

# But is it *dance*?

**Carole Edrich** previews the lecture “A Marriage of Dance and Art: Love, Seduction and Courtship in the Renaissance”, which takes place at the National Gallery on February 8  
Photographs by **Carole Edrich**

**T**here are new ways of thinking about images of dance in Renaissance paintings. Once considered a way to show that the subjects were having fun, images of dance, as current thinking suggests, can symbolise love, the expression of desire, special guests, democracy, consensus and more.

Siân Walters discussed this with me as part of a preview of a public lecture she will present at London's National Gallery next month on the run-up to Valentine's Day. She explains how the thinking first arose: “I'm an art historian in the education department and Darren Royston, an old friend, is a dance historian. Putting our heads together, we found an enormous amount of information, discussing how dance is represented in art and bouncing all sorts of new ideas off one another.”

Siân described a beautiful medieval image of dance in *The Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government*, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. On one side the city is falling to pieces and on the other the same city is depicted as an ideal place to live.

Nine dancers are prominent. Since medieval paintings use size to reflect relative importance of the subjects, we are led to understand this isn't just a record of a favourite activity. The dancers have been employed for allegorical purposes, in this case illustrating the theme of political harmony and stability and symbolising the Council of Nine, a new style of government.

The frescoes produced at that time were designed to show the ideals of the new government

and the well-ordered society that would flourish under its rule. The follow-my-leader chain dance depicted (which later becomes the farandole) also has significance on a number of different levels: the leader of the dance needs to be aware of others, the dance itself gives the impression that everyone is doing the same thing, which again represents the idea behind the Sieneese government (moving towards a more democratic kind of rule).

The Valentine's lecture will also involve a recreation of the dances by Darren's dance company Nonsuch History and Dance. Last year, in conjunction with the National Gallery's exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*, Siân translated

the elaborate Festa del Paradiso (part of the festivities held by Ludovico Sforza for his nephew's wedding, and staged by Leonardo da Vinci) from the Italian source to be used with music located by Darren that would have been used at the Sforza court.

The performance was recreated from the period as closely as possible – even to the extent of creating costumes similar to those in the National Gallery's portraits on display, to which the lecture also referred.

Often inserted into Renaissance furniture, especially popular receptacles of wedding dowries, stories like that of Patient Griselda (from the Spalliera in the National Gallery), Siân explains, were frequently given as illustrations

of marital fidelity, chastity and other womanly virtues.

Darren believes that specific dances can be identified on the panels shown on many Renaissance cassoni or chests. They also depict unusual dances that would commemorate and demonstrate the celebrants' status implied by foreign and other illustrious guests.

**A**ngels holding laurel branches and dancing a circle dance, known as a carole, are a major component of Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity*. This simple, round dance is recognisably a common dance that would have been performed on the streets. That they appear to be moving to the left, Darren believes, indicates

the kind of dance performed. It's of a type that Botticelli could have known well in Florence.

Like many followers of Girolamo Savonarola (responsible for the famous bonfires of the vanities in which objects deemed to be associated with sin were burned), Botticelli was fearful of the apocalypse. The 12 dancing angels symbolise celestial harmony and unity, along with a message of hope at a time of fear.

Savonarola also encouraged the performance of so-called laude or simple, devotional songs at Lent, which would be sung on the streets by groups of young men wearing white robes and carrying olive branches, bringing us to the angels in the painting again. ●

Detail of angels in *Mystic Nativity*, 1500, by Sandro Botticelli, c 1445–1510, © the National Gallery, London



Siân Walters describing the story of Griselda in *The Story of Griselda, Part I: Marriage*, c 1494, by the Master of the Story of Griselda (active c 1490–1500), © the National Gallery, London



Siân and Darren have collaborated in other similar events at the National Gallery, including “Renaissance Siena” and “Canaletto and his Rivals”. Their next event, “A Marriage of Dance and Art: Love, Seduction and Courtship in the Renaissance, An Evening Lecture and Performance” is on Friday, February 8 at 18:30pm. See <http://tinyurl.com/bv8qclg> to book tickets (£8).