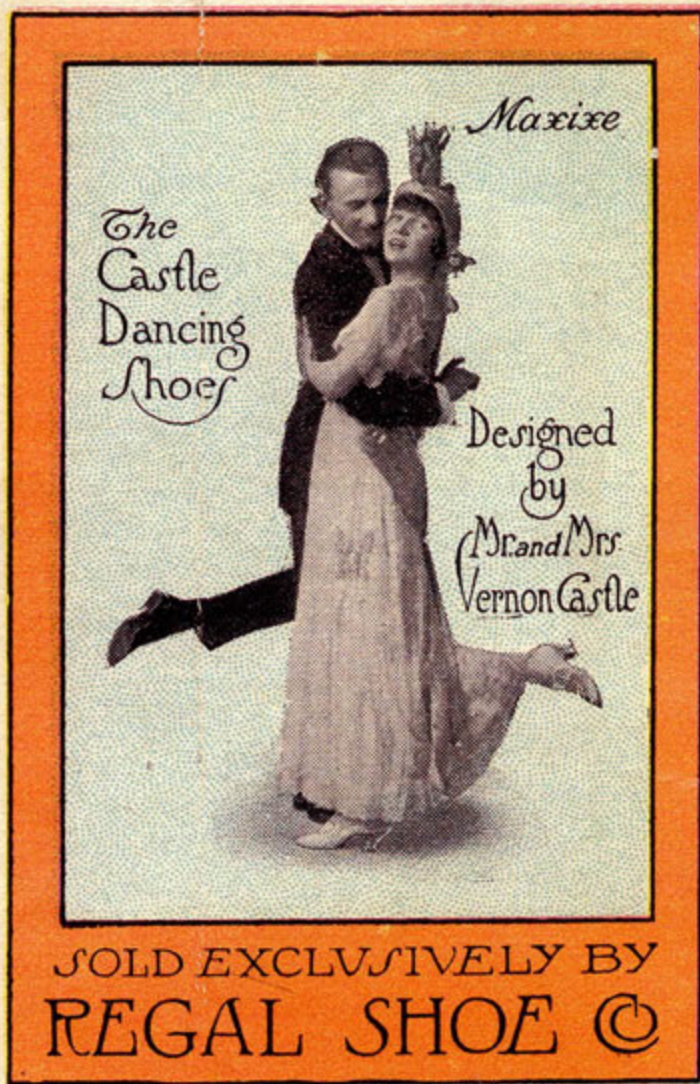


Shall We Dance

THREE CENTURIES OF DANCE IN AMERICA



All images courtesy Winterthur Library.

Irene and Vernon Castle shown doing the Maxixe, a Brazilian tango, in this poster stamp advertisement from about 1915. Downs Collection 04x53.10.

I by Jeanne Solensky

In the summer of 2005, the smash hit “Dancing with the Stars” exploded onto the television scene. The competition featured unlikely pairs of celebrities and professional ballroom dancers who waltzed, tangoed, and fox trotted into the hearts of more than 16 million viewers every week. At each stage, celebrities learned new dances, focusing on not only intricate footwork but also grace, proper posture, and communication with their partners.

The success of the show comes as no surprise. Dancing has always formed an integral part of the American cultural and social landscape, and the show continues a tradition of Americans learning dances from other countries.

Dances are influenced by the cultural movements of the day. In the 1700s the popular philosophical and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment championed the belief that the universe was a well-ordered mechanism that humans could understand through reason and intellect. This rationality carried over to dances, which taught precise movements of the body, rigid posture, and appropriate social behavior.

During this time, American colonists danced the hops, skips, and walking steps of the minuet and country dances popular in England and France. The minuet, originally a lively peasant dance refined into a very stately one, featured one couple at a time moving slowly and gracefully on the dance floor. The colonists, however, favored the simpler country dances featuring several couples facing each other in rows,

squares, and circles. Yet even in informal dances, strict rules for steps and etiquette—taught by dancing masters, published in dance manuals, or posted publicly—were the custom of the day. For public balls held in courthouses, taverns, and market buildings, managers, who were chosen by subscribers paying a fee for a series of dances, specified rules for the order of dances, the choice of music, and even the proper attire.

The Age of Romanticism, with its emphasis on feeling and sentiment, took hold in the 1800s across Europe and America and prevailed over the scientific principles of the Enlightenment. Dancing partners now held each other closely as they whirled and glided across the floor. Initially, the waltz was considered scandalous when it was introduced by the French in the early part of the century. Yet, with its intimacy and elegance, it soon epitomized the shift from rationality to romance.

Immigrants pouring into America in these decades brought with them folk dances celebrating national and ethnic customs. One of the best known, the polka, combined the closed hold of a waltz with the energy of a jig. Although formal dances were still held in ballrooms, informal ones sprang up at barn raisings, country fairs, quilting parties, and wherever people congregated. A shortage of instructors and manuals in the newly settled areas of the western frontier led to “callers” who shouted directions to dancers. In these venues, enthusiasm and energy won out over formal choreography and strict etiquette.

The 1900s witnessed an even greater explosion in the variety of dances and the media in which they were spread throughout America. Following the new syncopated rhythms of ragtime and jazz music, frenetic, jerky dance movements reflected a faster pace of life. People were exposed to new dances through performers in nightclubs and vaudeville shows as well as through the new entertainment media of film and television. Irene and Vernon Castle, international dancing sensations, took full advantage of all opportunities to bring new styles to the public. They danced in exhibitions and nightclubs, opened a dance school in New York, wrote manuals, and even appeared in movies and plays. The Castles created new dances by



merging the simple steps of African rhythms with the refined footwork of ballroom dances. Other dances to appear in the last century include swing, boogie-woogie, disco, and hip-hop, to name just a few.

Today, dance is constantly invigorated by exposure to different cultures and music. With its ability to bring people together and provide entertainment and exercise, dance will always remain part of our lives. ♦

A hand-colored stereo view from the 1860s shows couples pressed together in closed holds. Downs Collection 75x81.87.

Jeanne Solensky is Librarian of the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera at Winterthur

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INTO THE 1900S.