



Correct 19th Century Dance Technique

It's not what you might expect.

As dance historians who re-enact period balls, we must ask ourselves:

Is our goal to re-create **authentic** 19th century social ballroom dance, as it actually was?

Or to change 19th century technique into a **modern** approach?

Those who strive perform precise dance technique, to impress everyone with their superior skills, have the second, modern category—a 20th and 21st century competition ballroom approach to historical dance, not an authentic 19th century mindset. 19th century dance manuals advised:

Dance as others do. It has a very absurd look to take every step with dancing-school accuracy, and your partner will be the first one to notice it.

1

For professional teachers, dance is their work, so they might consider dancing to be like work-like, difficult and serious. However if they are teaching historical social ballroom dance, teachers must remember that for 19th century ball-goers, social ballroom dance was recreation, not work. Dance gave people respite from the difficulties of the time, an opportunity to relax and sociably mingle with others.

In a classroom, it's good for the dance master to demonstrate a step with precision, so the students can more clearly see the movements. But then at a ball, do we want to dance with the dance master's exacting degree of technique? No, not if you want to dance authentically:

Be not ambitious of doing steps with the pedantry of the school-room, lest you be taken for a dancing master.

2

In the introduction to his 1863 dance manual, Thomas Hillgrove used the terms “natural” or “nature” 23 times, and used “ease” 16 times. Natural ease was the ideal. Oppositely, dance masters' technique was perceived as artificial and affected.

There is a vice in dancing, against which pupils cannot be too carefully guarded; it is that of affectation. The simplicity of nature is the great fountain of all the graces, from which they flow spontaneously, when unchecked by affectation, which at once poisons and dries them up.

3

Those three quotes from the 19th century tell us what *not* to do. Then what should we do instead? Was sloppy technique recommended? No, the 19th century ideal was **quiet neatness, without stiff preciseness**:

waltz with great ease : above all, avoid elevated steps and forced action in all dances. Quietness and neatness without stiff preciseness, are the true characteristics of the lady and gentleman.

4

This preference for quiet neatness prevailed throughout the 19th century, from Barclay Dun's 1818 eleven-page discourse on the beauty of modest simplicity, rejecting ostentatious exhibitions of footwork agility "with disgust," to 1890, when M.B. Gilbert began his General Remarks chapter with his most important rule, effortless dancing:

As a rule, those who dance with little effort, dance gracefully and well. Movements to be easy, must necessarily be natural, and not forced. Natural movements are always graceful.

5

Why?

All 19th century ballroom deportment is based on **selflessness**. Many dance manuals reprinted this advice:

On entering a ball-room, all thought of self should be dismissed. The petty ambition of endeavoring to create a sensation by either dress, loud talking, or unusual behavior, is to be condemned.

This selflessness is the reason for the advice quoted on the first page. In the 21st century, we see some dancers working on their precise dance technique to impress others with their superior skills—to draw attention to themselves. The 19th century ideal was quite the opposite:

It is necessary to forget one's self, in order to be occupied with others, without affectation.

— James Miller, NY, 1830s.

Place everyone at ease in your presence, an end easily obtained by yielding a portion of your own personal comfort to that of the general company, within whose sphere you move. Such amiable and self-denying deportment ever characterizes the polished and educated person. — Charles Durang, Philadelphia 1848

In general manners both ladies and gentlemen should be polite and courteous toward each other, acting as though the other person's happiness was of as much importance as their own." — Prof. Maas, NY, 1871

Perfect ease of manner, free from restraint, and entirely removed from affectation or effrontery, are essential requisites in a gentleman, as the ability to dance does not alone give him the title, unless it is joined with good sense and an obliging disposition.



6

— Richard Powers

1. 1860, Florence Hartley, The Ladies Book of Etiquette
2. 1844, A Man of Fashion, The New Ball Room Guide
3. 1867, Laurence DeGarmo Brookes, Brookes On Modern Dancing
4. 1856, Charles Durang, The Fashionable Dancer's Casket
5. 1890, M. B. Gilbert, Round Dancing
6. c.1870, W.G. Youens, Youens's Dance Album & Ball-Room Guide