

St. Denis Ruth (1879?-1968)

Encyclopedia Article

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St. Denis Ruth (1879?-1968)

Early-twentieth-century American dancer and choreographer Ruth St. Denis is often considered to be the mother of modern dance. Born Ruth Dennis in Newark, New Jersey, she began her dance career as a teenager and took the stage name Ruth St. Denis. St. Denis traveled extensively, performing on the vaudeville circuit in the United States and using her visits abroad to learn about the dances of other countries. She was the first to present Eastern dance forms and themes to American audiences, developing a nationwide acceptance of Eastern art. She performed her first dance work, *Radha*, in New York in 1906 after studying Hindu art and philosophy. With her husband and dance partner, Ted Shawn, she created a dance school and popular performing company known as Denishawn in 1915 in Los Angeles, California. The two profoundly influenced modern dance through their company, the first organized center for dance experiment in the United States; they separated, both professionally and personally, in 1931. St. Denis will be remembered for her teachings and often religious choreographic works that helped to establish modern dance as a serious artistic genre for later generations. A dancer of considerable power and beauty, St. Denis was a great inspiration to her three most accomplished students: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, who each became legendary modern dance figures in their own right. Called the "First Lady of American Dance," St. Denis performed into the 1960s.

Further Reading:

Shelton, Suzanne. *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1981.

Sherman, Jane. *The Drama of Denishawn Dance*. Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1979.

St. Denis, Ruth. *Ruth St. Denis, An Unfinished Life: An Autobiography*. New York and London, Harper & Bros., 1939.