Summary

Creator: St. Denis, Ruth, 1880-1968

Title: Ruth St. Denis papers

Date: ca. 1915-1958

Source: Three gifts make up this collection. It is principally a gift of Ruth St. Denis (1966). Other donors include Gertrude Shurr (1981) and Walter Terry (1973).

Abstract: Documents Ruth St. Denis' personal life and professional career. Divided into eight sections; autobiographical material, including St. Denis' personal journal, history letters, and miscellaneous items (246 folders); writings, including addresses, essays, lectures, and poetry written by St. Denis and others (83 folders); information on the Denishawn era, including choreographic notes, Denishawn technique, and Denishawn schools (54 folders); St. Denis' post-Denishawn choreographic projects, including choreographic notes, descriptions of ballets, and production arrangements (10 folders); music scores, primarily for the choreographic works of St. Denis and Ted Shawn (17 folders); business records, including professional materials (bookings, publicity, program drafts), financial materials (budgets, bank statements, contracts), and miscellaneous (51 folders); St. Denis' projects and organizations, including information on her Creative Arts Colony, Society of Spiritual Arts, Ruth St. Denis Foundation, film projects, etc. (47 folders); and miscellany.


Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Wendy Laakso Hammond; machine readable finding aid created by APEX data services and revised by Chatham Ewing.

Creator History

Ruth Dennis was born in Newark, New Jersey, on January 20, 1879. Ruth St. Denis claimed she was born in 1878; Ted Shawn claimed it was 1880; her brother claimed it was 1879. Recent evidence presented by biographer Suzanne Shelton supports the 1879 date.
She spent her childhood on a farm in Somerville, New Jersey, with her parents, Ruth Emma Hull Dennis, a physician, and Thomas L. Dennis, an inventor. She had a brother Buzz and a half-brother Tom Dennis.

As a child, Ruth practiced exercises from the Delsarte system of expression which she learned from her mother. She also took dance classes in New Jersey and traveled to New York City to study ballet with Mme. Bonfanti. These classes did not last very long as, according to “Miss Ruth,” Mme. Bonfanti tossed her out of class after only three lessons. Thus, when Ruthie Dennis embarked upon her professional career, it was with little formal training. She began with minor roles in musical plays, appearing as a “skirt-dancer,” acrobat, high-kicker, model and actress. She even participated in a six-day bicycle race at Madison Square Garden.

In 1904, while on a tour with David Belasco's production of Madame DuBarry, Ruth St. Denis was inspired by a cigarette poster depicting the Egyptian goddess Isis to turn her career toward the exploration of dance as a serious art form. She began working on “Egyptia,” an elaborate Egyptian ballet, but was unable to meet the estimated cost of production. Instead she created “Radha,” a Hindu ballet, which was presented on a program with two of her solos, “The Incense” and “The Cobras,” at the Hudson Theater in New York City on March 22, 1906. The concert was a tremendous success and prompted Miss Ruth to embark on a tour abroad. She spent three years dancing throughout Europe to wide acclaim. She added “The Nautch” and “The Yogi” to her program and in Germany was offered a five-year contract. Miss Ruth chose not to accept the offer and returned to the United States in 1909 to produce the long awaited “Egypta.” For the next few years Ruth St. Deniss toured throughout the United States and danced in Vaudeville.

In 1914 she met Ted Shawn and hired him as her partner. They danced their first concert together on April 13, 1914, and were married on August 13th of the same year. Together they founded the Denishawn schools and company, which were to thrive until 1932. Their schools, which offered a well-rounded dance education program, were established across the country. Courses included Oriental and primitive dance, ballet, ethnic and creative dance, and the Delsarte System of Expression. Performing a repertory of spiritual, ethnic character, and music visualization dances, the Denishawn Company toured extensively in the United States, Canada, Europe, and the Orient. Among the notable works were “Spirit of the Sea,” “Egyptian Suite,” “Soaring,” “Sonata Pathetique,” “The Peacock,” “White Jade,” “Liebestraum,” “Salome,” “East Indian Nautch,” “Street Nautch,” and “Dance of the Red and Gold Saree.”

