



STEPHANIE OLSON

The Modern Dancer's Skin

The Costumes of
Gertrude Lippincott

*Gertrude Lawton Lippincott, undated, by
New York photographer Myron Tanenbaum*

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY is home to hundreds of dresses, ranging from wedding dresses to sundresses, formal wear to lounge wear. In this vast collection of garments, the costumes worn by modern dancer Gertrude Lippincott stand apart. A nationally influential dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Lippincott also wrote eloquently on the vital relationship of costume to dance:

The modern dance costume must be for a particular person with a particular figure, not like the ballet costumes which can be made for any dancer in keeping with the stylization of the ballet[.] The costume should fit the dancer “like his skin,” as does his technic [sic] and his dance. Does the costume do this?”¹

Her costumes, along with concept paintings, programs, performance notes, and teaching materials—not to mention photographs and videotapes of Lippincott herself—document and preserve the legacy of this important local figure in the national modern dance world.

Gertrude Lawton Lippincott (1913–1996) was born in St. Paul and developed a passion for dancing at an early age. By 1930 modern dance was gaining recognition and acceptance in the United States,² and at the University of Chicago Lippincott studied for one year under Marian van Tuyl, a noted teacher of the era. Lippincott then transferred to the University of Minnesota, graduating magna cum laude with a degree in psychology in 1935, a year after marrying political science professor Benjamin Evans Lippincott. Dance, which started as a hobby, became a life’s pursuit while she traveled with her husband as he taught in Oxford (England) and Boston. Traveling exposed Lippincott to different styles of modern dance and allowed her to study under various professionals, notably modern dance pioneers Jan Veen in Boston and Leslie Burrows in London. With her husband’s encouragement, Lippincott spent summers at the Bennington School of Dance in Vermont, where she studied under leading American modern dancers Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, and went on to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in education with an emphasis in dance from New York University in 1943.

After returning to Minnesota, Lippincott, together with local modern dancer Ruth Hatfield, organized the Modern

Dance Center in Minneapolis in 1937. The group, which toured throughout Minnesota and surrounding states, was the first modern dance establishment in the state and one of the first racially integrated dance groups in the country. In addition to being a dancer herself, Lippincott became a prominent choreographer and teacher, known for her appreciation of dramatic fashion—in performance and in everyday life. She brought these styles to her classes, emphasizing the importance of movement in conveying emotion. Throughout her career, which spanned more than five decades, Lippincott taught modern dance at the University of Minnesota, the San Francisco Dance Center, and the University of Oregon, among other prominent institutions. She also wrote and edited numerous dance articles and publications, and she founded or served on the board of several dance organizations across the country.

Lippincott always had very strong ideas about the role of costumes in the blossoming world of modern dance. She felt there was a personal relationship between a dancer and her outfit that went beyond visual beauty, a relationship achieved by being involved in the costume’s design and creation. In 1952 she co-wrote an article for *Dance Observer* about the process, explaining:

The modern dancer is more involved in the costume design because the technic [sic] of her dance is more personal than that of the ballet. Her dance is more a part of herself, and thus her costume should also be a part of her. Every detail of the costume should fit the action, and every movement of the dance should be heightened by the costume.³

In 1939, with the assistance of Hatfield, Lippincott created a list of “Costume Criteria” for the 1939–40 season at the Modern Dance Center. In it, she described the purpose of costuming and various requirements the modern dancer must keep in mind when planning a performance. The list contained costuming principles she had learned during her years of training, many of which would evolve throughout the course of her career, and it continued to inform costume design for the dances she choreographed in the coming decades. The inspiration and spirit in each of Gertrude Lippincott’s dances is revealed by examining these criteria alongside her costumes and performance notes. Turn the page for this exploration of her principles linked to particular performances, followed by full-color photographs of each costume paired with arresting performance stills of Lippincott.

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Is the design bold enough to carry from the stage?

