

Vision of Adorée Villany: The Naked Dancer's Body as Art

Kajsa Sandström

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the analysis of the naked dancer's body as art in the emergence of modern dance. Using the dance artist Adorée Villany and her extensive touring in the Nordics from 1914 to 1920 as a case study, the article highlights a cultural conflict regarding the view of nude dancing as art. Villany was controversial during her time for insisting that the dancer's naked body is an artistic material and expression. In moral debates, she was accused of 'decadence in disguise'. Despite her frequent touring in the Nordic countries, Villany is largely absent in Swedish dance history. In this article, Villany's dance work and art theory, described in her 1912 book *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral*, are examined in discourses of dance in the Swedish national and regional press, and her photographs are situated as part of the visual culture of modern dance. It is revealed that there was an opening for a more radical reformation of dance at the turn of the century, in which the naked body was decoupled from being primarily an object of moral indignation.

SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln bidrar med ett kritiskt historiografiskt perspektiv på nakendans i den framväxande moderna dansrörelsen. Med dansaren Adorée Villany och hennes omfattande turnéer i Norden 1914–20 som fallstudie, belyser artikeln en konflikt i kulturen vid denna tid angående synen på nakendans som konst. Villany var kontroversiell på sin tid för hennes insisterande på dansarens nakna kropp som ett konstnärligt material och uttryck. I den samtida moraldebatten beskylldes hon för dekadens förklädd till konst. Trots att Villany turnerade över hela Norden är hon till stor del frånvarande i svensk danshistoria. I artikeln undersöks Villanys dansverk och konstteori, beskrivna i hennes bok *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral* från 1912, i förhållande till diskurser om dans i svensk press; och hennes fotografier i den moderna dansens visuella kultur. Artikeln visar att det fanns en öppenhet i sekelskiftets kultur för en radikal reformering av dansen som konstform, i vilken den nakna kroppen frikopplades från att vara ett föremål för moralisk indignation.

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Photo of Adorée Villany in Expressions de la douleur, 1900. Photographer unknown. Image credit: Wikimedia commons/Library of Congress.

By adding a piece to the puzzle of dance history at the turn of the twentieth century, this article aims to shed new light on the naked body as an artistic expression in early modern dance. Taking the dance artist Adorée Villany and her extensive touring in the Nordics from 1914 to 1920 as a case study, the article highlights a cultural conflict at the time regarding the view of nude dancing as art. Previous research has often seen Villany in light of the controversies surrounding her naked dance performances, particularly the reactions of the church and the public indecency debates, on the basis of which she was perceived, to some extent, as a striptease dancer. In this article, I aim to understand Villany as

an actor in the modern dance movement by examining the reception of her artworks and theory in Swedish dance discourse and situating her photographs as part of the visual culture of modern dance. Additionally, the relationship between the centre and the periphery, as well as between fine arts and entertainment, is discussed during this historical period.

Historiographic research beyond the current canon

This article contributes to the critical historiographical writing of dance in the Nordics by shedding new light on a previously undervalued dance form and artist

(Järvinen et al. 2023, 31–47). It builds on previous research on dance in Scandinavia at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as on previous studies about Adorée Villany (Dickinson 2011, 13; Hamnergren 2001, 19; Hessérus 2019; Laakkonen 2009; Toepfer 1997; Vedel 2017; Von Rosen 2019). Empirical material was derived from advertisements and reviews of Villany's dance performances and art theory in the Swedish national and regional press. A reconstructed timeline from posters, programs and newspaper advertisements reveals that from 1914 to 1920, Villany toured over 20 Swedish cities, from Malmö in the south to Malmbergen in the north, with additional visits to neighbouring countries.¹ As a historiographic subject of nude dancing, Adorée Villany is of particular interest because her voice is documented in writing. In her 1912 book *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral: Kritisch-Satyrische Gedanken aus meinem Bühnen- und Privatleben*, she published an art theory in which, according to her, the naked dancer's body belongs to a fine arts culture. The book includes several work descriptions and is richly illustrated with photographic reproductions (Villany 1912). In the present article, her book is used as a source for understanding Villany's artistic vision. Situating her art theory in relation to dance discourses at the time, I argue that the book can be understood to reflect prevailing notions of nude dance in the emerging modern dance movement. How did Villany's dance performances and art theory contribute to the naked body becoming part of the modern expression of dance? In what way do her dance works and photographs offer a new perspective on the art of dance in early twentieth-century culture?

