



**Gino Severini's Dancers and His
Theatrical Milieu**

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Gino Severini created over a hundred works portraying dancers in various settings between 1910 and 1914.¹ While Severini was a major Figure within the Futurist movement that embraced the speed, technology, and industrial products of Modernity, only a minimal amount of research has been conducted concerning his personal relationship to theatre and dance performance. His dematerialization of form articulates the same movement, energy, and expression that Futurist performers personified in the performing arts. Severini set himself apart from standard Futurist ideology that glorified machinery by using dancer and dancehall subject matter to generate a mood and sense of “collective consciousness” that was equated with modern Parisian social life.

Severini’s complex dance paintings are rooted in an array of cultural artistic, literary, and philosophical grounds that were fertile at the moment in each place where he lived. Studying in Rome from 1899 to 1906, and moving to Paris after that, Severini served as an intermediary between Futurists in Italy and the Parisian avant-garde. Prior to Severini, Seurat and other Post-Impressionists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec had been compelled by dance imagery within cabarets, dance halls, and theaters of Parisian nightlife. Severini developed a fondness for the work of Seurat and explained:

“It was Seurat who first and most successfully established a balance between subject, composition and technique...the modern world that Seurat wished to paint...I chose Seurat as my master for once and for all.”²

Seurat’s color and line theories, exemplified in his *La Chahut* of 1889 (Figure 1) are also revealed in Severini’s selection

of complementary colors such as red and green in his *Dance of the Pan Pan at the Monico* of 1911 (Figure 2). Severini’s aim was to create a visual sensation of movement, the same energy experienced within the modern day dancehall. He focused on integrating the spectator into the painting to achieve “active intervention of the outside world.”³ While each of Severini’s dance paintings can be analyzed as an intricate composition of notions, enlightened by the styles and theories of former artistic periods, they simultaneously express an aspiration to diverge from the same tradition and assert a new Modernist vision of dance. He adopted similar stylistic attributes in Paris, selecting dancers as subject matter to embody a modern urban setting amidst a political and social rebellious culture. For those eager to defy traditional expectations, the dancehall served as a place to escape aristocratic conformity and meld into a new exciting crowd.

In 1906, Severini settled himself within the Montmartre district of Paris, a thriving entertainment location that put him in direct proximity to the neighboring Théâtre de L’Œuvre where he contributed to stage designs.⁴ Like the many 19th-century scenes of everyday life, Severini followed a genre painting compositional structure to illustrate the atmosphere within the room similar to Renoir’s *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* of 1876 (Figure 3). During these years, Severini’s styles were rapidly changing, as were all avant-garde artists. However, his subject matter remained consistent. Through experimentation, Severini’s style progressed into a more individualistic portrayal of Futurism, greatly influenced by Cubism. When Severini’s *Blue Dancer* of 1912 (Figure 4) is compared to Picasso’s *Violin and Grapes* of the same year (Figure 5), the similarities are clear but the differences in the two approaches are magnified. Within his first year in Paris, he attended a young artist circle that

included Picasso and Braque. There they discussed the doctrines of Nietzsche and other philosophers in order to formulate artistic theories more in tune with modernity.⁵ The majority of Severini's paintings post 1910 reveals Cubist characteristics, including multiple deconstructed geometric figures arranged in a flat manner to deny three-dimensional depth and traditional linear perspective.

Both images here include subject matter that reference musical connections as well as visual systems that simultaneously suggest multiple points of view. Picasso's composed layers of geometric forms construct a bow, a scroll, and strings that when put together, generate the idea of a violin. The *Blue Dancer* not only illustrates everyday life, but also shows space, time, and movement through the dynamic overlapping forms that swirl over each other. The dominant blue takes over the composition intensifying the intimacy a viewer experiences with the rhythmic atmosphere of a dancehall. Severini explained that Picasso and other Cubists had just begun "to dismantle objects, in order to present different points of view."⁶ However, while Cubists were "satisfied with such movement as a chair," Severini was more "thrilled by the movement of a dancer and boulevard filled with people."⁷ The juxtaposition indicates that Severini found Cubism lacking in atmosphere and human engagement. The subject matter and associated compositional structures for Cubists followed mostly portrait and still life conventions, whereas Severini employed narrative subject matter and compositional devices of genre-painting to communicate movement, interaction, and time sequences.

The *Blue Dancer* also demonstrates Severini's Cubist adoption of adding ornamental sequins to the canvas to give a synesthetic tangibility to the subject matter. Severini commented that sequins were "not meant to describe the

real, but to express it in a transcendental way."⁸ He included in a letter to Marinetti in 1913, that he chose sequins for its ability to reflect light into the observer's realm to achieve "ever-purer realities."⁹ The interaction between light and sequins produce a deeper internal experience between viewer and image.