At the close of their 1931-1932 season, St. Denis and Shawn decided to pursue separate careers, and the era of Denishawn came to a close. It had greatly influenced the art of dance in America for seventeen years and produced such dancers as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, who went on to develop their own dance styles and shape the course for modern dance in America.

After the separation, Ted Shawn went on to found a company of men dancers and the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. Ruth St. Denis continued to run Denishawn House in New York City for a short time but was forced to close for financial reasons. She then retired from theatrical dancing and spent the next few years staging religious dances for churches and her Society of Spiritual Arts. In 1935 Miss Ruth stated that the purpose of this organization was to “bring together like-minded people into an environment where ideas have opportunity to be expressed along lines of new horizons of spiritual and aesthetic value.”

In 1941 Ruth St. Denis re-created the same concert that had launched her career in 1906 for a
performance at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. It was very successful and reintroduced Miss Ruth to theatrical dancing. She performed her "historical" dances in New York and on tour for the next few seasons.

During World War II Ruth St. Denis moved to California, where she lived with her brother, and contributed to the war effort by working at the Douglas Aircraft Factory and participating in benefits for allied causes. She established herself in a new studio on Cahuenga Boulevard in Hollywood, which served as her headquarters for the rest of her life.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, Miss Ruth devoted most of her time to The Ruth St. Denis Foundation, "an organization designed to assemble, catalogue, and record material pertinent to her career, and to the establishment of a church in which dance and the related arts will be dedicated to religious service."


She also performed frequently during the summers at Jacob's Pillow as a solo artist and with Ted Shawn.

In 1964 Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at Jacob's Pillow and performed together for the last time. They danced "Siddhas of the Upper Air," a duet choreographed for the occasion to a poem by Miss Ruth with music by Jess Meeker. For the next four years Ruth St. Denis worked with William Skipper on a film illustrating her life through dance and continued to make occasional television appearances.

She died of a stroke on July 21, 1968. In addition to many articles, Ruth St. Denis published An Unfinished Life, her autobiography (1939), and Lotus Light, a book of poems (1932).

Scope and Content Note

The Ruth St. Denis Papers document Ruth St. Denis' personal and professional life from 1915 to 1958. They consist of Ruth St. Denis' autobiographical material; writings; information pertaining to the Denishawn era; post-Denishawn choreographic projects; music scores; business records; and projects and organizations.

The collection was received as a gift from Ruth St. Denis along with the Ruth St. Denis Letters [(S) *MGZMC-Res. 32], which comprise the personal and professional correspondence of Miss Ruth from 1914 to 1958. Portions of the Ted Shawn Collection [(S) *MGZMC-Res. 31] are closely related to the St. Denis Papers and Letters, and the three should be used in conjunction with one another.

Ruth St. Denis' autobiographical material is divided into three sections: her journal, history letters, and miscellaneous materials. Miss Ruth's personal journal, which she had hoped to publish, begins with the year 1927 and concludes with 1958. It includes writings regarding both her personal and professional life, and sections were used in her autobiography, An Unfinished Life(1939).

The history letters, which are arranged chronologically (1934-1954), were written by Ruth St. Denis to keep people informed of her activities and plans. Copies were sent to her close friends and associates.

The miscellaneous autobiographical material includes writings by Ruth St. Denis about her life. There is a detailed account of her trip to the Orient, an outline of An Unfinished Life, a scrapbook which includes
sketches and notes about her work at Adelphi College, and other miscellaneous writings, many about her religious beliefs. The items date from 1919 to 1959 and are arranged chronologically. Many of the materials dated before 1939 appear to have been used as a basis for sections of *An Unfinished Life*.

The writings are divided into four sections: addresses, essays, and lectures by Ruth St. Denis; addresses, essays, and lectures by other people; poetry by Ruth St. Denis; and poetry written to Ruth St. Denis. Miss Ruth's addresses, essays, and lectures are arranged alphabetically by title. There are approximately sixty works, some of which were published, covering such topics as religion, the art of dance, oriental dance, the relationship of dance to the other arts, women, and world affairs.