Reformation of dance as an art form

The reformation of dance can be understood as a common point of departure for the modern dance movement. This idea is repeated in Isadora Duncan's (1929) philosophy, which later became canonized in dance history. In her book *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral*, Adorée Villany advocated for a reformation of dance in opposition to ballet, which she believed caused dance to decay as an art form. Villany meant that the *classic modern style*—in contrast to dance at the opera—required a soulful perception by an audience sensitive to the new dance and its forms of expression, and she argued passionately for a 'realistic'

dance style, liberated from previous ideals² (Villany 1912, 11). According to her, naked dance could reveal a power of expression previously unfelt in the current stage of dance development. Her instrument was the harmoniously built body, appearing as a personal work of art (12–16). Despite her consequent use of nudity, Villany maintained that her dance remained chaste. By unveiling the physical expression of dance, Villany believed that she had revealed her soul. Her naked body was the highest means of expression, and the audience should judge her art by such measures (37).

At the time when Villany wrote her theory, ballet had experienced a downturn in Europe due to its lack of technical and artistic development and the decline in the Paris Opera's reputation. Opinions of ballet as an art form in decay were also present in Stockholm in 1908 (Hamnergren 2019, 107; Laakkonen 2009, 116). Karl Toepfer described how Villany's ideas about reform dance were not as much a reformation of art or politics as a reformation of morality. As such, Villany's 1912 book can be understood as an ambitious freedom project. These radical ideas about nude dancing were meant to reform the understanding of the body and its image by looking at the female body with the same seriousness applied to the contemplation of artworks (Toepfer 1997, 22–24).

On her tours in the Nordics, Villany performed several dance works described in *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral*. In what she labelled her 'ancient dances', Villany believed that she revived a historical dance style, based on scientific and archaeological grounds, that 'captured a cultural image from ancient time' (Villany 1912, 40–45). During this historic time, Villany was by no means alone in seeking inspiration from images of ancient cultures for her dances. Orientalist themes and scenes reminiscent of classical art were prevalent throughout the entire modern dance field. According to Edward Ross Dickinson, the study of motives from art history—embodied in statuary poses and in artistic renderings of costume and music—gave modern dance an aura of cultivation, refinement and authenticity. (Dickinson 2013, 308) Classical and romantic themes could further be regarded as a successful translation of nineteenth-century high culture into twentieth-century mass culture (309). Was the depiction of the female nude in painting and sculpture perhaps a difficult translation to achieve?

Swedish reception of the naked dancer

A search of the daily newspaper database at the National Library of Sweden reveals that Adorée Villany made her debut in Stockholm in December 1914. Upon her arrival from St. Petersburg, a reporter asked what Villany might have offered the Russians that the famous ballet dancer Anna Pavlova had not already in terms of the art of dance (*Stockholmsidningen*, 29 December 1914). As Lena Hammergren showed in her research of Swedish dance culture around 1900, Stockholm encountered internationally renowned dance artists at various theatres and venues. Villany arrived in a cultural and media environment where, among others, Anna Pavlova, Isadora Duncan and Cleo de Mérode had introduced new dance forms to the audiences (Hammergren 2001, 14–15).

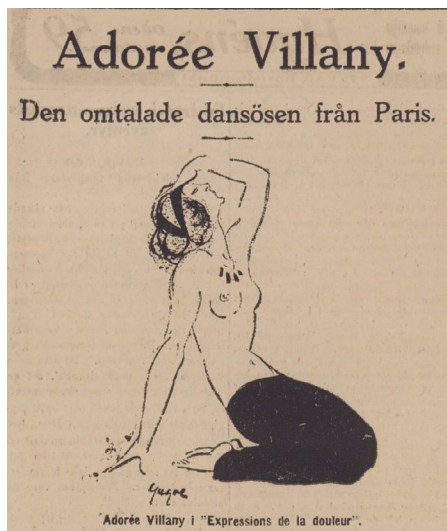


Illustration of Adorée Villany in *Expressions de la douleur*.
Stockholmsidningen 29 Dec 1914.

