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**Rhonda K. Garelick: Electric Salome**

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## Introduction



IN 1892, LOIE FULLER (NÉE MARY-LOUISE FULLER, in Illinois) packed her theater costumes into a trunk and, with her elderly mother in tow, left the United States and a mid-level vaudeville career to try her luck in Paris. Within days of her arrival, she had secured an interview with Edouard Marchand, director of the Folies-Bergère. Alighting from her carriage in front of the theater, she stopped short at the sight of the large placard depicting the Folies' current dance attraction: a young woman waving enormous veils over her head, billed as the "serpentine dancer." "Here was the cataclysm, my utter annihilation," Fuller would later write, for she had come to the Folies that day precisely to audition her own, new "serpentine dance," an art form she had invented in the United States (fig. I.1).<sup>1</sup> The woman already performing this dance at the Folies turned out to be one Maybelle Stewart of New York City, an acquaintance of Fuller's who had seen her perform in New York City and, apparently, had liked what she had seen a little too much.<sup>2</sup>

Told that Marchand could speak with her only after Stewart's matinee, a horrified Fuller settled in to watch her imitator. Although initially "trembling" and covered with "cold perspiration," she soon overcame her anxiety, determining that Stewart was no match for her. "The longer she danced the calmer I became. I could gladly have kissed her for her . . . inefficiency."<sup>3</sup> After the performance, Fuller put on her robes, took the stage in the now empty theater, and, with only one violinist left to accompany her, auditioned her own serpentine dance. By the end of the day, Marchand had granted Fuller a solo show of her own choreography and agreed to dismiss the imitator Stewart. However, since publicity for Stewart had already been circulated, and Marchand feared public protest, Fuller agreed to perform for the first two nights (October 28 and 29) under the name Maybelle Stewart, dancing her own imitation of Stewart's imitation of the serpentine dance. With this triple-layer simulation, worthy of an essay by Baudrillard, Loie Fuller launched her career as a modernist dance and performance artist. Although no one in Paris could have known it at the time, it was an ironically perfect beginning for

<sup>1</sup> Loie Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co. Publishers, 1913), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Sommer, "Loie Fuller," *Drama Review* 19, no. 1 (1975): 61.

<sup>3</sup> Fuller, *Fifteen Years*, 54.



Figure I.1. Loie Fuller in early "Serpentine" costume, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

someone destined to construct her career around self-replication, mirrored images, and identity play.

On November 5, 1892, Loie Fuller, short, plump, and thirty years old, finally premiered under her own name at the Folies, a venue known at the time for its strippers, gymnasts, trapeze artists, and other circus-style, often bawdy acts.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> During her time there, Fuller would cross paths with such well-known Folies performers as Yvette Guilbert and the exotic dancer known as "La Belle Otéro." (See Richard Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997], 74.)































