

# WHO IS THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN DANCER?

*Batyah Schachter*

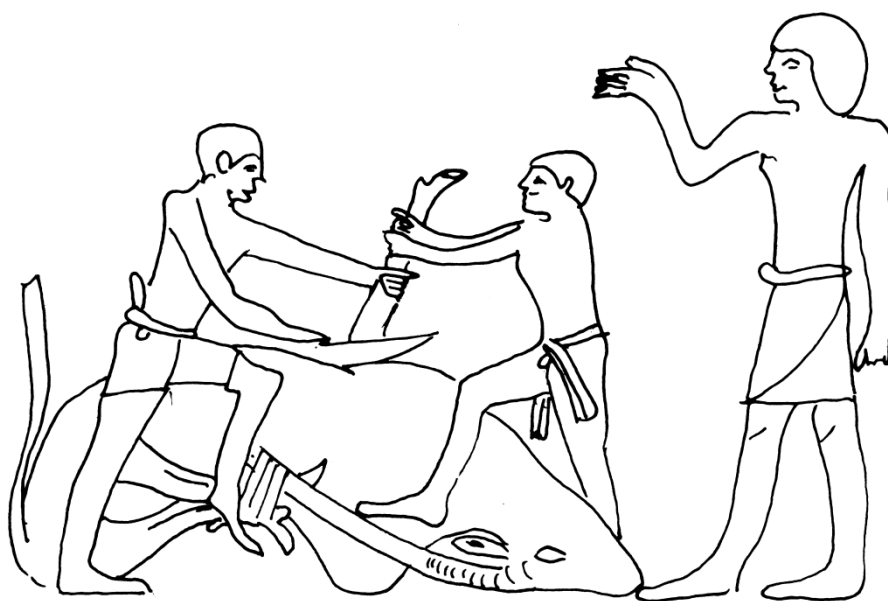
*The Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance,  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

**Abstract:** Any attempt to define the notion of 'dance' or 'dancer' is fraught with difficulties; this is the case even today, when we come to examine dance that we can witness or execute. This renders the study of dance in ancient Egypt all the more problematic, since the only documentation we have about dance in ancient Egypt is only that of plastic representations; as such, defining notions of 'dance' or 'dancer' is largely a matter of speculation and interpretation. This is further complicated by the fact that ancient Egyptian documentation of dance and dancers was not intended to record realistic information. Rather, it had to submit to clear rules of representation, presenting sufficient information for viewers to identify and recognise events known to them. This paper will attempt to formulate a definition of dance, while describing the principles of ancient Egyptian representation of the body and movement; using these tools, I will try to provide an analysis of dance scenes in ancient Egyptian art.

## Foreword

I have written this paper from the perspective of a dancer who has been involved in dance, the study of movement, and the creation and performance of dances for many years. When considering dance in ancient Egypt, I examine two-dimensional, silent images which provide no real clues regarding the movement which inspired the picture. Moreover, as a dancer trained to observe movement itself, many of the figures in Egyptian pictures and reliefs appear, to me, to be dancing. For example, a man bending down to fish, or kneeling in order to slaughter an animal (**fig. 1**), is represented in a deliberate and studied movement. If we

were to separate the clearly identifiable act performed by the man from the pose in which we see him, we could see a dancer in the middle of a rehearsed, trained and deliberate movement. At the same time, there are images where there is no doubt that the figures are performing a dance which has no additional purpose (**fig. 2**). Originally, I identified all the figures who were not obviously performing any specific action as a dancer. However, after consideration, and the need to find out more about the place, nature, function and character of dance in ancient Egypt, I realized that it was necessary to define what was and was not dance within the images of human figures so common in Egyptian art.



*Figure 1. Priest standing on the right next to a scene of slaughtering, tomb of Ninetjer, Giza, Old Kingdom (after Junker 1951, fig. 46).*

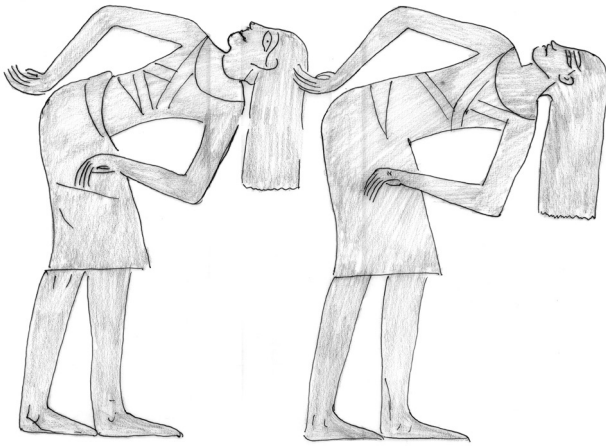


Figure 2. New Kingdom, tomb of Kheruef, 192, Thebes (after Strouhal 1992, 47).

In this paper I intend to try to define which amongst the figures drawn in movement in Egyptian art can be identified as dancers, which cannot, and which are doubtful. Each definition will be based upon observations of the movements portrayed in the imagery. It will be analyzed, using the rules of the Egyptian canon concerning the representation of the human body and my own understanding of the movement of the human body through observation and execution.

This approach has not previously been considered in Egyptological research. The few scholars who have engaged with the subject concluded that certain figures were dancers of one type or another, and dealt with them in this context. Emma Brunner-Traut in her book *Dance in Ancient Egypt* (1958) distinguished between dancers and those engaged in sports activities and games, and she also differentiated dance from the organization of groups in religious processions. She saw dance as “rhythmical movement that springs from the need for artistic or religious expression or a spontaneous and obvious expression of life” (Brunner-Traut 1958, 9). However, why these figures are identified as dancers and others as worshippers, gymnasts or maid-servants serving food at a feast, what characterizes these differences, according to which criteria is the question itself investigated – these questions have not so far been asked in the literature concerning dance in ancient Egypt.

In order to investigate these problems I shall give a detailed presentation of the issues regarding the definition of dance, as discussed by contemporary dance practitioners. I will consider the fact that dance is an action which exists in time, and the difficulties which derive from this for the documentation, preservation and even repetition of “the same dance” (McFee 1995, 93). Later, I will consider the principles of the Egyptian canon concerning the portrayal of the human figure in painting and the way Egyptian artists dealt with the problem of a two-dimensional representation of two- and three-dimensional space. These two elements are of the utmost importance when attempting to understand

or examine movement in paintings. One issue is the manner in which the human body is represented in Egyptian art in general. Although the human figure is drawn naturalistically and can be identified without any doubt, the manner in which it is represented is not realistic with regard to the accuracy of the shape of the body and its movement in space (Lexova 1935, 16). Finally, I will examine the features that characterize dance in Egyptian art by considering examples according to the elements presented beforehand, including the limitations which result from the minimal knowledge available to us. To me, this process is the first step in the study of Egyptian dance and the contemplation of the different possibilities of movement which exist within it. This will also serve as a base for further study of the social, artistic, textual and religious contexts of ancient Egyptian culture.

### How can dance be defined?

What turns one sequence of movements into dance when another sequence is not identified as such? What differentiates the sportswoman in the high-jump from a group of people moving within the defined space of the stage, performing a sequence of actions dictated in advance, with or without musical accompaniment and with or without an audience (McFee 1995, 49-54)? Questions of the definition of dance have preoccupied the creators of dance themselves since the middle of the twentieth century, when dance performance moved from the theatrical stage and into the street, the studio and other various spaces. During this period the question of the trained and professional dancer also fell under the scrutiny of a group of artists who preferred to utilise people who had not undergone systematic training as dancers and did not have any traditional or conventional technique (Scott 1997, 7). If the ability to define a dancer or a dance performance is complex and multi-faceted when referring to dance or movement that can be watched in the here and now, this issue becomes even more acute when applied to ancient images from ancient times, whose rules and customs are known to us only from the pictures and texts that have survived (Garfinkel 2000, 16).