Other people's addresses, essays, and lectures are arranged alphabetically by the author's last name. There are approximately forty works, many of which were written by close associates of Ruth St. Denis, including William H. Bridge, Jack Cole, Thelma Fisher, Ted Shawn, and Forrest Thornburg. Topics include: Ruth St. Denis, art, drama, dance, and religion.

Poetry by Ruth St. Denis comprises two folders of poems which are arranged alphabetically by title. Poetry written to Ruth St. Denis is arranged alphabetically by the author's last name. Again, many of the authors are close associates of Ruth St. Denis, including Ada DeLachau, Edna Guy, Ruth Harwood, Lucy Lampkin, and John Martin.

Materials pertaining to the Denishawn era are divided into three sections: choreographic notes, technique, and schools. There are choreographic notes for approximately 195 Denishawn dances, including: “Bach's Inventions,” “Brahm’s Waltz,” “Egyptian Suite,” “Frohsinn,” “Kinetic Molpai,” “Negro Spirituals,” “Radha,” “Soaring,” “Street Nautch,” and “The Yogi.” The notes are arranged alphabetically by dance title, and when the choreographer (Ruth St. Denis and/or Ted Shawn) is known, it is indicated on the folder list. In some cases, there are musical scores for the dances. These are filed in Section V of the collection.

The section on Denishawn technique consists of written descriptions of the exercises, barre work, center work, combinations, movement studies, and exercises for ethnic techniques which were taught in Denishawn classes. Also included in this section are descriptions of dances and classwork for children. Items are arranged in the order listed above. There is sheet music in Section V to accompany some of the exercises.

The Denishawn school material, which dates from 1920 to 1933, includes information on courses offered; school proposals and organizational plans for branch schools; student biographies; financial records; teacher contracts; and brochure layouts. Items are arranged chronologically.

Ruth St. Denis' post-Denishawn choreographic projects are arranged alphabetically by title. There are descriptions of ballets, choreographic notes, and production arrangements for approximately twenty-five works, ranging from short dances, to pageants, to full-evening ballets. Included are notes for Miss Ruth's “Arcadia,” “Ballet of Soul,” “Freedom,” “Light of Asia,” “The Prophetess,” and “Wisdom.”

The music scores are arranged alphabetically by title. There are approximately forty-five works and some unidentified fragments, most of which were used to accompany the choreography of St. Denis and Shaw during Denishawn, although there are also some post-Denishawn works. Choreographic notes for eleven of the compositions, including “Allegresse,” “Brahm's Waltz,” “Garland Plastique,” “The Goldfish,” “Japanese,” “Jewel Dance,” “Moszkowski Waltz,” “The Sacred River,” “Scarf Dance,” “Serenata Morisca,” and “Viva Faraon,” are located in Section III. In addition, there is music for the Denishawn classroom exercises which are also described in Section III.
Ruth St. Denis' business records are divided into three sections: professional materials; financial materials; and miscellaneous materials. The professional materials, which relate to Miss Ruth's career, span the years 1904 to 1958 and include booking arrangements, program drafts, publicity, and chronologies of professional appearances. The financial materials include Miss Ruth's bank statements, contracts, bills, and budgets from 1913 to 1963. Items in both the professional and financial sections are arranged chronologically.

The miscellaneous materials in the business section consist of calling cards; envelopes; names and addresses; lists of photographs; awards; membership cards; and the business records of Ruth Emma Hull Denis. The items are arranged as listed above.

The final section of the Ruth St. Denis Papers is titled projects and organizations. It contains proposals and descriptions of plans, functions, and activities for approximately eighteen organizations which Miss Ruth was involved with. Some of the organizations, such as the Creative Arts Colony, the Ruth St. Denis Foundation, and the Society for Spiritual Arts, were founded by Ruth St. Denis and thrived for several years, while others never got beyond the planning stages. The projects, which are interfiled alphabetically with the organizations, include arrangements for Miss Ruth's films, suggested dialogues for tape recordings, and proposals for theaters and magazines.

