From the Sewing Room to the Ballroom, the Evolution of Ballroom Dance Costumes

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FROM THE SEWING ROOM TO THE BALLROOM, THE EVOLUTION OF

BALLROOM DANCE COSTUMES

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
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**Thesis Summary:**

Although I have danced all my life, I only began to ballroom dance and dance socially after starting college at the University of South Carolina. While dancing with the Carolina Ballroom Club, I learned some of the history of ballroom dance from our instructors, but I never quite understood how we went from having very conservative court dances to the wide variety of ballroom dances where dancers wear extravagant costumes. I also have been sewing since I was a child; I helped do minor repairs in the costume room for ballet productions, and recently began making clothing for myself. I decided to research the history of ballroom dance costumes and design and make my own.

Although dancing has been a part of human society for millennia, the focus of this thesis is only on the past two centuries in Western Europe and the United States. Ballroom dancing originated from court dances and country dances that had designated steps and sometimes were called dances, like square dances where there is a leader that announces the steps as the crowd dances. However, these dances like the minuet did not allow for any close contact between the dancers and didn’t look like any of today’s “ballroom” dances. In the 1800s, the waltz became popular and spread from Germany into France and England where the close embrace between dancers was initially considered scandalous. Waltz was the prominent ballroom dance of the 19th century, and the costumes for women consisted of a corseted waistline, whose style changed throughout the decades, a stiff bodice, and a full skirt created by large numbers of underskirts called petticoats or wire cages. Men wore black tailcoats with a white shirt,
some variety of tie, and pants that began much shorter and tighter and grew into the slacks one is accustomed to seeing today. Both men and women in the 19th century wore gloves to dance.

In the early 20th century, ballroom dancing saw many changes. The tango from Argentina made its way to Europe, dances from the United States like swing dance and foxtrot grew in popularity, and interest in dances from Latin America began to grow. During the ragtime era, clothing became less rigid and allowed for more freedom of movement. This trend continued into the jazz age where women’s skirts became shorter and gained more movement. In the 1950s, Latin dances like the Rumba were added to the ballroom repertoire and dancers began to have different styles of costumes for “Latin” dances like cha cha than they had for “Standard” dances like the waltz. The silhouettes of both dresses were similar but with different embellishments. By the 1970s, Latin costumes became shorter and varied widely in style. This trend continues to this day, and standard costumes are long and flowing, while Latin costumes are short and diverse in style.

All of this knowledge helped me design my ballroom gown for standard dances. I chose a silhouette that has been used often in the past decades and a cut that fits my body well. The construction of the dress was time-consuming but well worth it, as I intend to wear this dress in many competitions to come.
Introduction:

Social dancing is an artistic form of expression that dates back centuries, but over the past two centuries, social dances have evolved and a large branch has broken off from social dancing to become what we know today as DanceSport. DanceSport is the name for competitive ballroom dancing that is strictly codified and regulated by rules instated by international ballroom associations. While social swing, Latin, and western dance still flourish, the emphasis on competition and opportunity to show off skills, makes DanceSport popular among ballroom dancers.

Before waltzing into my research, here is some background information that you need to know. DanceSport competitions are broken down into two major divisions- International and American. International standard dances are what people typically think of as ballroom dances, waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, Viennese waltz, and tango. American Smooth dances are waltz, foxtrot, tango, and Viennese waltz. The main difference between the two styles is that Standard dancers never break the closed dance position, while Smooth dancers are free to break hold and perform variations such as the underarm turn. International Latin dances are rumba, samba, Paso Doble, cha cha and jive. American Rhythm dances are rumba, mambo, bolero, cha cha, and swing. The differences between the styles are hard to notice directly but in American Rhythm, one steps onto a bent knee to achieve the required hip action, while in International Latin, one steps onto a straight leg.
As a member of the University of South Carolina Ballroom Club, I have been competing for several years in collegiate competitions around the southeast. At these competitions, I noticed that the dancers competing in higher levels wore elaborate dresses. I decided to investigate the origins of these designs and create my own dress for standard dances. In this research, I focused on the history of ballroom dance in England and the United States and drew connections between what influenced the dances and clothing worn throughout the past two centuries. My research focused mostly on women’s costuming in Standard and Latin dances as it has changed the most over the decades, but I noticed men’s fashion when it was distinctive.
Social Balls and Dance Halls:

Before we had ballroom dances, people would perform folk dances such as the Allemand, Minuet, Irish Jig, Roundels, and Contre-danses (Ferrero 53). These dances formed the basis of what would become the German Waltz.

The Regency Period

1800-1830

The Regency Waltz:

Reference Plate of Waltz dancing (Wilson 103)
The waltz of the early 1800s came to England from Germany via France. The German Waltz was very quick and focused on turning, while the French made it somewhat slower and more graceful. Upon arrival in England, the dance became slower still and changed form yet again to take a more meandering journey around the space (Wilson 41). Early in this period, only the higher classes danced the waltz, with the middle and lower classes dancing the country dances or cotillions. As the waltz became more popular, works such as manuals for public dance teachers were published that described how the dance ought to be performed. (Wilson 18)

In the Regency time period, the waltz came into fashion in England. The older generations saw dancing with a partner held close, as in the waltz, as scandalous, but at this point in history, it was seen as more “chaste” than the folk or country dances that were also popular (Wilson 14). The dance frame, or how the dancers embraced each other, of the time had an easy curve with hands clasped or on the back of the shoulders (Wilson 85).

