A Foreign Perspective of Early Modern Dance in Estonia: How Ella Ilbak's Photographic Image (1915-1948) Changed My Life

Karl Toepfer

Images of dance often provoke greater curiosity about dance than dance performance itself. The history of early modern dance attracts enthusiasm primarily because of the photographic record of those who performed it. Let me give an example of how the image of a dancer not only changed my understanding of early modern dance history, even though I never saw her perform and no one will ever see her perform. In the mid-1980s, when I began my academic career, my department assigned me to coordinate and teach graduate courses that included dance students, although I had almost no background in dance history or dance training. From the dance students, I learned that their knowledge of modern dance history focused entirely on the "pioneers" of American modern dance and that their knowledge came not from images or texts but through oral transmission from their teachers in the studio. The graduate students wanted a larger idea of dance history. My enthusiasm for Pina Bausch's "Tanztheater" opened my awareness of the astonishing achievements of German modern dance ("Ausdruckstanz") during and after World War I. The "Ausdruckstanz" culture led me to wonder about early modern dance elsewhere in Europe. In 1988, I received a catalogue from a company in Chicago that distributed books from the Soviet Union. The one title I ordered was Lea Tormis's (b. 1932) *Eesti ballett* (1984), which is mostly a picture album of Estonian dance history from 1918 until 1984. Tormis's book gives a vivid pictorial history of Estonian dance across many decades of the twentieth century. But the image that impressed me most was the first one, a photograph of Ella Ilbak (1895-1997) performing her dance "The Flame," as Tormis captioned it, although some academics have contended (not persuasively) the photo depicts Ilbak's dance "Vision" (Figure 1). The book implied that Estonian dance history began with Ella Ilbak.

Figure 1: Ella Ilbak, "The Flame," photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 2: Postcard images of solo dancers. Left: Sent M'ahesa (Else von Carlsberg) (1883-1970), Latvian-born dancer performing an "Egyptian" dance, photographed by Wanda von Debschitz-Kunowski (1870-1935), Berlin, 1921. Right: Gertrud Leistikow (1885-1948), German dancer, photographed by Hanns Holdt (1887-1944), Munich, 1920. Photo source: Brandenburg 1921.

Tormis did not provide a date for the photo. Ilbak created "The Flame" in 1922; it became one of her most popular pieces and remained in her repertoire for decades. When Ilbak began her career as a dancer in 1918, modern dance manifested itself almost entirely as solo dance concerts, in which a single dancer performed a program of between nine and twelve dances displaying her versatility in relation to different moods, costumes, narrative structures, and kinetic personas. To promote their concerts, dancers made postcard photos of themselves in dance poses, and they distributed these photos through bookstores and magazine kiosks and as publicity materials for newspapers and journals, which often published the photos as decorative embellishments, even if the dancer was not performing in the vicinity of the journal's readership. The vast European public understood modern dance through photos of dancers, not through dance performances. In these photos, female dancers assumed dance poses that made their bodies appear "modern" insofar as the poses made them look bolder, less inhibited, or freer than women of the time generally allowed themselves to appear.

Ilbak's photo for "The Flame" easily conveyed this message. In it, she is half-naked, sitting on the floor while twisting her torso into a profile pose while undulating her arms upward to simulate the movement of a flame. Her body glows voluptuously in the darkness that surrounds her. She projects an exotic sibylline majesty. No other photo in Tormis's book cast such a distinctive aura. It conveyed the idea that a dance could happen without the movement of the feet, with only the movement of the torso, arms, and head. Ilbak anchored herself to the floor, and yet her upper body movements made her appear "free" without moving from her initial sitting position. Freedom did not depend on consuming or cutting through space. The "flame" of desire could ignite, consume, and wither in the body without moving the body from its initial position of incendiary ignition. The photo made me curious to know more about Ella Ilbak and Estonian modern dance, but back in the late 1980s and 90s finding information on these subjects was quite difficult in America. Through university library loan, I obtained a copy of Ilbak's autobiography, *Otsekui hirv kisendab*, published in Sweden in 1953. Reading it was a severe challenge when my access to Estonian language resources remained confined to an Estonian-English dictionary published in the 1960s. The most interesting section of Ilbak's memoir at that time was her brief description of her friendship in St. Petersburg and Munich in the early 1920s with the German solo dancer Edith von Schrenck (1891-1971), who perhaps pursued an even more

imaginative and ambitious aesthetic of solo dance than Ilbak, but whose artistry quickly decayed because of her tormented love affair with the German writer Waldemar Bonsels (1881-1952). Like Ilbak, Schrenck liked moving close to the performance surface and making dances while sitting on the floor (Figure 3). I referred to this passage in Ilbak's book when I discussed Edith von Schrenck in my book *Empire of Ecstasy* (Toepfer 1997: 163-167). This was my first published reference to Ilbak, but I still knew very little about her; indeed, her own memoir is mostly just an account of people she knew and places she visited, with very little information about her dances or about her dance philosophy or about herself. Meanwhile, other projects, including *Empire of Ecstasy*, left me little time to cultivate my curiosity about Ella Ilbak.

Figure 3: Edith von Schrenck, performing an unidentified dance, photographed by Grete Kolliner, Vienna, 1930. Photo source: Wikipedia Commons.

Nevertheless, the photo of "The Flame" continued to haunt me. In the summer of 1995, I visited Estonia for the purpose of gathering information about Ilbak. I had no idea what I was doing, because I had no idea who to contact about Estonian dance in the 1920s. A German professor of literature recommended that I contact a dramaturge at the

Vanemuine Theater in Tartu, but, unfortunately, I cannot remember either of their names. I wrote a semi-literate letter in Estonian to the Tartu dramaturge, who agreed to meet with me. He showed me around the Vanemuine Theater. My letter in terrible Estonian had moved him: he said he did not know any Russians who had bothered to learn a word of Estonian. We spoke German, because he did not know English. He was unaware of Ella Ilbak, but he helped me get in touch with an Estonian theater historian in Tallinn, Lilian Kirepe (1927-2018). She and I met at the Tallinn Music and Theater Museum. Communication was difficult, because she did not know English and only a little bit of German, while I could say nothing intelligible in Estonian (Figure 4). Nevertheless, she guided me through the Ilbak material in the Museum. The archive seemed unusually small for such a prominent Estonian artist, but it did contain a couple of photographs in which Ilbak posed nude. The archive did not identify where or when the photos were made or who took them or how they came to reside in the Museum's archive. No one informed me that Ella Ilbak was still alive and living in the United States. I enjoyed Estonia for many reasons other than Ella Ilbak, but I sensed that much of the information about her career was not in her native land. In bookstores, I found little monographs on Estonian actors of the 1920s and 1930s published in interbellum and Soviet times, including a couple published by Lilian Kirepe. Ilbak was not the subject of any of these monographs, but neither were any of the other early modern Estonian dancers Tormis identified in her book. A new edition of Ilbak's autobiography appeared in 1990 with additional photos, but it did not inspire any scholarly inquiry into her life, although Heidi Sarapuu (b. 1944) produced a play at the Varius Theater about Ilbak's relationship to the writers August Gailit (1891-1969) and Henrik Visnapuu (1890-1951) (*Saarte Hääl*: Saare maakonna ajaleht, nr. 127, 27 Oktoober 1990). Information about her came in scraps. I was curious about Ilbak, curious about the woman in the startling photo of "The Flame," but I did not see her as a scholarly project. Knowledge of the Estonian language seemed necessary to attempt anything serious, and I did not see how I could learn it with the resources available to me.

Figure 4: Tallinn, 1995. Photos: Karl Toepfer.

Only the advent of the internet in the late 1990s expanded my knowledge of Ilbak beyond what I had acquired through her autobiography and my visit to the Theater and Music Museum. Eventually a clearer picture of her life emerged. Ilbak came from a prosperous upper middle class agricultural family in central Estonia. With her parents'

encouragement, she studied “plastic ballet” with Claudia Issatchenko in St. Petersburg and Dalcroze pedagogy under Sergei Volkonsky (1860-1937) in the same city. In Tartu during World War I, she took lessons in “free dance” at the studio of Elmerice Parts (1888-1974), probably the first such studio in Estonia (Figure 5) (Maripuu 2021). After the war (1919), Ilbak went to Paris, where she studied ballet with Maria Rutkoswka (ca. 1866-1950), movement with the countercultural philosopher Raymond Duncan (1874-1966), and physical education with Georges Hébert (1875-1957). She gave her first dance concert in Tartu on 10 May 1918, which was unusual at least for two reasons: 1) she used accompaniment by both piano and harp; and 2) she published in *Postimees* on the day of the concert a relatively lengthy theoretical essay on the goal of modern dance, which, she said, was to physicalize the emotions inspired by music, in contrast to ballet, in which music functions to “smother and rape the body into a graceful puppet” (Ilbak 1918).

Figure 5: Elmerice Parts, photographed by Anny Eberth (1877-1954), Berlin, 1920-1921. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Nearly a year later, she gave a concert in Tallinn. But she did not attempt any more concerts until she returned from her studies in Paris in 1922. After a concert at the Vanemuine Theater in Tartu, she performed in Estonia only occasionally. The great majority of her career occurred elsewhere. From Tartu, she went to Helsinki, then Munich, Budapest, Vienna, Paris, Stockholm, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Warsaw, Sofia, Cairo, Jerusalem, and numerous other European cities. It is difficult to identify another European dancer of the interwar period who performed in so many cities and countries; perhaps only the German solo modern dancer Niddy Impekoven (1904-2002) performed in more countries, although she stopped performing after a world tour in 1934.

Figure 6: Niddy Impekoven, performing "Der gefangene Vogel" ("The Imprisoned Bird"), photographed by Anny Eberth, Berlin, 1920. Photo source: Impekoven 1920.

Following her studies in Paris in 1919-1921, Ilbak ceased to be a resident of Estonia and spent the rest of her life residing in many cities: Munich, Helsinki, Riga, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Vienna, Budapest, Florence, Nice, Paris, Copenhagen, Goteborg, and finally various cities in the United States. As early as 1922, she announced her intention of touring the United States and even Japan. Ilbak gave solo dance concerts long after modern dance (around 1924) prioritized ensemble performance over solo performance, which was almost extinct by 1925 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Ella Ilbak, left, photographer unknown, 1930s; right, photographed by H. Perten, Stockholm, 1955. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Unlike other modern dancers, she had no desire to teach, no interest in establishing a school, no wish to perform with an ensemble or company. Though she published (1955, 1966) two novels in addition to her memoirs, she wrote nothing about dance after her 1918 essay. Her only attempt at collaboration, with the Dutch dancer Irail Gadescov (Richard Vogelsang [1894-1970]), lasted just a few months. In her autobiography, she mentions many people she has met in her life, but the reader gets the impression that she was never

close to anyone. Despite the intense eroticism of her dances and photos, she never discloses a single romantic feeling for anyone, except perhaps inadvertently in relation to Edith von Schrenck. She constantly changed accompanists and never sustained an enduring collaboration with any of them. Her most innovative period was from 1922 to 1925; after 1929, she performed the same dozen pieces for the rest of her career. She had no incentive for further innovation. Her taste in musical accompaniment was romantic and consisted mostly of nineteenth century compositions (Chopin, Liszt, Brahms), with occasional use of early twentieth century music by Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Debussy, Palmgren, Sibelius, and Achron, and for a couple of dances, she used accompaniment provided by cymbals or gongs; her *Nightmare* dance (1924) used no musical or sound accompaniment at all. Her *Prelude* used piano music by Heino Eller (1887-1970), her only dance to use music by an Estonian composer. She performed a few dances with an ostensibly ethnic or national identity, such as her *Hebrew Dance*, *Salome*, and "oriental" moods like *Temple Dance*, but she never performed a dance with a specifically Estonian theme. Her career as a dancer was largely over with the outbreak of World War II, although she gave a few dance concerts from 1947 until her last one in 1966, at the age of seventy-two. But even before the war, no one as old as her had performed solo modern dance concerts, and no one has since the war.