Determining the definition of dance is a complex task, as what we want to define is composed of elements of movement (McFee 1995, 52, 55-6). In practice, we have to distinguish between the different sequences of movement and sort them into categories in order to decide which are dance and which are not - to make this distinction we are forced to analyze every area of our lives from the perspective of movement. If we adopt the broadest definition, we can, in fact, view every movement of the human body as dance. But since I wish to deal with the subject of dance as it is recognized and expressed in human society, I must find a definition that identifies and distinguishes it from other sequences of movements (McFee 1995, 49). Therefore, I will not consider a wide-ranging definition in which every movement performed could be considered dance.

The concept of dance is inherently understood by everyone and does not require an explanation or definition to identify this action, whether it is dance on the stage of a theatre, folk dancing in the street, ballroom dancing, or dance in religious ceremonies. In all of these cases the person watching will recognize that they are viewing a dance (Alter 1996, 4).

Understanding these two extremes - the known and identified on the one hand and the complexity of definition on the other - I will try to illustrate the relevant points which can help identify dance as a concept, and which reveal something of the debate around this question in the dance world. I do not presume to give a complete picture of the current debate around the definition of dance, but to raise the points that, to the best of my understanding, concern the subject of this paper.

#### *Dance is movement for the sake of movement itself*

One basic distinction defines dance as movement that is performed for its own sake and not in order to perform another action (McFee 1995, 51). This distinction excludes all the actions of daily life in which movement is executed in order to achieve some goal external to the movement itself. That includes both simple everyday actions such as speaking, eating and walking, and complex movements that require concentration and clear intention such as playing musical instruments, sculpting, building, etc. It may be said that, by their very nature, these activities are not dance (McFee 1995, 55-6). The movements that serve them may, in themselves, be extremely complex or performed automatically, but ultimately they are the means for the fulfilment of another goal. In these cases, the importance of movement is that it is performed in order to bring about a desired, practical result. Therefore, dance may be defined as an activity in which the execution of movement is the centre of attention rather than any other functional outcome that occurs as a result of it. It can be said that, in dance, movement functions in order to create itself and, as such, exists as a sequence of movements of the human body in a certain space and at a given time (Alter 1996, 7-8).

From this we can conclude that dance is an activity in which movement is itself a tool and a goal at the same time. In this case the question must be asked: why did an activity whose goal is its implementation develop in human society? A record of the existence and importance of dance in human society has existed from prehistoric times (Garfinkel 2000). Dance managed to fulfil and express the different needs of man in his social life. In human culture, dance has been used in many ways and for the greatest variety of purposes - as a social expression of joy or grief (wedding dances and mourning dances at funerals), religious ceremonies, prayer (dances of supplication for rain), play, pleasure (ballroom dancing or folk dancing), for some type of social bonding (war dances), and for artistic expression. More recently, trends have developed in which dance serves as a means of self-expression, release and the understanding of the human

psyche and its healing. From this we can deduce that the movement of the human body has served and still serves as a tool to satisfy various personal and social needs that can be understood and defined in different ways (Alter 1996, 17, 19).

#### *What is and what is not dance?*

When dance serves so many purposes and has so many different aspects, how can we distinguish between them or decide if a certain sequence of movements is a dance or not? Whilst we define dance as an activity in which movement is the goal and the means at the same time, we are not denying the possibility that any movement can be used in the performance of the dance itself. "It is at least possible... that every movement that occurs in dance, may also exist in another context: there is no pattern of movement that can in itself be defined as dance" (McFee 1995, 51). Thus, for example, walking in itself is not dance, although dance can definitely include walking as one of its movements, when the purpose of walking is not moving from one place to another, but as part of the dance itself. In this case the emphasis will be on the manner in which the walking is performed, which would not be the case if it were just a function of "reaching" another place (McFee 1995, 49, 51).

In contemporary dance this question has come to the fore, mainly because many of the conventions concerning movement that we are accustomed to seeing as dance have been overturned by choreographers who prefer to create dances that incorporate everyday movements, performed by people not trained as dancers according to accepted tradition (McFee 1995, 67). This is relevant since it sheds light on the question as to what dance is in its widest sense, and does not rely solely on the simple and accepted identification of the dancing figure (McFee 1995, 49-54). Once again, the question arises: what defines an activity as dance? McFee<sup>1</sup> claims that in fact there is no need or possibility to provide a definition but instead we should try to find the differences between dance and other actions similar to it, such as gymnastics (McFee 1995, 49). He also claims that the only thing that defines this difference is the way it is viewed by the audience and the criteria by which it is judged (McFee 1995, 50, 66). Thus, for example, in a gymnastics competition the audience will consider the height of the jumps, the accuracy of the landing, or the speed at which a routine progresses. In contrast, a dance performance is judged according to artistic criteria, the expression of the dancer, the accord between the dance and the music (if there is any), the harmony or dissonance of the entire dance, etc. They are viewed differently, with different expectations, and these expectations are what determine that one is dance and the other gymnastics on the part of both the performer and the spectator (McFee 1995, 58-9, 65-66). McFee also notes that external conditions such as costumes, lighting and a stage do not necessarily define the

<sup>1</sup> In his 1995 book "Understanding Dance", McFee deals with the definition of dance and philosophical questions which are connected with and follow from this discussion.



activity as dance since they can represent other activities that take place with their assistance (such as a play).

*Dance as a performing art which exists in time*

Dance is an art form which exists in time and as such it exists for one moment and disappears in the next. All our efforts to capture, document and preserve dance are limited to its description rather than its manifestation. This debate about dance still exists today when it can be filmed by different methods, and yet photography is not performance and the screen is not the stage (Alter 1996, 14). The problem has implications for dance which is documented only in drawings, and as such provides us with very little information for the investigation of ancient dance using the minimal knowledge in our possession.

In practice, it is impossible to “catch hold” of the dance in order to watch it again. Even if we were in the same room and the same dancer repeated the same choreography, we would never see the same dance (McFee 1995, 93-94). The dancer might be more tired, more excited, more relaxed, etc. We can therefore see that it is impossible to view “the same dance” over and over again. This would be even clearer if another dancer were to dance the same steps at the same rhythm. With a different physique, a different inner rhythm and a different interpretation, the dance would change from one person to another and from one moment to another. Even if we as spectators could identify what was similar, it still would not be a repeat of the event itself but rather an additional performance of the same movements. Consequently, it would be a different dance each time it was performed (McFee 1995, 93, 101).

Nowadays, we can film a dance as it is being performed which creates the deceptive impression that it is possible to watch dance on the screen. While it is true that the event is documented, it has many limitations. The camera only gives us a fraction of the entire space and the movement within it. Frequently, it reflects the desires and understanding of the cameraman concerning the space, movement and relative importance of the details. This experience is in no way similar to watching a live performance of dance, and usually only gives us a slight intimation of the dance itself and the experience it generates (Alter 1996, 14; McFee 1995:88). As spectators, the experience of viewing an existing work of art, such as a painting or a sculpture, changes repeatedly. We see things differently each time, if only because our personal and subjective feelings change from moment to moment. As to the performing arts (acting, dance, music), there are undoubtedly changes in the performer and the spectator (McFee 1995, 89, 101).

