal Latin oration: measured walking sequences functioned as the introduction, alternating interactions between dance partners formed the argumentative development, and orderly geometric formations provided the concluding resolution. Bodily movement was therefore organized according to a clear internal logic rather than being reduced to spontaneous or arbitrary gestures.

This rhetorical system was fully absorbed by early ballet creators. Narrative ballets follow the fixed logic of setup-conflict-resolution, with corps de ballet creating dramatic atmosphere and *pas de deux* as emotional carrier. The logical

progression embedded in ballet movement sequences can be traced to the Renaissance conception of dance as bodily oratory. It was this aesthetic framework that endowed ballet with a rigorous narrative structure, distinguishing it from the improvisational character of many folk dance traditions.

3.3 Mathematical-Geometric Cosmology: Core Proportion and Formation of Ballet

Renaissance thinkers revived Pythagorean and Platonic cosmology, holding that the universe operates via regular numbers and geometric figures, so art creation must imitate cosmic harmony. Choreographers transformed this philosophical view into rigid creation rules: dance rhythms followed harmonious ratios of 1:2 and 2:3, and formal group dances only adopted circles, squares and equilateral triangles with unique symbolic meanings. Circles symbolized celestial eternity, squares represented stable governance, and triangles stood for balanced order (Burckhardt, 1860).

This aesthetic system of geometry and proportion was fully transmitted to classical ballet. Ballet steps, jumps, and extensions were all governed by principles of balanced bodily proportions. Ensemble dance sequences made extensive use of circular, square, and symmetrical triangular formations, while symmetrical stage composition became a defining visual feature of ballet. The five positions of the feet and the codified standards of bodily extension in classical ballet were likewise grounded in the Renaissance conception of mathematical harmony. In this sense, both the standardization of bodily proportions and the geometric organization of stage space in ballet can be traced to the humanistic cosmological aesthetics of the Italian Renaissance.

4 The Formation of Dance Theory and the Standardization of Ballet

Before the fifteenth century, European dance was transmitted primarily through master-apprentice instruction. It lacked unified terminology, standardized dance steps, and written standards, resulting in considerable regional variation. With the rise of the humanist movement of textual production and codification in Italy, scholars and dance masters began to systematically record dance techniques and aesthetic principles in written form. Their efforts produced the first comprehensive dance treatises in the western tradition and gave rise to a coherent and systematic body of dance theory. This written and standardized framework spread beyond the Alps and became the common technical foundation for court dance and early ballet throughout Europe.

4.1 The Emergence of Dance Treatises: Breaking with the Oral Tradition

Humanism encouraged the codification of artistic practices and classical knowledge in written form, while distinguishing refined elite arts from popular entertainment. Within this intellectual context, systematic theoretical writings on dance began to emerge. Early Italian dance masters adopted humanist models of scholarly writing in the composition of dance treatises, organizing them around four core components: aesthetic principles, standardized dance steps, formation diagrams, and accompanying music. These treatises clearly distinguished courtly dance from popular folk forms and, for the first time, defined dance as a liberal art endowed with intellectual and theoretical significance (Nevile, 2004).

Written dance treatises systematically documented dance steps, rhythmic conventions, and patterns of partner interaction, reducing the distortions and aesthetic inconsistencies associated with oral transmission and establishing a reproducible and geographically transferable standard for dance practice. From the sixteenth century onward, these Italian dance treatises circulated throughout the courts of France, England, and Burgundy. Ballet creators and court dance masters across Europe drew directly upon their movement vocabulary and aesthetic principles in refining local dance traditions, thereby laying the technical foundations for a unified European ballet tradition.

4.2 Construction of Specialized Choreographic Terminology

Guided by humanist aesthetic principles, Renaissance dance masters created an independent vocabulary of dance terminology to define posture, rhythm, and movement quality in a unified manner. Core evaluative concepts such as "proportion," "grace," and "lightness" formed a precise professional system of assessment, replacing the subjective criteria associated with folk dance traditions. This standardized terminology continued to evolve and eventually developed into the specialized terminological system of classical ballet. Professional expressions related to posture, extension, and rhythmic control in ballet can all be traced back to the humanist dance theory of fifteenth-century Italy. A unified terminology enabled artistic exchange across regions and allowed ballet to maintain consistent aesthetic criteria as it developed in different European countries.