Before 1939, photographers did not take pictures of Ilbak during the performance of her dances in concerts or even under studio conditions. Rather, Ilbak assumed poses of movements in a studio environment. Cameras lacked the high-speed shutter technology to "capture" bodily movement without producing a very blurred image. Some photographers were able to capture unblurred images of dance movement on stages as early as 1918 or 1919, but for many solo dancers, photographing movement on stage meant renting a theater to accomplish this task, which could cost as much as to rent the space for a concert. Photographing posed movements in a photographer's studio was more efficient and just as effective in constructing the dancer's unique image. Dancers often posed in the costumes they wore for concert performance, but the main goal of the pose and the photograph was to show a "movement"—or more precisely, a bodily configuration—peculiar to the dancer. Thus, dancers frequently assumed the same movement pose with different costumes. The purpose of a solo dance concert was to display a dancer's unique repertoire or spectrum of expressive movement. The purpose of the studio photo shoot was to extract from the dances a repertoire or spectrum of poses unique to the dancer. That sounds simple, yet it was not. Dancers could not rely on a single, "defining" image to attract audiences or media attention. But building a repertoire of poses distinctive to the dancer became increasingly difficult in the early, solo phase of modern dance history, because, as solo dancers proliferated, it became harder for audiences to differentiate them through movements and

poses, causing dance photos to assume generic qualities that undermined their purpose in revealing uniqueness (Figure 8).

Ella Ilbak adapted easily to these conditions between 1923 and 1933. Her image repertoire included a wide range of poses, and the poses derived from specific movements for specific dances. She worked with different photographers in different countries to produce the images, and she never developed a strong, enduring relationship with any photographer or photography studio. The earliest available photograph of her shows her at the age of fifteen or sixteen, probably a portrait for a high school yearbook.

Figure 8: (Left) Ella Ilbak as a teenager, photographer unknown, undated, from Ilbak file in the Estonian Music and Theater Museum archive. (Right) Ella Ilbak, Viljandi, Estonia, 1916, photo by Jaan Riet (1873-1952). Photo source: Estonian National Archive.

Here she demonstrates remarkable composure, with her face inviting the gaze of the photographer while projecting a measure of aloofness. However, it is very difficult to locate photographs of her in dance poses before 1922, although artists had done portraits of her around 1919-1921, including this 1919 portrait by Ants Laikmaa (1866-1942) (Figure 9):

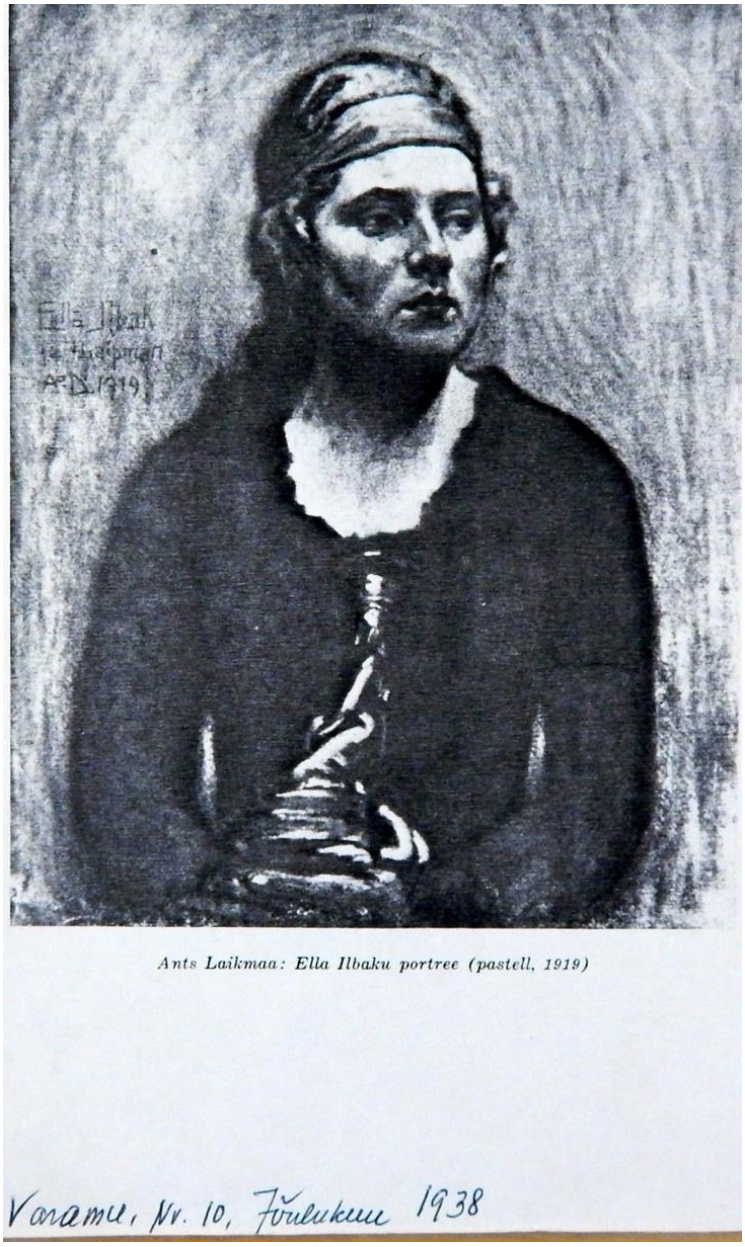


Figure 9: Ella Ilbak, pastel portrait by Ants Laikmaa, 1919, from Estonian Theater and Music Museum archive (whereabouts of the original unknown).

The artist has given Ilbak an unusually mature look and an aura of severity and even intimidating opacity or dark confinement, qualities not associated with her dance aesthetic. The first photo depictions of Ilbak as a dancer were facial portraits taken in late 1921 prior to her first concert in Helsinki in January 1922, apparently under the assumption that newspaper readers became interested in a dancer because of her face than because of a dancelike pose (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Ella Ilbak, unknown photographer, 1921. Photo source, Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Based on these photos, the Hungarian artist Endre Komaromi-Kacz (1880-1969) painted her portrait under circumstances that remain unknown. Presumably the idea behind the painting was to transform the image of Ilbak's face into an "artwork" that elevated her status as an artist in a way that a photo could not (Figure 11). But it is not clear why or for whom Komaromi-Kacz painted the portrait. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Ilbak continued to place great importance on glamorous facial photos to sell her identity as a dancer, despite or perhaps even because of complaints by some critics that in her dances she did not vary her facial expressions enough. Yet she did not update her photo facial portraits until about a decade later, when she had two different Viennese photographers produce portraits of her. In 1929, she produced a set of photo portraits in the Vienna studio of Georg Fayer (1892-1950), in which she experimented with a backlit, halo effect to dramatize variety of facial expression (Figure 12). While the photos are quite striking in revealing the luminous power of her face, Ilbak evidently found them unsatisfactory, because she did not use them much, if at all. Sometime between 1930 and 1931, she collaborated with the Viennese photographer Grete Kolliner (1892-1933) to produce a new set of photo portraits. Kolliner produced numerous photos of dancers, including, in 1930, Ilbak's friend and former classmate, Edith von Schrenck (see Misler 2017). Kolliner avoided the soft focus, chiaroscuro aesthetic adopted by Fayer and favored a sharp-focused,

shadowless, gleaming view of the many dancers she photographed (Figure 14). Ilbak preferred these images and used them throughout the 1930s to promote her concerts, although they convey a much more melancholy aura than the Fayer set. In the late 1930s, Ilbak attempted another photo portrait with a backlit, chiaroscuro effect, with an unknown photographer, this time in profile (Figure 15). But she seems not to have used it for any promotional purpose. The photo conceals more than it reveals, and her fussy, overly complicated blouse does not flatter her and makes her appear "too old." However, Fayer remained the photographer for perhaps her most famous and beautiful portrait, made in late 1929 (Figure 16); it was the cover photo for a Finnish magazine, *Kansan Kuvalehti* (29/02/1930) (Figure 17). Here, Fayer's distinctive backlighting and chiaroscuro approach to portraiture achieve a powerfully enigmatic effect. She appears less melancholy than in the Kolliner photos and more certain of her identity than in the 1929 Fayer set. She looks at once inviting and yet reserved, mysteriously shadowed. Her face exudes confidence, worldly sophistication, and intensity of gaze, with her eyes focused on something "beyond," something greater than the darkness that surrounds her. Ilbak paid considerable attention to her hair styling, and in 1931, she even won a hair styling contest in Vienna (Loog 2024). Reviewers sometimes commented on her "Nordic blondeness" and the modern complexity of her short, rippling haircuts. But the portrait photos do not bring out her blondeness; rather, they give her dark hair a strange, lustrous sheen.

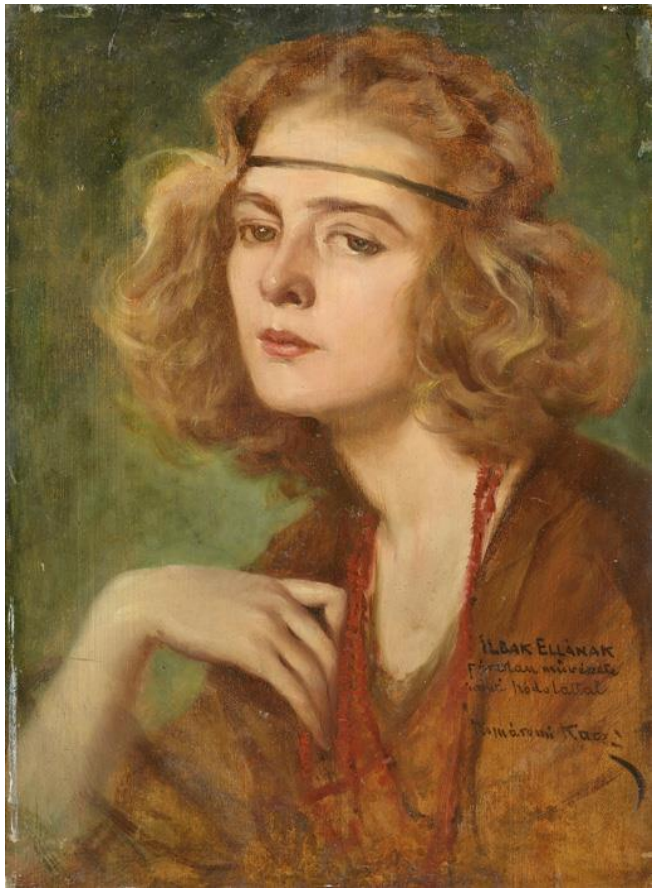


Figure 11: Ella Ilbak, painted by Hungarian artist Endre Komaromi-Kacz, 1921-1922, with partially legible inscription in Hungarian. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Figure 12: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Georg Fayer, 1929. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto.

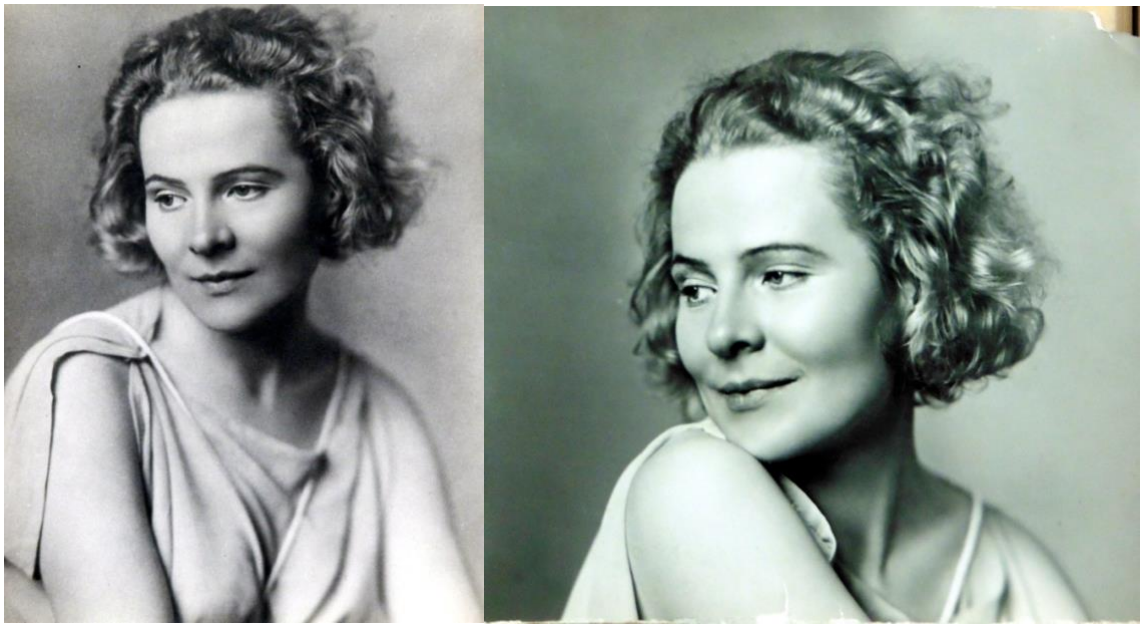


Figure 13: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Grete Kolliner, Vienna, 1931. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum archive.

