



St. Denis, Ruth (Ruth Emma Dennis)

Newark, NJ 1877 – 1968 Los Angeles

A poster of Ruth St. Denis, circa 1910, attributed to Will Bradley

PAPER, printed on two sheets in black on buff paper, dimensions overall 141.6 × 108.1 cm

Vertical and horizontal folds, minor cracking, several neat repairs executed without loss; light water-staining along sheet edges.

Framed and glazed with perspex.

PROVENANCE Jack Cole (1914–1974) — Sotheby's, 'Catalogue of the Jack Cole Collection of Books and Pictures on the Dance, Part II', London, 12 November 1979, lot 82

A **UNRECORDED ART POSTER** of impressive size, here attributed to the graphic designer William Henry Bradley (1868–1962), the foremost American poster designer of the Art Nouveau movement.¹ It depicts the American dancer Ruth St. Denis and apparently was created to publicise her 'American Tour of East Indian Dances' (November 1909–April 1910), or her 'Coast-to-Coast Tour' (December 1910–May 1911).²

The poster is based on a photograph published in *The American stage of to-day: biographies and photographs of one hundred leading actors and actresses, with an introduction by William Winter* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), [no. 90] (**Fig. 1**). Will Bradley, formerly Art Editor at Collier's, newly established as a freelance artist ('Will Bradley Studios'), is credited in the colophon for the book's design ('Arranged and Decorated by Will Bradley').³

¹ *Will Bradley: his Graphic Art*, edited by Clarence Hornung (New York 1974); Robert Koch, *Will H. Bradley: American Artist in Print: a Collector's Guide* (New York 2002); Martin S. Lindsay, 'Will H. Bradley: a bibliography' (<http://willbradley.com>).

² Christena L. Schlundt, *The Professional Appearances of Ruth St. Denis & Ted Shawn, A Chronology and an Index of Dances 1906–1932* (New York 1962), pp.14–16.

³ Anthony Bambace, *Will H. Bradley: his work: a bibliographical guide* (New Castle, DE & Boston 1995), p.77 no. A73; Koch, *op. cit.*, pp.152–153: '... one of Bradley's most impressive achievements in the field of book design'.



Fig. 1 *The American Stage of to-day* (New York 1910), [unnumbered page]



Fig. 2 Photographic postcard by Siri Fischer Schneevoigt, Berlin

According to the picture caption in *The American stage of to-day* (Fig. 1), St. Denis is photographed in her 'Nautch Dance', a solo dance which she premiered in Vienna on 5 February 1908 as part of a cycle of five East Indian dances. The original photographic portrait (Fig. 2) was taken by Siri Fischer Schneevoigt, in Berlin, probably during May 1908, when St. Denis gave numerous performances of the 'Nautch' in the Komisches Oper, to rapturous audiences.⁴ Another photograph made during the same sitting is known;⁵ two

⁴ Schlundt, *op. cit.*, p.12. Versions of the photographic postcard are in Scripps College, Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Acc. No. PH 17 (16.51 × 22.54 cm; see <http://ccd.libraries.claremont.edu>) and New York Public Library for the Performing Arts / Jerome Robbins Dance Division, *MGZEB (Denishawn, no. 195) (9 × 14 cm, mounted on paper 41 × 36 cm; see <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>).

⁵ Silver gelatin print on cardboard, Scripps College, Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Acc. No. PH44 (22.54 × 16.51 cm; see <http://ccd.libraries.claremont.edu>). Another print of the same photograph

further photographic portraits of Ruth St. Denis by Siri Fischer Schneevoigt, perhaps of earlier date, also survive.⁶

In November 1909 St. Denis commenced a five-month tour of the United States, performing the 'Nautch' in New York's Hudson Theatre, Chicago's Colonial Theatre, in Boston, Washington, DC, Baltimore, and elsewhere. Our poster may have been produced to publicise these performances, or else performances given during her next tour which commenced in December 1910 and closed in California in May 1911. Both tours were organised by St. Denis's agent, Henry Harris, manager of New York's Hudson Theatre in partnership with the theatrical producer Charles Frohman. Harris and Frohman had previously collaborated in organising the London engagements of St. Denis's European tour (1906–1909). It may be no coincidence that Bradley's poster for 'The Masqueraders' (New Empire Theatre, New York, September 1894) had been commissioned by Charles Frohman.⁷ Further evidence of the artist's work for the stage has yet to come to light.⁸

Our poster was formerly in the collection of the choreographer Jack Cole, who in 1930 joined Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, and spent time learning and performing the repertory of the Denishawn troupe. Cole later assembled a substantial collection of material related to Ruth St. Denis. There was no example of the poster in the collection of memorabilia gifted by Ruth St. Denis to the Museum of Modern Art in 1940 (since transferred to the New York Public Library), or among the material sold by her to the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1966–1968.

is in New York Public Library for the Performing Arts / Jerome Robbins Dance Division, *MGZEB (Denishawn, no. 188) (22 × 17 cm, mounted on paper 41 × 36 cm; see <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>).

⁶ The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts / Jerome Robbins Dance Division, *MGZEB (Denishawn, nos. 1037–1038) (see <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>). The latter portraits are dated 1906 by the Library's cataloguer.

⁷ The poster is known only by two preparatory drawings; see *Will Bradley, his work: an exhibition*, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery (San Marino 1951), p.25 nos. 67–68: 'Probably the first signed theatrical poster produced by any American lithographer'. One of the drawings is reproduced by Victor Margolin, *American poster renaissance* (New York 1975), p.18, and by Koch, *op. cit.*, p.45.

⁸ See *American art posters of the 1890s in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, including the Leonard A. Lauder collection*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, catalogue of an exhibition, by David W. Kiehl, Phillip Dennis Cate, and Nancy Finlay (New York 1987), pp.104–111 nos. 13–35; Koch, *op. cit.*, p.188: checklist of 'Poster Design', and *passim*.