When we come to define dance we are dealing with an activity that cannot be documented or duplicated. Moreover, it is an activity that is difficult to define, being composed of elements that serve us in our daily lives - movements of the human body. One of the significant criteria for identifying dance is met when the movement exists for its own sake

and not in order to execute some other functional goal. Even when we exclude all the instances that fall outside this definition, we still need to define what distinguishes the use of body in dance from that in sport, for example. Since the definition of dance can be very problematic if based solely on watching the movements, it is our point of view both as dancers and as spectators which create the criteria that will determine the activity or the event as dance. Our observation of the movements and the event taking place determines what the act is. If the dancer says that he is dancing and the audience understands that it is watching dance, then the way the dance is executed and the expectations of the spectator will together create the existence of dance (Scott 1997, 22 note 37). This dance event may include movements that the spectator identifies as typical of dance, recognizable and identifiable by its steps and movements; alternatively the spectator may associate the movements with those of everyday life or any other specific activity, or any combination of both.

**Documentation of dance of ancient Egypt**

From the extant Egyptian finds, no groups of three-dimensional figures have ever been found. While statues of Bes, the dancing god, considered to be a super-human figure (Spencer 2003, 112), have been found, as well as two statues of a long-haired female dancer in a back-bend position (Brunner-Traut 1958, 39), these three-dimensional representations appear as individuals and do not give us a picture of a group moving in space. Extant representations of group dances are two-dimensional, making it even more difficult to understand how they could have moved, and they provide few clues as to the spatial perception and group formation that was common in Egyptian dance. Since dance always takes place in space, in order to understand the possible nature of their movements, we have to learn some essential details of the way the human body was portrayed and the method of dealing with space according to the Egyptian principles of two-dimensional art.

*Principles of representing the body and space in two-dimensional Egyptian art*

Egyptian art is a semiological system in which a picture is a symbol of the message behind it (Tefnin 1984; 1991). Egyptian art does not accurately portray reality but rather represents, in codes, the scenes which were familiar to the viewers; the body and its movement is not portrayed with realistic accuracy but rather in an indirect manner that is simple, clear and effective for the artist's needs (Aldred 1986, 18). This is done using the aspective method, whereby the parts of the body are drawn separately in the manner which constitutes the most characteristic aspect of each element. The picture of the complete body is thus a composition of these parts (Shäfer 1986, 18).

This system creates codes and agreements concerning the content and the way it is portrayed. Egyptian art is in fact a language that connects the regime and the individual, and



Figure 3. Soldiers running, New Kingdom, El-Amarna, tomb of Meru (after Schäfer 1986, 179).

man and god. In the Egyptian language, there are several words and terms to represent the concept of dance (Green 1883; Brunner –Traut 1958; Montet 1925). When we look for the existence of dancers and dancing we are searching for the codes and symbols that characterize dance and portray it clearly. We have to remember that the events represented were clear to the Egyptians and the hints that were given provided the information necessary for them to recognize what the picture portrayed.

Unlike modern art, Egyptian painting was not a means of free expression. The Egyptian painter was subject to clear and even ironclad rules and his work had to serve the specific propagandist and religious goals of the regime, and art was usually created in order to aggrandize the king or the dead to both men and the gods. The painting and its message were supposed to be understood by the contemporary audience and were constructed in a way that enabled the meaning of the artist to be easily apparent. The representation of a man's movements were all known and recognized by the people to whom the art was directed. "The aim of the painter was to communicate. This is art in which each person could choose what was essential for the portrayal of the figure, to disregard any naturalistic visual representation as long as the object was recognizable. In practice it created a language of forms. In time these chosen forms became a canon" (Schäfer 1986, 150).

One of the fundamental factors that dictated the method in which the artists worked was the lack of perspective. There is usually no consideration paid to the notion of depth in the paintings. Any attempt at perspective that does exist is through the portrayal of one object partially overlapping another object, indicating that one object is in front and the other is behind. This may be seen in the picture in which a group of people is running and the legs and arms of those in front partially overlap those of the figures behind them (fig. 3). Another example can be seen in the portrayal of a chair being carried by two men (fig. 4). In it, the hand of the arm holding the chair from behind is actually drawn holding the front, with no consideration given to the depth of the chair being carried. In the case of the group of running men,

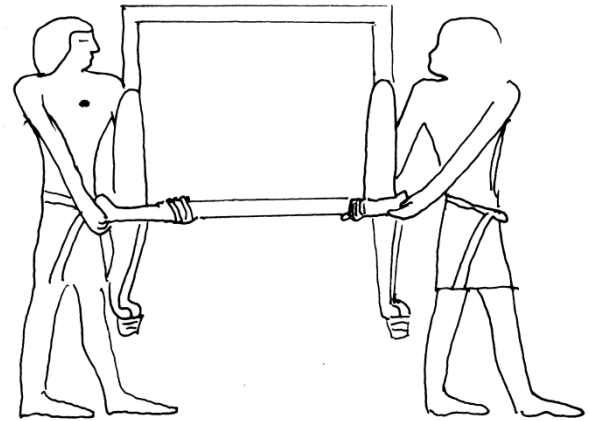


Figure 4. Two figures carrying a chair, tomb of Ti, Old Kingdom (after Schäfer 1986, 143).

we can tell that some of them are in the back and others in front but we cannot know how they are spread out in the space.

In the representation of the body itself, this lack of perspective resulted in a sort of flattening or spreading of the body; the depiction of the body is an amalgamation of specific parts drawn from the angle by which they are easiest to depict, resulting in a body composed of parts seen from different angles. The body is usually shown with the legs in profile, the furthest one stepping forward so that both legs can be seen. The line of the buttocks is clearly seen while the pelvis is rotated three-quarters towards us. The torso is also rotated in the same way, almost completely facing the front while one breast, or nipple in the case of a man, is drawn in profile. The entire width of the shoulders is represented frontally and the arms also face the front. The head appears in profile (Lexova 1935, 16-17). In practice, a person could not be in the exact position portrayed in most of the pictures. Since the lines flatten the form in a way that makes it easiest to represent each part, the direction in the picture does not necessarily indicate the direction in reality. When discussing how to understand a pose (or a movement), this principle is of great significance. A clear example of can be seen in the picture of a man sleeping on a small bed (fig. 5). The man is sleeping and his legs appear to be pointing upwards and his head, seen in profile, rests on its back part. In fact, "the customary sleeping position, according to three-dimensional representation, is on the side with the head resting on the ear on a head-support, so that the knees are facing us and not vertical as they are drawn in the picture. For the Egyptians, the sleeping position was known and they understood it according to this unrealistic picture" (Schäfer 1986, 251). This example makes it clear that in other cases, even in those where the body is turned or



Figure 5. Man sleeping on a bunk, New Kingdom, Berlin 20488 (after Schäfer 1986, 123).

rotated in a manner which seems realistic - as in the pictures of the musicians and the dancers (fig. 6) - one should still question the intentions of the artist in his portrayal.

An additional point when contemplating representations of Egyptian dance is the organization of space. In Egyptian paintings there is no reference to space as such. The figures can be placed anywhere and objects can be dispersed in the picture without any relationship to their real position in space<sup>2</sup>. Spatial connections occur through the creation of groups of figures or layers of figures without there being any change in their individual forms. This shows that there are multiple figures but does not explain their exact arrangement in space. Thus, for example, in a scene in which a royal couple is standing and receiving gifts, the queen seems to be standing behind the king (fig. 7). This is an Egyptian picture of an extant statue; in the statue, the royal couple is standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder. The Egyptians, who recognized the scene, knew this, but we would not have known this without the statue (Schäfer 1986, 172).

