



The New York Public Library
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

Denishawn photographs and scrapbooks

1875-1960s [bulk 1910s-1930s]

*MGZEB 21-0007

Processed by Amy Lau in 2021.

Summary

Creator: Denishawn Dancers

Title: Denishawn photographs and scrapbooks

Date: 1875-1960s [bulk 1910s-1930s]

Size: 1.58 linear feet (5 boxes)

Source: Unknown.

Abstract: The Denishawn photographs and scrapbooks, dating from 1875 to the 1960s, consist mainly of prints of the Denishawn company and school, as well as professional and candid prints of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. The collection also contains some photographs of the construction of Jacob's Pillow, and Shawn's company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers.

Preferred citation: Denishawn photographs and scrapbooks, *MGZEB 21-0007. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Amy Lau in 2021.

Creator History

Denishawn, the company and school, was founded in Los Angeles, California by Ted Shawn (born on October 21, 1891, in Kansas City, Missouri) and Ruth St. Denis (born on January 20, 1879, in Newark, New Jersey) in 1915. At the time of Denishawn's founding, St. Denis was a well-known solo performer and Shawn was an up-and-coming performer and choreographer. The company, known as Denishawn Dancers, toured extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia from 1915 until the company was dissolved in 1931. From 1925 to 1927, the company became the first United States-based dance company to tour Asia. While the company performed a variety of dances, most of the pieces created by St. Denis and Shawn stereotyped and culturally appropriated dress, music, and movements from East Indian, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Spanish, American Indian, Arab, and Egyptian cultures. Some of the most prominent figures in modern dance, including Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and Doris Humphrey, were members of the company.

The school, known as Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, was the first dance school to produce a professional company in the United States. While the school's dance education program was based on the fundamentals of ballet technique, the school also taught courses in European modern techniques, culturally appropriated dances from Spain and Asian countries, and the Delsarte System of Expression. The school taught that all styles of dance are valid and that less structured forms of dance are important. Most of the company members of the Denishawn Dancers were also students at the school. By 1927, Denishawn dance was being taught in schools around the United States, and St. Denis and Shawn decided to establish a satellite school on Stevenson Place in the Bronx, New York. The school's building was known as Denishawn House.

In 1931, Shawn and St. Denis separated personally and professionally, and the Denishawn Dancers were dissolved. St. Denis continued to teach at Denishawn House in the Bronx, New York until 1934 when she was forced to close the school for financial reasons. For several years, St. Denis retired from theatrical dancing and focused instead on creating religious dances for churches and her organization, the Ruth St. Denis Society of Spiritual Arts. She returned to theatrical dancing at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 1941. Her last performance with Shawn was at Jacob's Pillow in 1964 for their 50th Wedding Anniversary. In 1968, St. Denis died in Los Angeles, California at the age of eighty-nine.

After separating from St. Denis in 1931, Shawn purchased a farm, known as Jacob's Pillow, located in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. Shawn used Jacob's Pillow as the rehearsal, and sometimes performance, location for his company of all-male dancers. The company, established in 1933, was the first all-male dance company in the United States and became known as Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers. It was founded to promote the idea that dancing was an acceptable art form for men. From 1933 to 1940, the company toured the United States, Canada, Cuba, and England, and helped construct many of the dance buildings at Jacob's Pillow. With the advent of World War II, Shawn dissolved the company, as most members enlisted in the armed forces.

In 1941, Shawn, deeply in debt, rented out Jacob's Pillow to Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin. Markova and Dolin held a financially successful international dance festival at Jacob's Pillow. After the festival, local supporters raised 50,000 dollars to buy Jacob's Pillow from Shawn and build a theater. Shawn was named the director of Jacob's Pillow, and in 1942 the Ted Shawn Theatre became the first performance space in America designed for dance. Shawn remained in a leadership position at Jacob's Pillow until his death in 1972 at the age of eighty.

