



Ballet Folklórico- An Introduction

Folkloric dance, like the English term “folk dance”, means dances of the people. This type of dance reflects the traditions, cultures and beliefs of people in a particular region. Folkloric dance expresses the life and spirit of a people through its movement and music. It is both historical and current, preserving tradition yet shifting with the current times.

In 1952, Amalia Hernández, dance teacher and choreographer at the Mexican Academy of Dance, formed the dance company known as the Ballet Moderno de México. With only eight members at the beginning, this small group began presenting choreographies created by Amalia herself. In this first experience as an independent artist, she debuted her well-known Sones de Michoacán (Melodies of Michoacán) with indisputable success.

In 1958 The Mexican Department of Tourism took notice and asked Amalia Hernandez to take her show on the road. The company visited Cuba and Canada, and also participated in the Festival del Pacífico. This same year the group also traveled to Los Angeles to take part in the Mexican National Celebrations. Ms. Hernández was again invited to participate abroad the following year, this time at the Pan-American Games in Chicago. For this purpose, she organized a tour in which the fifty-member company adopted the name Ballet Folklórico de México. Among the most successful pieces performed were *Los Hijos del Sol* (Children of the Sun), *Antiguos sones de Michoacán*, *El Cupidito*, *Fiesta Veracruzana*, *Los Quetzales*, *La Danza del Venado* (Deer Dance) and *Navidad en Jalisco* (Christmas in Jalisco).

Their successful performance in Chicago launched this folk dance company on the road to greatness. The then-president of Mexico, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, offered to make the group “the best dance company in the world.” Soon after, the National Institute of Fine Arts scheduled a weekly performance by Hernandez’ dance group. On October 11, 1959, the permanent program of the group began. Currently the Ballet Folklórico de México has given over 5,000 performances and has been honored with more than 200 awards recognizing their efforts.



History of Mexican Dance

Ritual Dance

Before the Spanish conquest the Indians had magnificent dance art. They put on great spectacles in which sometimes hundreds of dancers participated. Many of the dances involved acrobatic feats and incorporated colorful costumes adorned with jewels, gold, and flowers. They also made use of masks, rattles, drums, primitive wind instruments and songs for accompaniment. Ritual dances of the Indians were about the birth of the sun, the harvest, rain, hunting, fishing, combat, victory, the offering of human sacrifices, marriage, death and burial, home building, and other domestic and religious functions. One example is the Aztecs and their numerous religious festivals, in which both sexes participated in songs and dances. There were processions of women and children crowned with garlands of flowers and bearing offerings of fruits, ripened maize, and other products of the land. In contrast, the religious dances offered human sacrifices to the Gods and were quite disturbing to the Spanish settlers. Everyone participated in the dances, upper classes, lower classes, warriors, priests, and even the king. Dancing and singing was obligatory for children in school. They danced in temples, palaces, homes, streets, and large courtyards where sometimes a platform of wood or stone was erected high enough to enable the dancers to be seen from all sides. Early accounts refer to dances done in circles and concentric circles, or in single file lines face to face, advancing, retreating, and exchanging places. Sometimes they danced in imitation of animals, birds, and butterflies. Ritual dances were performed mostly by men, but in some dances women participated. When men and women danced in the same dance there was no body contact.

The Conquest and Spanish Influence

Dance in central Mexico continued untouched by Western influence until Hernan Cortés arrived in 1519. Looking for power and victory for Spain, Cortés began to conquer the indigenous people. In the conquest and the subsequent colonization, they destroyed much of what was beautiful of the Indian civilizations and also broke the hold of the Aztec religion and sacrifices. What they brought with them, in exchange, was the culture of Spain's artistic golden age. Spain's golden age was marked by the richness of its folk music and dance, incorporating the influences of the Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Muslim, and Basque cultures. The early dances Spaniards brought with them were their own religious festivals of pre-Lenten Carnival, Christmas, Holy Week, Corpus Christi, and saints' days. They, like the Aztecs, danced in religious and solemn ceremonies as well as in times of celebration. The monks brought miracle and mystery plays, from which *Los Moros*, or *The Battle of the Moors and Christians*, still survives in dance form today in many Latin American countries. At their parties and gala occasions Spanish emigrees danced the *jotas* (HOH-tahs), *fandangos* (fahn-DAHNGohs), *zapateos* (zah-pah-TEH-ohs), *boleros* (boh-LEH-rohs), *zambras* (ZAHM-brahs) and other beloved dances from their home provinces.



