

## In Search of Pavlova

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It was her first public appearance, and she at once caught the eyes of all [...]. ethereal and fleeting, she was as graceful and fragile as a piece of Sèvres porcelain. But at times she assumed classical poses, and then [...] she recalled some charming Tanagra statuette so vividly that it was really deceptive.

Valerian Svetlov, 1902

One must be utterly devoted to beauty, with every nerve of the body [...]. What exactly is success? For me it is to be found not in applause, but in the satisfaction of feeling that one is realizing one's ideal.

Anna Pavlova

### DEVOTION

**ANNA** Pavlova, the great Russian ballerina, died in 1931 at the age of fifty, on the eve of yet another tour. Close to seventy-five years after her death, it's become nearly impossible to find a man or woman still living who remembers having seen her perform, despite the fact that Pavlova and her company toured the world between 1910 and 1930, journeying to countries

as diverse and as distant as Egypt and Chile, Denmark and Japan, and dancing on thousands of stages. Perhaps in Mexico City, where Pavlova appeared before an audience of 25,000, there remains some ancient person, then a small child, who would still recall the dancer whose movements were pronounced “divine emanation,” “music made visible,” and “poetry of motion” (Franks 1956, 19).

My grandmother was a small girl in St. Petersburg at the time of Pavlova’s last Russian performance in 1914. Although she loved all traditional forms of dance, especially classical ballet, and stirred in me an abiding admiration for this art form, she and I never discussed Pavlova. Now that my grandmother is gone, I will never be able to ask her if she saw Pavlova dance before the artist left Russia for the last time in July 1914. (Unlike most Russians, Pavlova was able to proceed—safely—from war-torn Berlin into Belgium and then on to England and the United States, despite the fact that Germany and Russia were at war.)

The reasons for my own interest in Anna Pavlova are many. Most immediately, Pavlova evokes the Russia of my grandmother’s most enchanted memories: a snow-banked, icon-colored land that the Revolution and the rise of the Soviet state eradicated. On a deeper level, there is the fact that Pavlova remains one of the legends of ballet. She was a dancer whose physical movements seemed to express the yearnings of the spirit, those intense, impossible desires—to be light, music, rain, snowfall, the sun—yearnings I share.

With no one to act as my guide, when I went searching for clues to Pavlova (whose name—like Garbo’s or the Mona Lisa’s—inevitably conjures up a host of associations), I knew already that I was at a great disadvantage, for how can one recapture something as temporal as dance? Today, all we have left of Pavlova’s career survives in writing and in the still photographs preserved in the biographies of her life. Inevitably, with the fading of living people’s memories of Pavlova, her legend too begins to fade.

In trying to write about Pavlova, then, I found myself dependent upon the artifacts of cultural memory. Instead of viewing my situation as a disadvantage, I decided to see how text and image could further develop the picture of the artist that had already begun to take shape in my mind. Because she was a prima ballerina, I implicitly knew that she must have been lithe and absolutely mobile, having disciplined her body to the ever-shifting shapes of strength softened by grace that are the hallmarks of a great dancer. Because she was Russian, had been born in St. Petersburg, and

educated to great advantage at the Imperial Ballet School in czarist Russia despite her widowed mother's poverty, I associated her with the White Russia that the Revolution erased. The influence of my St. Petersburg-born grandmother had prepared me to associate Pavlova with the romanticized sorrow that she and the other exiles in her acquaintance felt for a vanished world, despite the suffering and inequality of life under the czars. In other words, long before I pulled the first book down from the shelf, I already pictured the otherworldly Pavlova as a woman who bore her grief with dignity and consummate grace.

As soon as I saw her portrait, the face that gazed beyond me—whether caught in movement or posed for a formal sitting, Pavlova rarely looks back at her viewer—fully equaled the image I had conjured. In the most natural photographs (natural in that she wears little or no makeup, though she almost always wears an extraordinary hat), Pavlova appears as a dark-haired, pale woman with dark, deep-set eyes. Her nose is as dramatic as a dancer's most elegant line, and her mouth as private and at the same time as sensuous as I imagine Anna Karenina's to be. In several photographs, Pavlova sits reading on a shaded veranda or in a window box and occasionally, she just sits and gazes out a window. In the more dynamic photographs, she feeds her swans, plays with one of her beloved bulldogs, or perches on the steps before a pair of heavy doors, about to set out from home.