**Fashion of the Regency Period**

In this period, the clothing was inspired by ancient Greece and light sheer overdresses with trim on the edges were fashionable. Women’s skirts could be slightly shorter than floor length such that ankles and feet were sometimes seen, and the waistline on the dresses was almost directly under the bust, with open necklines. (Bishop). The slightly shorter skirts and lighter fabrics in the women’s dresses allowed for more ease in moving. During the Regency period, corsets were worn, but they transitioned from having minimal boning into a longer corset that supported the bust.
without compressing the waist too much (Bishop). These less restrictive corsets were an important part in allowing for the energetic dancing of the period.

In this period, dancing dresses could have been in satin with net or silk overdresses (Bishop). This is interesting considering that cotton and wool were everyday fabrics, and silks, lace, and linens were expensive and generally available only to the wealthy (Time Table, 2015). This might explain why the waltz was initially danced only by the upper classes, who could afford the materials to make dancing dresses.

The Romantic Era
1830-1850

Ball gowns from the 1830s, and the 1840s (Aldrich, 26)
During the Romantic era, joyful, good-natured partner dances such as the gallop and the polka made the waltz even more acceptable as it was seen that dancers could dance in each other’s arms without it being a sensual experience. However, with the rise of these dances, the intricate steps of the country dances were slowly getting replaced with simpler, more natural walking steps (Powers). With this change in dance style to simpler steps, more people could take part in the dances and it became an opportunity for entertainment and to gain social standing. As a place to improve one’s social standing, it became worthwhile for families of the middle and upper classes to learn the dances, meaning that children were also expected to learn these dances (Powers).

**Fashion of the Romantic Era**

In this period, dresses became longer and fuller. In the thirties, the waist line returned to the natural waist, and the skirts were embellished with lace and bows, but in the 1840s, dresses became less ornate and were embellished by flounces of fabric as opposed to lace. A new method of pleating the skirts was developed which helped the skirts to grow in width. To achieve this width, women would wear multiple stiffened petticoats under their dresses (Aldrich 26). Corsets of this period were getting laced tighter to achieve a small waistline, but there was also strong opposition to lacing of corsets so tightly as to deform the body. This was shown by the etiquette guides and beauty books that refer to the many ailments caused by corsets and deem those who wear corsets in this manner as unfit to be a wife or mother as they prevented easy movement and activity (Aldrich, 26). The sleeves of the 1840s hung off the shoulder and were too tight to allow for freedom of movement in the arms, and corsets were
restricting the torso, but at least the dancing shoes of the day were long and square toed which was not compressive to the foot.

In these decades, the middle class found a way to use luxurious fabrics such as silks in even their every-day garments, which meant the eveningwear must have been very expensive (Aldrich, 25). Dresses were still made on an individual basis, but during the 1840s, the sewing machine was invented which allowed for dresses to be made much more quickly than when they had to be sewn completely by hand (Taylor, 55).

The Victorian Period
1850-1870
At this period of time, Dance Manuals, or booklets discussing the etiquette for dancing, how one should dress, and how to perform the dances were well distributed among the people. These manuals imply that not following the rules of etiquette describing proper interactions between people was extremely frowned upon, and individuals put great effort into living up to the standards.

In this era of dance, the quadrille, country dance, and waltz of previous decades were still being danced, but a newer dance that originated in Bohemia called the redowa became popular as well in the 1850s (Ferrero, 53). This dance is set in ¾ time like a waltz, and had the hop-steps of a polka (Powers). The waltz and redowa were danced at private or public balls that were typically held in public assembly halls or private homes that had a well sized room with proper flooring (The Ballroom Guide).

In the early Victorian era, everyone from the middle and upper classes danced a wide variety of styles, but as the era progressed, the upper class balls began to emphasize cotillion games called the German, and social dancing became less popular with the youth. Even with the invention of new steps by dance teachers trying to keep their jobs, middle class balls for the general public saw the Mazurka, Schottische, Redowa, and Polka begin to fade. The dance masters tried to revive interest in social dancing by forming professional associations, but the formation of these organizations was unsuccessful. The codification of steps was less exciting than being able to experiment in social dance which caused Interest in dancing to continue declining (Powers, “Social Dances”). I find this information quite interesting because even today, many college dancers who are first learning about partner dances initially find it easier
to learn dances with strict steps. Once they understand how partner dances work, I have seen many of my friends gravitate toward social dances such as salsa or lindy hop where the rules are less strict and they can have more fun.