Scope and Content Note

The Denishawn photographs and scrapbooks, spanning from 1875 to the 1960s, reveal the performances, rehearsals, and spaces of the Denishawn company and school, as well as the individual work of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. The majority of the collection features prints of the Denishawn Dancers' performances, as well as candid and professional dance performance prints of Ted Shawn. These prints, and the prints of St. Denis's performances, discloses Denishawn's cultural appropriation of the movements, dress, and music of East Indian, Spanish, American Indian, Arab, Sri Lankan, Japanese, and Egyptian cultures. While most of the Denishawn School of Dancing prints detail the activities of the students at the Los Angeles school, there are some prints of Denishawn House located in the Bronx, New York. The collection consists of prints, negatives, and scrapbook pages, as well as a few newspaper clippings, postcards, and a tintype.

The Schools and Companies grouping dates from 1915 to 1963, and chronicles the rehearsals, performances, and events of the schools and companies associated with Ted Shawn and Ruth St.

Denis. Included are prints of the Denishawn Dancers 1925 to 1927 tour of Asia. While prints of the Denishawn company and schools compose the majority of the material, the group also encompasses prints of Ted Shawn and His Male Dancers, and Ruth St. Denis Day at Adelphi University. Due to the fluidity of Denishawn students performing in the company, there is a folder of material containing prints of dancers who could have been members of the company and/or, students. Of note are prints that identify Denishawn company members, Charles Weidman, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey, who influenced modern dance; and prints of Denishawn House.

The Personal grouping spans from 1875 to the 1960s, and is composed of mostly personal candid and professional prints of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. There are prints of St. Denis and Shawn performing and posing together before, and during, Denishawn. The group also holds prints of Shawn and St. Denis during their childhood and youth. The Jacob's Pillow prints recount the construction of dance spaces at Jacob's Pillow during the 1930s, and Ted Shawn's work as the director, and dance instructor, of the Pillow. Also included are a cover and pages from Charles Weidman's scrapbook containing candid prints of family and friends; candid photos of people, such as Louis Horst, associated with Shawn and St. Denis; and prints of Doris Humphrey with Shawn. Of note are candid prints of St. Denis performing in 1965; Shawn teaching at Jacob's Pillow in the 1960s; and an 1875 tintype of Shawn's mother, Mary Lee Booth.

Arrangement: This collection is arranged alphabetically in the following two groupings: Schools and Companies; and Personal.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Albums (books)
Negatives (photographs)
Newspapers
Photographs

Subjects

Cultural appropriation
Dance companies
Dance schools
Modern dance

Occupations

Dancers.
Teachers.

Names

Humphrey, Doris, 1895-1958
Shawn, Ted, 1891-1972
St. Denis, Ruth, 1880-1968
Weidman, Charles
Denishawn Dancers
Denishawn School of Dancing
Jacob's Pillow
Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers

Container List

Schools and Companies 1915-1963

- b. 3 f. 1-2 Adelphi University--Ruth St. Denis Day 1963
- b. 1 f. 1-11 Denishawn Dancers 1915-1931
 - b. 3 f. 3-4
 - b. 4 f. 1-4
- b. 1 f. 12 Denishawn Dancers and School of Dancing 1917-1920s
- b. 2 f. 1-2 Denishawn School of Dancing 1917-1930
 - b. 4 f. 5
- b. 2 f. 3 Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers 1933-1940

Personal 1875-1960s

- b. 2 f. 4 Booth, Mary Lee 1875
- b. 2 f. 5-7 Candids 1890s-1965
- b. 2 f. 8 Humphrey, Doris 1930s-1942
- b. 2 f. 9 Jacob's Pillow 1930s-1960s
 - b. 3 f. 5
- b. 2 f. 10-13 St. Denis, Ruth 1890s-1965
 - b. 3 f. 6-7
 - b. 4 f. 6
- b. 2 f. 14-15 St. Denis, Ruth and Ted Shawn 1915-1931
 - b. 3 f. 8
- b. 2 f. 16-18 Shawn, Ted 1900s-1967
 - b. 5
- b. 2 f. 19 Weidman, Charles 1901-1930s
 - b. 3 f. 9