One of my favorite photographs of Pavlova was taken in New York in 1916. Here, she is posed in the manner of the Renaissance masters (Rembrandt comes to mind). She wears a wide-brimmed hat and for once meets the viewer's eye, though she offers no emotional connection. Except for her pale face, the hint of glowing pearls at her throat, and her white gloves, the composition is dark. If a photograph paints with light, then the Pavlova of photographs becomes almost as luminous as the mental image, for the darkness surrounding her in the photographs seems to suggest that we look in at Pavlova, who exists now only within the sacred space of memory.

In every possible way, Pavlova's was a face perfectly suited to the soft light and shadow of the photographs of the early twentieth century, her beauty of a kind the Renaissance masters would have called "vago": a loveliness that seems within reach, yet is impossible to grasp. The effect of many of the portraits taken when Pavlova is not dancing is contemplative, often melancholy, and definitely remote. One of her fellow dancers in the Imperial Ballet captured this quality when she described Pavlova's

“charming smile, and beautiful eyes that were a little sad [...] graceful, delicate, and ethereal, [it seemed] as if she were trying to leave the earth” (Franks 1956, 16).

Encouraged by the images and descriptions of the ballerina I encountered, images that did not stray from my preconceptions, I began reading about Pavlova’s life. A richly multifaceted portrait emerges in the comprehensive biography by Keith Money, who is an authority on both ballet and roses, expertises that seem particularly fitting for Pavlova. Money’s *Anna Pavlova: Her Life and Art* (1985) is a heavy, twelve-by-fourteen-inch tome that brings the artist to life through a chronological narrative interspersed with interviews, reviews, articles, reminiscences, and hundreds of photographs.

Money’s biography contains Pavlova’s very first interview with the *New York Times* on March 6, 1910, a date marking the start of her first American tour. In her first words to the American press, Pavlova encapsulated her development in this way:

I was born in St. Petersburg—on a rainy day. You know, it almost always rains in St. Petersburg. There is a certain gloom and sadness in the atmosphere of the Russian capital, and I have breathed the air of St. Petersburg so long that I have become infected with sadness. I love the note of sadness in everything: in art, in the drama, in nature. Ah, in nature above all: I love the dreamy Russian forests [...]. (Money 1982, 400)

Here in her own words was the Pavlova I sought, a woman and an artist whom I could understand, one with whom I could identify. And identification was key, for my own romantic temperament and understanding of Russia (one created through reading Tolstoy, Pasternak, and Akhmatova; viewing my paternal grandmother’s collection of carefully preserved photographs; and listening to her highly polished stories) would not accept a Russian prima ballerina who was lighthearted and frivolous, especially not during the historical period that brought her forth. The most dynamic years of Pavlova’s dancing career overlapped with the years of the First World War, the bloody Russian Revolution, and the period of political and economical uncertainty that followed.

So too, a lighthearted creature would not have kindled my respect because of the self-discipline and consummate devotion that ballet requires, coupled with the fleeting reality of a dance career. In Pavlova’s time it was traditional for a dancer to retire at thirty-five. Pavlova’s dancing until the time of her death (and in some people’s opinion, she danced herself to

death), testifies to her physical and spiritual strength. Truly, she lived up to her own words: “One must be utterly devoted to beauty, with every nerve of the body” (Franks 1956, 123).