4.3 Three Standardized Dance Genres: The Origins of Ballet Genre Classification

Guided by moderate and geometric aesthetics, Renaissance dance was divided into three fixed genres with independent functions, corresponding to three core creation directions of later ballet (Nevile, 2004):

(1) *Basse danse*: Slow, symmetrical ceremonial group dance, the prototype of classical *corps de ballet*;

(2) *Ballo*: Emotional narrative *pas de deux*, the origin of ballet solo and duet;

(3) *Moresca*: Masked mythological pageant, the embryonic form of narrative ballet.

The classification of these three dance genres was directly inherited by seventeenth-century French ballet, leading to

the emergence of three major ballet forms: ceremonial ensemble dance, lyrical partner dance, and narrative ballet based on mythological themes. Renaissance dance genre classification thus provided the basic creative framework for classical ballet.

5 The Transmission of Humanist Aesthetics to Early Ballet

From the late fifteenth to the sixteenth century, Italian dance manuscripts and itinerant dance masters spread throughout Northern Europe. The humanist aesthetics and technical practices of Italian dance gradually entered the courts of France, Burgundy, and England. They became a common model for court dance across early modern Europe and directly contributed to the emergence of early classical ballet.

Courts across Northern Europe gradually abandoned local, less structured folk dances and adopted Italian systems of dance instruction. At the same time, aristocratic education promoted the Italian emphasis on restrained bodily comportment and geometric formations. Before printed books became widely available in Northern Europe, dance training served as an embodied means of transmitting humanist ideals, familiarizing the aristocracy with classical notions of proportion, moderation, and restraint. These bodily standards later became a key foundation for the development of ballet at the French court.

During the seventeenth century, French ballet introduced modifications to dance technique, including more complex steps and an expanded vocabulary of jumps. However, its underlying aesthetic principles remained firmly rooted in the traditions of the Italian Renaissance, emphasizing bodily control, symmetrical geometric stage composition, rhetorical modes of narration, and an elegant aristocratic style. In other words, French classical ballet built upon the foundations established by Renaissance dance in Italy. Its aesthetic values, choreographic principles, and genre framework all derived from the humanist dance tradition of fifteenth-century Italy. Renaissance dance should therefore be regarded as an essential artistic source of classical ballet (Fisher, 2004).

At the same time, the humanist ideas embodied in Renaissance dance continued to spread through ballet. Concepts such as individual self-expression, a harmonious vision of the universe, and an ordered social structure remained embedded in ballet narratives, stage composition, and bodily aesthetics. In this sense, ballet became a dynamic artistic medium through which humanist values were continuously transmitted (Brinson, 2004).

6 Conclusion

This study integrates multiple dimensions, including Renaissance humanist aesthetics, the social environment of the Italian city-states, and innovations in written dance theory, to advance the following argument. During the Italian Renaissance, the aesthetics of moderation, bodily rhetoric, and mathematical conceptions of the cosmos fundamentally transformed traditional perceptions of the body and redefined the standards by which dance was evaluated. Supported by the humanist movement of textual production and codification, Italy produced the first standardized and written system of dance theory in the Western tradition, establishing clear genre classifications and a professional vocabulary of movement. At the same time, the parallel development of courtly ritual dance and festival narrative dance gave rise to a mature dance culture that combined elegant bodily expression with coherent dramatic structure.

This comprehensive dance system, which emerged in Italy, spread northward and provided European court dance and classical ballet with their underlying aesthetic principles, standardized movement conventions, and choreographic frameworks. It therefore constituted a primary artistic source of classical ballet. Existing scholarship has often tended to separate Renaissance dance from the history of ballet, attributing the origins of ballet primarily to the reforms of the French court in the seventeenth century while overlooking the aesthetic foundations established by the humanist dance tradition of fifteenth-century Italy. Renaissance dance was not merely an independent artistic form of its age; it also served as the foundation upon which the aesthetics, spatial composition, narrative structures, and training systems of classical ballet were built. The transformation of bodily aesthetics driven by humanism shaped many of the artistic characteristics that ballet has preserved for centuries.

Future research may further compare the technical differences between Italian Renaissance dance and French classical ballet, while also examining how humanist aesthetics were transformed and transmitted during the development of Baroque ballet.

About the Author

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