The division into registers appears in the Old Kingdom period (ca. 2500 BCE) when figures on a line, representing the ground, emerged. However, this still does not indicate the way the figures were dispersed in space and in which direction they were facing. This is undoubtedly true when the figures do not overlap each other (in a practical arrangement) as they do in the picture of the dancers from the Old Kingdom (fig. 8). Accordingly we cannot tell if they are positioned one behind the other or side by side, if the group of singers and dancers are turning in different directions, or if they are arranged in a semicircle, etc. There are many ways in which the spatial distribution could be understood and consequently the possible directions of movement are many and varied; we cannot know which is the 'correct' possibility nor what the artist intended. The Egyptian, however, saw these dances and recognized the scene from their own lives and knew the intentions of the artist.

To sum up, the Egyptian artists do not provide us with an accurate portrayal of the position of the body or its location



Figure 6. Musicians-dancers, New Kingdom, Thebes Tomb of Nakht (after Schäfer 1986, 210).

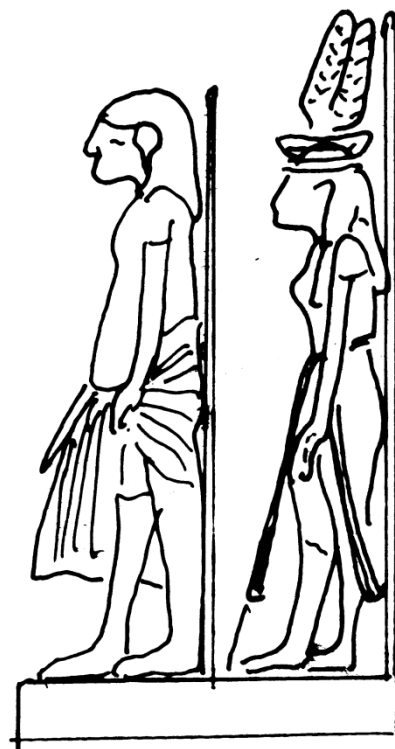


Figure 7. King and queen in receiving offerings, Ancient Egyptian drawing from a statue of the same period, tomb, El Amarna, New Kingdom (after Schäfer 1986, 172).

<sup>2</sup> For perception of space and time, see Frankfurt 1962.



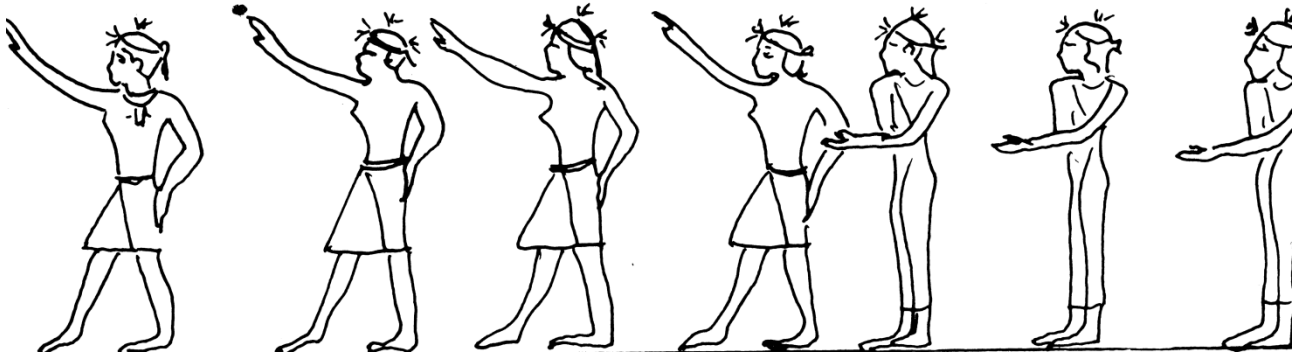


Figure 8. Dance from the Old Kingdom, three singers, and three dancers, Giza, tomb 90 (after Schäfer 1986, 173).

in space in relation to other figures or objects. Consequently, we lack too much information to know with any certainty the actual arrangement of the figures to which the painter was alluding.

Even when I take the liberty of identifying these figures as dancers and the scene as dance, it is not possible to infer much about the way these dancers moved or the way the dance was performed as a whole. It is possible to derive a few hints from certain cases in which there are details that are emphasized or that are unusual<sup>3</sup>. There is nothing in them which provides a picture of one distinct possibility of movement but they do open the door to many possibilities that can be derived from them.

### Characteristics of Ancient Egyptian Dance scenes

In light of the definition of dance presented above, the following discussion will examine the scenes that contain moving figures that I have identified as dancers. Taking into account the points raised earlier, and the difficulties in defining what dance is and what it is not, the question becomes much more complex when we are faced with silent pictures alone, and when the codes and the intentions behind these pictures remain open to our interpretation without any first-hand guidance or explanations (Garfinkel 2000, 16). The text accompanying the picture is often not clear and does not provide clarifying information (Brunner-Traut 1958). In this section, I will investigate the question according to the definition of dance and the points raised above, using individual examples to illustrate them.

According to the definition discussed above, it is the intention and the context of the situation or the event which defines the act or the performance as dance. Without any testimony or clear information concerning the intentions behind each scene, the possibility of classification is, in many cases, left to us. As a result, we can formulate

<sup>3</sup> For example the *Muu* dancers, who frequently appear to be touching the ground with the toes of the rear leg, and with the heel of this leg raised. This seems to indicate a dynamic, forward movement or even the beginning of a leap (fig. 12). In another example, several dancers have a round disk at the end of their braided hair, with the braid waving in a motion that may suggest a swinging, circular movement (fig. 19).

either the most comprehensive or the most selective definition of what could be considered dance. The most comprehensive definition would include every movement or physical activity that does not portray any other action, and every group organization that does not involve any other categorized activity. According to this definition, people who are not trained dancers by occupation may be executing a dance as part of their ongoing activity, for example priests, worshippers or sometimes mourners. I will describe the examples which I present and the principles underlying them. If the narrowest definition is chosen, only those people that are organized symmetrically and deliberately into groups will be considered to be dancers. In many cases they are accompanied by the presence of musicians. Their position in the picture indicates a clear purpose in the execution of the movement and its character. For the most part, the dancers in those scenes will be performing identical or similar movements. Sometimes many different movements can be seen, performed by dancers who are identical in size and dress. An additional aspect that would determine dance within this narrow definition would be the character and type of the movement. Whether the movements are simple but specific, or so complex that they are acrobatic, in both cases the group clearly appears to be composed of trained and organized dancers, each one of whom is performing his role precisely in a position that was determined in advance. I will present assorted examples of these cases in this discussion.

### Dancers do not engage in any other identifiable work

The first criterion for dance defined above is that the figures are not engaged in any clear, recognizable or identifiable work. Therefore, although the bending forms of the slaughterer or the kneeling bodies of the fishermen at work seem to be engaged in a complex and stylized movement, we do not consider them to be dancers. For example:

*A slaughterer at a funeral feast, the tomb of Ninetjer, Old Kingdom (fig. 1)*

In this picture a male figure on the left grasps an ox. The man is standing on his right foot and his entire body is leaning slightly forward diagonally. His left foot is bent

and lifted forward at a right angle to the supporting leg, while his back is inclined in a straight line that continues in the diagonal direction dictated by the supporting leg. The shoulder girdle is almost completely facing the viewer, thus twisted in relation to the lower part of the body, whereas his arms are extended at different heights in the same direction as his head and body, towards the right side of the picture. If the slaughterer was not holding a knife in one hand and the leg of an ox in the other, we could see an extremely dexterous dancer depicted in the middle of a dynamic movement. Since this movement does not exist separate from the context of its purpose - the subjugation and the slaughter of the ox - I do not regard it as movement that exists for its own sake. The emphasis here is not on the movement itself but on the successful fulfilment of the movement in slaughtering the ox. Therefore, although the pose of the slaughterers in this scene portrays dynamic and arresting body movements, I do not see them as dancing figures according to my definition. The figures that I regard as dancers are not engaged in any work but only in movement itself (figs. 2, 8). Sometimes these figures appear to be holding a musical instrument with which to accompany the dance and can also be seen playing instruments while dancing (figs. 10, 11). In another case they are holding a stick that is used to hunt birds (fig. 11). Here it is clear that the tool held in their hand is not being used for its original function but as an object which plays a part in their dance (Spencer 2003, 114). Usually, however, the dancing figures do not hold anything in their hands and their arms are part of the entire body movement.