## EMOTION

Pavlova is praised for her technique—“her *pas de bourées sur les pointes* across the stage were so rapid and so smooth that she did appear to be skimming through air” (Franks 1956, 32)—and her arabesques seemed to defy gravity. Yet she is not primarily distinguished for her technical precision, but for the emotional complexity she infused into the dance. Unlike too many of her contemporaries, Pavlova was determined not to dazzle solely through a display of technique. Instead, her dancing was always enriched by what she valued most: the emotional demands of the moment. As Pavlova’s early dancing partner, lifelong choreographer, and close friend Michel Fokine remembers,

Before [1906] a ballerina, irrespective of the part she performed, was on stage as she was in real life, in the same hair-style in which she entertained her friends at tea. [...] The idea of creating an artistic image, the idea of transformation into a role, appeared only now. [...] An entirely different approach to music demanded a serious consideration of each musical sentence in rhythmic detail. Everything began to serve one purpose: the unity of the presentation. The ballerina became just one of the elements of the performance. (Franks 1956, 132)

For Fokine, the shift in Pavlova’s own approach occurred in 1906 when she danced the part of Sylphida, or winged hope, in *Chopiniana*, a ballet organized around several orchestrated piano pieces by Chopin. Fokine describes the ballet poetically:

This was a dance of the Taglioni style, that beautiful period of the ballet art when poetry was the main purpose of the dance, that forgotten period [...] when a dancer rose on her toes not from the desire to exhibit her steel-like toes, but with the minimum of contact with earth to create an illusion of a dance light, unrealistic, fantastic. (Franks 1956, 133)

Pavlova’s hypnotic performance as Sylphida convinced Fokine to create the *Dying Swan* for her. This two-and-a-half minute sequence set to a soulful piece by Saint Sæens became the most successful piece of her career, one that showcased the emotive power of her talents. As Fokine remembers

Pavlova's last words, she asked for her Swan costume, then said, "Play that last measure more softly" (Franks 1956, 134).

As her dying words attest, Pavlova considered "each musical sentence in rhythmic detail." In so doing, she was able to infuse movement with emotion. It's easy enough to say that a plasticity of movement infused with feeling distinguished her from countless other dancers. More difficult is the search for traces of this quality in the artifacts that remain. Here then is where my own quest became more complicated and more interesting. Sure, I could read descriptions of the dance, but such language almost never lives up to the movement it describes. A dancer is only known through her dancing, and yet how can one describe dance without resorting to abstraction ("poetry of motion," "divine emanation," "music made visible") or metaphor ("as graceful and as fragile as a piece of Sèvres porcelain")? At its best, even poetry fixes Pavlova because it holds her to a certain feeling, instead of allowing for the full range of her art, as these anonymous lines (in translation) attempt to do: "Anna Pavlova, thy name is a spell that to our ears recalls/Sweet soft sounds of the doves cooing by old shadowy walls" (Franks 1956, 19).

Not satisfied with abstraction or metaphor, I turned to yet another contradiction: the photographs that arrested images of movement. One of the most compelling and ultimately one of the most problematic photographs in Money's book shows Pavlova outfitted as the Swan and dancing en pointe, her head bowed, her long-fingered hands folded across her chest, a gesture evocative of a fan of wings. The caption states that Pavlova had to be supported by a clothesline later brushed out of the portrait. The reason for the support was the lengthy exposure needed to create the impression of suspended movement. In performance, the moment would have passed by in milliseconds so that an exposure of ordinary length would not have captured the effect. Here then was a stunning point. In order for photography to begin to evoke the quality of Pavlova's dancing, the dance had to be literally arrested. Even as the photograph was being made, actual, natural movement had ceased.

Both the history and the effect of this image illustrate perfectly Walter Benjamin's "aura." "What is aura?" Benjamin asks, "A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of distance, however close at hand" (Qtd. in Price 1994, 46). For Benjamin, the aura inevitably creates a barrier between the viewer and what she is looking at. Often, that barrier endows the subject with an atmosphere of the sacred where "gods have sway and myth is powerfully evident" (Price 1994, 46). This is the case in many of the

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Pavlova as *The Swan*, photographed in New York. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

photographs depicting Pavlova. In the photograph of Pavlova as the swan, the aura is reverential, inevitably suggesting distance. There is indeed something haunting and intensely beautiful about the dancer en pointe, her averted face obscured by shadow. We want to read the language of her suspended body. At the same time, we are held spellbound by the effect of the image, a reaction that ultimately creates a barrier between us and what we would have experienced while watching the movement spontaneously unfold to music in time.