Figure 14: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Grete Kolliner, Vienna, 1928-1931. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum archive.

Figure 15: Ella Ilbak, photograph by unknown photographer, late 1930s. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 16: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Georg Fayer, Vienna, 1930. Photo source: Un regard oblique.

Figure 17: Georg Fayer's portrait of Ella Ilbak on the cover of Kansan Kuvalehti, *August 1930.*

Ilbak's face attracted the attention of fine artists, but it is surprising that artists preferred to depict her face rather than her dancing, unlike numerous other modern artists who depicted known modern dancers in performance, such as Dutch artist Jan Sluijters' (1881-1957) 1921 painting of German modern dancer Gertrud Leistikow (1885-1948) (Figure 18). Fine art representations of Ilbak dancing or even of her beautiful body did not emerge. Her face dominates the artists' vision (Figures 19-21). This exclusive focus on facial portraiture may have to do with confirming the dancer's status as an artist. In her autobiography, Ilbak constantly refers to her meetings and interactions with socially prominent and upper-class persons. In the elite cultural circles in which she circulated, fine art facial portraits could establish the subject as a person of high social status, unlike pictures that depicted the same person performing work or engaged in professional activity. However, it is not known

for whom these portraits were produced when Ilbak never seems to have owned them (Figure 22).

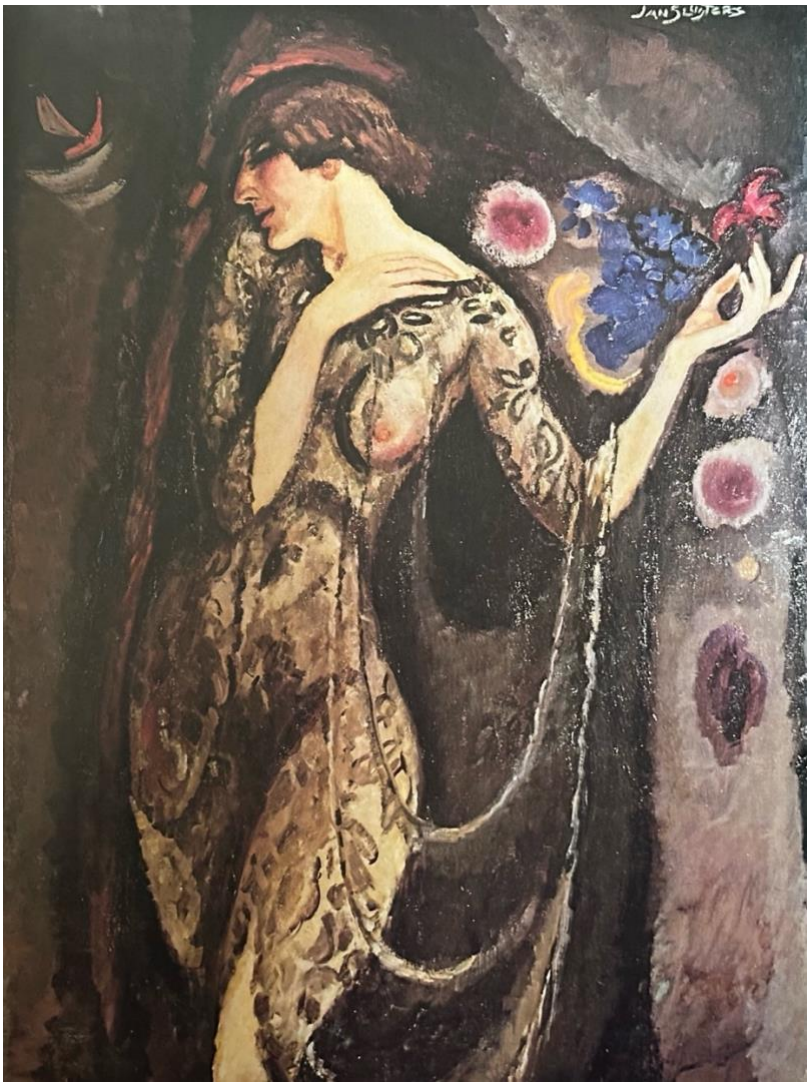


Figure 18: German dancer Gertrud Leistikow painted by Dutch artist Jan Sluijters, Amsterdam, 1921. Photo source: Collection Van Voorst van Beest, The Hague, Netherlands; Juffermans 1981: 100.

Figure 19: (Left) Ella Ilbak, painted portrait by Hungarian artist Caesar Kunwald (1870-1946), Budapest, 1926 Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum. (Right) Ella Ilbak, sculpture by Italian artist E. Casali, 1935. Photo source: Scenario *Vol. 5, No. 1, January 1936, p. 15.*

Figure 20: Ella Ilbak, charcoal drawing by Serge Fotinsky (1887-1971), Paris, 1920. Photo source: Noorhani 2009, p. 10.

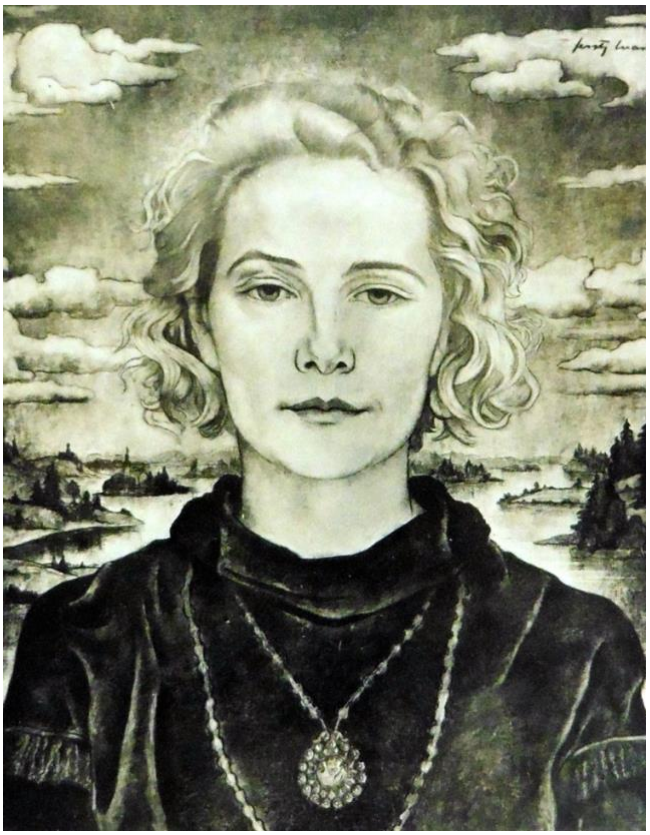


Figure 21: Ella Ilbak, portrait by Hungarian artist Masa Feszty (1894-1979), 1934. Identified by Kopócsy (2026).

Figure 22: Ella Ilbak, portrait by Masa Feszty, Hungary, 1934. Photo source: Magyar Nemzeti Digitalis Archivum. See Figure 39, which apparently inspired the artist.

Figure 23: Ella Ilbak (second from right) with upper class performing artists at a reception for a matinee concert in honor of Hungarian violinist and composer Jenő Hubay (1858-1937), Budapest, 1933. Left to right: Wanda Lussato (1921-?), thirteen-year-old Italian violinist from the Milan Conservatory, Margit Nagy (1893-?), Hungarian opera singer and film actress, Emília Márkus (1860-1949), Hungarian theater and film actress, Ilbak, and Jenő Léner (1894-1948), Hungarian violinist, leader of the Léner String Quartet. Photo by Juan (Janos) Gyenes (1912-1995), Hungarian and later Spanish celebrity photographer. Photo source: Szinhazi Elet*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 24 December 1933 – 1 January 1934, p. 58.*

But Ilbak's career as a dancer required that she make photos of herself in dance poses. From the beginning of her career, commentators remarked that her dances relied heavily on the expressive use of her torso, arms, hands, and head, not her legs. Unlike most other dancers, her movements did not consume a great amount of performance space. Her movement was "sculptural," suffused with athletic "plasticity," yet more "lyrical" than

dramatic in emotional construction. She avoided displays of acrobatic virtuosity and did not devise complex movements to demonstrate a superior control over her body. She liked making movements low to the performance surface; she saw movement as arising from the "ground" rather than as a struggle against the oppressive power of gravity. In some of her dances, most famously in "The Flame," she did not even stand up, but performed all her movements with her upper body while sitting or even lying on the floor. In the earliest dance photos of her, she emphasized her affinity for movement close to the performance surface (Figures 24-27). She made these photos with an unknown photographer at the Klio photography studio in Riga in November or December 1921, when she gave dance concerts that received an enthusiastic reception (Vidzemniece 2024: 178-182). The reason Ilbak did her dance photos in Riga and produced her first concert since her Parisian studies in Helsinki is probably due to the political controversy in Estonia that resulted from the Estonian government giving her a grant to study in Paris (thirteen other art and science students received grants). According to an article by Riikka Korppi-Tommola, Social Democrats in the Estonian Parliament questioned the government spending money on Ilbak's Paris education when the state did not have enough money to pay for schoolteachers in Estonia (Korppi-Tommola 2018: 3-5). Ilbak may have believed that she would avoid political controversy by organizing and self-financing her post-Paris concert in Finland, although the Estonian diplomatic corps assisted her in setting up the concert. Governments invest in artist education abroad in the hope that the education will return exceptional benefits for the artist's homeland. But Ilbak may have assumed, because of negative feeling about her stirred up by the Social Democrats, that she needed an enthusiastic response to her dancing from a foreign audience before she could set up a concert in Estonia.

The Riga dance poses strongly emphasized Ilbak's closeness to the performance surface. The Klio studio made photos of her performing more conventional dances poses, but these are dull compared to the photos of her low to the floor or reclining; she perhaps released them as postcards but not as publicity material (Figure 28). The Riga studio made photos of her posing in a costume other than a chiton, but these have disappeared except for what newspapers published in 1922, such as *Suomen Kuvalehti* (Figure 29). Ilbak liked posing in a skimpy white chiton that showed off her bare arms, legs, and thighs, and it's possible that she performed most of her dances in a white chiton, which adapted well to a variety of moods. Unlike other dancers, she did not wear tights, tutus, pants of any sort, or flamboyant dresses, nor did she employ accessories like capes, hats, gloves, or masks. In spite of Fayer's mysterious 1929 chiaroscuro portrait of her, she avoided posing or dancing in dark garments. None of her photos show her using any props. The white chiton remained her default costume for displaying bodily movement, although, as will be

evident, she revised and perfected the chiton design in relation to new interactions with photographers.

Figure 24: Ella Ilbak, early embodiment of the position for performing "The Flame," photographed at Klio studio Riga, Lativia, 1921. Ilbak premiered "The Flame" at her 11 December 1922 concert in Helsinki. Photo source: Alvar Loog.

Figure 25: Ella Ilbak, "Amazon" dance, photographed at Klio studio Riga, Lativia, 1921. Photo source: Alvar Loog.