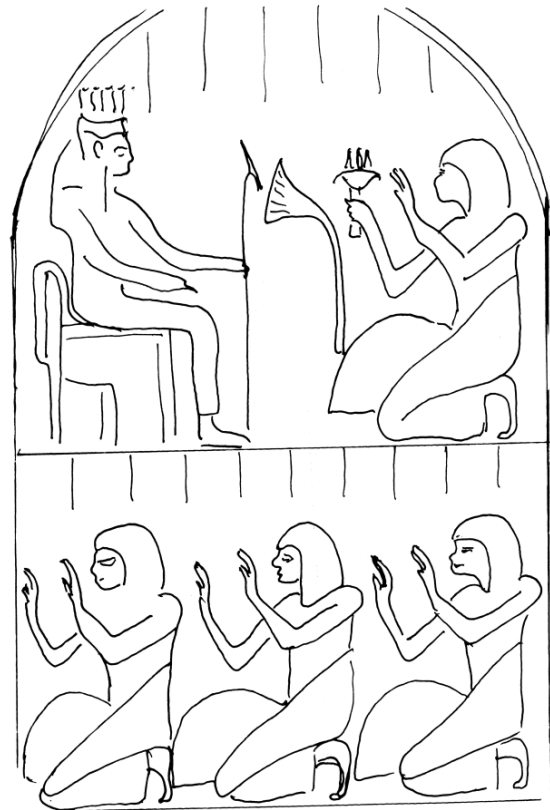


Figure 9. Worshipping the goddess Hathor, stele of the workman Nefersut, Deir el Medina, New Kingdom, (after Robins 1997, 188, fig. 223).

Figures that raise questions regarding this criterion are representations of priests (hieroglyph 26A in Gardiner) or worshippers (hieroglyph 4A) (figs. 1, 9, 12). It is difficult to clearly describe what these figures are doing and the purpose of their actions. At the same time, although their actions do not seem to have an intelligible and apparent goal, we see a stylized and specific movement of their bodies which can be portrayed with great attention to detail, such as the position of the fingers, the direction of the head and the bending of the legs. These figures, whose occupation is clearly sacred, might be considered dancing figures according to the present definition if dance serves as a means for carrying out their sacred work: prayer, ritual or any other ceremony (Scott 1997, 8). Even though I would not call them dancers *per se*, dance exists and is part of their functions as priests or worshippers. If we wished to incorporate only those for whom dance is a vocation, their occupation and their expertise as representatives of dance, we could limit the definition according to these criteria and in this case priests and worshippers would not be included.

*The funerary priest at the tomb of Ninetjer, Old Kingdom (fig. 1)*

The figure on the right in the top register is a funerary priest. He is standing to the right of the slaughtering scene and his body and the movement of his hand are inclined to the left, in the direction of the scene nearest to him and to the owner



Figure 10. Dancer playing instrument and two musicians. New Kingdom, Thebes. Tomb of Nakht (after Kanawati 2001, 103).





Figure 11. Dancers, dwarf and musicians at a funeral feast. Tomb of Ninetjer Giza, Old Kingdom (after Junker 1951, fig. 4).

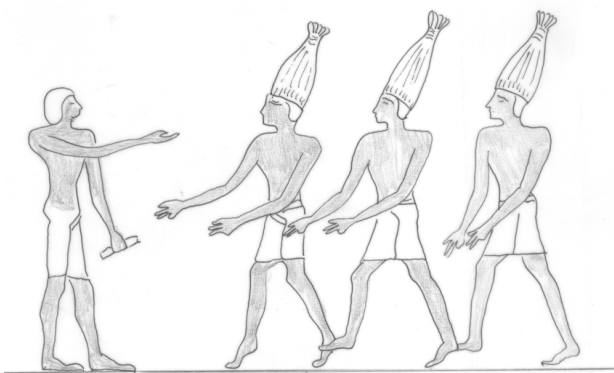


Figure 12. Muu dancers progressing towards the funerary priest during a funeral. New Kingdom Thebes, tomb of Tetiki (after Lexova 1935, fig. 59).

of the tomb. According to my first definition, the priest is not performing any physical activity with his body that would produce a visible and obvious result. Because of the nature of his role, he is performing some kind of ceremony. When we look at the position of his body, he is executing a movement in which his right hand is stretched out and bent forward slightly at shoulder-height. His hand and fingers are also fashioned in a deliberate and stylized manner. His left arm, with its clenched fist, is placed along his side. There is no doubt that his motions are purposeful and planned and all the elements of his body are precisely placed. The movement is not a complex one, but its very existence indicates intention by its execution. In my opinion, the movement in this case can be regarded as a dance within a ceremony. The movement here is a tool that represents, symbolizes and expresses the content of the ceremony (or a part of it).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In his article, Scott (1997, 8) cites Augustine's attitude to ritual dance. The citation explains that even if the ceremony itself has another purpose or objective, when the movement is emphasized in any way it can be said to be a dance within the ceremonial framework.

### A dance scene incorporates a number of participants and not one individual dancer

An Egyptian dance scene mostly incorporates a number of dancers, two or more. The dancers do not appear as individuals except in a very few cases (Meyer-Dietrich 2009).

1. Ostracons that were found in the workmen's village of Deir el Medina, where a few records of individual dancers were found (fig. 13), may have served as the artist's sketchbook and been created from observations of community life. It is highly likely that they are an indication of spontaneous dancing that existed in the life of the community.
2. Another representation of an individual dancer which also seems to have the character of a sketchbook is seen in the picture of a dancer who appears in the apparent



Figure 13. Girl in back-bend (bridge). Ostrakon Torino, 7053, Deir el Medina, New Kingdom (after www. Egyptyoga.com/umages68.jpg).

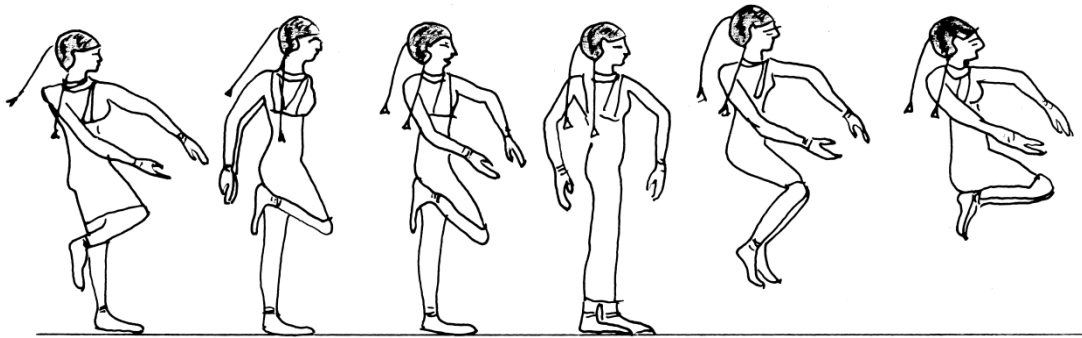


Figure 14. Girl in different stages of a movement, Beni Hasan, Middle Kingdom (after Lexova 1935, fig.31).

progression of one movement along a timeline (fig. 14). This representation shows the development of a movement executed by the same dancer at different stages of the process, from standing to jumping (Lexova 1935, 19. Meyer-Ditrich 2009).