This staged image distances us from Pavlova. Still, it satisfies in a way that so many of the photographs taken during performance do not. It satisfies because its very process (the long exposure) allows us time to contemplate the dancer caught in a transcendent moment when her folded arms suggest that she, too, is holding something precious close to her heart.

Of the photographs taken of Pavlova during a performance, the least satisfying are the lavish group scenes. Here, Pavlova is not the center of interest, and the impact of her dancing gets lost in the crowd of activity and stage design. Even in a relatively successful photograph of a group scene from *Les Préludes* in Money's book, in which ten dancers are caught in graceful attitudes against semi-abstract woodland staging, Pavlova is just one of many people on stage. The image thus distracts one's attention away from her. For these images to even begin to elicit a response to Pavlova alone, one would need to remove the distracting elements, cutting out the other dancers or at least blurring their presence, so as to foreground Pavlova.

Pavlova on stage, as one of her first biographers, Valerian Svetlov, said, "at once caught the eyes of all." (Franks 1956, 15–16). During a performance, if the beholder's eye was immediately drawn to the dancing Pavlova as the center of interest, a photograph that simply documents the performance proves a hopelessly inadequate surrogate precisely because the camera lens is not an editing eye. The photographer and artist must capture the dancer's attitude as it occurs and dissolves for the resulting image to succeed. The photographer, then, must be attuned to Pavlova with the same pitched attentiveness that she gives to realizing the unity of the presentation. In this way, the photographer must almost become a part of the performance.

If the group scenes fail, then most of the photographs of pas de deux fail as well, because either the male partner's outfit is often clownish or the photograph makes him look dumpy and lead-footed. Of the dozens I examined in Money's biography and A. H. Franks's collection of biographical essays about Pavlova, one of the few that triumph captures her in a deep back-bending arch, her hands supported and her balance ensured by the outstretched arms of her kneeling partner, whose firmly rooted body tethers her own. As her colleague from the Imperial Ballet noted, Pavlova danced "as if she were trying to leave the earth."

As a group, the photographs that come closest to capturing the emotional power of Pavlova's dancing are the solo shots. Here, even if the costume is fussy and the makeup overdone, Pavlova's very presence as the object of attention satisfies, as in a still from *Rondo*, where Pavlova beckons the viewer, her graceful hands curled in a come-hither gesture, or as in a moment from *California Poppy*, where her costume's cloud of flowing layers fans up around her turning body, accentuating—almost carving out—the feel of spinning motion.

One of the finest solo shots shows her dancing the lead in *Swan Lake* in a Berlin performance of 1908 or 1909. Here, she stands en pointe, her right leg as sharp and assured as an arrow, her left leg extended in a perfect line that skims the very edge of the photograph. Pavlova's elegant arms are extended at her sides, showcasing the gracefulness of her hands and fingers. Her head is tilted back slightly, and she is smiling. The image is an example of a flare photograph, where the subject is illuminated only from one side. Unlike traditional photography, in a flare photograph the light comes from a single source, and the flare thereby creates a heightened sense of shadow on the side of the body that is not being lit. The overall effect is kin to an exquisite bas-relief, so distinctly carved is the play of light against shadow, in this case along the outline of Pavlova's body. The caption reads, "The difficulty of achieving this flare photograph without support must have been great" (Money 1982, 85). An image like this one succeeds in conveying emotional power not just because the solo shot most accurately captures the spirit of Pavlova's dancing, but because it also satisfies the photographic

Figure 2 CD filename ps-dan 1326u

Pavlova in *Swan Lake*, Berlin, 1908 or 1909. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

principle of dynamic simplicity, which is the result of the photographer's expert editing eye. The photographer caught Pavlova in a moment of perfect balance and principle of grace. The effect of the flare gives a tactile or multidimensional feel to the image. Paradoxically, while the composition satisfies, it inevitably falsifies the impression Pavlova's dancing must have conveyed. Most obviously, the human eye does not work like a flare photograph. The intensely sculptural feel of the image is not akin to the more impressionistic way in which the eye tracks movement. Then there is the fact that no matter how closely one focused on Pavlova on the stage, one would also have taken in the corps de ballet and the set, not to mention the effect of the lights and the music—all the elements Fokine alludes to when he speaks of "the unity of the presentation."