One Denishawn tunic was received with the collection and is listed at the end of the folder list. It was a gift from Gertrude Shurr who wore it when she performed “Sonata Pathetique” with the Denishawn company.

(removed to costume collection, see folder list)

When the Ruth St. Denis Papers were received, they included a section of clippings and programs. These have been removed from the collection and have been placed in the clipping and program files of the Dance Collection.

RSD Ruth St. Denis
TS Ted Shawn
misc. miscellaneous
n.d. no date

**Key Terms**

**Subjects**
Manuscripts -- Collections

**Titles**
Principally a gift of Ruth St. Denis. Other donors include Gertrude Shurr and Walter Terry

**Names**
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f. 319  Harwood, Ione Godwin

f. 319  Harwood, Ruth

f. 320  Heald, Louise

f. 320  Hornbrook, Glendon

f. 320  James, Fred C.

f. 320  Jensen, Helene Hyde
II. Writings (cont.)
   C. Poetry (cont.)
   f. 320    Jones, Nell
   f. 320    Kelly, Lucile Spenser
   f. 320    Koster, Anne
   f. 321    Lampkin, Lucy
   f. 321    Manning, Rena
   f. 322    Martin, John
   f. 323    Miles, Kenneth
   f. 323    Newsome, Diane
   f. 323    Oldroyd, Alice Wilson
   f. 323    Owen, Rica
   f. 323    Parker, Josephine
   f. 323    Phillips, Etheldreda
   f. 323    Piper, Raymond Frank
   f. 323    Pratt (?), Alicia
   f. 323    Pythias, D.
   f. 324    Rell, Dog E.
   f. 324    Richberg, W. V.
   f. 324    Rose, Ray Clark
   f. 325    Schloss, Malcolm
   f. 325    Shafer, Lester
   f. 325    Sills, Milton
   f. 325    Smith, May Mott
   f. 325    Snyder, Margaret
   f. 325    Solon, Samuel
   f. 325    Sum Nung Au-Young
   f. 325    Sylva, Carmen
   f. 326    Tietjens, Eunice
   f. 326    Ungar, Florence
   f. 326    Van Dyke, Henry
   f. 326    Van Uchelen, J. Croiset
   f. 326    Warren, James E.
   f. 326    Worth, Patience
   f. 327-329 Unidentified

III. Denishawn era
   A. Choreographic Notes
   f. 330    Adagio - Chopin Prelude
   f. 330    Allegresse (Shawn)
   f. 330    Allegrias Trianeras (Shawn)
   f. 330    Amethyst (Shawn)
   f. 330    Archaic Greek
   f. 330    Around the Hall (Shawn)
III. Denishawn era (cont.)
   A. Choreographic Notes (cont.)
   f. 331  Bach's Inventions (Shawn)
   f. 331  Bailarina Real (Shawn)
   f. 331  Balinese (St. Denis)
   f. 331  Barcarolle (Shawn)
   f. 331  Basket Dance (St. Denis)
   f. 331  The Bayadere
   f. 331  Bead Plastique
   f. 331  Bird Song (Shawn)
   f. 332  Biskara
   f. 332  Boston Fancy (Shawn) 1854
   f. 332  Botticelli (Shawn)
   f. 332  Brahms' Ballade (Shawn)
   f. 332  Brahms' Waltz
   f. 332  Burmese (St. Denis)
   f. 333  Cambodian Dance (Shawn)
   f. 333  Carnival Night (Shawn)
   f. 333  Chaminade Gavotte
   f. 333  Chinese Dance (Shawn)
   f. 333  Chinese Wedding
   f. 333  Choeur Dansé (Shawn)
   f. 334  Chopin Ballet (Shawn)
   f. 334  Chopin Valse
   f. 334  Christine's Dance (St. Denis)
   f. 334  A Classic Adagio
   f. 334  Corcovada (Shawn)
   f. 334  The Crapshooter (Shawn)
   f. 334  Crotali Dance
   f. 335  Dance Javanese (St. Denis)
   f. 335  Dance Louis XIII (Shawn)
   f. 335  Dance of Nymphs and Fauns
   f. 335  Dance of the Ages (Shawn)
   f. 335  The Dance of the Redeemed (Shawn)
   f. 335  Dances in 16 Rhythms (Shawn)
   f. 336  Danse Arabe (Shawn)
   f. 336  Danse de Demoiselles (Shawn)
   f. 336  Danse Fragonard
   f. 336  Danse Siamese (St. Denis)
   f. 336  Danse Styrienne (Shawn)
   f. 336  Diana (Shawn)
   f. 336  Dohnanyi
   f. 336  A Dreier Lithograph (Shawn)
III. Denishawn era (cont.)
A. Choreographic Notes (cont.)