Villany had a full schedule in January 1915. Advertised as 'the well-known dancer from Paris' or 'the Parisian dancer', she was dancing matinees at the *Intima teatern* and in the operetta *Solsträlen* at the Oscar Theatre in the evenings (*Stockholmsidningen*, 2 January 1915; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2 January 1915). For some readers, the name

Adorée Villany might have sparked recognition. In a well-known court case in Munich in 1911, Villany was arrested for public indecency. At her trial, art professors and artists came to her defence: Villany's nude dance was high art and must be considered chaste. Acquitted of charges but expelled from Bavaria, Villany continued her career in Paris, where the pattern repeated itself, and she was arrested in 1913. The debacle, widely reported in European and American newspapers, reached the Swedish press (Dickinson 2011, 95; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 29 November 1911; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2 July 1913). However, even if Villany might have been unknown to most people in Stockholm, Paris had been the centre of an artistic avant-garde since the 1890s. As such, a dancer from the French capital created certain expectations.

Targeted for moral debate

In Stockholm in 1915, Adorée Villany once again became a topic of moral debate. Upset by the publicity and large audience numbers, Teodor Holmberg, president of the Swedish National Association of Moral Culture, opined against her naked performances. According to the historian Mattias Hessérus, Holmberg's agitation was directed as much towards the press as the police, for giving space and publicity to a foreign dance artist who, according to Holmberg, violated the sense of modesty of the 'noble born Swedish woman' (Hessérus 2019, 49). The ambiguity surrounding Villany's artistic intent in reception and the uncertainty regarding the 'real' interest behind the unusually large audiences made her, according to Hessérus, a symbol of 'decadence in disguise' (50–53). However, more nuanced voices were also found in the press. The critic Carl G. Laurin had a more open attitude towards Villany's naked performances at the *Intima teatern* in 1915, although he found her art theory to be mainly the work of an eccentric. Laurin reflected on the fact that nudity had been extremely rare on theatre stages historically but concluded that the reasons were too complicated for him to cite (Laurin 1915, 126–27).

Reviews of Villany's performances at the *Södra Varietén* in September 1915 were inclined towards scepticism. Debates about indecency followed on her heels. One critic was suspicious of the high salary she received; another was amused by the clinking sound of machines for borrowing theatre binoculars (Hessérus 2019, 50). Villany herself was quick to use the attention



Adorée Villany in Dance of Apis, 1910. Photographer unknown.
Image credit: Wikimedia commons/Library of Congress.

to sell new performances and turn publicity into praise (*Jämtlandsposten*, 1 February 1915; *Stockholmsstidningen*, 30 March 1915). Yet again, a more serious reception was also present. Villany's performances at the *Grand Hôtel* in October 1915 were compared with Isadora Duncan's. Although the comparison was not in Villany's favour, critics attributed qualities to her dance in terms of Villany's expressions and costume changes (*Stockholmsstidningen*, 14 October 1915).

A recurring topic in the Swedish press is Villany's body type. Some critics brought her physique to the morality debate. Without forms and curves, she was apparently too skinny to be attractive (*Scenska Dagbladet*, 5 February 1915; *Söderhamns tidning*, 15 February 1915). Villany took an active part in the debate. In 1919, she was announced to give a lecture with a demonstration of 'women's beauty, nudity in gymnastics and dance' at the Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm (*Dagens Nyheter*, 31 December 1919; *Scenska Dagbladet*, 30 December 1919). The focus on dancers' bodies can be understood in light of the changing norms of private and

public female corporeality. It also reveals a phenomenon in the reception of dance at the time, in which little, if any, distinction was made between a dancers' persona and the dance performed on stage (Hammergren 2001, 41–53, 58–62). Seen in this light, Villany's emphasis on her body as a work of art—and the naked body as the highest form of expression in dance—eliminated the division between the dance performed and the dancer's body altogether.

The church caught up with Villany after a year of touring in the Nordics, and she was forbidden from performing naked in Stockholm (*Aftonbladet*, 28 March 1916; *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 December 1915). When the ban was imposed in the capital, the doors seemed to have closed like dominoes across the country. However, there was an interesting exception. In the rural north, Villany's naked art was defended in the morality debate. A Luleå paper praised Villany's dance works in a description that resonated with her art theory (*Norrskensflamman*, 12 April 1916).