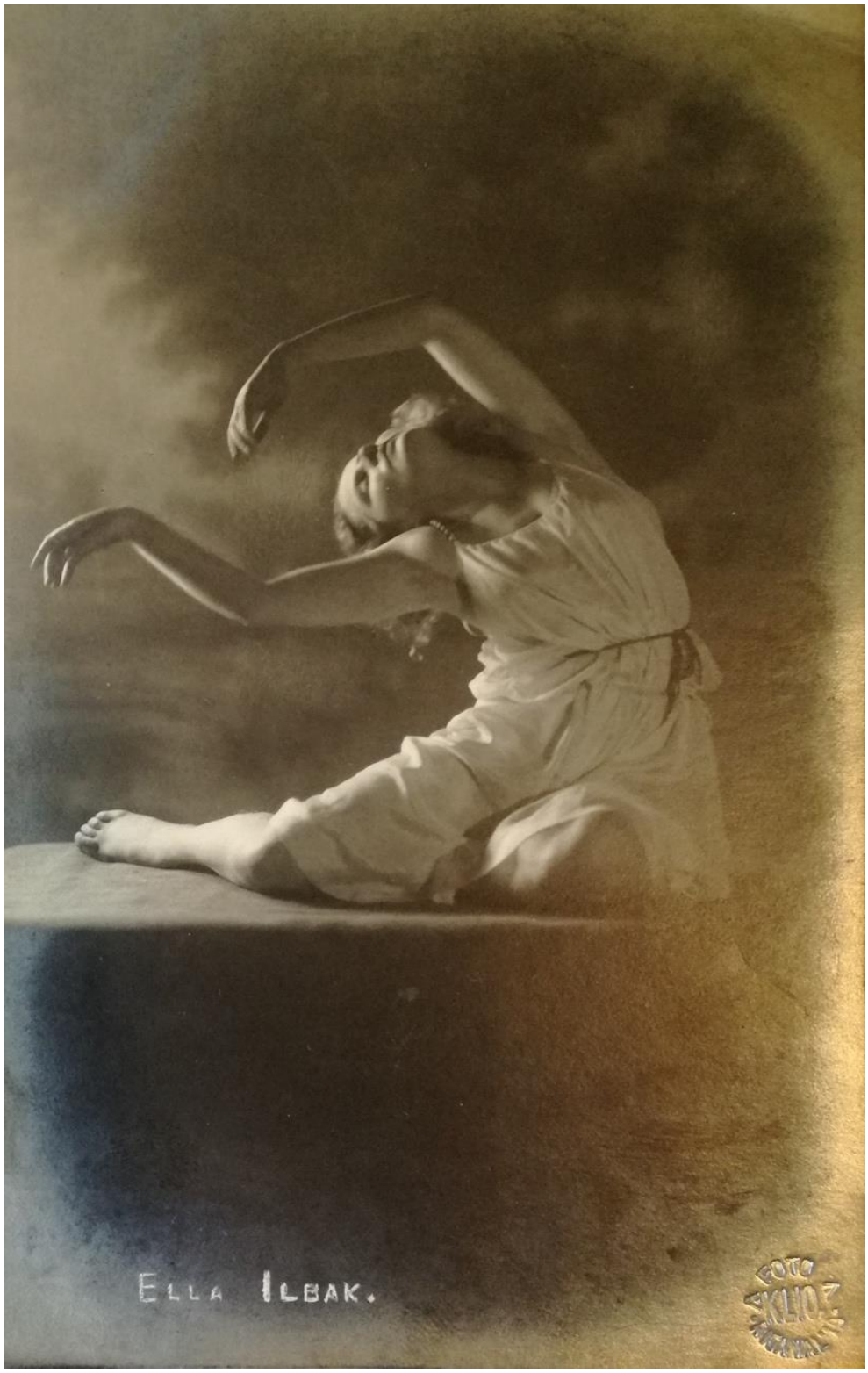


Figure 26: Ella Ilbak, photographed at Klio studio Riga, Lativia, 1921. Photo source: Alvar Loog.

Figure 27: Ella Ilbak, "Melancholia," photographed at Klio studio Riga, Lativia, 1921. This photo appeared in Suomen Kuvalehti, *11 February 1922. Photo source: Alvar Loog.*

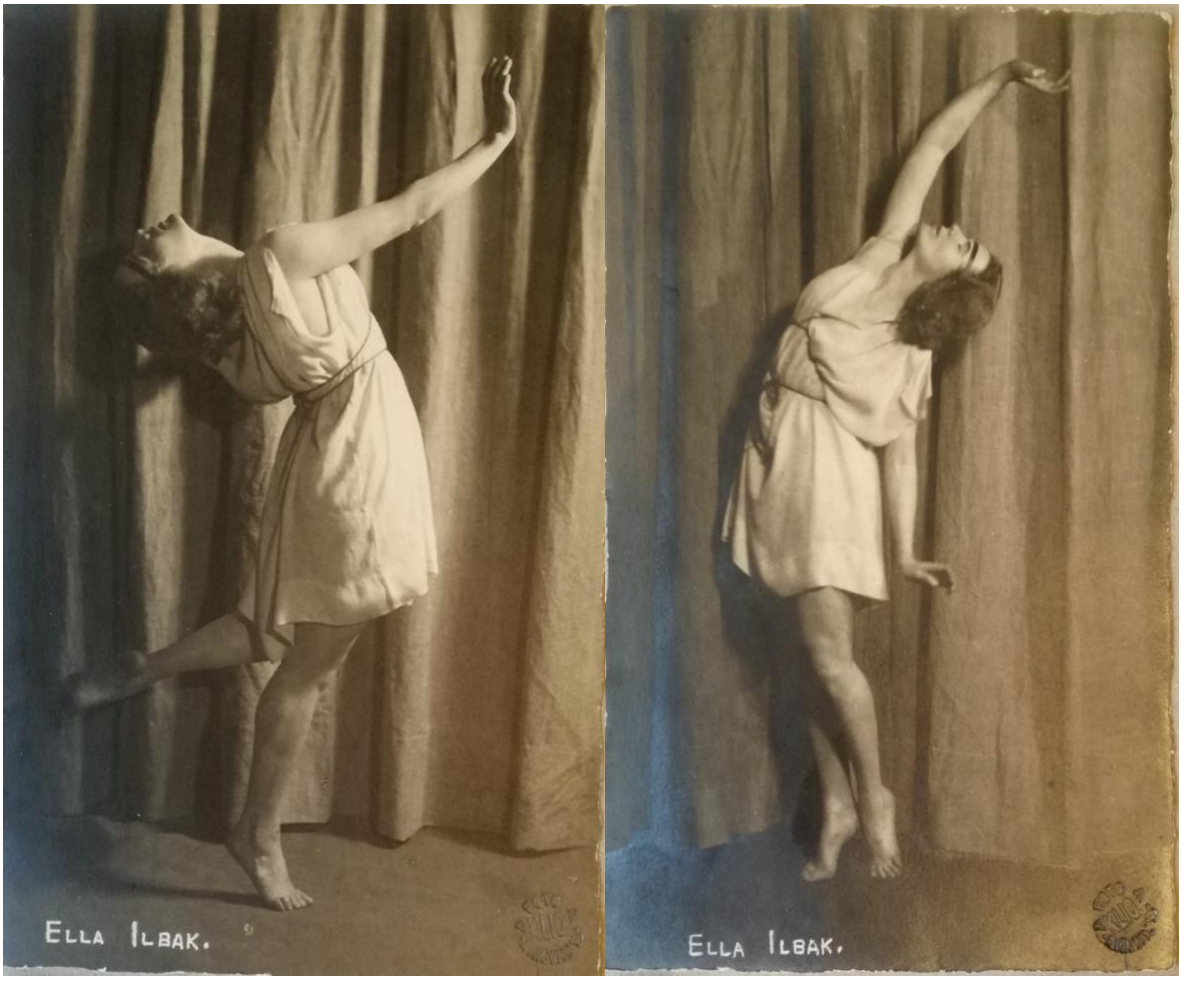


Figure 28: Ella Ilbak, photographed by the Klio photography studio, Riga, 1921. Photo source: Alvar Loog.

Figure 29: Left and bottom right: Klio studio photos of Ella Ilbak performing an exotic dance and "Melancholia," in a Finnish newspaper report of her inability to give a concert because of ice, presumably in the Gulf of Finland, preventing her from reaching Helsinki. The page editor used various graphic design devices to amplify the voluptuousness of Ella Ilbak and contrast it with the square plainness of the male musicians: Ilbak's dancing body exceeds, distorts, or bends the frames meant to contain her. Photo source: Suomen Kuvalehti, *11 February 1922.*

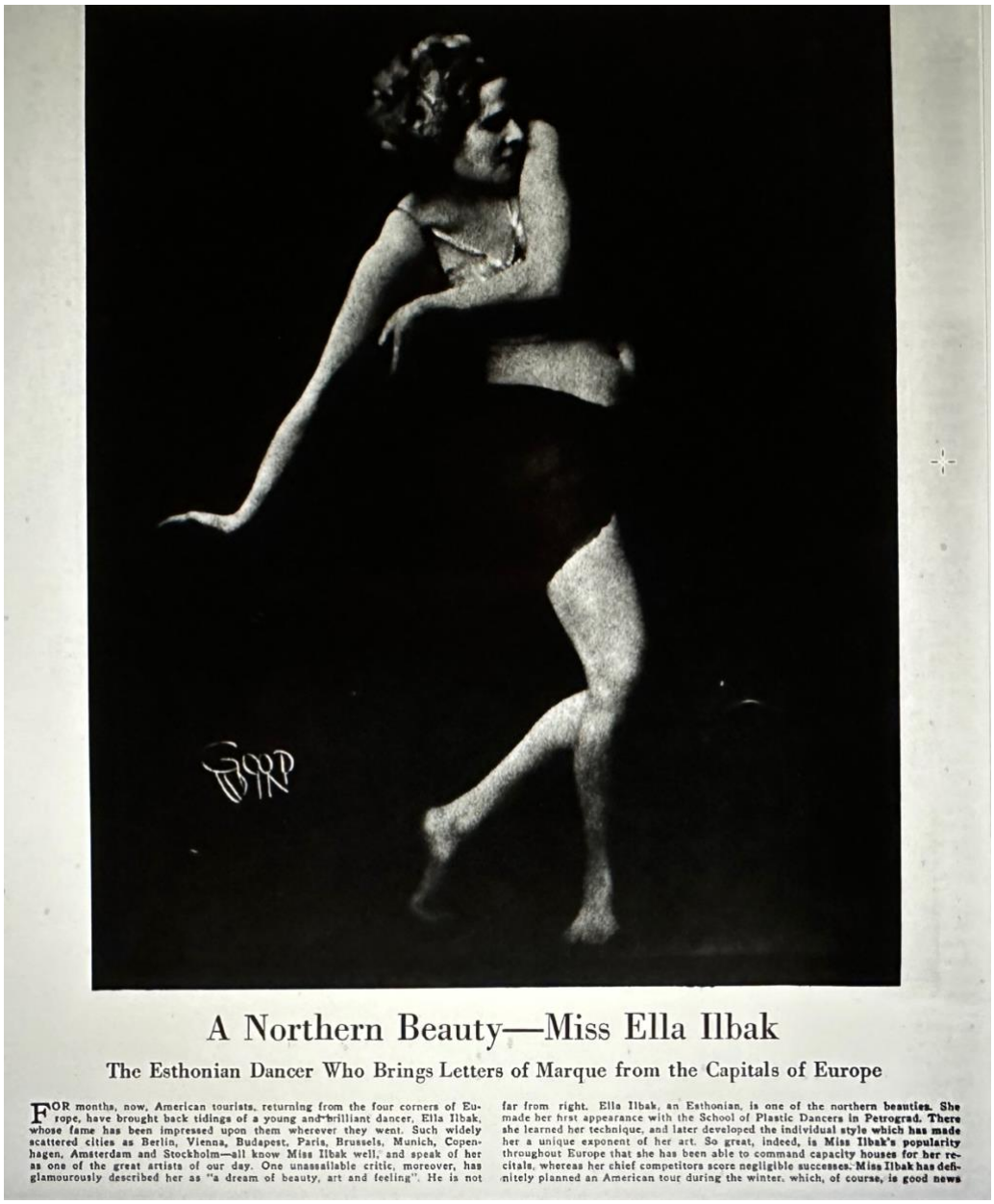
Ilbak was aware that the Riga photos lacked glamor and sophistication, even if the Finnish press found them helpful in reporting on her debut concert in Helsinki. In March 1923, she went to Paris to give a concert at the Champs-Élysées Theatre, which received an enthusiastic response. But I have found no evidence yet of the Parisian press publishing any photos of her in relation to this event. Although a Finnish newspaper, *Aamulehti*

(14/12/1922) reported that she planned to perform a concert in Monte Carlo after her Parisian engagement, evidence of further performances in 1923 has yet to emerge. She made the Riga photos when she gave a concert in the city in December 1921. Most likely, she made the photos there rather than in Tallinn because she wanted to create erotically charged images of herself and felt she would further complicate her relations with public officials in Estonia if word leaked out of a Tallinn photo studio that she was using photography to construct a voluptuous identity. When she performed in Tallinn in April 1922, the journal *Aeg* published (No. 4 1922) an unenthusiastic review of her concert by the drama critic and theater director Voldemar Mettus (1894-1975). The editor of the journal appended to the review a statement claiming that *Aeg* wanted to publish photos of Ilbak but that she forbade the journal to publish them because of the review; the editor asserted that "criticism does not always mean paying compliments." However, none of the other Estonian newspapers that covered her performance published photographs of her, even though they published very favorable reviews of it and even though the Finnish press had already published a few of the Riga photos. Ilbak's own ambivalence toward the Riga photos may explain her absence from the stage for so long after the Paris performance: she needed a stronger image of herself in the media to attract wider public interest in her art. In 1924, she went to Stockholm to launch a tour of Sweden. There she engaged the services of Henry Goodwin (1878-1931), a master photographer highly esteemed for his dramatic portraits of performing artists.