Acknowledging this, then, I turn to the solo shot of Pavlova pictured against a dark background in an otherworldly still from *Les Préludes*. Dressed in a long white tunic, she is seen in profile, her face completely obscured by the soft, blurry darkness that seems to engulf her. She holds her right hand up to her face so that we behold her entire palm. Her left arm stretches out in an elegant line behind her. The photograph obviously distorts what Pavlova must have looked like as she moved across the stage. Yet the image's strength is in its calling attention to what is assumed to be there: Pavlova.

Even more compelling for me is the realization that the image seems to be of a memory—an image that embodies or at least evokes my search to recapture what a performance by Pavlova might have been like, now that it is no longer possible to experience one. As George Santayana wrote, "We are grateful to any art which restores the sensuous filling of experience, which was its most lovely and substantial part in passing, but which is now so hopelessly past" (Qtd. in Price 1994, 43–44). As an art form and source of fascination, photography compels in large part because exploring a photograph closely holds out the possibility of recovering reality; it restores one's sensory connection to the past moment. In the case of Anna Pavlova, the photographs that transfix the beholder seem to have arrested the spirit of her dancing, and dancing was the thing she valued most of all in life, so in a profound sense, such photographs open a window into her soul.

## **EVOCATION AND ESCAPE**

Created through an intricately imaged relationship of light and shadow, the solo photographs foregrounding Pavlova in heightened detail succeed

eloquently, but interestingly enough, so do the images that obscure or hide Pavlova, whom we know to be there thanks to context and caption. Returning to Benjamin, many other images that conceal or withhold at least as much as they reveal succeed because they rely upon creating an “aura.” Here what masks or hides its subject, Pavlova, creates an additional sense of distance through a barrier or screen between what one can and cannot see, and therefore between what one can and cannot know.

The murkiest of these images is a scene from *Les Nuits*, published in Money’s biography. In this photograph, all we have is the ghostly silhouette of Pavlova, dressed in flowing white robes and glimpsed through the charcoal shadows. If the caption did not identify her, we would have no way of knowing who the spirit-like shape is. Still, we would identify the figure as female due to some subtle hints of form. So too, we would recognize the dancer’s gracefulness and her mystery, for although we see very little of her body, which is blurred and hidden by the figurative night, we see her upstretched arms and the willowy silhouette of her body. The image is hypnotic, for it transforms Pavlova into a creature of memory. Here, light is emblematic of the present whereas darkness comes to embody the landscape of the past. The photo, with its resonant play of light against dark, enacts the animating power of imagination fueled by the artifacts of cultural memory, in this case, a photograph. Obscured by darkness, Pavlova’s willowy form feels far away. The contemporary beholder wants to draw her closer, bring her into the light of the present, and yet that possibility is out of the question because she is no longer alive to dance. As Pavlova herself wrote in her memoirs, “Happiness is like a butterfly which appears and delights us for one brief moment, but soon flits away” (Qtd. in Franks 1956, 124). Pavlova is that butterfly. At least when she danced, her audience could experience her delight. Today, however, the viewer who desires to understand her power is at a profound disadvantage. The obstacles the contemporary viewer faces in trying to understand the power of Pavlova’s dancing is why Pavlova’s conjurer’s stance in *Les Nuits*—her arms raised above her head, her palms arcing inwards as if she were cradling some invisible object or secret above her head—creates the impression that she is being summoned from beyond by the contemporary viewer who is calling her back because she longs to know her secrets.

Were we to put together all of the images of Pavlova published in biographies of her, we could begin to weave a satisfying story of the great ballerina. In constructing a sequence, I would place this image from *Les Nuits* either first or last because its obscurity suggests that there is inevitably

Figure 3 CD filename ps-dan 1327u

Pavlova in *La Nuit*, photographed by Arnold Genthe. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

so much more about Pavlova's dancing that we cannot know now that she is gone.