A Time for Tears premiered June 29, 1945, at Northrop Memorial Auditorium in Minneapolis. Lippincott wrote, “A TIME FOR TEARS depicts, in an abstract manner, emotional reactions after a time of great stress. The music was composed by Freda Miller, well-known composer for modern dance, after the dance was choreographed.” A critic for the *Minneapolis Tribune* astutely pointed out the relation of costume to dance: “Reaction—A Time for Tears—was the emotional peak of the program, its acutely expressive pattern made the more dramatic by a costume of two somber colors with a single broad slash of crimson.”⁴

The synthetic stretch-knit dress that Lippincott wore has a circular neckline and flared ankle-length purple skirt. The bodice and left sleeve are orange; a purple cropped panel covers most of the bodice and the right sleeve. There are snaps at the sleeve cuffs and a zipper up the back, allowing the costume to be put on or removed easily and quickly. The label at the back collar reads, “Julie Boutell, inc. couturiere/MINNEAPOLIS.” Boutell, who owned her own shop in downtown Minneapolis, designed and made numerous costumes and garments for Lippincott in the 1940s.

The costume should be practised [*sic*] in a great deal before the actual performance, so that the dancer will become familiar with its movement, drape, and action of its various parts.

Lippincott premiered *Deirdre of the Sorrows* as a solo July 19, 1948, at Colorado State College in Fort Collins, Colorado. Her choreography, she wrote, “tells of the ancient Irish legend which prophesies the birth of Deirdre, whose beauty will cause the ruin of men and cities. The dance is in no way a literal interpretation of Deirdre’s tragic life, but is rather an emotional portrayal of the story. Henry Cowell, noted composer, and authority on Irish lore, composed the musical score and supervised the choreography.”⁵

Underscoring the wisdom of practicing in one’s costume, Lippincott’s performance notes relate that this was the second version of the outfit, as the first design did not work properly for the dance.⁶ The white synthetic stretch-knit dress features gold edging, a wide shirred waist, pleated full-length skirt, and zippered sleeve cuffs. Julie Boutell of Minneapolis also made this costume.

Does the costume accentuate the mood?

Just We Two, a duet, premiered October 26, 1950, at the Minneapolis Young Women’s Christian Association.⁷

Both costumes were co-designed and painted by Robert Moulton and Lippincott. Moulton, a faculty member of the University of Minnesota department of theater arts and dance, also danced the male role during this number. Moulton and Lippincott collaborated on numerous dance and writing projects over the course of their careers.

A later performance review enthused,

Without a doubt the last number, a dance-pantomime suggested by cartoons of William Steig’s “Till Death Do Us Part”—was the jolliest and most lively and most enjoyable in the program. The costumes, painted directly on white leotards, and a cocky paper hat atop Miss Lippincott, were the ingenious designs of Moulton. This witty comment on the institution of marriage was fun to watch and to hear.⁸

The costumes are made from stretchy white cotton and have matching black hand-painted designs. The comedic, clown-like features of the costumes and accessories emphasized the satirical, silly nature of the performance depicting a bickering husband and wife.

Are the accessories used carefully so as not to detract from the main idea of the dance? Is there a reason for their use?

A Full Moon in March premiered as a solo February 10, 1951, at Brodbeck Auditorium in Maryland. This somber dance, Lippincott wrote,

follows the duet of the Stroller and the Lady. . . . The Stroller has conquered the Lady but has gone to his death for his audacity. The Lady’s solo is a lament over the death of the Stroller. The mask she carries in her hand is symbolic of his severed head. The action follows the general outline of the [W. B.] Yeats’ play of the same name from which the dance is derived.⁹

This costume, not the first used for *A Full Moon in March*, initially appeared in May 1951. The yellow synthetic stretch-knit dress has a circular neckline, flared full-length skirt, and corded arm holes and skirt hem. The headpiece has a corded crown and chin strap of the same material. The mask prop, a papier-mâché face, is backed with yellow and peach terrycloth and has a wooden handle. Photos show Lippincott gazing at the mask while performing, using it to emphasize the emotion she wished to portray.

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D. M. HATFIELD



A Time for Tears



Deidre of the Sorrows



Just We Two





LOUIS MÉLANÇON



A Full Moon in March

Goddess of the Moon



ROBERT J. GRAHAM





ROBERT MOULTON



Madonna della Rosa



JEAN M. ANDERSEN



Echoes of Erin

Does the costume carry the line of the movement? For example, a full, drapy skirt will accentuate a turn, and also will take longer to turn than the actual movement. The dancer will have to wait for the “skirt to come around.”

Goddess of the Moon premiered February 18, 1952, at the Baltimore Museum of Art. According to Lippincott, it “presents the primitive and ritualistic trilogy of birth, love, and death in the form of the three phases of the moon.”¹⁰

The sleeveless, synthetic pink dress has a flared, full-length skirt. The tightly fitted bodice is puckered at the top and has a zipper at back. Two long strips of the dress fabric were used as hair ties. The light-pink net dress-cover is open at front, held at the waist by a hook-and-eye clasp, and forms mid-length, angel sleeves. Those sleeves and the flared skirt would indeed take time to “come around.” All costume pieces were made by Robert Moulton.