3. Single dancers only appear in pictures from the New Kingdom, when an individual dancer appears between a group of female musicians who are holding instruments and playing. It is usually the costumes which differentiate the dancers and the musicians (fig. 10) (Lexova 1935, 44).
4. Another representation of an individual dancer is that of the dancing god, *Bes*. This figure also appears in three-dimensional form (fig. 15) (Spencer 2003, 112).

In all other instances which appear in tombs or temples throughout all periods, the dancers are in groups. Here are a number of examples of a variety of dance scenes in which the dancers appear at least in pairs.

*Dancers at a funeral feast. The western wall in the tomb of Ninetjer, Giza, Old Kingdom (fig. 11)*

There are seven large female dancers in this picture and one dwarf. Three women are sitting in front of the dancers with their legs folded beneath them. They are clapping and looking at the dancers. The dancers are in two groups and while the pose of their bodies is slightly different it is clear that they belong to the same scene and are participating in a single event (Junker 1951, 127). Their costumes are similar; their movements are stylized and were coordinated in advance.

*Muu dancers at a funeral ceremony, New Kingdom (fig. 12)*

Three men are seen on the right, advancing in a uniform movement in the direction of the funerary priest standing to the left. The three men are wearing short skirts and on their heads are tall, narrow papyrus hats. Their hands are placed at their sides and their fingers are arranged in a distinctive position. Their legs are apart in a wide stride and the heels of their left legs are raised while the front

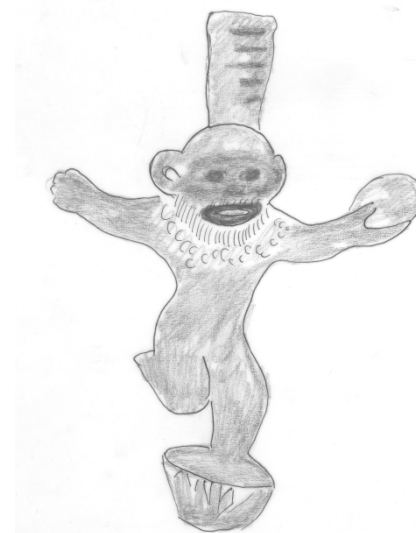


Figure 15. The dancing figure *Bes*, combining characteristics of a man and a lion. British Museum 20865 (after Spencer 2003, 112).

legs are in the air, creating a sense of a dynamic movement at the moment of transition (this is a transient position that cannot be sustained). This group of men appear only in the context of funerals and always at least in pairs (Brunner-Traut 1958, 53. Meyer-Ditrich 2009). The coordination of their movements indicates a prior choreography.

*Dancers in a temple, festival of Opet to the god Amun-Ra, New Kingdom (fig. 16)*

A group of male or female dancers are seen in a dynamic, acrobatic movement. These dancers are participating in the Opet ceremony which is celebrated in honour of the god *Amun-Ra* (Spencer 2003, 112). In this ceremony, a procession accompanies the god who is taken out from his temple and led to the temple of his wife *Mut*, and intricate acrobatic movements are seen. There is no doubt that the dancers who performed this dance were trained both as individuals and as a group.

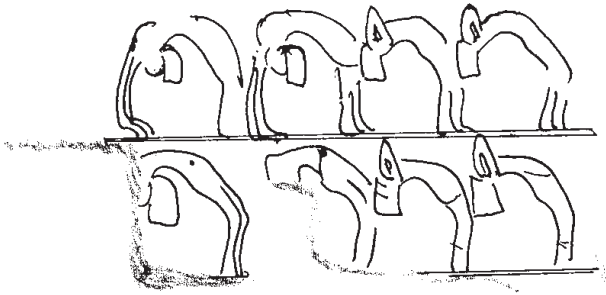


Figure 16. Male or female dancers in a back bend. Opet. Temple of Amon Ra, Luxor (after Spencer 2003, 112).

*Dancers at the tomb of Kheruef, Thebes, New Kingdom (fig. 2)*

The pair of dancers seen in the picture are part of a group dancing in a line. They are dancing as part of the jubilee festival (the Sed ceremony) in honour of the king (Strouhal 1997, 46). Their movements and costumes are identical. The movement of their bodies is complex as it involves twisting their spines and bending downwards at the same time. Their glance is directed upwards so that their necks are also twisted at an acute angle. Their arms and hands are also beautifully and precisely styled. The positions of the body and the obvious coordination between the dancers are evidence of their training and the precise planning of the dance.



Figure 17. Dancers at a feast, New Kingdom, tomb of Nebamun, Thebes (after Spencer 2003, 113).

*Dancers at a feast, Tomb of Nebamun. Thebes, New Kingdom (fig. 17)*

Two female dancers are seen in the picture, accompanied by musicians who are playing and singing during a feast (Aldred 1986, 176). The dancers appear to be almost naked, wearing only necklaces and a narrow band around their hips. They are intertwined in a joint dance whilst clapping. Even though their movements are not completely identical and their poses are slightly different from each other, there is no doubt that the dance is composed for both of them together and their movements complement one another.

*Mourners, tomb of Ankhmahor, Saqqara, Old Kingdom (fig. 18)*

The men and women in the picture are mourners (Kanawati 2001, 5). A physical, group event is taking place. Mourning is characteristically expressed by repeated movements, the hands touching the head or raised up to different heights, the body crouched in a sitting position. In this picture the figures lean so far back that they are almost falling. The mourning is taking place in a group and two or three people can be seen holding each other in a joint movement.



Figure 18. Men and women mourning, Old Kingdom tomb of Ankhmahor, Saqqara (after Kanawati 2001, 29).



In all these scenes and others like them, the dancers appear in a group. This can be understood as a socio-cultural statement regarding the nature of dance in Egypt. Dance takes place in a social context and deals with the connection between both man and man, and man and god, in festivals and in the context of death; between one dancer and another and between the dancers and the spectators.

### **Symmetry in the depiction of dance scenes**

In our eyes there is beauty, perfection and appeal in symmetry. “Symmetry, as wide or narrow as you may define its meaning, is one idea by which man has tried throughout the ages to comprehend and create order, beauty and perfection” (Weyl 1965, 5). Symmetry is a practical concept in our everyday lives that we identify intuitively (Abas and Salman 1995, 32). We live symmetry in the arrangement of our bodies and in the arrangement of the environment in which we live. Symmetry is one of the primary elements that give us a sense of order, organization and harmony. “In the everyday sense, we use the concept of symmetry to describe balance and total agreement in size and form of opposite sides of a structure. In the wider sense it is attributed to organized patterns that are created by objects constructed from identical or similar units. The concept also relates to harmony of proportions (Abas and Salman 1995, 32). The definitions of symmetry in science are different and much more complex. I will treat symmetry here in the simplest and most accessible manner since our intuitive or instinctive attraction to symmetry is one aspect of its strength. It is a concept of form that is easy to understand intuitively and gives a sense of orientation and order. Pictures of many Egyptian dance scenes have a characteristically symmetrical structure, which is possible because they are composed of a number of figures that are usually performing the same or similar movements, either parallel to or opposite to each other. This arrangement draws the viewer’s eye and creates a basic sense of identification and partnership with what is taking place. Two examples from the images presented above will be further discussed to highlight this structure; one is from the Old Kingdom, where there is a clearly symmetrical arrangement of the figures, side by side and opposite each other. This is a typical, although complex, example of many dance scenes. The second example depicts a pair of dancers from the New Kingdom in which another sort of symmetry can be seen and the pose of the dancers is much looser. Nonetheless, the symmetrical organization of the picture is easy to perceive.

