

**Ballet Chalkware: 1950s Kitsch**

Anyone who has ever taken ballet lessons is probably guilty of forcing porcelain slippers or ballerina ornaments on their teachers as end-of-year gifts. The world of ballet has not been immune to the commercialization that has resulted in kitschy merchandise to line the walls of studios and living rooms. At Dance Collection Danse, an army of plaster ballet dancers was lovingly collected by founders Lawrence and Miriam Adams because they felt it was important for the collection to demonstrate how the public outside the profession views dance. Though depicting positions that evoke ballet technique, most of the figurines would certainly receive a stern glance from any répétiteur. Known as chalkware and made with plaster-of-Paris, the figures are often garishly coloured and embellished with swirls and flowers, or are mounted on decorative metal grids.

I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse. I welcome you back to another edition of Artifact of the Month after a brief hiatus during which we moved our headquarters to a new space. We now have a larger research centre and a gallery for exhibitions. We hope that you will visit us at our new home.

Now back to the Artifact-of-the-Month. Mid-twentieth-century chalkware was often mass produced for home décor or as carnival prizes until carnivals replaced the delicate plasters with sturdier stuffed animals as winnings. Many are hand-painted and, though mass produced, have a unique quality. Canadian manufacturers include Devonware, Winnipeg-based FavorWare and Girotti Sculptured Art in St. Catharines, Ontario, although most of the plasters in our collection are not marked by a manufacturer.

In terms of ballet positions, any teacher or dancer will find flaws right away, for example, legs that are not turned out or stretched at the knee. What dancers call the “working leg”, the one that is off the floor and not supporting the weight of the body, is often overcrossed in the retiré position where the pointed foot is supposed to be placed at the side of the knee. Hands don't always display the delicacy or expressivity that we usually associate with ballet and some even appear fist-like.

These 1950s designs also reflect an aesthetic view of the female body that differs from today's ideal ballet body. Before the long and ultra-slim “Balanchine body” was popularized in the 1960s by Russian-born choreographer and New York City Ballet Artistic Director George Balanchine, the 1950s ballet body was more robust. A more curvaceous, fuller-thighed body type is the one depicted in these plasters.

Chalkware was very much a display of popular culture in the mid-twentieth century. American chalkware often depicted kewpie dolls or cartoon characters such as Betty Boop or Disney characters. There are also series of chalkware that, by today's standards, would be considered quite ignorant or racist in their depiction of peoples of African or Asian descent. The range of designs is vast including everything from fruit to animals to mermaids. The choice of dance as a subject makes perfect sense considering the rising popularity of ballet in the mid-twentieth century.

From the Depression right through the war years and into the 1950s economic boom, ballet saw a meteoric rise in its popularity in North America. From the mid-1930s, the various Ballets Russes companies toured the continent and some of these companies, as well as many sought-after teachers, found refuge in North America during World War II. In Canada, the art

form blossomed with the arrival of immigrants in the 1930s such as British teachers Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Farrally, who founded the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and Russia's Boris Volkoff, who is recognized as the father of Canadian Ballet. They were followed by the post-war immigration of European ballet dancers. The activities of amateur ballet groups across Canada combined with a substantial rise in the amount of dance training available led to the Canadian Ballet Festivals in the late 1940s and early '50s. The popularity and success of the Ballet Festival movement was multiplied by the visits of the very popular Sadler's Wells Ballet from England, the formation of The National Ballet of Canada in 1951, and the broadcasting of ballet on CBC television beginning in 1952. The 1950s were a boom period for ballet in Canada and so the commercialization of the discipline through merchandise merely reflects that popularity.

Before our move, DCD's collection of chalkware dancers were proudly displayed on our "wall of kitsch" to the delight of visitors. We will be sure to exhibit them in our new home as well. Come visit us at 149 Church St. in Toronto.

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