Ultimately, the fact that Pavlova is now out of living reach is remarkably important in understanding and in honoring Anna Pavlova as a great artist, for great art inevitably escapes any final interpretation. No matter how well one seems to have described, interpreted, or "framed" a work of art, it always slips (or pirouettes) away, thereby intimating an abundance that interpretation cannot convey. Anna Pavlova's art was great in precisely this manner. Although the finest photographs—each in itself a work of art—evoke the gift she bestowed upon her audience, Anna Pavlova's art existed and unfolded within time. A photograph stills a particular moment so that the beholder can contemplate it, and perhaps come to appreciate what was at stake in the performance.

Having written at length of about a half dozen of the most successful photographs, I close with one more, taken the year before Pavlova was admitted to the Ballet School in St. Petersburg, sixteen years before she became a prima ballerina. It is a formal portrait of the nine-year-old Anna and her mother. The first time I encountered it, in Keith Money's biography, I was struck by the standing child's separateness from her mother, who is depicted sitting on her daughter's immediate left. Although they are physically close, there is a visceral sense of distance between them. Chin held high, Anna appears in partial profile. Yet she looks neither at her mother nor at something in the distance. Nor does she look at the camera. Instead, she seems to be preoccupied with something within herself.

The second time I saw the photograph was in Franks's collection of essays by people who knew and revered Pavlova. Here, her mother had been completely cropped out. The mother's omission makes all the difference to my own reading of Pavlova. In the official portrait in Money's book, I inevitably see the young girl's desire to be different from the staid, grave, absolutely "fixed" mother, a respectable but poor woman who worked as a laundress after her husband's death. In contrast, when the child stands alone, the tilt of her chin seems not defiant but assured, and indeed, Anna Pavlova determined to be a dancer as soon as she saw *The Sleeping Beauty* at the age of six, an excursion that must have been a great luxury for her widowed mother. Pavlova wrote that at her first opportunity after this performance, she told her mother, "One day, I shall be the Princess, and dance upon the stage of this very theatre [the Maryinsky]" (Qtd. in Franks 1956, 112). The force of Anna's personality makes itself further felt when one learns that she soon convinced her mother to allow her to audition for the Ballet School, when she reached the age of ten.

In understanding Anna Pavlova then, I include this image of the young Anna and her mother because it captures the determination she possessed from the time she was very young, as well as her absolute sense of who she was: a great dancer. The fact that she grew up without a father in a patriarchal society is further testament to her strong character. Anna Pavlova's legal father, Matvey Pavlov, died when she was two years old. According to Russian custom, she should have been addressed as "Anna Matveyevna," the daughter of Matvey. Instead, she chose the unusual name of Anna Pavlova. In her own memoirs, she barely mentions her father, and biographers report credible suggestions, though no actual proof, that she was actually the illegitimate child of a wealthy Jew named Lazar Poliakov. Such a birthright was a dangerous stigma in czarist Russia throughout Pavlova's

years in her homeland. Anna's Jewish ancestry may explain the extreme devotion Pavlova and her mother gave to the outward forms of Russian Orthodoxy, which is documented in her memoirs.

In the case of Pavlova's self-naming, the facts are ultimately secondary. What matters most to this portrait of Pavlova is her strong sense of individual authority, which the image of the nine-year-old Anna evokes. Already in this photograph, one sees a person determined to follow her own path, one that would not honor conventional notions of femininity and familial inheritance. Though Anna Pavlova was by anyone's standards a beautiful woman who well knew and loved the impact of clothes and took full advantage of the physical power of conventional femininity (see the portraits throughout Money's book of Pavlova posed in the elegant clothes of an affluent and cosmopolitan early twentieth-century woman), she lived like very few women of her day, or ours.

Anna Pavlova lived, absolutely, for her art.

A final thought: Anna Pavlova, who proved so illusive and captivating in front of the camera, ultimately shunned mirrors in the ballet studio because, she believed, the mirror prompted the dancer to falsify a movement—to give back a static image without embodying the movement's true form. And embodying forms of movement infused with emotion was the ideal ambition of her life. "I want to dance for everybody in the world," she said once (Franks 1956, 40). Understanding this desire, one of Pavlova's friends believed it a blessing that she died while she could still dance. As Pavlova herself revealed in both speech and gesture so many times, for her, there was nothing else.

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