

A Look Back



In her autobiography, *Ruth St. Denis, An Unfinished Life* (1939), the eminent dancer and choreographer describes the invitation she received from Adelphi President Paul Dawson Eddy to create a dance department that emphasized "the technical and artistic phase of the modern and the Oriental."


Ruth St. Denis '63 (Hon.) A WELL-CHOREOGRAPHED LIFE

Dr. Eddy's request was a fitting and prescient one, and she accepted the challenge. At the time, college and university dance courses were typically offered within physical education departments. Ms. St. Denis would have the opportunity to create a unique stand-alone program at Adelphi.

Pioneering was familiar ground for Ms. St. Denis, who was one of the first professional dancers outside of ballet to treat dance as a serious art. Early in her career, she made a name for herself through performances in Europe and the United States of her dances based on Asian styling, elaborate costumes and settings, and theatrical characters. In 1915, she and her husband Ted Shawn formed the Denishawn School and Dance Company. The company toured Asia and the United States, including four sold-out nights at Carnegie Hall in 1927. Denishawn produced some of the world's leading modern dancers, including Martha Graham.

Although Ms. St. Denis's popularity waned in the 1930s, she continued her mission to make American dance a more respectable art form, and the formation of the Adelphi dance department was integral to

this process. A glossy 1938 addendum to the Adelphi College Bulletin announces the new department, explaining that it would teach "Ancient and Modern forms as well as the Ballet, Oriental compositions and Social Dancing." Ms. St. Denis, known as Miss Ruth, served as chair and is listed as instructor for three courses.

Ms. St. Denis remained connected with Adelphi throughout her life. She was long involved with Adelphi's Children's Centre for Creative Arts and the annual Ruth St. Denis Days it sponsored, which began in 1955 and continued through the 1970s. Ms. St. Denis won the Capezio Award in 1961 and received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Adelphi in 1963. Her birth date is variously provided as anywhere between 1877 and 1880 (she herself claimed not to remember). Ms. St. Denis died in 1968, but lives on in the memories of many connected with Adelphi and through her legacy in modern dance. 

By **Mary M. Manning**

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Based on the original research of Ben Munisteri

One of 17 large portraits in Adelphi's Special Collections by Marcus Blechman, a well-known dance photographer and friend of Ms. St. Denis



An autographed copy of Ms. St. Denis's autobiography and a typed manuscript showing her handwritten annotations and editor's comments



Materials related to Ms. St. Denis's famous husband Ted Shawn, dancer, choreographer, founder of Jacob's Pillow, and co-founder (with Ms. St. Denis) of the renowned Denishawn School and Dance Company

Ruth St. Denis Honored in Exhibit and Performance

The dance department will celebrate its 70th anniversary and the opening of the new Performing Arts Center during the fall 2008 Dance Adelphi, October 14–19, 2008, which will feature choreography by Ms. St. Denis. Many of the items pictured here, along with other materials from the Ruth St. Denis Collection in University Archives and Special Collections and borrowed items, will be on view at the Adelphi University Gallery in the University Center from September 28–October 20, 2008. An opening reception will take place on October 14, 2008. For more information about performing arts at Adelphi, visit WWW.ADELPHI.EDU.