Dance and Christianity

In their religious zeal to wipe out all things considered pagan or non-Christian, and because music and dance were associated with so many Aztec religious ceremonies, the early missionaries set about to supplant the native music and dance with European forms. They began with European church hymns translated into the Native Indian language. They taught the natives European notation, how to play and construct European instruments, and encouraged their creative ability in composing. Yet the conversion was neither sudden nor complete. Some of the more beautiful and solemn indigenous dances were permitted in the early Christian churches. The early missionaries found it expedient to permit the Indians to carry on their old dramatic dance forms, adapting them to Christian themes, substituting saints and feast days for idols and pagan holidays, and eliminating blood sacrifice. The resulting intermingling of Catholic and Indian customs is seen today at fiestas where the Catholic Mass and dances of ancient Indian origin both take place in or near the church.

The Combining of Cultures

Throughout the years the customs of both the Spanish and Indians have combined to make what we know as the Mexican tradition. However, in more remote regions less accessible because of natural obstacles like mountains and swamps, where contact with the invaders was limited or avoided entirely for many years, many pre-conquest dances exist much as they did four hundred years ago. Despite these few tribes, most of the pre-conquest dances have been modified in some origin and plumes, flowers, animal hides, and masks are still abundantly used. However china, paper, ribbons, bits of mirrors, and colored glass beads provided the sparkle formally achieved by precious jewels and gold. Among the existing dances which are said to be of pre-conquest origin are: the famous *El Volador*, or the dance of the flying pole, in which one performer dances on a small platform atop a pole thirty feet high, while four others hang by ropes tied to their waists, whirling earthward as the ropes unwind; *Los Quetzales*, named for a beautiful tropical bird; the *Zanco* dance, which is danced on stilts, the Ribbon dances of the Yucatan, Campeche and Hidalgo regions, which bear resemblance to a Maypole dance; and *El Venado y Las Pascolas*, or the Deer Dance of the Yaqui Indians. This type of *baile* (BAH-ee-lay), as well as the aforementioned Spanish folk dances, of the earlier colonists and some of the native Indian steps, contributed to the dances of the *mestizos* (meh-TEE-sohs), the Mexican people who are of combined Spanish and Indian heritage. The Indians observed the European and Creole dancing at their Carnival and parties, and at first mimicked them. In doing so they became fond of the dances and adopted some of their steps and patterns, and made them their own. The style of movement was changed to the Indian postures, for example the Indian barefoot or sandal could not be used like the Spanish high heel. Dances changed their names, different music was used and the resulting patterns became something peculiarly their own. The Spanish and Indians intermarried, and the resulting *mestizo* amalgamated their cultural heritages, as well as the blood and ancestry of both races. In addition to the Indian, Spanish and French, another influence must be recognized which contributes to the mosaic of Mexican dance. Along the eastern coast, particularly around Veracruz, where the Spanish brought African and Caribbean slaves, music and dance of the huapango (oo-ah-PAHN-goh) and son (sohn) strongly resemble Afro-Cuban dance music.



The Evolution of Dance and its Modern Form

Out of this diverse background the secular folk dances of the present day developed. As people began travelling throughout the country, dances naturally evolved and continued to their present forms. Today in modern Mexico the *bailes* of 1850 have given way to the ballroom dances similar to those later danced in the United States and Europe like the modern waltz, fox-trot, rumba, mambo, and the tango. The ritual and folk dances continue to be danced at fiestas, but unfortunately even in the less cosmopolitan areas the native folk dances are sometimes beginning to be considered “old fashioned” by modern young Mexicans. Mexico’s Department of Education, however, has recognized this decline and is making efforts to rectify the situation. Folk dances are encouraged and taught in the city and rural public schools through college. They are included in fiestas and parades, and regional dancers have been invited to perform at the Palace of Fine Arts. Through these efforts, folk dancing is regaining popularity throughout the country.