**Victorian Dance Fashion**

In this period, ladies wore dancing dresses with short sleeves that had long, full skirts that didn’t drag the floor (Hillgrove, *The Scholar’s 13*). The colors of the dresses were determined by a woman’s physical appearance and her position in society. Light colors were reserved for slimmer bodies because it was thought that light colors added bulk to the figure. Paler colors such as pink or light blue or white were considered to be complimentary to blonde haired ladies, while vibrant, rich colors were for those with darker skin and hair. Women in mourning who were able to attend balls could wear black dresses with scarlet or violet trimmings (*The Ballroom Guide 19*).

Although the styles of the dress varied with the season, in general, elderly ladies who did not dance were to wear dresses that were lighter and less formal than dresses they would have worn to the opera. These ladies wore beautiful jewelry to display their wealth and standing. Silk dresses were not typically acceptable for the dancers, but a married woman might have worn a light colored or white silk dress if it were trimmed with tulle and flowers. Young unmarried ladies were to wear light materials over a silk slip of colors that complimented their features, with no more than a single bracelet as jewelry (*The Ballroom Guide 20*). The lightweight materials in the dance dresses included satin slips with an overlay of crepe or net tarlatan, which is an open weave muslin fabric (Hillgrove, *The Scholar’s 14*). Tulle, gauze, and areophane were also
layered in the skirts (Routledge 12). Dancing boots of the day were silk or satin and could be white or the color of the dress. Women were required to wear white gloves that were well fitted while in the ballroom (The Ballroom Guide 20).

The style for men of this period was relatively consistent; however, the accessories would change with the decades. Generally men wore black coats and pants with a waistcoat, gloves, and possibly decorated with a gold watch-chain (Howe 10). In the 1850s, the fashionable accessories were a white waistcoat, black tie or cravat, low heeled patent leather boots, and white or lemon kid gloves (Hillgrove, The Scholar’s 14). However, in the 1860s, the opposite was true with white neck cloths or ties and black waistcoats being the fashionable choice. Special dancing shoes or pumps were worn instead of boots as well (Hillgrove, A complete and practical guide 29).

The ballroom guides suggest using the best quality materials one can afford in men’s ballroom attire as this was a sign of wealth and practicality, due to the fact the main items didn’t change over the years and good fabrics wouldn’t wear out as quickly as cheaper fabrics (Routledge, 14). This is intriguing as Hillgrove stated “Ladies should remember that men look to the effect of dress in setting off the figure and countenance of a lady, rather than its cost.” (Hillgrove, A complete and practical guide 18). This suggests that the quality of the materials in the dress of a lady was secondary to how it made her look, which makes sense for several reasons. One of the reasons was because fashions in women’s dresses change, and the other was because a woman who had the ability to make a beautiful gown without spending a lot of money was one who would have been seen as an asset to a family, because she would be spending money wisely.
Overall, the Victorian era dance costumes were not conducive to dancing. Corsets became tighter, constricting waists, displacing organs, and making it difficult to breathe. Heeled shoes, although still not the best for the body, were lower than today’s shoes at one to one and a half inches, and were tapered at the toe which caused foot fatigue (Aldrich 27). One aspect of dance fashion that made sense for the bodies was that silk dresses were not worn by ladies doing a lot of dancing because they showed sweat. (Routledge 12), Additionally, the introduction of a cage-like crinoline made of wire in 1856, meant the number of petticoats or skirts a woman had to wear was reduced. As a result, women could obtain the full desirable shape of the dress while allowing legs to not be constricted by fabric (Aldrich 26).

The End of the 19th Century
1870-1900
Waltz continues to reign

(Aldrich 29)  (Aldrich 32)
The end of the 19th century saw another change in the waltz. The waltz of this time had lost some of the turning action of the original waltzes and became more box-like with a pendulum motion (Aldrich 31). Although most of the middle and upper class danced in this period at public and private balls, the rules of etiquette from the Victorian era were still strictly followed so that ladies would appear poised and graceful.

**Turn of the Century Fashion:**

With the new waltz’s slower, pendulum-like nature, less movement of the legs was required of the ladies and in the 1870s and 80s, the width of the skirts shrank to become more sheath-like. The bodices of the dresses extended over the hips of the woman and the bustle she wore under the dress.

Necklines were rounded and could be off the shoulder with short sleeves. These dresses were often longer, and had trains that were secured with hooks while dancing (Aldrich 28). In the 1880s the bustles grew in size, creating a more abrupt shape in the skirt. As time progressed, the hues chosen for the fabrics became richer and sometimes involved combinations of color. Gloves were still worn at the elbow or longer. The shoes at the end of this time period had higher, two inch French heels with pointed toes (Aldrich 30).

The materials used in the dresses were similar to previous decades in that they were made of very light materials such as gauze, tulle, fine muslin and lace. Silk could be worn by married ladies if it was trimmed with tulle, but generally, silk was not used in dance dresses. The colors used were chosen in a way that complimented a lady’s
features (*Canadian* 8). Velvet was sometimes used by the wealthy in their dresses (Taylor 55).