Goodwin created some of the most glamorous and enduring images of Ilbak, and his photos of her dominated publicity about her throughout the 1920s. No other photographer was as successful as him in capturing her as a dancer, and he was responsible for the most famous image of her, performing "The Flame" (Figure 30). One of his photographs of her (not in the Moderna Museet collection) appeared in the New York fashion, arts, and society magazine *Vanity Fair* in 1927 (Figure 31). Goodwin, too, relied on chiaroscuro lighting, but avoided backlighting. He set Ilbak against a dark background but bathed her body in a soft light that made her skin glow and made her shadowless body the source of light within darkness. This technique was not unique to his Ilbak photos; he applied it to many photos of other performing artists, such as dancer Vera Fokina in 1918 (Figure 31). But Ilbak was unique for the extent to which she exposed her flesh and brazenly assumed erotically charged poses. In several of the photos, including "The Flame," she posed with her eyes closed, as if to signify a state of rapture. In most of her subsequent dance photos with other photographers, she posed with eyes closed. Except for a few poses in her white chiton, Ilbak posed for Goodwin in variations of her scanty "exotic" or "oriental" dance costume (ornamental brassiere and satiny cloth around her pelvic region) (Figures 32-36). Goodwin was very skillful in capturing a feeling of movement in Ilbak's poses, something

which she did not achieve in her subsequent collaborations with other photographers, where she emphasized a meditative stillness or a "sculptured," statuesque quality to her poses. She never seems more relaxed than in the photos Goodwin took of her. He also photographed her attachment to the performance surface in a more dramatic manner than other photographers. Most of the many Salome dancers of the early twentieth century preferred photos of themselves performing a "wild" or flamboyant movement, such as Danish-Finnish dancer Edith von Bonsdorff (1890-1968) (Figure 38). However, for Goodwin, Ilbak presented Salome reclining languidly on a tapestry-draped platform, propping her chin on her hand, with her eyes open, gazing at the viewer, as if studying something to determine whether it should interest her (Figure 39). Despite her nearly complete nudity and supine pose, she does not convey any serious sense of vulnerability. The viewer sees in her a vaguely intimidating aura of self-composure.

Figure 30: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, performing "The Flame," photography by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.



A Northern Beauty—Miss Ella Ilbak

The Esthonian Dancer Who Brings Letters of Marque from the Capitals of Europe

FOR months, now, American tourists, returning from the four corners of Europe, have brought back tidings of a young and brilliant dancer, Ella Ilbak, whose fame has been impressed upon them wherever they went. Such widely scattered cities as Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Paris, Brussels, Munich, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Stockholm—all know Miss Ilbak well, and speak of her as one of the great artists of our day. One unassailable critic, moreover, has glamourously described her as "a dream of beauty, art and feeling". He is not far from right. Ella Ilbak, an Esthonian, is one of the northern beauties. She made her first appearance with the School of Plastic Dancers in Petrograd. There she learned her technique, and later developed the individual style which has made her a unique exponent of her art. So great, indeed, is Miss Ilbak's popularity throughout Europe that she has been able to command capacity houses for her recitals, whereas her chief competitors score negligible successes. Miss Ilbak has definitely planned an American tour during the winter, which, of course, is good news

Figure 31: Ella Ilbak, photograph by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Vanity Fair *(New York), November 1927, p. 64. From the caption: "American tourists arriving from the four corners of Europe, have brought back tidings of a young and brilliant dancer, Ella Ilbak, whose fame has been impressed upon them wherever they went. Such widely scattered cities as Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Paris, Brussels, Munich, Copenhagen. Amsterdam and Stockholm--all know Miss Ilbak well, and speak of her as one of the great artists of our day. One unassailable critic, moreover, has glamourously described her as 'a dream of beauty, art and feeling' [. . .]"*

Figure 32: (Left) Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Henry Goodwin, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet. (Right) Vera Fokina (1886-1958), Russian ballerina, 1918, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, Sweden. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Bengtsson 1998.

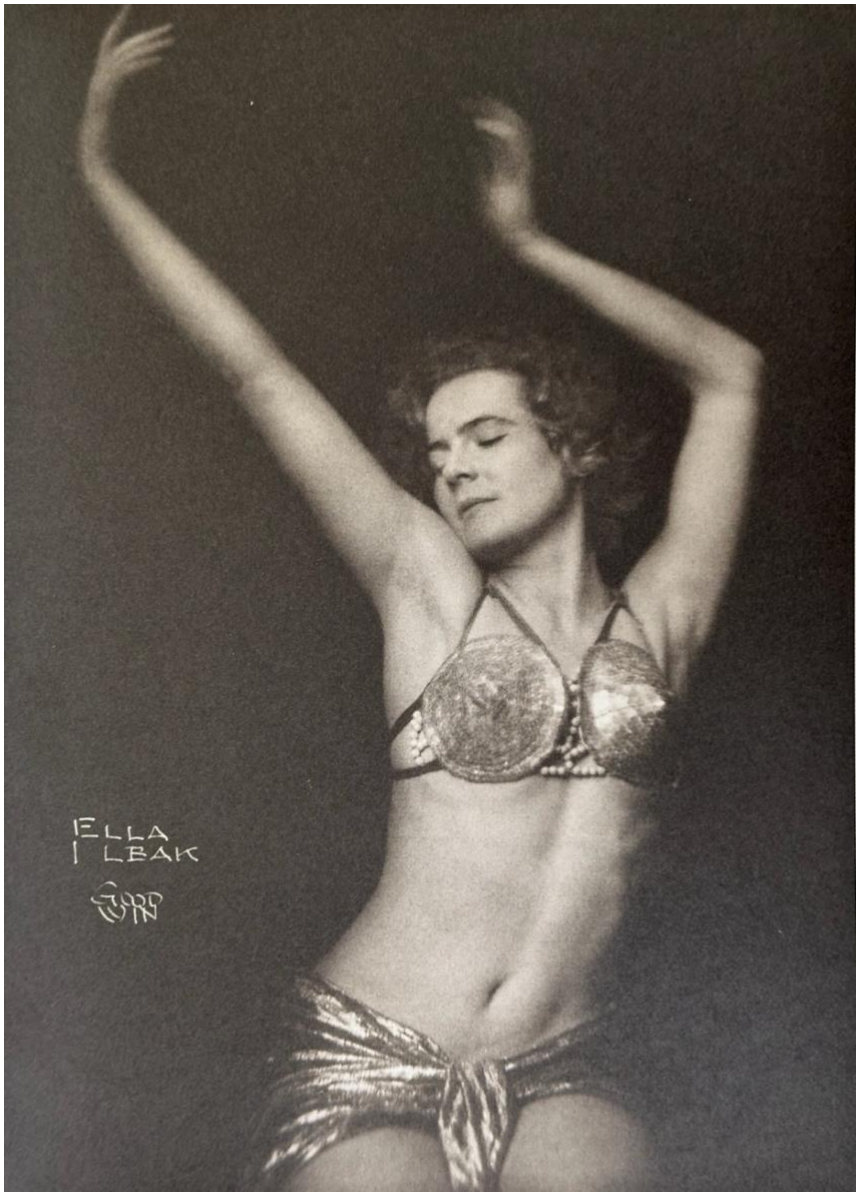


Figure 33: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photograph by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Bengtsson 1998.

Figure 34: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 35: Ella Ilbak, (left) eyes open; (right) eyes closed, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

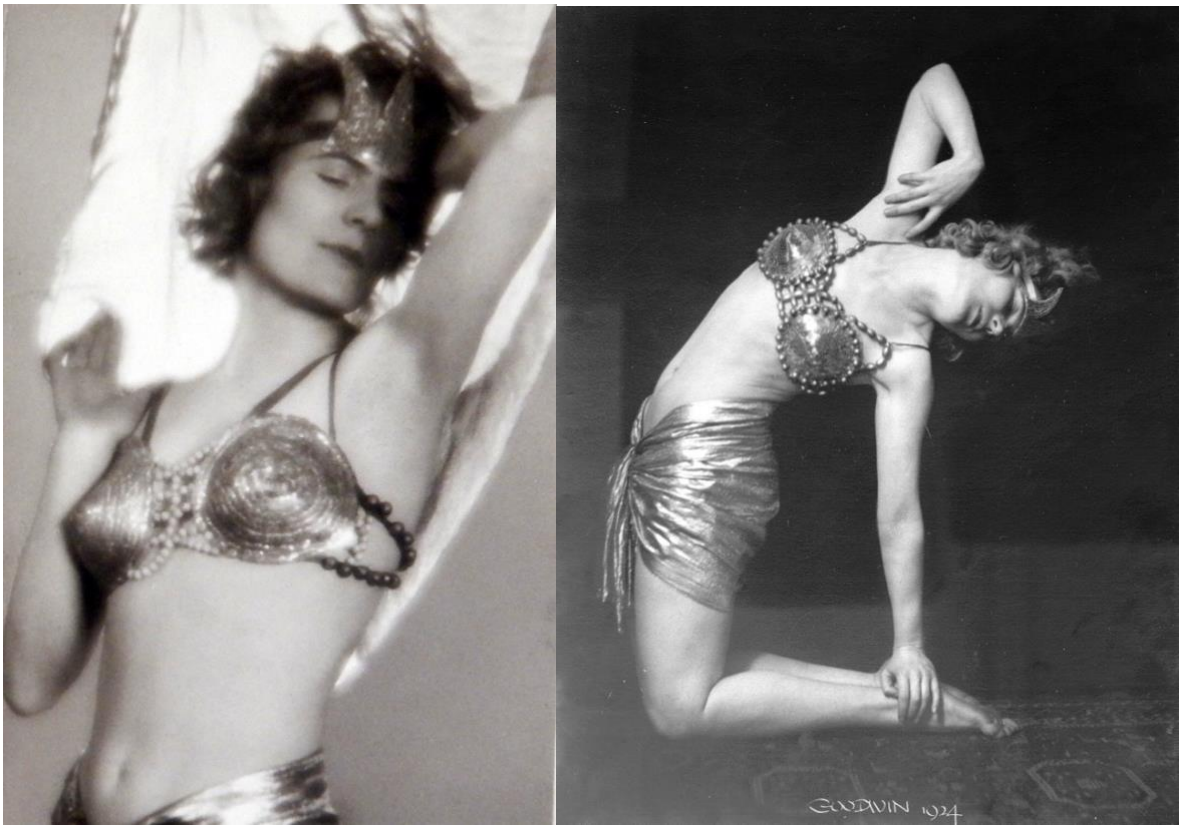


Figure 36: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. The left photo shows a rare use of backlighting by Goodwin. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 37: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 38: Edith von Bonsdorff, performing Salome, photographer unknown, 1923. Photo source: Helavuori 1997, p. 55.

Figure 39: Ella Ilbak as Salome, eyes open, gazing at the viewer, photographed by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 40: Ella Ilbak, photograph by Henry Goodwin, Stockholm, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Goodwin did a beautiful portrait of Ilbak employing a hand-propping-chin pose similar to her Salome gaze and apparently without wearing any clothes (Figure 40). But she appears not to have used the portrait for any publicity purpose. Goodwin was known internationally for his suave, elegant, and dramatic photos of nude women. His famous "Torso" photo (Figure 41) depicts Ilbak's body (Östlind 2010: 110, 112, 139). But she also posed nude for Goodwin in a much more voluptuous and self-consciously idealized manner, with her eyes closed (Figure 42), although the location of prints of this or other poses of similar explicitness has not been identified.

