

LOIS GREENFIELD

Martha Graham Dance Company dancers form sculpture.

DANCE | Degas celebrates love of shape and motion

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"Most visual artists start out working with live nude models," says Carol Halsted, director of dance for Michigan Opera Theatre and the owner of a museum-class collection of dance photography. "I think it's only natural that photographers - and other artists - would be drawn to an art form that involves the human body."

Often, there are more individual motivations.

Edward Steichen was a member of the same social crowd as Isadora Duncan, a connection that led to a memorable series of photographs of Duncan on the Acropolis in Athens.

Matisse was fascinated by the prospect of working with Igor Stravinsky and ballet master Leonid Massine.

Haring sought refuge in the artistic foment of New York's lower east side and found street culture - especially the dancing - endlessly intriguing.

But underlying all of these individual connections is the simple fact that dance is a visual art.

"No way," you're probably saying. "Dance is a performing art."

Yes, of course. There is a performance element to dance.

But just as a painter positions various elements on a canvas and a sculptor decides what piece of the material remains and what will be chipped away, a choreographer arranges dancers on a stage to make a particular visual impact.

In the late 1970s, choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones began one of his more noted performance pieces in the dark. Literally. The curtain came up, but the lights weren't on. You could hear him move around the stage, huffing and puffing. Occasionally he would speak to the audience.

Then, just before the stage was bathed in a wash of bright light, he explained that this was part of his crusade to convince audiences that dance is a visual art.

It was a compelling argument.

### **Lover of women**

In the case of Degas, one can only speculate about why he was so smitten by dance, says Jill DeVonyar, the cocurator of the show.

"He seems to have been fascinated by women," says DeVonyar, noting that more than 90 percent of his career's output related to women. "But he also seemed intrigued by various types of movement."

Not choreography, mind you. Very rarely did you see Degas' dancers dancing. He was more interested in the stuff of everyday life; tying the ribbon on a dance slipper, adjusting a tutu. It was evident in his other work, as well, as he depicted laundresses ironing and women bathing.

But time and again, he came back to dance. At the Paris Opera - the place where most of his dancers worked - he found something inherently visual. Here, he found a grand setting filled with dramatic lighting, a place where he was free to roam and observe and, perhaps most important, he found a community of people who were every bit as fascinated with form and shape as he was.

### **Dance's dimensions**

There is something paradoxical about the link between dance and other visual arts. Dance exists not only in three dimensions, but also along an arc of time. Unlike paintings or sculptures, which sit still long enough for us to study and observe them, dance keeps moving.

Most visual artists - those who draw, paint or take photographs - are limited to two dimensions. Sculptors have a third dimension, too, but are just as limited by the static nature of their work as their colleagues. Video and film artists can dabble with time, but depth eludes them.

Only choreographers have all four dimensions at their disposal.

An artist by chance Lois Greenfield is widely regarded as the most influential dance photographer of this age. And yet it wasn't choreography or a love of dance that drew her to it.

"I was a photographer who happened to stumble onto dance in the course of being a photojournalist."

Greenfield wasn't interested in notating choreography or providing a literal representation of someone else's art. For her, dance was - and remains - a tool, a starting point.

The defining moment in her career came during a 1982 photo session with dancer-choreographer David Parsons.

Greenfield caught images that were absolutely unattainable in real life. They had nothing to do with gravity or the laws of physics as we know them. In frame after frame, Parsons was suspended in impossible-looking positions.

"You could argue that I'm encapsulating an entire dance in a split second," says Greenfield. "Except that it's a photographic event that can't be seen on a stage."

### **Modern view**

In contemporary art, there is probably no artist who has dealt with dance as extensively as Robert Rauschenberg.

Over the years, he has designed sets and costumes for Brown and Cunningham and, on occasion, even become an onstage participant.

When he first hooked up with the cutting-edge choreographers working at New York's Judson Church in the mid-1960s, a similarity of philosophies bound them together.

"In the early days, I heard him say many times that he was jealous of dancers," says choreographer Brown, of whose board Rauschenberg is chairman. "That's because we were always live, we were always different, we were always making our work for the first time."

Rauschenberg was among a group of young painters trying to escape the tyranny of static art. They participated in so-called happenings and created painted works that battled to escape the bonds of their two dimensions.

And perhaps that is it - the combination of intellectual challenges, spontaneity and the willingness to live in the realm of abstraction - that is at the heart of the singular connection between dance and visual arts.

"Sometimes when you look at my photos," says Greenfield, "you don't know if the person is going up or down, if they're landing or taking off. I love that ambiguity and the internal contradictions it introduces into a picture."

It's a quality Degas himself might have appreciated. Art historians have spent the better part of the past century interpreting exactly what is being depicted in Degas' works. While some are just studies of dancers lingering in the corners of rehearsal studios, many are filled with often inexplicable mini-dramas.

"When I'm shooting in the studio," says Greenfield, "I often use a Polaroid. If I can make a rational sentence describing what I've just shot, then I'm not interested. But if I look at it and think 'What the heck is going on there?' then I know I'm on the right track."

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