

Section 3. Tango returns to Buenos Aires

The female tango dancer's costume

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3-1 Further evolution of tango

After its trip to France, tango was considerably altered. From 1917 onward, because of Gardel, as mentioned before, tango was no longer music and dance only, but it also turned into poetics (Archetti 1996, 105). Although an analysis of tango lyrics would deviate from this dissertation's topic, it does seem relevant to mention its importance, as this aspect is the most essential cause of tango transformation and acceptance in Argentina.

Following our previous acknowledgement, reinforced by Savigliano's arguments (quoted in Archetti op. cit, 106), the Argentinean tango had been received in Paris as something both scandalous and fascinating. While modifying it, the French eventually adopted it. However, tango was much more than music or dance.

The Argentinean culture and identity, wounded by economic, political and social instabilities, became a major issue among tango anthropologists (Cruse 1948 [[1](#)] or Taylor 1998, for instance). Out of a gamut of instability came the complex relationships between men and women. France's final approval of tango may have implied the very recognition of Argentina as having her own identity and character, although Europeans may not have accepted tango for these reasons. Nevertheless, this might be why tango was welcomed back in Argentina after this consequential transition.

The erotic taste of tango had been somewhat smoothed - if not completely removed - and this also helped Argentineans to greet it. Tango was not reserved to brothels anymore: it was now allowed to enter the high ranks of society, and quickly became popular among "decent people" and artists (Bernand 1997, 251). It was danced in the rich salons of Buenos Aires and won public places back, where it had been severely rejected. Elegance and delicacy were now what characterised tango (Bernand op. cit, 252).

Here is an example of how female tango dancers were dressed in Buenos Aires, given by Bernand (op. cit, 224), describing a photograph published in *Caras y Caretas* [[2](#)] in 1905, taken in front of the Victoria theatre [[3](#)]: "Les femmes, habillées avec recherche, portent des robes jusqu'aux pieds et de grands chapeaux qui cachent leurs cheveux. Il est certain que c'est une danse plus sage, sans les enjambées qui la rendront célèbre". ["Women seem to be concerned with their appearance and wear foot-long dresses with large hats to hide their hair. This tango is undoubtedly more discrete and deprived from the footwork that made it a famous dance"].

The image of tango evolved from a vulgar and lascivious dance to a refined and elegant one thanks to the talent of Gardel and his lyrics writer, Valentino, who extracted it from brothels and made it correspond to everyday tales. The disdainful thug exchanged his place with the miserable ordinary man forsaken by his mistress. Tango became a personal and common tragedy that most Argentineans identified with, and was finally accepted as the national symbol of Argentina (Bernand op. cit, 252).

3-2 The modern female tango costume and shoes

The colours red and black have remained the symbol of tango but nowadays, the female tango costume

and shoes can be found in all sorts of colours [4]. Indeed, by wandering about tango dress or shoe makers' and sellers' websites, one can easily find blue, pink, brown and many other colours for dresses and shoes. Still, it seems that white, gold and beige have been added to the traditional colours and that bright orange, or the "colour of tango", has more or less disappeared.

Even today, no one design has typified the tango costume for the female dancer of the Argentinean tango, only a style and the strict condition that it should be convenient, according to several Argentinean tango teachers interviewed for this research. The special dresses specially made for tango dancers, found on many websites, seem to be made for ballroom tango, which is completely different from the Argentinean tango as it is exclusively competitive.

Indeed, although the style is more or less the same, these dresses look a bit glitzier, with many pearls and sequins. They may be more chic but too flamboyant to dance the Argentinean tango off stage. This may be due to the need for dancers to accentuate their costumes so as to present an extravagant and flashy show, in the same way that performers have to emphasise their makeup for people to see it from the back of the theatre.

Nowadays, women who perform the Argentinean tango in dancing simply wear daily trousers or may adopt the traditional style if they want to look elegant during evening balls. In this case, they are likely to wear slinky black or red dresses most of the time, according to the results of this research. The top may be halter necked or boat necked, among others. The back can also have several shapes, like a keyhole back for instance, occasionally very low.

The most commonly used fabrics are satin, silk and lace, as well as chiffon, velvet (crushed or not), organza, and others. Lots of dresses are decorated with fabric ornaments such as flounces or fringes.

Most of the time, female tango dancers wear fishnet stockings or, if not fishnet, stockings with very delicate patterns (as shown in the movie *Moulin Rouge*). These stockings are hold ups or 'top stockings', usually fastened with garter belts. They were very popular in the 1920's and represented one of the tools women used to seduce men (Simon 1998, 94). This image fits the new reputation of the modern female tango dancer, said to be irresistible to men.

To complete the depiction of the female tango costume, it is now necessary to discuss tango shoes. According to the results of this research, tango shoes all follow the same basic conception, although some recent designers, like Arika Nerguiz or Sylvie Geronimi, have attempted to change their shape. The aim of the tango shoe is similar to the rest of the outfit: to be convenient. Tango balls usually last several hours and to enjoy them, the dancer should wear comfortable shoes.

This is why they are always made of leather, a flexible material considered to be the best one for tango shoes, according to the designers [5]. The reasons for this choice are the following: firstly, leather, made of animal skin, gives you the feeling that your shoe is the continuation of your foot and gives you more stability and energy. The dancer can spin easily without slipping and master her movements perfectly. Secondly, leather is one the best materials for the feet to breathe properly, which is even more important for tango shoes, as dancing requires a lot of energy. Thirdly, leather is strong enough to be durable, whether it is used for the insole or outsole. Fourthly, leather is easy to transform and other materials can be created from its raw state: patent and suede for example.

The shape of tango shoes is distinguishable from everyday shoes. Most of the time, their heels are high (only a few are low heeled), usually a stiletto or spike heel, but thick enough to keep one's balance. The shape of their toe box, open or not, is rounded and narrow, halfway between rounded and pointed. Generally, the shoe is open on the upper part of the foot, which is referred to by some designers as a décolleté [6].

Indeed, as this name suggests, the shape of the tango shoe seems to reveal the sensuality of the wearer, as it discloses only a small parcel of skin without showing the rest. It emphasises the curve of the foot and this décolleté might betray the personality of the wearer. This may be a way to put forward this very

important element that is the foot for a dancer. Already a subject of worship in literature, the foot seems to be a great concern in dancing and in tango especially.

This shape may also account for the fact that the female dancer has to follow her partner's feet very closely, and wearing very pointed shoes would make the male dancer step on her feet. Similarly, the toe box needs to be a bit narrow so as to put forward the direction of the feet. But the female tango dancer needs to be comfortable while dancing otherwise her motions might be altered.

For the foot to be well maintained, the tango shoe needs a firm strap around the ankle. Even though tango is not always made up of quick steps and violent legs movements, it is essential that the female dancer should be able to rely on her shoes. Moreover, high heels often incline the ankle to crush, so the strap, single or double, prevents this.

As mentioned before, shoes are the only traditional item of the Argentinean tango, in a manner similar to men's suits, versus women's dresses that do, nonetheless, seem always to have a style in common. Overall, the female tango costume seems to be a blend of that described during both the beginning of tango and afterwards, in France as well as in Argentina.

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Footnotes

[1] Roberto Puertas Cruse, Psychpathologie du tango, mentioned in Hess 1999.

[2] Caras y Caretas is an Argentinean magazine of the beginning of the twentieth century.

[3] The Victoria theatre is an Argentinean theatre founded in 1838 (Bernand 1997, 165).

[4] For examples of shoes, see Webliography, "Tango shoes pictures" section.

[5] See Webliography for further discussion, shoes information section.

[6] Blandin, Noël (2003).