Dancing in fashionable dresses before the turn of the century was not an easy feat. The trains of the dresses of this era were very long and had to be held or pinned up in order that they did not drag the floor while dancing (Aldrich 28). Women’s shoes were gaining higher heels and more tapered toes which could cause dancers to move with bent knees which could lead to fatigue. Corsets were still causing problems with breathing and movement, and the steel wired bustles of the 1880s were heavy and cumbersome. However, by the end of the century, the importance of healthy and active women began to be recognized (Buckland 99).

**The Ragtime Era and Tango**

**1900-1920**

![Image](image_url)

(Lacasse, 14) (**“Frocks from Tangoville”**) The Castles (Castles, 131)
Tango came to Paris in the early 1900s from Argentina and spread like wildfire and men began to outnumber women at dances (Buckland 171). This was probably due to the nature of the dance, and according to the Dancing Times:

The tango is an ideal dance for the man. He creates the design of it throughout, and in doing this calls into play mental as well as physical prowess and as he develops a mastery over many diverse steps the more elaborate and interesting to him becomes the designing of the dance. He has no uncomfortably close or tight hold of the lady, yet his control of the lady’s movements is more complete than in the waltz. (*qtd. in Buckland* 172).

Because of the closer embrace required between partners, the tango led to more “risqué” styles of dress that deviated from what was socially accepted. The dances themselves were not considered proper like the waltz or two-step, and because they came from the lower classes, it took some time before they found their place with high society (Walker 7).

The tango was more relaxed than the “haughty” waltz and after World War I, the dance moved back to the United States with the men who grew to love the dance (Buckland 171). However, in the United States, the Fox-Trot and Maxixe and Hesitation waltz were very popular and the tango dissolved into a stylized one-step dance that looked very different than its Argentine ancestor. These ragtime dances were danced in a variety of settings, from cafes to dance halls, and they were simple “one-step” type dance that everyone could do. (Nelson, “Ragtime Dance”).
Ragtime and Tango Fashion

When Argentine Tango made its way to Europe, the dance fashions became more relaxed. Women wore skirts with slits, with Turkish trousers or similar clothing covering the legs underneath. Corsets became less constricting, black heels were strapped to feet and small hats were worn. Men wore white spats, morning coats and a shorter shirt collar with no gloves to tango (Buckland 171).

The standard dress for everyday dress up until 1908 was the “Gibson Girl” style which required a thin corseted waist, many petticoats, and very large hats that gave bodies an hourglass figure (Golden 65). The American dancers Vernon and Irene Castle left a major mark on fashion when they went to dance in Paris. They were very popular dancers who chose to dress in much less constrictive clothing which allowed them to move freely (Golden 45). Irene’s style exhibited dresses with an empire waist, shorter and leaner skirts, over a non-restricting corset for support. On her head she wore a turban-like headdress over her short bobbed hair. From her example, the highly structured dresses of previous decades were replaced with the flowing chiffon and lace that began the “flapper” fashion that would boom in the next decade (Golden 65).

Thanks to the tango, Irene Castle, and the public’s interest in health, constrictive corsets were going out of style during this period. Also, the dresses of the day became less structured and restrictive. The heels worn in tango dances were strapped to the feet so they wouldn’t fall off (Buckland 171). All of this meant that the dancer could focus on her steps rather than her shoes, her breathing, and any constrictive clothing.
Vernon castle also changed the style of male dancers as he chose not to wear tail suits while dancing because they were problematic in crowded dance spaces and cafes where he often danced. Instead he wore a tailless evening coat while dancing (Golden 67).

**The Jazz Age of Foxtrot and Swing**

**1920-1950**

(Powers, *Evolution*) (British Pathe: Charleston Dancing) (British Pathe: Dance Steps)

After the hardships of World War I, dancing brought a return to normalcy. Social dancing ranged from the simple walking fox-trot to the spirited lindy hop and everyone could find something to enjoy. Even during the great depression, dance seemed to be a way to find joy in hard times (Powers, *Dances of the Jazz Age*). During World War II, social swing dancing was extremely popular as people used dancing as an escape from the terror and fear of the War (Losse). In fact, during the war years, the Royal Opera
House in London was converted into a dance hall that held dances twice a day and often hosted more than 1500 dancers a night (Losse).

In the early 1920s, the first ballroom competitions were held for dances like the Waltz. This began a new era in ballroom dancing where people could be dancing not so much for their partner but for a judge (Powers, *Evolution*). People continued to dance in the dance halls to the jazz and swing music of the day. But the “Modern” dances such as the waltz also found a home in the competitive sphere. It is helpful to note here that at this point in competitive dancing, the style was easygoing and natural. According to *The Modern Ballroom Dance Instructor*, a dance manual from 1923, “All movement is easy and unaffected, which can be so easily ruined by exaggeration. The best dancers are the quietest; they do not flourish their prowess.” (Powers, *Evolution*). The best dancers were those who looked relaxed and had mastered their steps which showed a stark contrast to the exuberant and showy swing dances.

