

A Jester's Marotte – A Stage Prop from the Amy Sternberg Collection

Welcome to Artifact of the Month. I'm Amy Bowring, Director of Collections and Research at Dance Collection Danse. This marotte, the traditional sceptre of a jester, is a stage prop that was used in an original pantomime called *The Wedding of Prince Charming and Princess Dewdrop*, which played at Toronto's Massey Hall in 1923. Choreographed and staged by Toronto dance teacher Amy Sternberg, the prop was used by her ten-year-old nephew, Eric Hehner, who played the Court Jester in the production. Sternberg was well known in the Toronto art scene of the 1910s and '20s for her epic productions sometimes using hundreds of performers of various ages and incorporating lavish sets and costumes. Young Hehner appeared in "The Wedding Procession", which was the eighth scene out of seventeen in this pantomime featuring 133 dancers.

The artifact itself consists of a belled jester's hood made out of blue cotton, although it has mostly faded to a dull grey-blue. In the folds where the fabric is gathered at the base of the doll, we get a glimpse of the original bright blue colour. Small brass bells are stitched onto the fringes of the hood and still jingle. The stuffed, white face is made of an artificial-leather fabric, possibly Fabrikoid, which was commonly used in the 1920s for car convertible tops, seat covers and other items. The face is hand coloured to create facial details such as eyes and rosy cheeks. There was a pink silk bow tied at the base of the jester's hood but only a few thin pieces of silk remain. Typical of a marotte, the artifact resembles the costume of the young jester who carried it and it is likely that Eric Hehner's costume was also made of the same blue fabric.

Eric's mother and aunt were entrepreneurial women, and talented and respected teachers in Toronto. Originally from Montreal, the Sternberg sisters, Sarah (1875-1966) and Amy (1876-1935), trained at Barnjum's Gymnasium in the late nineteenth century. Here they studied physical culture, a wide-spread health movement that included exercises for both men and women. Exercises consisted of a range of gymnastics and calisthenics that sometimes included hand-held apparatuses such as rings, balls, bean bags or dumbbells. And the movements practiced would incorporate bending, stretching, twisting, swinging and jumping. These exercises would be practiced in a way that was deemed acceptable for women and they encouraged dress reforms for women because corsets were abandoned in favour of more flexible practice clothes.

The Sternberg family moved to Toronto in 1893, two years after Sarah and Amy's father died. Sarah immediately established Miss Sternberg's Gymnasium Classes in Dancing and Physical Culture to help support the family. In 1894, Amy joined her sister as a teacher at the prosperous school. In addition to physical culture, ballroom classes were given and the Sternbergs often arranged costume balls for their students at St. George's Hall on Toronto's Elm Street – a building better known today as the Arts and Letters Club. When Sarah married Charles Hehner, a British-born chemist, in 1910 Amy took over the school. The Hehners welcomed a son, Eric, in 1912.

When Charles Hehner died of kidney disease in 1921, the Hehner family had already moved back to Toronto to live with Amy and the family matriarch, Eva Sternberg – Sarah and Amy's mother. As a widow and mother, Sarah did not return to teaching and Amy remained as the main breadwinner for the family.

The famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova first toured to Toronto in 1910, and her popular performances spurred a desire for ballet lessons among hundreds of Toronto girls. To meet the demand, Amy Sternberg travelled to New York during the summers to study ballet at the Menzelli Normal School achieving certification as a teacher of ballet in 1913. In later trips to New York, she also trained with modern dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis at the Denishawn School and this influence can be seen in the costuming and inclusion of dances such as an *Indian Incense Dance* in her school's recitals.

In addition to her recitals, Amy Sternberg staged some of the largest theatrical presentations Toronto had ever seen and they were often organized to benefit social causes such as childcare for hospitalized mothers, children's hospitals, sanatoriums or, during World War I, the Red Cross Fund. In 1915, she worked with costumer and organizer Mrs. A.J. Arthurs and director Stanley Adams to stage the *Fantastic Extravaganza* at Massey Hall, which used hundreds of performers and 600 costumes including a Christmas tree costume that lit up. A newspaper report from the time describes the scene, "Staid old Massey Hall was a blaze of light and filled to the last seat last night, when 'The Fantastic Extravaganza' was given. In every particular it surpassed any performance of its kind ever seen in the city." Another example of Sternberg's ability to stage mammoth productions is her 1927 *Historical Pageant* sponsored by the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, which celebrated Canada's Diamond Jubilee. It also involved hundreds of performers and deftly portrayed Canada's history.

Sternberg's range of classes gradually extended to include ballet and pointe work, pantomime, classical and interpretive dances, nature and pastorelle dancing, national and folk dancing, and ballroom classes for adults. At this point in our knowledge of Canadian dance history, Amy Sternberg is also the first to offer a teacher training program to certify dance teachers. Both she and her graduates could be found among the faculties of the Toronto Conservatory of Music, the Canadian Academy and College of Music, Upper Canada College, St. Andrew's College, the Hamilton and Brantford Conservatories of Music and in several Ladies' Colleges in Toronto.

As a single woman, a business owner and the main breadwinner for her family in the early twentieth century, even before women could vote in Canada, Amy Sternberg is a trailblazer. Her lavish productions entertained on an epic scale and her training encouraged a generation of Toronto women to become professional dancers and teachers. This marotte is but a glimpse into the contribution she made to dance.

To read more about Amy Sternberg, download Dance Collection Danse Magazine issue #59 and read Seika Boye's article "Finding Amy Sternberg" on pages 24 through 27.
<http://www.dcd.ca/general/dcdmag.html>

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