



Icons, Idols, & Legends

An idol may not be the greatest dancer on earth, but something in him appeals to something in you.

According to the 1966 *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, an icon is “a picture, image or other representation.” It adds that in the Eastern Church it can be “a painting or enamel of some sacred personage.”

Luckily, language is a movable feast, forever growing and expanding. Yes, an antiques dealer would still recognize an icon as a religious painting. But in a world where society is basically secular, the word “icon” has been transferred to a person, someone akin to Japan’s “living national treasure,” although here sometimes dead. In the Western world it can take time to become an icon. The word has come a long way since 1966.

Perhaps icon’s counterpart, idol, has not moved quite so far. But it too has long shed its religious exclusivity, now meaning primarily a person idolized by the populace in his or her particular field.

Then, in this hierarchy of supermortals, come legends who live on through their work or other people’s memories. Beneath these are stars, superstars, megastars and all the other astral supplements we ink-stained (or now, computer-weary) wretches of journalism can envisage. So who are these people?

The first person in dance I ever heard called an icon was Martha Graham, and I understood precisely what was meant because Graham became her own monument. She formulated an entirely new kind of dance. The same might be said of her predecessor, Isadora Duncan.

In my ranking, icons are extraordinary creatures. From the beginning of the 20th century, there have been comparatively few. Of the dancers and choreographers I would include George Balanchine, for redefining and popularizing classical dance; Michel Fokine, for making ballet a serious art form; and Anna Pavlova who, like Duncan, laid the groundwork for dance’s international acceptance.

Next there are the impresarios and artistic directors. First and probably foremost Serge Diaghilev, followed in no particular order by Lincoln Kirstein, Ninette de Valois, Marie Rambert, Lucia Chase/Oliver Smith/Richard Pleasant, Robert Joffrey, the

immaculate dancer Peter Martins, the major Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso, Sol Hurok, Serge Lifar, Doris Humphrey, and Katherine Dunham. All of these have, one way or another, carved out a new and lasting pathway for dance.

The dance legends are perhaps more easily picked out. There, to my mind, are the major choreographers whose work already seems embedded in the repertory—Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Jerome Robbins, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Yuri Grigorovich, Roland Petit, Maurice Béjart, Kenneth MacMillan, Alvin Ailey, and possibly Léonide Massine. Lined up behind them, waiting the test of time, are Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, and quite a few others.

The legendary partnership of Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, for their impact on popularizing classical dance, should perhaps be regarded as icons. Certainly, in the short term, this duo (neither alone had anything like the effect of the two together) had as much influence during the ’60s and early ’70s as Balanchine himself. Other legendary partnerships are Alessandra Ferri and Julio Bocca, Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, Alexandra Danilova and Frederic Franklin, Lupe Serrano and Royes Fernandes, Antoinette Sibley and Anthony Dowell, and Carla Fracci and—ranking with the great male dancers of his time—Erik Bruhn.

Two of the legendary French dancers of the last century were the extraordinary Jean Babilée and the ballerina Yvette Chauviré. And then there were the two other defecting Russian superstars, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova, both, like Nureyev, coming from St. Petersburg’s Kirov school and company. Also from the Kirov came the unforgettable Yuri Soloviev. From Moscow’s Bolshoi Ballet came Galina Ulanova, indisputably one of the great ballerinas of the 20th century; Vakhtang Chabukiani, who helped transform male dancing; and that splendid character dancer Sergei Koren. Peerless dramatic dancers must include Nora Kaye, Maria Tallchief, Lynn Seymour, and Maya Plisetskaya.

There are a lot of choices here, some controversial, but when it comes to dance idols, the sky’s the limit. Everyone will have their pet choices and pet peeves. An idol may not be the greatest dancer on earth, but something in him appeals to something in you, the idolater. My own first idol was the Sadler’s Wells dancer approaching the end of his career, Harold Turner, the original Blue Boy in Ashton’s *Les Patineurs*. Clearly he wasn’t one of the greatest dancers in the world—his virtuosity was bought at the expense of style. But the guy fascinated me. That’s the way of idols.

Senior Consulting Editor Clive Barnes also covers dance and theater for the New York Post.