According to a New York Times article from 1925, the dresses that showed the knees were vulgar and people from groups such as the “National Congress of Parents and Teachers” frowned upon the shorter skirts and that women were smoking. If these groups had their way, wider ankle length skirts would come back in style (Special to *The New York Times*).

While the dance instructors of the jazz age were beginning to focus more on codified steps than social dancing, social dances such as the Charleston, Lindy Hop, and foxtrot, which became the most popular dance of the era, were booming. One of the
standard dances that came from this time was the quickstep which evolved from a one-step foxtrot to faster jazz music (Nelson, “Jazz Age”).

In the early thirties in the United States, the Rumba became popular. This dance has a similar basic to the box step in waltz but with counter sway and hip motion, and it is one of the first Latin dances that was adopted and standardized by the Official Board of Ballroom Dancing. Other dances from Latin America with African roots, such as the Brazilian Samba and Maxixe, also became popular during the Jazz Age (Powers, *Evolution*).

**Fashion**

In the social scene, this was the age of the flapper. The flowing dresses and bobbed hair with small hats from the stylings of Irene Castle became the rage. A lady might wear flowing culottes to dance or knee length skirts. Even in the competitive scene, the dresses were softer, corsets had been discarded, and the dresses covered the knee. The shoes worn were simple pumps with substantial heels (Nelson, “Jazz Age”). By the end of this period, floats, or pieces of fabric attached to the upper part of the dress that move freely, were worn on the dresses of competitors in Europe to emphasize the movement of the dancers, but not much adornment other than flowers and full short-sleeves was worn for competition (British Pathe: “All Ireland”).

In the early 1940s, at social swing events, skirts lengthened to below the knee and necklines were high. Some ladies wore shirt-waist dresses and kick pleats were in style. (British Pathe: “Jive Dance”). For the more traditional, competitive dances such as
the waltz, lace and chiffon were seen in the dresses. Skirts were mid-shin length or slightly longer and they moved well with the dances. The heels worn were simple pumps with substantial heels (British Pathe: “Dance Steps”).

The lack of corsets was helpful to the dancing, but the energetic movements could cause some injuries. However, the styles of the jazz age overall seem to not have a huge effect on the health of the dancers.

The Era of Rock and Roll and Fluffy Dresses

1950-1970

(British Pathe: “Top Dancers’ Competition”) (Jeffery-Nec)

Early 1950s Latin Costumes

Standard attire
As mentioned earlier, after the Second World War, people were happy and looking for ways to express their joy (Losse). Teenagers were looking to dance while their parents were settling down, and jazz musicians were becoming more expensive, so rock and roll came onto the scene and became the music of choice.

Rock and roll music took hold and swing dance continued evolving to fill the role (Powers, *Teen Dances of the 1950s*). In the 1950s, dance halls were still frequented where the foxtrot and waltz continued to hold some appeal along with more of the swing-type dances (British Pathe: Dancing). In the competitive scene, this was a time when the 10 dances of international ballroom had been accepted and standardized. During this time, Latin Dances such as the cha cha were developed, and the mambo gained popularity (Herbison-Evans).

In the 1960s, social dancing ceased to involve “touch dances” but rather highlighted personal expression. The youth of this age did freestyle dances like the twist. Traditional ballroom dances were left to grandparents and competitors (Allen 16). With
this historical division between social and competitive ballroom dance, I will now focus more on the competitive side.

**Fashion**

In the 1950s the dresses worn for standard dances went from being slightly A-line shaped to extremely full, bell shaped dresses with many layers of circular tulle and net skirts. Skirts were adorned with floral appliqués and rhinestones while the bodices remained somewhat simple (British Pathe: Morecambe Dance Festival). Competitive Latin dancing was new at this time, so dancers wore very similar dresses in both standard and Latin dance categories. The main difference between the two types of dresses was that in Latin dance, the costumes were more embellished. They might be striped, have large ruffles, or made of different fabrics. Aside from embellishments, the silhouette and construction of the Latin dance dresses appears almost identical to a dress one would wear for a waltz. (British Pathe: “Top dancers’ competition). These dresses also used the new synthetic materials that were becoming more common in this period, and it would not have been uncommon to see ladies in nylon stockings or wearing rayon (Time Table, 2015)

By the late 1960s, some changes began appearing in the Latin costumes. Women started to wear heeled sandals instead of pumps, and even though circle skirts were still quite popular, they had reduced both in length and volume from the 1950s era (British Pathe: Central European Dance Championship). Youth competitors wore slightly shorter dresses than the adults, and they had more ruffles and the skirts were even fuller. The
youth could be seen wearing flat shoes as well which was helpful for the developing
dancers’ feet. (British Pathe: “Top Dancers’ Competition”)

The Age of Disco
1970-1980

(British Pathe: Ballroom Dancing)  (Northtwentyteam: North Twenty Formation
Team 1974 Come Dancing)

In the 1970s, the popular social dances included disco and the hustle which took
steps and stylings from the Hispanic community in New York (Allen, 16). Partner dancing
came back to the forefront after a decade or so of freestyling, and the Latin styles of
ballroom dance became more popular and ready to evolve (Powers, The Disco lifestyle).
The disco era brought many middle class white people together with the African
American and Hispanic dancers to do a dance that was supposed to be “sophisticated”
and “modern”. The massive speakers and state of the art light systems commonly found
in dance halls contributed to the sophistication. Dancers dressed up for the disco in
spandex jumpsuits and moved to upbeat music with a strong back beat that was made for dancing (Powers, *The Disco Lifestyle*).