*Dance scene from the tomb of Ninetjer, Giza, Old Kingdom (fig. 11)*

Order and symmetry can be seen in the structure of the line of figures – despite the difference between the two groups, their arrangement shows their structural connection and the clear relationship between them. The three figures on the right are parallel to the three on the left, and the middle group relates equally to the two groups at each end. This group can itself be divided symmetrically in the

middle. The space between the middle group and the two outer groups is equal on both sides where, on one side, the small figure of the dwarf is seen, and on the other the two limbs of the dancer-musician. In the two spaces, the upper part of the register is empty above the tops of the dancers’ heads. On closer scrutiny, differences between the two groups of dancers may be perceived. There are variations in their costumes and their movements. The left arms of the dancers on the right are bent and held above their heads with their forefingers and their thumbs touching each other (possibly producing a sound). The dancers in the middle group are holding sticks in their left hands along the side of their bodies<sup>5</sup>, and in the hands of their right arms, which are bent and held high, they are holding sistrums (rattle-like musical instruments that are also associated with the worship of the goddess *Hathor* (Junker 1951, 135)). As for the structure of the picture, the figures in each group are duplicated, so that each one is clear and defined in itself. This duplication gives a general sense of order, direction and meaning, although scrutiny of the details shows us that there are slight differences in the figures. The differences can be seen in the dress, the position and size of the limbs, and even in the portrayal of the faces. The symmetry is not rigid but can be perceived in general, giving us a simple and immediate sense of the group, the directions and the movements within it. This is a picture that has a clear sense of organization, order and orientation, but at the same time it is not rigid or static but conveys a feeling of movement, change and dynamism.

*A pair of dancers, tomb of Nebamun, Thebes, New Kingdom (fig. 17)*

The two figures dancing together are also in a recognizably symmetrical arrangement. Here too, even though the dancers are not performing the exact same movements, they intersect one another, creating a harmonious structure that is symmetrically balanced. The movements of their hands, where the hands of the dancer at the rear are clapping downwards and the clapping hands of the dancer in front are held aloft, together creating a single diagonal line. In the same way, the lines of their hips combine to form a horizontal line despite the slightly different angles at which they are bending. If we view them from a short distance, the two dancers look like one figure with double limbs intertwined. In the picture it seems that the central two legs of the dancers create the basis of their joint pose.

### **The representation of dancers in a shifting movement**

Another less frequent arrangement of dancers is the representation of similar figures, exactly alike in dress and size, appearing one beside the other along a single line, in a similar movement that changes from one figure to another or from one pair of figures to the next. This image may indicate a large group of dancers simultaneously performing a dance that incorporates a variety of movements, or

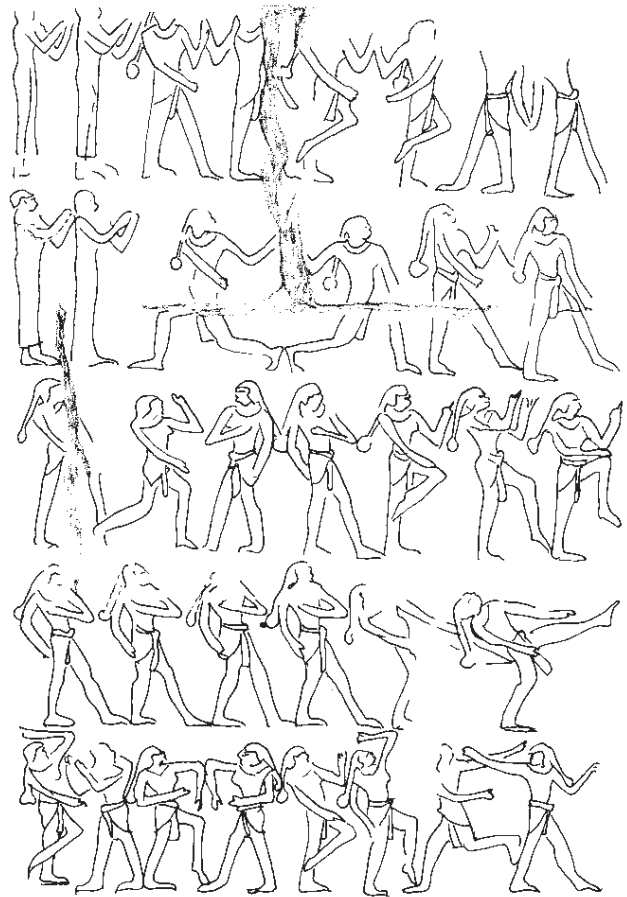
<sup>5</sup> The Egyptians used sticks of this kind to hunt birds. This may be a hint that this was a “hunting dance”.

alternatively the documentation of the development of the movements of a dance along a timeline, where the artist has decided to record specific movements of the dance. Although there is no apparent symmetrical structure in the representation of the scene, the figures appearing in it are in fact identical and may even represent the same figure over and over. Close observation of the entire mural gives a clear sense of dynamism and movement precisely because of the lack of rigid organization of the figures. Looking at one register separately shows us the possible development of the dance through the transition from one movement to another and from one pose to another, clearly revealing dynamic movement. This representation may be seen as a type of “movement notation”, or could be read as notes for the performance of a dance or of a certain movement exercise.

*Five registers showing dancers. Tomb of Mereruka, Old Kingdom (fig. 19)*

On this relief dancers are arranged in five separate registers. The direction in which this picture should generally be read is from left to right, as all the figures on the left are turning their heads to the right as if they are advancing in that direction, and all the figures on the right are turning to the right as if they are also continuing to advance in the same direction<sup>6</sup>.

When studying each register separately, two dancers clapping can be seen on the left of the highest register, on their right are a pair of dancers in skirts with a disc-like circle at the end of their plaited hair that seems to indicate that its weight has caused it to swing slightly away from their bodies. There are three pairs of dancers of this type, all of whom are clearly symmetrical and perfectly coordinated and each pair is holding hands in a joint pose that is different from the two other pairs. This series of figures can be read as three pairs of dancers dancing simultaneously in the same place, but recorded at three different points of the same dance. Alternatively, it is possible that they are performing a complex and diverse dance that incorporates different movements and steps carried out at the same time. We can also see this picture as a record of the progression of different stages of a dance performed by the same pair of dancers. If we choose this reading, we can look at each register separately and read the progress of either a pair of dancers (in the two upper registers and in the lowest one) or a single dancer in each of the remaining registers. According to this reading, it is possible that these registers, in which the dancers are dancing separately, show the part of the dance in which they have separated (after dancing together in the two higher registers), later returning and meeting again for a joint dance in the lowest register. In view of the Egyptians' preference for an orderly and organized presentation of many dance scenes, I am inclined to read this picture as a depiction of the course of the movements of



*Figure 19. Dancers, Old Kingdom, tomb of Mereruka, Saqqara (after Van Lepp 1985, 386).*

one or two dancers and not a record of a dance with many participants and a diverse assortment of movements being performed at the same time.