Source: www.ums.org/education



Timeline of Mexican History

10000 BC	Human settlement established in the Valley of Mexico
9000-1200 BC	Beginning of agriculture with the cultivation of corn
1200-400 BC	Pre-classical period. Mayan settlement begins in the southern low lands
400-900 BC	Classical period. Building of large cities and ceremonial centers
900-1000 AD	Beginning of post-Classical period. Most cities are mysteriously abandoned
1345	Aztecs found the site of present day Mexico City
1517	Spanish navigator Hernández de Córdova arrives in Mexico
1519	Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors arrive in Tenochitlán
1520	Hundreds of Indians are murdered in massacre known as Noche Triste (Sad Night)
August 1521	After a 75 day siege, Tenochitlán falls to the Spanish
1530	King Carlos V declares Mexico City capital of "New Spain"
1566	Martín Cortés instigates first revolt against centralized government from Spain
1571	Spanish Inquisition is established in Mexico
1692	Riot in Mexico City. The Viceroyal Palace and City Hall are set on fire.
1810-21	Mexico's War of Independence from Spain.
September 1821	Independence is declared with the arrival of General Agustín de Iturbide
1823	The Mexican Constitution is announced, with the establishment of a federal republic.
1846-8	President Santa Anna declares war on the US; Mexico cedes the land that now makes up Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.



1855	Benito Juárez orders confiscation of Catholic Church property; Church is separated from State.
1862	The Battle of Puebla. Invading French forces defeated by National Army.
1867	Mexican Republic re-established and Benito Juárez declared president
1876-1910	General Porfirio Díaz is president, then dictator.
November 1910	Armed rebellion ousts Díaz from office.
1917	New constitution announced; Venustiano Carranza elected president.
1918	Emiliano Zapata is assassinated.
1929	Formation of the first official political party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario- now called the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)
1968	Student uprising in Mexico City
1986	Mexico enters GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade)
1994	North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, US and Canada goes into effect.
January 1994	Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) campaign for land distribution and human rights issues.
February 1996	EZLN signs the first of six peace accords with the Mexican government.
1997	Long ruling PRI loses control of the lower legislative house and the mayoralty of Mexico City
2000	Presidente Vicente Fox is elected President of Mexico, ending the PRI's 71 year control of the presidency.
2006	Ruling party candidate Felipe Calderson wins close presidential election against Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

Source: www.ums.org/education



Mexico at a Glance

Location

Middle America, bordering the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico, between Belize and the US and bordering the North Pacific Ocean, between Guatemala and the US

Area

Total: 756,061 square miles; slightly less than three times the size of Texas

Land Boundries

Border countries: Belize 155 miles, Guatemala 598 miles, US 1,952 miles

Coastline

5,797 miles

Climate

Subtropical to arid; hot and dry February to June; rainy, humid and mild June to November; cool and dry November to February

Terrain

Varies from tropical to desert

Natural Resources

Petroleum, silver, copper, gold, lead, zinc, natural gas, timber

Land Use

Arable land: 12.99%

Permanent crops: 1.31%

Other: 86.06% (2005)

Natural Hazards

Tsunamis along the Pacific Coast, volcanos and destructive earthquakes in the center and south, and hurricanes on the Pacific, Gulf of Mexico and Carribbean coasts.

**Environment**

Scarcity of hazardous waste disposal facilities; rural to urban migration; natural fresh water resources scarce and polluted in north, inaccessible and poor quality in center and extreme southeast; raw sewage and industrial effluents polluting rivers in urban areas; deforestation; widespread erosion; desertification; deteriorating agricultural lands; serious air and water pollution in the national capital and urban centers along US-Mexico border; land subsidence in Valley of Mexico caused by groundwater depletion.

Population

111,211,789 (July 2009 est.)

Ethnic Groups

Mestizo (Amerindian-Spanish) 60%, Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian 30%, white 9%, other 1%

Independence

16 September 1810

National Holiday

Independence Day, 16 September (1810)

Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>



Lesson Plans and Informational Websites

<http://www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/3906/>

<http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3148-mexico-history-time-line-overview-resource-page>

<http://www.dpsk12.org/programs/almaproject/pdf/CelebrationsofMex.pdf>

Lesson Plan on Corridos during the Mexican Revolution:

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/3738/>

Diego Rivera web museum site:

<http://www.diegorivera.com/index.php>

Ballet Folklórico clips:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clik9pPMz4I>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-ZTQuWgUlg&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfGkU5dw7Xo&feature=related>



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