Although Futurists preached to rebel against the "spineless worshiping of old canvases, old statues, and old bric-a-brac," according to a group manifesto of 1910, it can also be suggested that mosaics inspired Severini's flattening of space and use of sequins.¹⁰ Severini was certainly familiar with ancient Roman and Byzantine mosaics. The sequins present a similar purpose as the glass, gold, or mirrored tesserae in mosaics by reflecting iridescent light to bedazzle the viewer. Additionally, the flat shapes are broken down into repetitive geometric patterns that appear as tiles of a mosaic.

Paris was the headquarters of aesthetic and creative experimentation as well as philosophical critique in the early 20th -century. Technological advancements such as automobiles, airplanes, and war machinery forged an optimistic contemporary lifestyle.¹¹ The Futurists, as their nomenclature indicates, emphasized movement away from tradition more than any other group of ideologues. Filippo Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, was the first to publish Futurist manifestos that were shocking in their devotion to the machine, the new phenomenon of speed, and the call for the ruin of museums and 'old' artwork of Italian antiquity.¹² "Great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot" that supported the Futurist ideals of the adoration of war, speed, and industrialization became the staple images in Futurist artwork as seen in Boccioni's *The Charge of the Lancers* of 1915 (Figure 6).¹³ Even though Severini officially joined the movement in 1910 and was influenced to praise modernity,

machinery, and activity within the urban environment, he differentiated himself from his colleagues by choice of subject matter and by his motive to evoke mood. While the majority of Futurist paintings portray images of machinery, Severini instead chose the dancer. It is fair to say that no other painter of the movement shared his enthusiasm for this type of subject.

In 1914 Severini recorded the theoretical foundations of his works into a manifesto, *The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism*.¹⁴ His manifesto asserts that the chosen subject of an artist must generate a mood and visual reality. Through the means of emotion, memory, and awareness of the external environment, the artist should produce metaphysical forms that shed light on a “plastic equivalent of reality.”¹⁵ A piece of artwork can revive a memory of an unrelated past event or image, which becomes blended into a new idea. To Severini dance posed as the ultimate subject to visualize Futurism and to capture an apparition of modernity.

Some of the ways Severini diverged from the more commonplace paradigms of the Italian Futurists can be attributed to his literary circle in Paris. Severini was introduced to Paul Fort, an influential poet in Parisian literary groups who organized weekly discussion circles where artists and writers conversed about art subjects.¹⁶ Through these meetings, Severini met Jules Romain, who introduced him to the literature of Stéphane Mallarmé.¹⁷ Both writers played an influential role in Severini’s artwork.

The scholar Marianne Martin has asserted that the manner in which Severini’s paintings capture metaphysical forms closely aligns with Romain’s modernist art philosophy called unanimism.¹⁸ Although it was relatively a minor movement, unanimism was influential for select avant-

garde artists. A primary principle put forward was that each individual person partakes in a shared “collective consciousness,” where separate feelings and impressions toward a given experience are fused with the mutual thought of those surrounding.¹⁹ “Collective consciousness” would occur in a crowd setting so that each individual is fused together with the whole to share a universal experience. Similar to Nietzschean philosophy, not everyone had the ability to experience “collective consciousness,” which empowered artists to communicate such shared feelings through their artwork. The Futurists likewise developed a Nietzschean philosophy that artists were superior to the average common man. It was the artist’s duty to act as *supermen* by communicating the sensations felt in the spiritual nature of life through their images.²⁰ Thus, environments such as a dancehall—and the special abilities of the artists and performers within that crowd—took on special significance, a value for Severini that was not appreciated by other Futurist artists who did not participate in this literary milieu or understand the concepts of unanimism.

Returning to *Dance of the Pan Pan at the Monaco*, we can see how the painting exemplifies Romain’s philosophy of unanimism where human forms fill the composition, merging together on the dance floor as a single entity. The choice of complimentary colors emphasizes various planes that interchange amongst each other, creating a rhythm and sense of movement, music, and dance. As Romain wrote, “the noise, the odor, the moistness, the breath, come together to fill the illuminated space; the limbs, and nerves and muscles of all work to forge the great and unique joy. And the individual dissolves.”²¹ Each individual is fused together to make up the collective conscious experience in a dancehall setting.