f. 336  The Dryad
f. 337  Egyptia (Shawn)
f. 337  Egyptian Slave
f. 337  Egyptian Suite (St. Denis and Shawn)
f. 337  Egyptian Tambourine Dance
f. 337  II Viennese Dances (Shawn)
f. 337  España Mia (Shawn)
f. 337  The Evolution of Prayer (Shawn)

f. 338  The Fakir
f. 338  Fantasie Arabe
f. 338  Fetish (Shawn)
f. 338  Floor Plastique
f. 338  Flor de Triana
f. 338  4 Dances Based on American Folk Music
f. 338  Free and Easy Polka
f. 338  The French Sailor (Shawn)
f. 338  Frohsinn (Shawn)
f. 338  From a Temple
f. 339  Garden Dance
f. 339  Garland Plastique (St. Denis)
f. 339  A Giddy Girl (Shawn)
f. 339  Gitanillo (Shawn)
f. 339  Goldfish (Shawn)
f. 339  The Gracious Maid (Shawn)
f. 339  Greek Scene (St. Denis)

f. 339  Greig Suite
f. 339  Gringo Tango (Shawn)
f. 339  Gypsy Rondo-bout Town (Shawn)

f. 340  Herd-girl’s Dream (Shawn)

f. 340  Humoreske (Shawn)

f. 340  I Call Upon Thee, My Lord (Shawn)

f. 340  Impromptu (Shawn)

f. 340  Indian Summer

f. 340  Indienne (Shawn)

f. 340  Intermezzo (Shawn)

f. 340  Invocation to the Thunderbird (Shawn)

f. 341  El Jaleo (Shawn)

f. 341  Japanese

f. 341  Japanese Dance

f. 341  Javanese Dance (Shawn)

f. 341  Jewel Dance
III. Denishawn era (cont.)
   A. Choreographic Notes (cont.)
   f. 341   Josephine and Hippolyte (Shawn)
   f. 342   Kentucky Mountain Dance
   f. 342   Kinetic Molpai (Shawn)
   f. 342   Kwannon (St. Denis)
   f. 342   Lady Picking Mulberries (Shawn)
   f. 342   Lal - A Stick Nautch (Shawn)
   f. 342   Lazy Nautch
   f. 342   Legends From the Vienna Woods (Shawn)
   f. 342   Leyenda Morisca
   f. 342   Liselotte
   f. 342   Lyric Greek
   f. 343   Madrassi Nautch (St. Denis)
   f. 343   La Malagueña y el Torero
   f. 343   March Indienne
   f. 343   Maria Mari
   f. 343   Max Reger - Music Visualization
   f. 344   Mazurek
   f. 344   Mazurka, Chopin
   f. 344   Mazurka de Salon (Shawn)
   f. 344   Mexican Hat Dance (Shawn)
   f. 344   Mignardises (Shawn)
   f. 344   Moon of Love (Shawn)
   f. 344   Moorish Tambourine
   f. 344   Moszkowski Waltz (Shawn)
   f. 344   The Mountain God Dance
   f. 344   Mountain Whippoorwill (Shawn)
   f. 344   Musette
   f. 345   Nata Nautch
   f. 345   Nature Rhythms
   f. 345   Nautch
   f. 345   Nautch - East Indian
   f. 345   Negro Spirituals I (Shawn)
   f. 345   Negro Spirituals II (Shawn)
   f. 345   Nochecita
   f. 345   Nocturne - Chopin, Opus 15, No. 2
   f. 346   O, Libertad (Shawn)
   f. 346   Oriental
   f. 346   Oriental Dances
   f. 346   Orientale (St. Denis)
   f. 346   Osage - Pawnee Dance of Greeting (Shawn)
   f. 347   La Pandereta
III. Denishawn era (cont.)
A. Choreographic Notes (cont.)