In the competitive sphere, the Latin ballroom dance style seemed to take on some of disco’s modern characteristics and celebration of individuality and grew in popularity. Another notable event that happened in the 1970s was the peak in popularity of formation ballroom dancing, which is where teams of ballroom dancers perform synchronized routines. The first World Championships of formation dancing was held in 1973 (“Formation Dancing”). This combination of events is interesting as formation dancing emphasized the teams rather than the individual dancers, which runs counter to the whole movement toward individuality seen in the Latin and social styles.

**1970s Fashion**

In the 1970s, the differences between costumes for “ballroom” and “Latin” styles became well defined. For the standard dances, a brightly colored dress with a very full skirt like those of the previous two decades was common. Sleeves were short and voluminous (British Pathe: Ballroom Dancing).

The Latin dance costumes, however, were starting to become much, *much* smaller. With the rise of the miniskirt, Latin skirts became mid-thigh length and fringe and circular skirts were popular. The bodices were very intricately designed with metallic accents, sequins, low cut backlines, and large sleeves (prrutherford: U.S. Latin Dance Competition in 1970s-Part 1). Synthetic fibers were a big part of the costuming. Lycra, or spandex, was first developed in 1959 and it was used to create some stretch in
the bodices of the dresses (Time Table). The elastic fibers allowed for freedom of movement not previously allowed for in natural fibers.

I think the most interesting thing about this period of dance costumes is how different each of the women’s Latin dance costumes was from each other. Although the standard dresses looked very similar, the variety in the Latin dance costumes let dancers show their individual style which is something that carries over to today. There were plenty of people who considered the “individual style” shown in the 1970s Latin dresses to be immodest. For example, in 1974, a commentator of the television program Come Dancing said, “the girls dresses, well they’re practically swimsuits” (Northtwentyteam: North Twenty Formation Team 1974 Come Dancing).

The Eighties
1980-1990
The decade of many styles

1982 (Barry Levhr) 1985 (Joliem L) 1988 (Martin van der Poel)
After the free expression and promiscuity of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s was a decade that moved back toward conservative values. This meant that romantic relationships moved more slowly again and ballroom dancing regained its place as a way to meet and get to know people. Ballroom dancing came back to national attention in this decade with the help of President Reagan, who along with his wife Nancy, announced the third week of September to be National Ballroom Week (Allen 17).

Mainstream social dancing in the 1980s all but abandoned partner dances, since the popular hip hop and electronic music of the time did not lend itself to the traditional dances. Lambada, salsa, and other Hispanic dances were the exception as Latin music became popular (“How it All Started”), and movies like Dirty Dancing, and Fame helped kick-start this style of dancing in the 1980s.

By the time the International DanceSport Federation acquired its name at the end of the decade, ballroom dance had a following of people who wanted to dance and who were interested in the competitive aspect of ballroom dancing that was widely televised (“How it All Started”).
**1980s Fashion and the Catsuit**

For the ladies, the stylings of the dresses changed throughout the decade. In the early 1980s, standard dresses still retained much of the volume of previous decades, but the point where the dress widened moved downward past the hips (Barry Levhr). The bodices of the dresses got more intricately designed and often were multicolored to catch the eye of the judges. In the middle of the decade, the fullness of the dresses dropped closer to the hemline and feathers had become more widely used for volume as opposed to thick crinolines (Joliem L). By the end of the decade, ostrich feathers were a staple of standard dresses and were used at minimum as a trim on the hem but often were found on floats or as a material covering the entire skirt, and the thick net crinolines were gone (Martin van der Poel).

Latin Dresses of the early 1980s had large open backs, but the skirts almost reached the knees when not moving. Once the dancers started their routines however, the fringe and split skirts flew and showcased the dancers’ legs (Barry Levhr). In the mid-1980s the dresses became shorter and often showed a leotard front even while standing still. Nude fabric was becoming increasingly more common to create costumes that looked like they revealed more than they ever could without worries of a wardrobe malfunction (dancevisionlasvegas). By the end of the decade, dresses of the most elite dancers became more “modest” as fringe was replaced with longer asymmetrical skirts with slits to the hip or fitted hip sections with large ruffles below (Martin van der Poel).