Is the costume so spectacular or stunning that it detracts from either the movement or the idea?

Madonna della Rosa premiered in November 1954 at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The *Antioch College Record* reported, “Lippincott performed the period number . . . with proper stateliness, grandeur and simplicity. Her movements and mood came through very well.”¹¹

Designed and made by Robert Moulton, this dress is one of Lippincott’s more elaborate costumes. The moss-green velvet Renaissance-style dress has pink satin accents and rose satin trim with hand-painted design. Pearlescent beads are attached along the trim and at the choker neckline. It features a zipper up the back and at the fitted sleeve cuffs. The accompanying rose headpiece is decorated with gold netting and beads and has an attached pink and sheer veil. The tight bodice and sleeves would have restricted any large movement, requiring simpler dance technique while still promoting the idea of the dance as a period piece. Thus, the elaborate dress enhanced the overall performance rather than competing with the dancer for the audience’s attention.

Does the costume fit the idea of the dance?

Echoes of Erin, subtitled *To Henry Cowell*, premiered May 7, 1955, at the Minneapolis YWCA. Lippincott explained,

The titles of the sections are taken from early experimental piano pieces by Henry Cowell, famous Irish-American composer. *Manaunaun* (written in 1911) is the ancient Irish God of Motion [God of Motion]. The Banshee is an Irish ghost who conducts the souls of the dead to the underworld.¹²

The kelly-green cotton dress by Robert Moulton features brown bias edging and decoration, with a red burlap trailing sash. It has an offset triangular yoke at the waist and open-flared skirt that incorporates strips of all three fabrics. The colors and design elements reflect Lippincott’s interpretation of historic Irish dress, meant to enhance the experimental nature of Cowell’s music.

GERTRUDE LIPPINCOTT can be credited with bringing modern dance into the spotlight in the Midwest, and she choreographed and performed dozens of modern dance routines, each with its own unique costume. The Minnesota Historical Society houses 17 boxes of manuscript materials and more than a dozen costumes, preserving Lippincott’s strong belief that modern dance was a deeply personal form of expression, as evidenced by the detail and thought she put in to each of these spectacular pieces. ▣

Notes

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1. “Modern Dance Center Costume Criteria—Season 1939–40,” in *Modern Dance Center-Costumes*, undated and 1939–1940, Gertrude Lawton Lippincott Dance Career Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS).

2. Charmaine Patricia Warren, Suzanne Youngerman, Susan Yung, “A Brief History of American Modern Dance,” 2013, 4, Companion Articles, <http://dancemotionusa.org/education/>. Here and below, biographical details assembled from materials in the Lippincott papers.

3. Gertrude Lippincott and Robert Moulton, “Case History of a Costume,” *Dance Observer* 19 (1952): 132–34, copy in Articles for journals, 1939–1984, Lippincott papers.

4. Notes and Instructions, Costumes 1945–1961; Dance Programs, event announcements, and flyers (folder); and Norman C. Houk, “Gertrude Lippincott Meets Old Friends,” *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Oct. 16, 1946, 16, copy in Reviews and articles about Gertrude Lippincott, 1940–1995—all in Lippincott papers. Stage lighting might account for Houk’s use of “crimson.”

5. Dance Programs, event announcements, and flyers, 1947–1949.

6. “Deirdre of the Sorrows” Choreography, Performing files, Lippincott papers.

7. “Just We Two—A Marital Tragedy” Choreography, Performing files.

8. Carol Thirer Freedman, “Lippincott Trio,” *Antioch College Record*, Nov. 16, 1954, 3.

9. “A Full Moon in March” Choreography, Performing files; Dance Programs, event announcements, and flyers, 1950–1957.

10. “Goddess of the Moon” Choreography, Performing files; Dance Programs, event announcements, and flyers, 1950–1957.

11. Notes and Instructions, Costumes 1945–1961, Lippincott papers; Freedman, “Lippincott Trio,” 3.

12. “Echoes of Erin” Choreography, Performing files.

All dance photos are in the Gertrude Lawton Lippincott Dance Career Papers, MNHS; the costumes, photographed by Jason Onerheim, are in MNHS collections.



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