Martin also denotes that the connections drawn between Mallarmé and Severini suggest that Severini had an interest in the American Futurist dancer Loie Fuller. Mallarmé had written about her in his literature regarding dance, which Severini would have likely known. His 1912 painting titled *Dancer at Pigalle* (Figure 7) reflects Mallarmé's report: this "woman associates the flight of clothes with the powerful or vast dance to the point of sustaining them, to infinity, like her expansion."²² The canvas is developed with layers of plaster to malleably capture the dancer's motion and costume by projecting them out into the viewer's realm. Severini explained the folds of his dancers' dress in the Marlborough Gallery exhibition of 1913 as encapsulating:

These folds preserve their exterior form, modified in a uniform manner through the rotary movement. In order to better convey the notion of relief, I have attempted to model the essential portions in a manner almost sculptural. Light and ambiance act simultaneously on the forms of movement.²³

When compared to Loie Fuller's butterfly (Figure 8) dance costume photograph, similar visual traits are apparent. The way in which Severini depicted the dancer's attire mimics the circular flow, tempo, and movement portrayed in Fuller's costumes.

As Mallarmé put it, "a dancer is not woman dancing but an idea of form."²⁴ To Severini the dancer was a metaphor for the mood and atmosphere of the fast-paced Parisian social life around him. Severini stood at the intersection of several movements in art and literature, fusing his ideas with his Italian Futurist colleagues, bringing them together with the avant-garde styles of Paris, including Post-Impressionist expressivity and Cubist form, and differing from them by

his association with Romaine's concept of unanimism and Mallarmé's appreciation of dance. For Severini, both dancer and dancehall had the Nietzschean capability to morph into the spectacle of the collective conscious experience.

Endnotes

- ¹ Daniela Fonti, *Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916*, (Milan: Skira, 2002).
- ² Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, trans. Jennifer Franchina, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 35.
- ³ Gino Severini, "The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2001), 125.
- ⁴ Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 44.
- ⁵ Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 41.
- ⁶ Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 63.
- ⁷ Gino Severini quoted by Daniela Fonti in *Gino Severini: The Dance*, 15.
- ⁸ Gino Severini quoted by John Gage in "Severini's Socks or the Dancing Colours," in Daniela Fonti, *Gino Severini: The Dance 1909-1916*, (Milan: Skira, 2002), 40.
- ⁹ Letter from Severini to Marinetti in Anne Coffin Hanson, *Severini Futurista: 1912-1917*, (Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 1995), 145.
- ¹⁰ Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters," (1910) in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, (Yale University Press, 2009), 62.
- ¹¹ Stephen Kern, *Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 113.
- ¹² Gunter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre 1909-1944*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 45.
- ¹³ F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909), in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman. (Yale University Press, 2009), 49.
- ¹⁴ Gino Severini, "The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism," in *Futurist Manifestos*, 125.
- ¹⁵ Gino Severini, "The Plastic Analogies of Dynamism: Futurist Manifesto 1913," in *Futurism An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman. (Yale University Press, 2009), 166.
- ¹⁶ Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, 126.
- ¹⁷ Marianne Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 102.
- ¹⁸ Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory*, 102.
- ¹⁹ Dennis Boak, *Jules Romains*, (New York: Twayne, 1974), 22.
- ²⁰ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 46.
- ²¹ Jules Romains poem, *Le Theatre* quoted in *The Dance* by Daniela Fonti, 19.
- ²² Dee Reynolds, "The Dancer as Woman: Loie Fuller and Stephane Mallarme" in *Impressions of French Modernity: Art and Literature in France 1850-1900*, ed. Richard Hobbs (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 164.
- ²³ Daniela Fonti, *Gino Severini Catalogue Ragionato*, (Milan: Edizione Philippe Daverio), 130.
- ²⁴ Mallarme quoted in *Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev*, (London: Routledge, 1963), 1-28.

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Figure 1 Georges Seurat. *La Chahut*. Oil on canvas. 1890.

Figure 2 Gino Severini. *Dance of the Pan Pan at the Monaco*. Oil on canvas. 1911. (Original destroyed, copy produced in 1959.)

Figure 3 Pierre Auguste Renoir. *Moulin de la Galette*. Oil on canvas. 1876.

Figure 4 Gino Severini. *Blue Dancer*. Oil on canvas. 1912.

Figure 5 Pablo Picasso. *Violin and Grapes*. Oil on canvas. 1912.

Figure 6 Umberto Boccioni. *The Charge of the Lancers*. Oil on canvas. 1915.

Figure 7 Gino Severini. *Dancer at Pigalle*. Oil on canvas. 1912.

Figure 8 Artist unknown. *Loie Fuller in Butterfly Dance Costume*. photograph. 1893.

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