Nude dance in art and visual culture

The numerous photographs in *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral* place Adorée Villany within a discourse of dancers who experimented with the new medium of photography. In the Nordic context, the photographs of Vera Fokina in *Salome – Dance of the Seven Veils* by Waldemar Eide in 1919 allude to the same widespread orientalist motif in which Villany depicted herself—in her version of Salome's dance—a decade earlier (Vedel 2017, 147; Villany 1912, 51–53, 81–82). In her photographic series 'Mot l'juset', the dancer Anna Robenne, who was of Russian origin and had an international career in Scandinavia, Europe and America in the years around 1920, is artistically framed nude in diffused lighting. The photos are attributed to a photographer connected to a theatre. (Rosen 2019, 213–215) According to Astrid von Rosen, her research shows evidence that nude dancing was an important component of Robenne's repertoire (221–222).

Another connection between Villany's dance works and nude dance in artistic rendering is the drawings by symbolist painter Tyra Kleen (Laurin 1915, 126–27). In Kleen's estate, sketches of Villany, based on photographic templates, and additional paintings of Mata Hari and Isadora Duncan can be studied (*Norrköpings konstmuseum* 2024). Kleen's drawings are visual proof of how Villany's dance works were not only influenced by but also inspired new images of modern dance in the Nordic culture at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The naked dancer's body as art

The presence of Adorée Villany's naked dance performances in Nordic dance culture in the 1910s reveals a moment when dance became art, and the naked dancing body was recognised as an artistic expression. The reception of Villany's dance performances in Sweden highlights a cultural debate in which different perceptions of nudity were present at the same time. While some critics saw a refined striptease dancer in disguise, others held a more open attitude towards Villany's dance work and artistic ideas.

In her 'Reform Dance', Villany adopted several strategies from the field of modern dance. The reformation of dance as an artform mirrored the general opinion that ballet lacked artistic development, while the

aesthetics of orientalist and archaic motives gave dance an aura of cultivation and authenticity. Furthermore, Villany's idealist consideration of artistic nudity as 'chaste' and her argument for a 'realistic' dance style can be paralleled to modern dance's ideals of 'natural' movements on bare feet and in loosely fit tunics. In her art, Villany envisioned a more radical reformation of dance in which nudity, already present in modern dance, was decoupled from being primarily an object of moral indignation.

Understanding the book *Tanz-Reform und Pseudo-Moral* as a reflection of the prevailing discourses of modern dance, we can—in the same mirror—also see the photographs of Anna Robenne and how Villany's consistent use of nudity as an integral part of her own dancing was part of the high ambitions of the emerging modern dance field. Although Villany eventually lost against the guardians of morality, her art theory and dance works offers insights into the artistic intentions behind nudity in early expressions of modern dance.

History is established through a process of selection and consolidation. With a common theory formation, dance became a *high* culture. Villany toured all over Sweden at the time of the First World War. Her impact on audiences might, in effect, have been more widespread than that of well-known, canonized dance artists. Hammergren showed how Swedish dance culture at the turn of the twentieth century held an openness to embracing different styles and ideas. As the case of Adorée Villany and her influence on dance reception and visual culture has shown, the naked dancer's body as art is one of them.

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BIOGRAPHY

Kajsa Sandström—dancer, choreographer and dance archivist—holds a master's degree with a major in art history from *Södertörn University* (2021) and graduated from *PARTS, School for Contemporary Dance* in Brussels in 2004. Her choreographic work is characterized by an investigation of movement, image and processes of reflection between the dancer and the viewer in performance. She most recently performed in Mette Ingvartsen's *Manual Focus*. Since 2022, Kajsa has worked at the *Music- and Theatre Library* in Stockholm, where she collects, preserves and makes the cultural heritage of Swedish dance available for research.

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Endnotes

1 For a description and analysis of Adorée Villany's dance works and Swedish tours, see Sandström, Kajsa. *Min avslöjade kropp visar min bara själ: Adorée Villanys dansturné i Sverige 1914–1920*. Master's thesis in Art History, Södertörn University 2021.

2 All quotations were translated into English by the author.

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