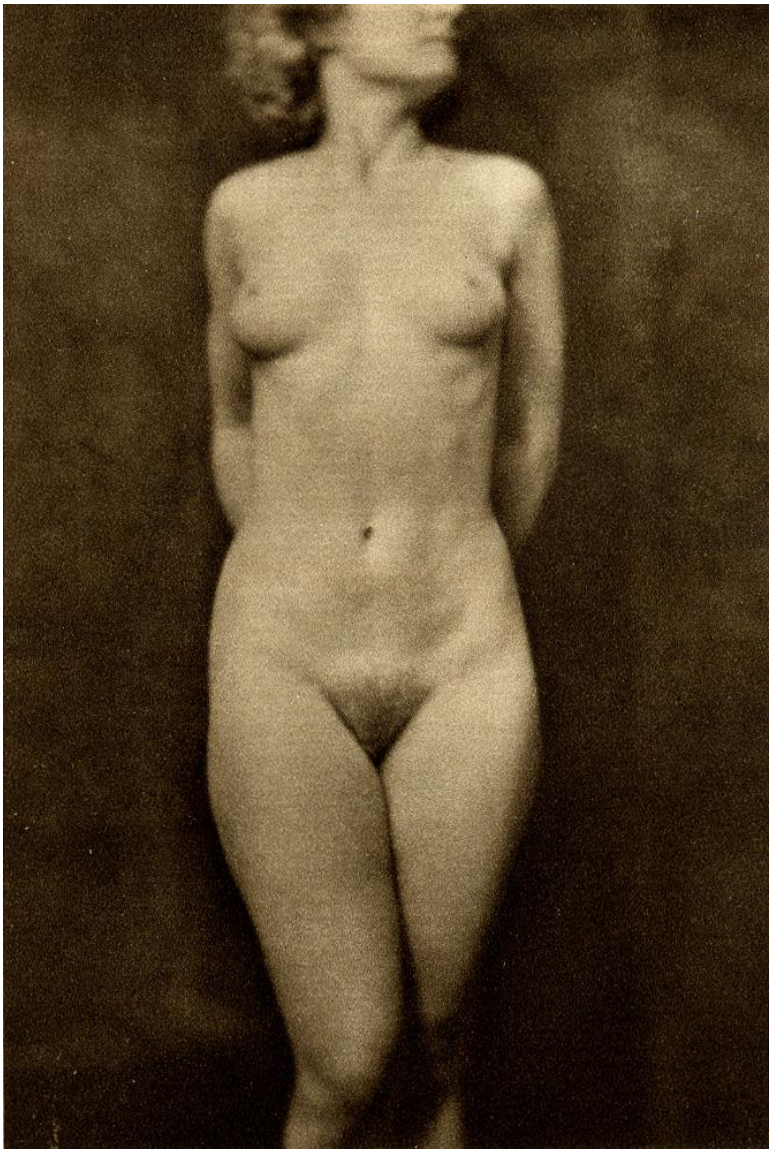


Figure 41: "Torso" (Ella Ilbak), photo by Henry Goodwin, 1924. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 42: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photo by Henry Goodwin, 1924. Photo Source: DantéBéa. Print location is unknown.

Ilbak's desire for nude photos of herself was intense and perhaps found its most beautiful manifestation in the photos she made with Goodwin, but it is not known how many photos or poses she made with Goodwin (cf., Östlind 2010; Östlind 2009). Only a few photos survive from any studio with whom she worked; she may have made nude photos elsewhere that have disappeared. In the mid-1920s, she posed nude in an unidentified

studio. Goodwin did not take the photos, and it is not known how two nude photos of her in the unknown studio ended up in the archive of the Estonian Theater and Music Museum (Figure 43). The photos are crudely made, with poor lighting, clumsy décor, awkward framing, and a desperate effort to generate enough light by posing before a large, industrial type window. The pictures were most likely an experiment or test contrived out of curiosity and in collaboration with a trusted amateur. As far as I can determine, no one published any nude photos of Ilbak during her lifetime, so her purpose in making nude photos was personal rather than promotional. She apparently derived great pleasure in looking at herself nude, but gazing into a mirror was not enough. She needed photographs that documented her beautiful nakedness, because in photographs she saw her nakedness as someone other than herself saw it, as the unknowable viewer of a photograph would see it, and this sense of her beautiful nakedness being visible both to herself and a fantasy audience inspired her, strengthened her confidence in herself and her belief that audiences in various countries would love watching her perform. But perhaps only her nude photographs made with Goodwin achieved this goal. Ilbak's vaguely masturbatory purpose in making nude photographs contrasts with that of German dancer Claire Bauroff (1895-1984), who, in 1925, collaborated with Viennese photographer Trude Fleischmann (1895-1990) on a series of nude photos that circulated widely in the 1920s and contributed to a pervasive belief that Bauroff was a "nude dancer," although evidence that she ever performed nude has yet to appear (Schreiber 1990: 117-119; Schreiber indicates that Fleischmann did a similar series of nude photographs in 1926 with Latvian dancer Mila Cirul [1901-1977] 120). Like Goodwin, Fleischmann contrasted the glow of flesh against a dark background (Figure 44). But Bauroff's poses were carefully contrived, slightly, elegantly contorted, designed to emphasize the sleek leanness and athletic muscularity of her oil-glistened body. These were promotional shots, eroticized advertisements for a "new," modernized, taut, perfectly self-engineered female body. Bauroff displayed her nudity almost as a kind of armor, a power that somehow made her immune to vulnerability, perhaps even touchability. Whereas Ilbak's pose for Goodwin projects a much more "private" or "naked" aura: she revels in her vulnerability, which magnifies her sexual provocativeness, her pleasure in revealing herself as a sexually hungry woman, a self-enraptured woman.

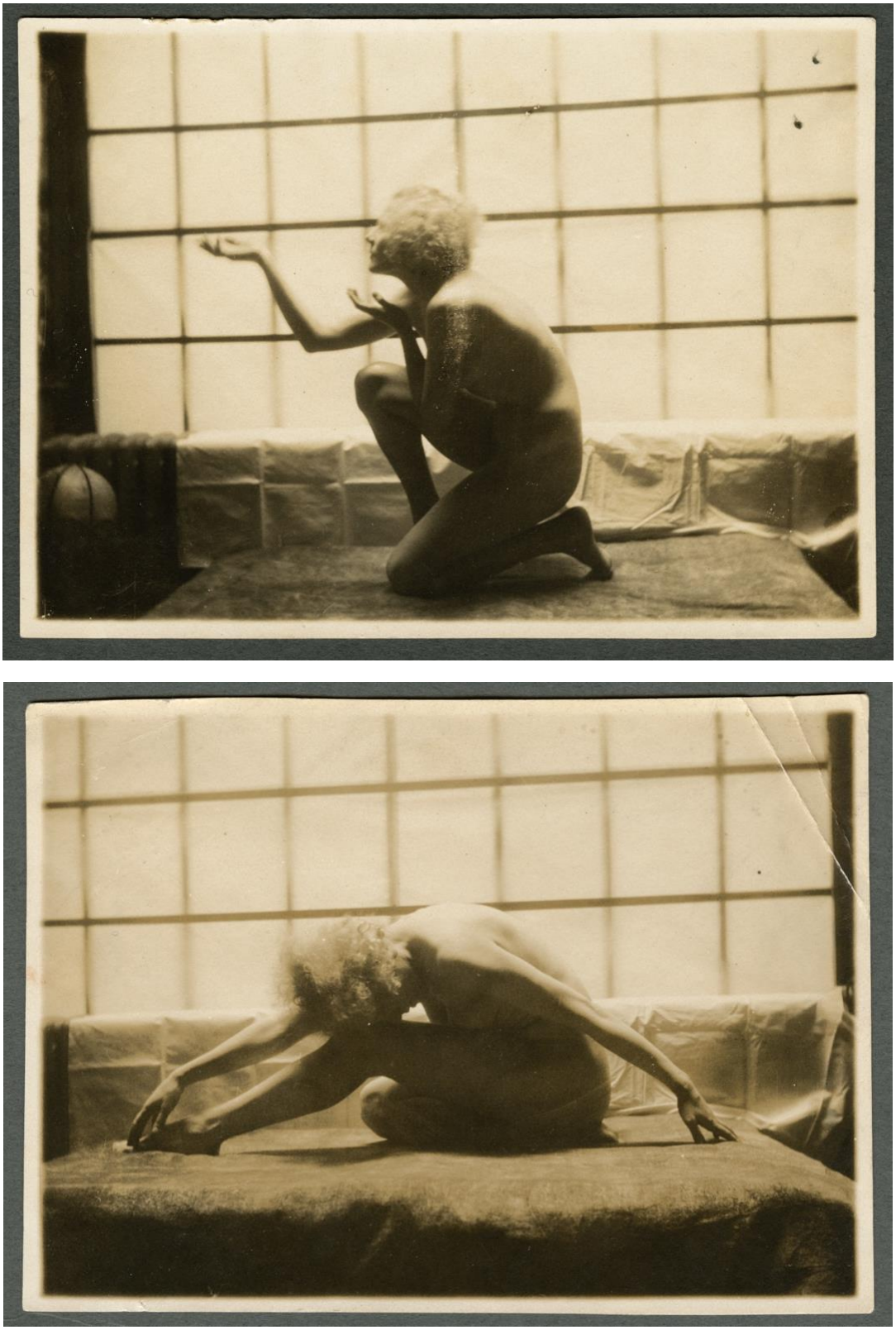


Figure 43: Ella Ilbak, photographer unknown, unknown studio, mid-1920s. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

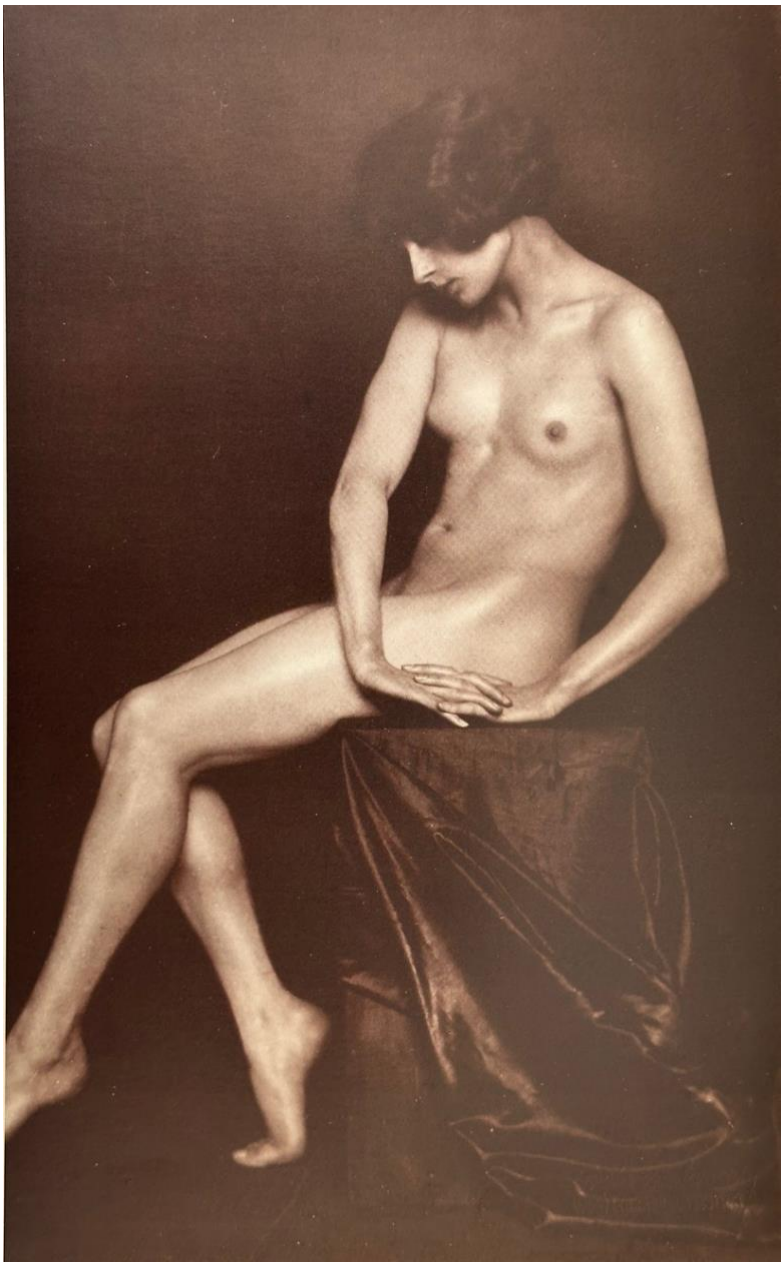
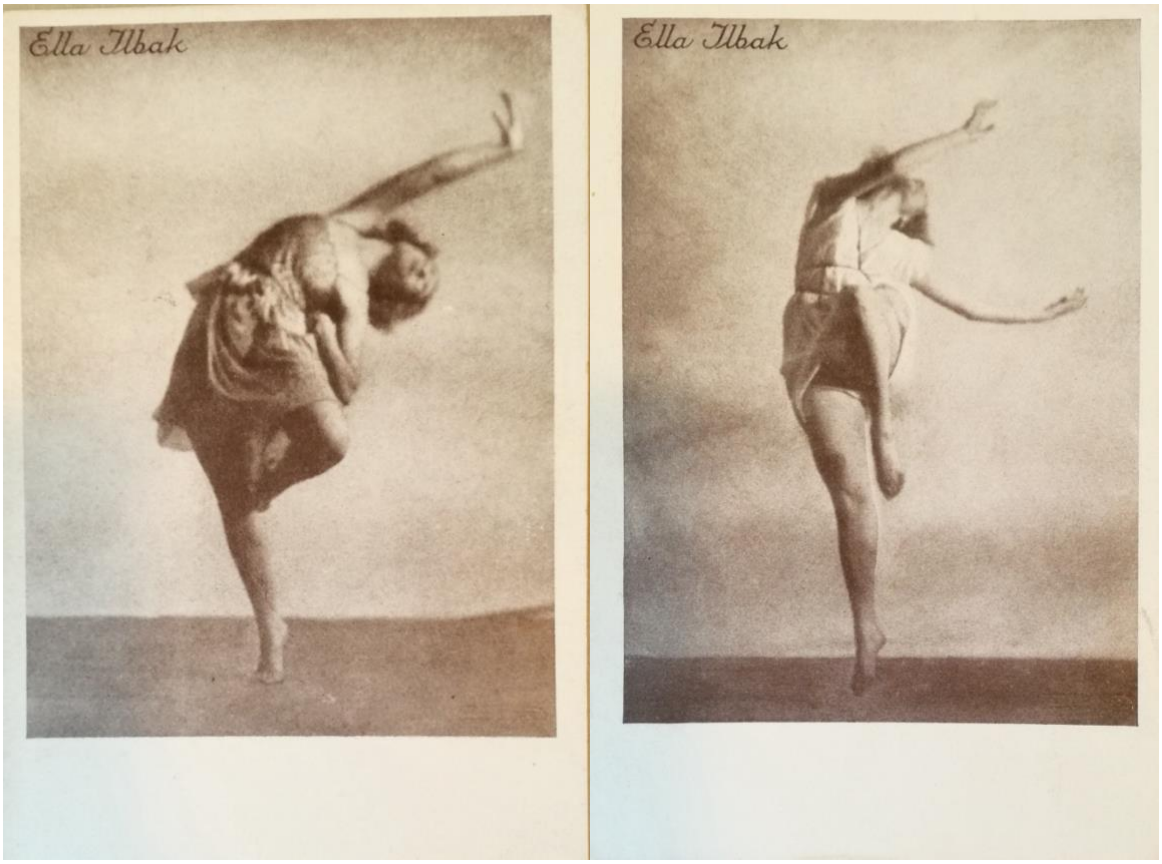