*A girl in different stages of movement. Beni Hassan, Middle Kingdom (fig. 14)*

The girl in this picture is changing the position of her body from one picture to the next in a way that could portray different moments of one extended movement (Lexova 1935, 44). We have here a depiction of a movement that includes the transition from standing on one foot to standing on two, to a leap from both feet at the same time. There is no record here of the jump's landing. The course of the arm-movements is also clearly shown. It is hard to imagine that the intention here is to record several figures in different positions (even though this is possible), therefore I perceive this to be a ‘page of instructions’ for the execution of an exercise or the progression of movements of a dance. Alternatively, it may be an attempt by the artist to capture and record the characteristics of a movement.

## Conclusion

How do we define dance in ancient Egypt? What are the

<sup>6</sup> An interpretation of the way in which the dancers are depicted and the relationship of this whole scene to the representation of words in hieroglyphic writing can be found in an article by Van-Lepp (1985).

tools and criteria according to which we can call one drawing a dance scene whereas another drawing will not be included in this definition? These are the questions that have been discussed in this paper.

The more I attempted to create the tools to identify dance and to formulate a clear definition of it, the more the complexity of the problem became obvious. Since I have been investigating this subject as a dancer, I have not been content to classify dancers and dance scenes merely on the basis of images. My trained eye notices movement and analyzes body postures almost as a regular habit, and this has brought me to question and study this subject, if only because so many of the representations of human figures in Egyptian art seemed to me to represent dancers. In the limited Egyptological literature that deals directly with this field, this question has not been raised explicitly, and the treatment of dance in Egypt deals mainly with categories, roles and different representations. There is no clear definition of the categories according to which a specific figure should be defined as a dancer as opposed to another figure that should not.

In order to find the necessary tools, I investigated the subject via contemporary dance and became aware of the complexity of the problems of definition. Since dance plays many roles in human society, defining it requires various tools. It must be defined as an art, as a social skill, as the means for social or personal expression for the individual, as part of religious ceremonies, etc. These are all different areas that have to be assessed in different ways. The role of the classical ballet dancer on stage is different to that of the folk dancer in the street or the ballroom dancer on the dance floor. In order to achieve a definition that can serve all of these, one needs to discover what it was that defined a certain set of movements as dance. I found that it was not possible to arrive at such a definition on the basis of movement alone, since many different sequences of movements could be considered as dance. However, certain dances would not be included within this definition on the basis of movement sequences alone. This shows that the human context, the environment and the intentions of both performer and spectator are the determining factors required to define a sequence of movements as a dance as opposed to any other physical activity.

When approaching this problem concerning the finds from ancient Egypt, I considered them only on the basis of what could be seen in the drawings. Since there is also a problem of definition regarding contemporary dance, how much more difficult must it be when we only have images to study? When we take into account the fact that the Egyptian artist worked according to a set of rules and portrayed these scenes in a language that was understood by his audience, rather than trying to portray a realistic picture, we are left with more questions than answers.

Despite all the issues and complexities mentioned, I have tried to examine the different types of representations and

the definitions that I believe classify them as possible dance scenes. The guidelines were: examination of the shape of the pose, the form in which the scene is presented, the purpose of the activity, and the context in which it exists. All these provided both the tools for studying the different representations of movement and a method for determining whether they represent dance or are some other form of activity. They also exposed borderline cases where the existence of dance is open to question.

For me, this primary attempt to create guidelines for the definition of dance in ancient Egypt is the first step in an examination of many instances that intrigue both the eye and the mind concerning the character, nature and purpose of the movements and dance of this rich culture. Our most basic understanding of movement shows us that we cannot assume that we know how the dances portrayed in paintings and drawings were actually performed. This fact, to me, has two facets. On one hand, there is some sadness that I will never be able to see, experience or perform the portrayed dances in the way that they were lived and experienced in Egypt. On the other hand, because of my love of dance as an evanescent and unique art form, these pictures leave hints that are full of mystery and which offer many possibilities for creating dances inspired by them. Going deeper into the analysis, classification, and understanding of the many possibilities of movement concealed in the moving figures, we are given the opportunity to read these dancing figures as footsteps or clues that will enable us to bring them to life in many different ways.

## References

- Abas, S. J. and Salman, A. S. 1995. *Symmetries of Islamic Geometrical Patterns*. Singapore, World Scientific.
- Aldred, C. 1986. *Egyptian art in the Days of the Pharaohs 3100-320 BC*. London, Thames and Hudson.
- Alter, J. B. 1996. *Dance-Based Dance Theory, From Borrowed Models to Dance-Based Experience*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing.
- Brunner-Traut, E. 1958, *Der Tanz im Alten Ägypten*. Glückstadt, J. J. Augustin.
- Dominicus, B. 1994. *Gesten und Gebärden in Darstellungen des Alten und Mittleren Reiches*. Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens, 10. Heidelberg, Heidelberg Orientverlag.
- Gardiner, A.H. 1957. *Egyptian Grammar: Being an Introduction to the Study of Hieroglyphs*. Oxford, Griffith Institute .
- Groenewegen-Frankfort, H. A. 1972, *Arrest and Movement. An Essay on Space and Time in the representational Art of the ancient Near East*. New York, Hacker Art Books, Inc.
- Green, L. 1983. Egyptian Words for Dancers and Dancing. In J. K. Hoffmeier and E. S. Meltzer (eds.) *Egyptological Miscellanies. A Tribute to Professor Ronald J. Williams*. *The Ancient World* 6( 1-4), 29-38.
- Garfinkel, Y. 2000. *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*. Austin, University of Texas Press.



- Helck, W. and Otto, E. 1975. *Lexikon Der Aegyptologie*. Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz.
- Junker, H. 1951. *Grabungen auf dem Friedhof des Alten Reiches bei den Pyramiden von Giza (Giza X)*. Vienna, Rudolf M. Rohrer.
- Kanawati, N. 2001. *The Tomb and Beyond*. Warminster, Aris & Phillips.
- Lexova, I. 1935. *Ancient Egyptian Dances*. Prague, Oriental Institute.
- Meyer-Dietrich, E. 2009. Dance. In *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*. University of California, CA (<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5142h0d>)
- Montet, P. 1925. *Les scènes de la vie privée dans les tombeaux égyptiens de l'Ancien Empire*. Paris, Strasbourg University.
- McFee, G. 1995. *Understanding Dance*. London, Routledge.
- Robins, G. 1997. *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Schäfer, H. 1986. *Principles of Egyptian Art*. Oxford, Griffith Institute.
- Scott, G. 1997. Banes and Carroll on Defining Dance. *Dance Research Journal* 29(1), 7-22.
- Smith, W. S. 1981. *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*. Revised with Additions by William Kelly Simpson. London: Penguin Books.
- Spencer, P. 2003. Dance in Ancient Egypt. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66(3), 111-121.
- Strouhal, E. 1997. *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.
- Tefnin, R. 1984. 'Discours et iconicité dans l'art égyptien', *Göttinger Miszellen* 79, 55-72.
- Tefnin, R. 1991. Éléments pour une sémiologie de l'image égyptienne. *Cronique d'Égypte* 66, 60-88.
- Van Lepp, J. 1985. The role of Dance in Funerary Ritual in the Old Kingdom. In: S. Schoske (ed), *Akten des vierten Internationalen Ägyptologen-Kongresses München 1985, Band 3: Linguistik - Philologie - Religion*, 385-394. München, Helmut Buske Verlag.
- Vandier, J. 1964. *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne. Tome IV. Bas-reliefs et peintures. Scènes de la vie quotidienne*. Paris, Éditions A. et J. Picard et Cie.
- Weyl, H. 1965. *Symmetry*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Wild, H. 1956. *La danse dans l'Égypte ancienne. Les documents figures*. Positions des thèses des élèves de l'École du Louvre (1911-1944). Paris, Ecole du Louvre.