f. 347 Pas de Quatre (Shawn)
f. 347 Pathan Stick Dance
f. 347 The Peasants
f. 347 La Peri
f. 347 Petite Valse
f. 347 Pièces Froides (Shawn)
f. 347 Pierrot Forlorn (Shawn)
f. 347 Pioneer’s Dance (Shawn)
f. 347 Polka
f. 347 Polo Dance
f. 347 Priestess of Isis
f. 347 Puchinello (Shawn)
f. 348 Quasi-March (Shawn)
f. 348 Quasi-Pastorale (Shawn)
f. 348 Radha (St. Denis)
f. 348 Red Radiance - Group Version (Shawn)
f. 348 El Relicario (Shawn)
f. 348 Rondo
f. 349 The Sacred River (St. Denis)
f. 349 Sarabande
f. 349 Scarf Dance
f. 349 Scarf Plastique (Shawn)
f. 349 Sculpture Plastique (Shawn)
f. 349 Se Seran Rose (Shawn)
f. 349 Second Arabesque (St. Denis)
f. 349 Serenta Morisca
f. 349 Skipping Rope Dance
f. 350 Soaring (Humphrey)
f. 350 Sombra
f. 350 Sonatina
f. 350 Sorocabo (Shawn)
f. 350 South Sea Island Dance
f. 350 Souvenir of Bavaria (Shawn)
f. 350 Spear Dance
f. 350 Spirit of Lotus
f. 350 Spirit of the Rose (St. Denis)
f. 350 Street Nautch (Shawn)
f. 350 Suite Espagnol (Shawn)
f. 350 Surprise Waltz
f. 350 Syrian Sword Dance (St. Denis)
f. 351 Tango
III. Denishawn era (cont.)
   A. Choreographic Notes (cont.)
   f. 351 Temple Bells (Shawn)
   f. 351 Three Apsarases (St. Denis)
   f. 351 Three Little Sisters
   f. 351 Torch Dance
   f. 352 Valse Aragonaise (Shawn)
   f. 352 Valse Ballet
   f. 352 Valse Bluette
   f. 352 Valse Brillante (St. Denis)
   f. 352 Valse Lumineuse
   f. 352 Viennese Vignette (Shawn)
   f. 352 Village Dance
   f. 352 The Vision of the Aissoua (St. Denis and Shawn)
   f. 352 Visitation (Shawn)
   f. 352 Viva Faraon
   f. 352 Vogue
   f. 353 Waltz (St. Denis) 1924
   f. 353 Waltzes from Der Rosenkavalier (Shawn)
   f. 353 Women of Spain (Shawn)
   f. 353 Worker's Songs of Middle Europe (Shawn)
   f. 353 Xochitl (Shawn)
   f. 353 The Yogi (St. Denis)
   f. 353 La Zingana (Shawn)
   f. 353 Zuni Dance
   f. 353 Unidentified
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   B. Technique
   f. 361 "Shawn's Fundamental Training Exercises (Pre-dance body training)"
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   C. Schools 1920-1933 & n.d
   f. 375-383 Class information; student biographies; school proposals and organization plans for branch schools; finances; teacher contracts; brochure layouts; misc.
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Includes descriptions of ballets, choreographic notes, and production arrangements.

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B. Financial Materials
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    removed to [UNK] [UNK] basement [UNK] [UNK]