Figure 44: Claire Bauroff, photographed by Trude Fleischmann, Vienna, 1925. Photo source: Schreiber 1990: 118.

However, Ilbak made photos with another studio in 1924 or possibly before she worked with Goodwin. The studio has not been identified, but with this studio Ilbak produced the most dancelike images of herself she ever made, including the only known photo of her making a leap for her dance "Caprice." Finnish newspapers published photos from this set in 1924, and the photos appeared in subsequent years in Swedish and Hungarian newspapers (Figure 45). But the photo series lacks the glamor and dramatic intensity of her work with Goodwin. The minimalist studio environment resembles that use by Grete

Kolliner in Vienna, but the photographic style does not, even compared with Kolliner's work around 1924. The photographer places Ilbak's movement against a white backdrop that undermines the idea of light emanating from her body. Her face lacks sufficient definition, and neither she nor the photographer can seem to imagine her dancing on her feet without her arms raised over her head. On her feet with this photographer, she can only communicate exuberance and exaltation. Only in the last photo of the series here, with Ilbak kneeling, casting a shadow from a spotlight and creating a chiaroscuro effect, is there facial clarity and dramatic mystery. Except for the last one, the photos project a generic quality: they show "dance" rather than a unique personality performing dance movements.




Ella Ilbak

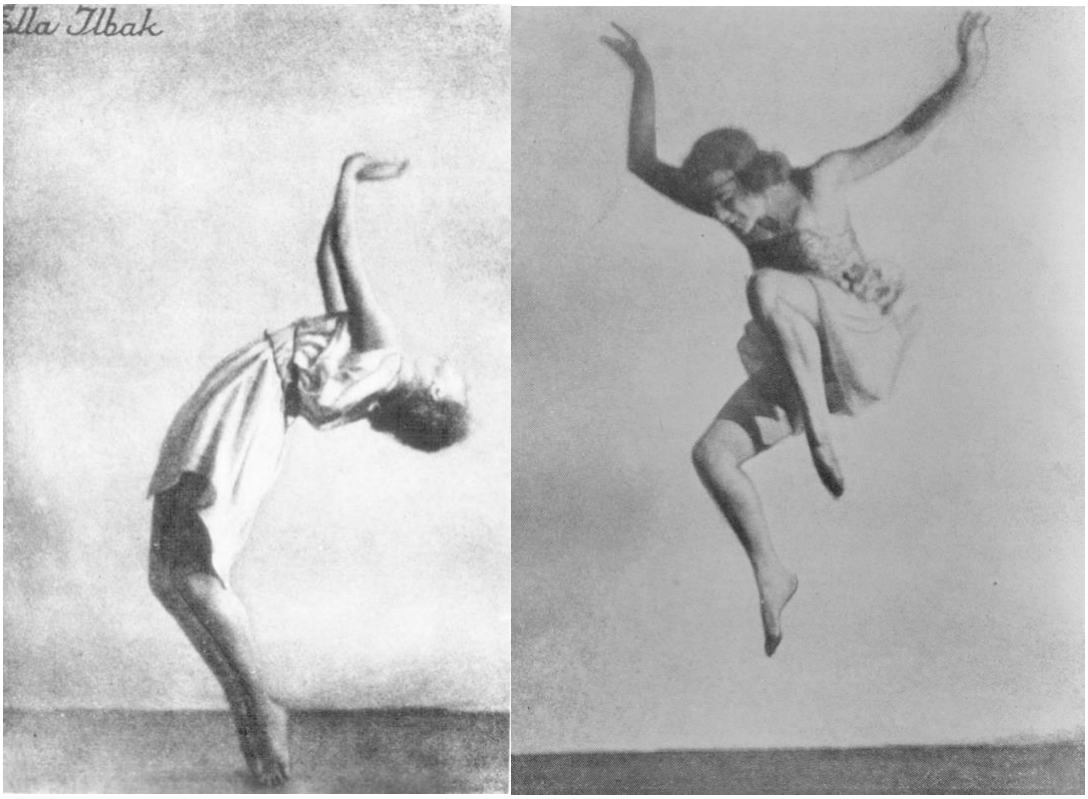

Ella Ilbak

Figure 45: Ella Ilbak in a series of photos made in 1924 or earlier with an unknown photographer. Photo sources: Alvar Loog; Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

In 1928, Ilbak worked with another studio that so far I cannot identify. None of these photos were published. They lack technical sophistication: greater focal clarity would require more expert lighting (Figure 46). But in these photos, it appears that Ilbak, in her chiton, wanted to revive some of the peculiar erotic charge of her Riga chiton photos. These photos exude a clandestine, underground quality, as if Ilbak wanted to see herself in the chiton in a way that the public never would, a vaguely pornographic goal, and for this reason they remain fascinating (Figure 47). Ten years later, in 1938, she worked with the same studio to produce a striking profile portrait in the same "unfocused" style, with her head turned away from the viewer and her gaze uplifted toward some "higher" object of interest, creating a vaguely "aristocratic" aura (Figure 48). Most likely she made these photos in a Budapest studio.

Figure 46: Ella Ilbak, photographer unknown, 1928. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 47: Ella Ilbak, photographer unknown, 1928. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 48: Ella Ilbak, photographer unknown, most likely Budapest, 1938. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

In 1928, Ilbak did work with the famous Budapest studio established by Pál Funk (1894-1974), which went by the name Angelo or Paul Angelo. Funk produced internationally famous photos of celebrities (e.g., Charlie Chaplin, Béla Bartók), entertainment figures, fashion magazine models, and socially prominent personalities. He also made many experiments in staged photography that greatly expanded the artistic or "modernist" scope of the medium. The photographs made in the Angelo studio were perhaps the most

luxuriously voluptuous and technically polished she ever produced (Figure 49). The ornamentality of the images, with in one photo the veil lushly draped over her legs, evokes an exquisite fashion display more than one of her actual dances. But it is very difficult to locate examples of them beyond those that appeared in Hungarian journals, such as a 1928 issue of *Szinhazi Elet*, a performing arts magazine. Probably original prints disappeared when Soviet military forces bombed and then confiscated Ilbak's Budapest apartment in 1944.

Hogyan csapta be Ella Ilbak táncművésznőt egy francia artista, amikor Budapestre utazott

Ella Ilbak, a világhírű eszt táncművésznő a mult héten vendégszerepelt az *Operaházban*. Az öltözőjében ezt az érdekes kalandját mesélte el a *Színházi Életnek:*

— A Calais—Strasbourg—München—Salzburg-i vasútvonalon utaztam. Párizs közelében nagyon elálmosodtam és — elaludtam. Amikor felébredtem, nem voltam magam. Egy visszataszító alak foglalt helyet mellettem. Gnómszerű, púpos ember volt. A rémes figura megszólalt:

— Kegyed Ella Ilbak.

Ránéztem, de nem válaszoltam.

— Nagyon rút vagyok? — kérdezte újra.

— Igen!... Hagyjon békén, mert kiabálok!...

Félni kezdtem. Egyszerre csak a gnóm arcvonásai átalakulnak és rendes emberi formát öltenek. A púpja is mintha eltűnt volna. A furcsa figura vetett véget a rémes helyzetnek:

— Ne féljen, asszonyom, elértem a célomat.

— Kicsoda maga?...

— Egy artista, bocsássa meg ezt a szemtelenséget! Be akartam bizonyítani, hogy a «branche»-hoz tartozom. Pénzre van szükségem, mert nincs jegyem!

Elővettem a retikülömet és pénzt adtam neki. Amint átnyujtottam a bankjegyeket, már el is tűnt a kupéból.

És én úgy örültem, hogy elment! Olyan boldog voltam, mint még soha az életben.

Ella Ilbak (Foto Angelo)

Figure 49: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Angelo (Pál Funk), Budapest, 1928, Photo source: Szinhazi Elet, *No. 43, 21-27 October 1928.*

In any case, Ilbak was hungry for different photos of herself when she visited the Fayer studio in Vienna in 1929 and the Kolliner studio in 1931. Fayer made an image of her moving low to the performance surface and wearing a new, sleeker chiton. She also wears dance shoes instead of assuming the pose in her bare feet (Figure 50). But Ilbak did not use the image in her publicity, perhaps because she believed the media would regard it as too unfocused for publication, although the chiaroscuro lighting does produce a dreamlike effect. Fayer also made a photograph of her in a vaguely "folkloric" dress undulating her hand while smiling; he amplified her radiance using backlighting and a complicated gobo shadow lighting on her face (Figure 51). In 1932, a Finnish cosmetics firm used this photograph to support Ilbak's endorsement of the company's palm oil cream (Figure 51).

Figure 50: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Georg Fayer, Vienna, 1929. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 51: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Georg Fayer, Vienna, 1929. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 52: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Georg Fayer in advertisement for palm oil cream made by Havis, Wiborg (Finland). The advertisement quotes Ilbak: "I am particularly fond of Havis Palm soap, which is mild and surpasses many foreign similar soaps." Photo source: Wyborgs Nyheter, No. 46, 1932, Swedish language newspaper published in Wyborg, at that time a city in Finland. The advertisement appeared in other Finnish and Swedish-language newspapers in Finland in 1932.

Fayer also appears to have been responsible for the photo of Ilbak performing her "Prayer" dance, with head uplifted to the light but eyes closed and hands summoning invisible identities, but it is still not certain where this photograph was taken (Figure 53). Grete Kolliner photographed Ilbak in a pose from her dance "Meditation," supposedly in 1931 (Figure 54). However, another photograph of Ilbak assuming a sculpted pose in a sleek, satiny tunic appears to have been taken at the same time: Ilbak's haircut is the same in both pictures, and Kolliner lights the folds in the costumes in the same way (Figure 55). A similar sculpted pose photo appeared in Finnish newspapers in 1930, which may have occurred in the same studio that photographed her dance poses in 1924, but probably not

at the same time (Figure 56). This unidentified studio photo of the pose appeared in Finnish newspapers after the Kolliner photo had been published, so it a puzzling question why either a newspaper or Ilbak chose to publish one photo or the other.

