



Memoria Saltationis: The Memory of Dance - 5 June 2020

Dancing Like the Ancients: The Role of Memory in 18th-19th Century Revivals of Ancient Greco-Roman Dance

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This paper focuses on the shift from textual to visual engagement with the sources used in the revival of ancient Greco-Roman dance from the works of John Weaver (1673-1760) to those of Isadora Duncan (1878-1927). The memory of ancient dance, over these two centuries, was shaped by its archive. While Weaver and Duncan sought, in some way, to access antiquity through bodily movement, the sources they used and the methods they employed were quite different, reflecting broader cultural and intellectual contexts. Weaver relied heavily on literary texts, such as Lucian's *On the Dance*, and early modern compilations of ancient dances drawn from textual sources, and had some awareness of inscriptions relevant to dancers of ancient pantomime. He claimed that while its gestures had been irrecoverably lost, the study of ancient dance could introduce a new kind of performance, by changing the education of players (*Essay towards an History of Dancing*, 148). While the art of memory had long been associated with dance movement, Weaver's Lucianic argument for the liberal education of dancers moved dance memory from a physical to an intellectual sphere. Over the course of the 18th century, research into ancient dance, and particularly pantomime, came to encompass its material remains, such as inscriptions and visual art, as interest in archaeology increased. Lady Emma Hamilton (1765-1815) also attempted to access antiquity through the bodily imitation of statues and vases. Similarly, Isadora Duncan studied the iconography of dance on the Greek vases in the British Museum and the Louvre, and sought to access the visual aesthetic of ancient dance through costume and setting, even dancing amid the archaeological ruins of Greece, reflecting changing attitudes about what was recoverable about ancient dance, movement, and gesture.