The 1980s were a time in which not only women’s fashion, but men’s fashion changed. While in the standard dances, tail suits were still the rule, in the early 1980,
men performing Latin dances had the chance to wear something other than a black suit. Men began wearing white suits, and spandex “catsuits”, or one piece long sleeved unitards, that matched their partner’s dresses (Barry Levhr). In the mid-1980s, the men’s costumes gained billowy sleeves and a deep v neckline that opened to a high waistline that was at the level of the ribcage (dancevisionlasvegas). By the late 1980s, the colorful unitards were replaced by black once again. The pants were high-waisted with a belt and the tops were cut in an even deeper and wider “V” than before with slightly slimmer sleeves. The fabric could be sequined, but no longer matched the color and design of the costume of the lady directly (Martin van der Poel).

The usage of synthetic fibers was necessary for the stylings of the 1980s. Brightly colored polyester, spandex, and nude fabrics were used in the catsuits, leotards, and bodices of dresses and defined the fashion of the era.
1990 to Today

Latin 1996 (santamoris)

Latin 2010 (37even)

Although the early 90s saw many grunge and hip hop bands that supported freestyle dancing, interest in social dancing began growing again in the late 1990s. Latin Dances such as salsa, the wide variety of swing dances, and Country Western dance have gained many followers in recent decades. With the influence of shows such as *Dancing With the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, more people have gained an interest in ballroom dancing as well. Although there may be a “type” of dancer who
attends each kind of social dance event, social dance has gained a following in all ages and demographics of people.

There is a unique group of people who participate in any specific style of social dancing, and it is found in a variety of venues. Unlike with salsa or swing styles, when an individual shows an interest in typical ballroom dances, they often end up dancing in competitions, at the encouragement of their teachers, as ballroom dance instructors are often either current or past competitors (McMains). However, whether one dances at nightclubs, bars, rented halls, or dance studios I believe the shared reason for dancing during this period has been to have a good time and meet new people.

**Fashion:**

Throughout the 1990s, standard dresses did not change much, feather boas or other hem treatments accompanied by layers of underskirts left the volume of the dresses at the hemline, and rhinestoned bodices were the norm. Most standard ballroom dancers also wore draped fabric on their arms and dresses called wings or floats (Bart Wessling). As time went on, the backlines of the dresses got lower and the dresses got sleeker. Feather hemlines were still common by the end of the millennium but they were not a strict requirement since flowing chiffon skirts were starting to come into fashion (almica119). By the mid-2000s, standard dresses became very sleek and excess volume at the hemline had been removed entirely, leading to more similarities in silhouette between Standard and Smooth style dresses, which are typically more revealing with cutouts and slits at the leg (AlexN).
By the late 2000s and early 2010s, however, dancers seemed to miss the movement a skirt with more volume provides and feathers and ruffles began to reappear on the hemlines of the skirts (WDC & WDE AL Video Channel). Today, the fashion of ballroom includes a menagerie of styles from skirts trimmed with feathers, to godet skirts with many layers of chiffon and netting to add volume, to even skirts with movement provided by a hem that has a curled appearance from horsehair braid or wiring. The recognizable elements of these dresses are that they are heavily rhinestoned and have well-fitted spandex bodices, low backlines, and floats or wings (DSI London).

Latin costumes for women have not really changed drastically since the mid-1980s, where there were basically three styles of costume: the two piece dress with a long or short slim skirt, the dress with the bodice fitted past the hips dress with ruffles below, and the asymmetrical skirt cut high to the hip. The main changes in the costumes have been an increase in cutouts in the bodice, and shortening of skirts. Sometime in the 1990s, two piece dresses became less common and the cutouts on the dresses began to reach around to the front (B&C Dance). Today, just like in Standard dresses, the bodices of Latin dresses are typically adorned with many crystals that catch the eye. I really think that dresses are now chosen more on what style looks best on the body of the dancer and what will catch the judges’ eye in a positive way than a specific style one is expected adhere to.

Men’s fashion hasn’t changed much over the past 20 or so years. In the standard style of professional ballroom dance, attire is expected to remain traditional and appear as though the dancer is wearing a tail suit and tuxedo pants (Bart Wessling). The
materials for these costumes however are not what one would find at a normal menswear store, as they are woven with a spandex blend to allow for freedom of movement. Smooth styles of dance are less strict about men’s clothing than standard, and you will often see sport-coats without tails, vests, and sometimes spandex tops worn with dance pants in competition.

In the Latin and rhythm styles of ballroom dance, there is much more leeway for creativity in men’s fashion. The pants are still black dance pants, but the shirts can be a variety of colors and are sometimes fitted, spandex shirts with designs or rhinestones.
Discussion of Project

Designing the Dress:

When beginning the project of making my own dress for standard and smooth dances, I had a lot to consider. The current styles of dresses, what looks good on my body, and my sewing abilities helped me determine the design. I chose the colors of garnet and black for two main reasons. First, these are pleasant rich colors that look good with my skin and hair, and second, as my school colors they mean a lot to me.
because it was here at the University of South Carolina that I learned how to ballroom dance.

I know that sleeves on dance costumes can be difficult to sew as they require special care and shaping to allow full range of motion in the arms, so I opted for a sleeveless form of the dress. I compete more often in standard than in smooth dancing so I wanted to make the back of the dress intricate. Since I really enjoy low back dresses and am comfortable showing my back, the decision was made to make a garnet and black low back dress with lots of details on the back.