Figure 53: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, performing "Prayer," photographer uncertain, probably Georg Fayer, Vienna, 1929. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Figure 54: Ella Ilbak, in a pose from "Meditation," photographed by Grete Kolliner, Vienna, 1931. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Figure 55: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Grete Kolliner, Vienna, 1931. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Figure 56: Ella Ilbak, photographer unknown, 1929-1930. Photo source: Wyborgs Nyheter, *No. 46, 19 April 1932. The same photograph appeared in* Vaasa, *No. 105, 9 May 1930.*

In early 1930, Ilbak embarked on an ambitious tour of Finland. The Finnish press reported on her plan and published photographs of her taken by Goodwin, most commonly the "Flame" photo. The newspaper photos provoked the ire of a Lutheran pastor in Lapua, Kaarlo Kares (1873-1942), an extreme rightwing politician and leader of the militantly anti-communist Lapua movement, later a supporter of Nazism. In a Lutheran newspaper, *Herättäjä-lehti,* Kares published a diatribe against the decadence in contemporary culture that Ilbak represented in the photos of her published in the Finnish press. Kares did not see her concerts (Korppi-Tommola 2018: 12-13). Kares wrote:

> A dancer recently came here from Estonia, who, judging by the pictures in the paper, has a habit of dancing in really indecent clothes, showing her nakedness in the same way as butchers' bodies hang in a butcher's shop. The Finnish newspapers wrote that she is the

> most famous name and person in our fraternity. This does not mean that there are no persons in Estonia who deserve recognition and introduction, but it does mean that educated public opinion does not value other qualities than noble flesh and the artistic display of this flesh. It is no wonder that in honor of such a celebrity, official parties are held in the embassy of the country in question and the gathering is attended by the same "official" persons, whom we also see at official religious services, the National Day ceremony, and elsewhere. It is understandable if such a wonder and celebrity respects our little Finland by twisting her body parts [into] pornographic positions (*Nool* [Tartu], 18, 29/03/1930; Korppi-Tommola 2018: 13).

Kares' essay precipitated a prolonged debate in the Finnish press about Ilbak's significance as a modern artist. In general, leftwing newspapers, including the communist *Tiedonantaja,* defended Ilbak's dancing in relation to progressive, modernist attitudes toward the body. In her 2018 article, Riikka Korppi-Tommola has described this debate in detail. When the newspaper *Aitosuomalainen* (No. 34-35, 1930) asked Ilbak herself about the debate, she said: "I understand that there are also those who do not understand the art [modern dances] represent. Käres is a priest, a thing of the past! Men and priests also have much to forgive." The controversy precipitated by the publication of the photos caused a steep rise in ticket sales for Ilbak's concerts throughout Finland; Ilbak claimed that she performed in 26 Finnish towns, and everywhere audiences received her with great enthusiasm (Korppi-Tommola 2018: 14; *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 127 12/05/1930).

In 1931-1932, Ilbak presented concerts in Istanbul, Palestine, and Egypt. For these concerts, she created her "Hebraic Dance" and her "Egyptian Dance." These dances inspired her to produce new photos, but these she made in Sweden and Finland. In 1933, she worked with the Stockholm photographer Moisé Benkow (1892-1952), who came from a Jewish Russian-Norwegian family of successful photographers. He established his Stockholm studio in 1924 and quickly achieved a very high reputation as a studio photographer. In addition to portraits of distinguished persons, he produced photos of nude bodies in highly refined, sleek, sculptured poses that associated nudity with a spare, gleaming modernity (Figure 57). Benkow applied the same sleek, sculptured style to photographs of Ilbak, wearing her revised tunic, although he did sometimes use a chiaroscuro technique when photographing other bodies (Figures 58-59). The photos, however, convey the feeling of a model assuming statuesque poses rather than a dancer observed constructing a dance movement. Benkow also photographed Ilbak's "Hebrew Dance," which used music by Joseph Achron (1886-1943) and which was another of her dances, like "The Flame," performed while sitting on the floor (Figure 60). In this photo, with eyes closed and arms and legs crossed, Ilbak adopts a pose of meditative stillness. Yet this photo, despite the unnatural complexity of the pose, projects an energetic tension, a pulsation of life, that is absent from the other, sculptured poses in the Benkow photos that have survived.

Figure 57: "Grief," photo by Moisé Benkow, Stockholm, 1933. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 58: Ella Ilbak, (left, eyes closed) photographed by Moisé Benkow, Stockholm, 1933. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 59: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographed by Moisé Benkow, Stockholm, 1933. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 60: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, "Hebrew Dance," photographed by Moisé Benkow, Stockholm, 1933. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

It is not clear when in 1933 Benkow took these photographs. In the same year, Ilbak made photographs in the Helsinki studio of Aarne Tenhovaara (1890-1945). But it is not known why she worked with two different studios in the same year, other than to suppose she was not happy with one or the other photographer. Tenhovaara established his Helsinki studio that year, 1933, after operating a studio in New York City for ten years. He almost immediately became highly esteemed for his photos of performing artists and theatrical productions, a status he maintained until his death. As with the Benkow photo series, only three or four photographs of the Tenhovaara set have survived (Figure 60). From this small set, it is evident that Tenhovaara was less certain than Benkow of how to photograph Ilbak. In two of the photos, the camera captures a profile pose. In the chiton pose, Tenhovaara used a spotlight for a chiaroscuro view of Ilbak in profile. In the "Hebrew Dance" profile, Tenhovaara has Ilbak facing the light with delicate background shadows to suggest the dancer is summoning sunlight or extending a gesture of submission to it (Figure 61). In the veil image, Tenhovaara moved the camera close to her, showing only her upper body and face with closed eyes, her hands clasped cryptically, creating a strange feeling of intimacy

in relation to a woman who seems to be in a trance, oblivious to the viewer (Figure 62). The Tenhovaara photos are much more dramatic than the Benkow photos, yet the Finnish press published photos from both photographers.

Figure 61: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Aarne Tenhovaara, Helsinki, 1933. Photo source: Estonian Theater and Music Museum.

Figure 62: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, "Hebrew Dance," photograph by Aarne Tenhovaara, Helsinki, 1933. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 63: Ella Ilbak, veiled, eyes closed, photograph by Aarne Tenhovaara, Helsinki, 1933. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

After 1933 and until 1948, Ella Ilbak did not produce any more dance publicity photos that have survived, except the two that I have already mentioned and a delightful photograph of her taken in the Budapest studio of Werner Ren in the mid-1930s (Figure 64). Here, sitting in her chiton on the floor in profile, with her eyes closed, she smiles and moves her hands delicately, as if to conjure up something she imagines in her mind rather than before her. But I haven't yet been able to locate a publication of this beautiful photograph. However, after 1930, European newspapers in general seem to have published much fewer pictures of dancers than in the 1920s, although magazines devoted to the performing and visual arts continued to publish them abundantly. After 1936, Ella Ilbak's performance career faded into obscurity, and when the Finnish and Estonian press mentioned her, it was to

remember her rather than to report on new appearances on European concert stages. After somehow surviving the Second World War in southern France and now destitute, she made plans to revive her career as a dancer. Eventually, she made her way to Sweden, where, in 1948, she enlisted the services of the photographer Anna Riwkin (1908-1970), a Jewish-Russian-Swedish protégé of Benkow. She opened her own studio in Stockholm in 1928 and became a prominent member of the city's cultural elite, for whom she took numerous portraits. A former dancer, she specialized in taking pictures of dancers, and in 1932, she published a book of dance photographs, *Svensk danskonst*. By 1945, however, Riwkin was focused primarily on photojournalism, covering such subjects as the Sami people of Lapland, Swedish gypsies, and daily life in emerging Israel (see Wigh 2004). Her photographs of Ilbak are dull compared with earlier photographers (Figure 65). In the few photos from the series that have survived, Ilbak mostly has her back to the camera and performs generic dance gestures that are not distinctly associated with her dance aesthetic. Riwkin used a downlight to contrast Ilbak's body with the surrounding darkness, but the relation between Ilbak and the light seems muddled or at any rate uninspired. The photographer did not find a distinctive way of seeing the dancer, and Ilbak could not find a distinctive way of presenting herself. In a couple of the pictures, Ilbak wears an unflattering, fluffy skirt that the photographer should not have let her wear (Figure 66). The strongest photo in the series is of Ilbak kneeling in some sort of exotic, perhaps "Egyptian" costume, inviting the viewer to look at her while she closes her eyes against the light that reveals her (Figure 67). But perhaps Riwkin realized she was photographing a person searching for a new image of herself that could exist only in her mind. In any case, the Riwkin photos remained unpublished until Piret Noorhani included a couple in her 2009 book about the correspondence between Ilbak and Estonian author August Gailit (1891-1960) in the 1950s. Ilbak's future lay in literary activity, not dance.

Figure 64: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photograph by Werner Ren, Budapest, mid-1930s. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto, Canada.

Figure 65: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Anna Riwkin, Stockholm, 1948. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 66: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Anna Riwkin, Stockholm, 1948. Photo source: Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 67: Ella Ilbak, photographed by Anna Riwkin, Stockholm, 1948. Photo source: Moderna Museet.

Putting together this history of Ella Ilbak's photographic image as a dancer has required large resources and patience. It has required traveling several times to Estonia, and then to Canada, Sweden, Finland, France, Germany, and New York City. It involved a time-consuming and futile effort to learn Estonian. It entailed interaction with numerous people in different countries. I bought numerous books related to Ilbak and acquired others through interlibrary loan; I gave a presentation on her at a dance conference and discussed her briefly in scholarly writings (cf., Toepfer 1997; Toepfer 2012; Toepfer 2022). She moved my life in a direction I never anticipated and gave a sense of purpose over decades. It has taken over thirty-five years to produce this little history, which most likely could never have been done earlier. The internet was necessary to complete this project and gain access to digitized newspaper articles in eight countries to confirm or discard information about Ilbak, and many newspapers have been digitized only recently. The reading of these newspapers articles and other digitized texts was possible only because of recent developments in artificial intelligence that have led to astonishingly accurate and efficient translation programs that allowed me to read texts in languages I would never have had time to learn: Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, and Polish. But many relevant newspapers and documents remain undigitized or inaccessible, and much of Ilbak's long and mysteriously international career as a solo dancer is unknown or unknowable. Most of the photographs she made in different studios have disappeared because of war or social change. What exists in archives are merely fragments, remnants of what the studios produced; knowledge of her working relations with various photographers is completely obscure, other than what one might speculate from the photographs themselves. But much else about her is equally obscure. How or with whom did she organize and manage such complicated international tours? How, after 1936, did she maintain a residence in Budapest while also living in Italy and then in France until 1947, especially when she was apparently incapable of any close, enduring friendship with anyone? To what extent, if any, was her sexual orientation responsible for so many riddles in her biography? Of course, what exactly was her dance aesthetic? The available photographs offer only the briefest glimpse of a few of the dances in her not especially large total repertoire of dances. Reviews of her dances in the newspaper archives are abundant and will always remain the chief source of information about her dances, despite their journalistic limitations and the persistent reluctance of so many reviewers to connect their emotional responses (metaphoric language) to specific movement choices. Yet an exploration of this international avalanche of language in response to her dancing remains to be done.

Ella Ilbak's achievement as a solo dancer was astonishing for its longevity and for the variety of national audiences she attracted. A thorough account of her achievement entails a large-scale project that exceeds any national boundary. Anyone who investigates her becomes a foreigner in relation to material about her. She herself was always a foreigner, never "at home" even in Estonia. She spoke of dance as a mystical or "transcendent" experience, but it was through dance that she discovered the foreignness, the aloneness of her body and sensibility. She did not experience dance as a freeing of the body from physical or invisible constraints; rather, she saw dance as a unity with an arbitrary, unstable surface or "ground." Over many years, she worked with different photographers to construct a better or at least another image of this unity, which makes her photographic heritage unique in the history of dance photography. This image of unity constituted her foreignness as a dancer. This foreignness was evident in the photo of "The Flame" that Lea Tormis published in her book: Ella Ilbak stood out from all the other Estonian dancers pictured in the book for a reason that I did not understand. That image sparked a thirty-six-year odyssey to find that reason, which actually lay within myself, in my own *desire* for foreignness, in the knowledge that beauty which moves you to some sort of new "ground" is always foreign and intensifies your foreignness no matter where your ground is.

At heart, Ella Ilbak is a migratory bird, but her heart is still in our homeland. Maybe lately we have disappointed her when she was in her home country, we have given her less love than she brought us from her travels. Ella Ilbak has not lowered her pair of wings, and there is nothing left to do in her art heaven. On the path that she built for herself, she flies forward towards an endless goal. L. Tari. (*Uus Eesti*, Number 69, 10 March 1938) Leida Tari (1916-2011)

Figure 68: Ella Ilbak, eyes closed, photographer unknown, probably Budapest, 1930s. Photo source: Tartu Institute, Toronto.

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