I was not sure about how I wanted to rhinestone the dress at this point, so I decided to make a dress that could stand on its own before much embellishing, and I found a sewing pattern that would assist me in that task. Below you will see the original sketch of my design:
**Finding the Materials:**

The next step in completing this project was determining what fabrics could be used. Honestly, this was the most challenging step of the process because I could not find what I was looking for in any of the local fabric stores. After looking online, I decided I needed to change my design. Once I committed myself to this, I found black stretch velvet and garnet stretch satin that would fit the needs of the project.

Thankfully, I had several coupons for fabric on shopping day and saved about $70. Even saving that much left me with a bill of over $100 on materials alone before even thinking about rhinestones.

**Sewing Process:**

The next major step of the project took several weeks to complete. The first step in this process was acquiring a dress form. I was lucky enough to know a local dance teacher who loaned hers to me. I then had to cut and fit the pattern to my measurements before ever cutting the fabric. The first part of the dress I had to make was to make the leotard base of the dress followed by the black stretch-velvet bodice.
This took two long evenings as the fitting had to be perfect. These two layers of fabric were then basted, or loosely sewn, together while on the dress form so I could finish their edges with elastic. After I had the top half of the dress complete, it was time to move onto the skirt.

![Dress Image](image1)

Although the skirt did not have to be precisely fitted, it took a long time to complete. The skirt, made of eight large, quarter circle pieces had to be sewn into each of the godet points around the dress without getting caught in the serger or sewing machine.

![Dress Image](image2)

This caused a problem about halfway through where I had to make a patch for a small slice the serger took out of my material, but the patch held and is invisible to anyone.
looking at the dress. Once the skirt panels were all attached, the dress had to hang for several days so the fabric could stretch before hemming.

The next task for the dress, one that took 3 full days of work was the hem. I first trimmed the fabric relatively even at the bottom while it was hanging on the dress form, then I had to get some help to have the proper hem length marked while wearing the dress.

After the length was marked, the fabric was trimmed, checked to see if it was even, and then horsehair braid, a woven plastic material, was attached at the hemline by machine to add some body to the hemline. The 30 feet of hem had to be finished by hand so the stitches wouldn’t show on the outside of the dress.
After the hem was complete, I had time to embellish the dress. To accomplish this, I placed the skirt of the dress in a trash bag to prevent it getting dirty and experimented with organization of details. I added two appliques to the lower back and rhinestoned the neckline and scattered stones on the velvet. This process took two days because of the drying time needed for the rhinestones. But once the rhinestones had been attached, it was time for it to shine in its first competition.
Competition experience

My goal for this project was to have a dress completed and ready to wear by Triangle Open, which is a DanceSport competition held at NC State every year. In the future, I will probably make some floats to wear with this dress but I am more than satisfied with how it turned out. Above you can see a picture of my partner and me dancing a tango event, one of the many events we placed in at this competition. To see the dress in motion, here is a clip of me in the dress while my partner and I are practicing our foxtrot (https://youtu.be/pTL215qFkvw).
Conclusion

In the process of writing this thesis and making my dress, I learned a lot about dance history and fashion, as well as costume construction and performance. I think my ideas about ballroom dance gained a more factual basis, and I found it very interesting to utilize a variety of primary sources to accomplish this.

Among the many interesting things I learned in writing this paper are that the ballroom dances like the waltz that we see as demure, classy, and respectable, were once seen as scandalous. I also was intrigued by the Castles and how their fashion influenced the flapper age. I’m still not sure why the men in the 1980s wore what they did, but I believe it was the spark that let men display more creativity in their attire in the Latin dances.

Ballroom dancing was a way to show status for a very long time, and this encouraged people to follow strict fashions. By the 1960s, individuality became more important to both men and women, and today while men are still expected to wear dress attire for standard ballroom dances, men and women have taken more liberty to wear what makes them feel confident, beautiful, and eye-catching on the floor, with less regard to what is fashionable.

Designing and making a ballroom gown was a challenging process. I had moments of doubt when I realized how much fabric was needed and when I had to figure out how to complete the thirty-foot hem, but I believe the process was completely worth it. Not only did I gain new sewing skills, but I believed the dress helped my performance in competition. While wearing a ballroom dress, I felt the
ability to project more emotion and character through my dancing, and felt that my dancing was regarded as better by the audience. I encourage any dancers who have any experience in sewing to create their own costume; not only will you get to wear a dress more extravagant than you would be able to afford otherwise, but will you also feel more confident while dancing in something you created.

Ballroom dancing has been a wonderful addition to my life and I believe there is a form of dance for everyone to participate in and to enjoy. Ballroom dance is a great way to meet people in the community, to improve your physical fitness, and even to help reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s disease (Verghese et al). Dance has been a central aspect in culture throughout history, and to understand a culture, one can often just look at its dances as it is a universal human language. I believe everyone should explore the world through the window of dance as each individual brings a unique perspective to the artistic experience of dance that enriches one’s own life in the process.
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