

Methods for Designing a Contemporary Dance Performance from a Western Painting: A Case Study of the Vitruvian Man

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Abstract

This article aims to search choreography methods inspired by a western painting, a case study of The Vitruvian Man. The author has brought the concept of shape and figure including a comparison between physical organs in different sizes and heights, and of different organs in the same size, and the body proportions. The idea also includes geometric shapes and figures which are the connotations lied behind the painting. The author designs the performance by employing data from the documentary research, interview with relevant stakeholders, field survey, information media, seminar, and the author's own experiences. The methodology leads to the search of methods for designing a dance performance by conducting two experiments. The methods found in this study are using the painting as an archetype for creating the dance styles, accompanying the performance with guiding props, and employing Butterworth's and Wildchut's four-stage choreographic process including Improvisation, Development, Evaluation, and Assimilation. It can be cautioned that any paintings could become a frame that shapes or limits the imagination of the creator. Personal

experience is another necessary aspect for creation along with all the four stages of the choreographic process. Moreover, the trust in performers would foster experience sharing among them and enables them to create the dance styles from their internal imagination which results in diverse physical movements.

Keywords: Creation, Dance Choreography, Contemporary Dance

Introduction

Choreography is one of the key components for communication and for the story of which choreographers of all kinds want to share through their expressions, styles, and movements. It is necessary that these aspects are conducted in an action design research in order to find the directions of expressions, styles, and movements that are appropriate with a particular dance performance. The choreographer may need his/her personal experience or expertise to find his/her own identity and uniqueness. It was stated that the basis of choreography should emphasize movements which are unique and distinctive. According to Merce Cunningham, “a contemporary choreographer usually observes the movements of his/her performers, pedestrians, animals, and objects to explore and experiment those movements to create unexpected ones as well as new forms of expressions and rhythmic movements” (Smith-Autard, 2016: 109). The first thing before the choreography process begins, a choreographer should specify what the main idea of a particular performance is or what the performance is about. “The main idea of a dance possibly comes from various sources such as from an individual’s experience, songs, history, books, imagination, motivation, impression, personal interest, movement theories and techniques, arts, or other abstracts such as lines, colors, figures, dynamic, or rhythm” (Pollack, 1959: 32). These features become the sources and the beginning of the experiment to find out the methods for designing a dance.

In this article, the author takes an interest in searching for the methods for designing a contemporary dance from a western painting, a case study of The Vitruvian Man. Sirithorn Srichalakom pointed out the significance of this painting

that Vitruvius, a Romance architect and art historian, had written the *Proportion of the Human Figure* in about 100 B.C. The book described the relationship of a face, palms, a head and the height of a person. This notion sees architecture as the imitation of the components of nature which is in connection with human's body figure. The idea has extended to a world famous painting called *The Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci (Srichalakom, 2016: 38-40). From the study, the author found that this painting has influenced various fields of sciences, namely, architecture, natural science, physiology, and visual art in the forms of painting and sculpture. However, there is no evidence of the first person who brought the idea of this painting into contemporary dance choreography in Thailand. Therefore, the author is interested in searching for the methods for designing a contemporary dance from *The Vitruvian Man* with an emphasis on dance choreography of which ideas are originated in the painting, that is, the concept of figure, shape, and geometry. Narapong Charassri (2016) expressed his view on the key issue of finding appropriate choreography process that a choreographer should bear in mind. "A choreographer should be able to see the key issue raised in the design and find a new way to present them. Especially for the dance choreography, if the choreographer implements everyday movements in a dance, those movements will meet his/her expectation. This is considered a major aspect in the process of dance choreography" (Charassri, 2016: interview). Another artist pointed out that, in designing dances from the painting, there are many more things presented apart from imitations of movements or the positions on the painting. "A painting does not only depict the lines, but it also presents colors, intensity, and distance related to a drawing theory. For example, in the work of Trisha Brown, she ran a rehearsal by having the performers drawing pictures while making movements along with the drawing action. The drawing piece had specified the quality of movement, lines, and components of area until it brought about the performance named *It's Draw*. This performance was criticized of its exceptionally completeness and balance" (Lepecki, 2012: 185). From this information, it is found that dance choreography can be undertaken in various ways including developing everyday movements following a selected plot or designing the dance styles based on lined

patterns, line weight, and distance in the painting. However, the author found that such findings was only a fundamental notion for designing a contemporary dance from the painting “The Vitruvian Man”. In addition to the research study, the author desired to explore and experiment to find out additional methods for designing a dance from the painting and to look for specific methods that can be used to communicate the story and the concept of figure, shape, and natural geometry presented in The Vitruvian Man so that the author will be able to do clearly to the audience.

For this reason, this article aims to investigate the methods for designing a contemporary dance from the painting “The Vitruvian Man” by using the concept of figure, shape, and natural geometry which the author would like to present on the belief that “there is no need to be a story, neither a unity, but the dance can be presented through the conflicts to make the audience intrigued by the questions so that they concentrate on the performance. Through this method, the audience could make an interpretation based on their own experience” (Charassri, 2017: interview). The author will use the knowledge from a document research, interview with the experts, and action design research to obtain the methods for designing a dance performance which is unique and fosters a clear communication of various issues in the performance.

Scope of the Study

The author has specified the scope of the study as follows:

1. The study focuses only on the concept of geometry, proportion, and symmetry in the painting “The Vitruvian Man” in relation to a human body with emphasis on the figure, shape, and geometry.
2. The author mainly presents the dance in a contemporary form with the concept of post-modern dance choreography.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the methods for designing a dance performance from the painting “The Vitruvian Man”.

Methodology

Instruments

In this study, the instruments employed by the author are as follows:

1. Document research

The author has done a document research for different issues including related information on the painting, the concept of figure in connection with choreography, relevant data concerning the concept of figure and natural geometry in relation to choreography, Laban’s Theory, contemporary design, post-modern dance, semiology and dancing performance, and concepts and theories of fine and applied arts.

2. Interview with the persons concerned with this article

The interview will give the author primary data from the experts including the issues in the author’s interest. The data corresponds to the issues the author would like to find information about and it is up-to-date for those who want to study the topic in this article.

3. Field survey

A field survey in this matter is done by the author becoming the audience of the performance, participating in dance skills development activities, observing works in different fields in Thailand and those of international artists. Then, the data analysis for the methods for designing a dance performance in this study has been done.

4. Information media

Contemporary media are concerned with technology in different forms including a work recording system, editing tools, different forms of storage, computers, and network technology.

5. Seminar

The author exchanged knowledge of the concept development for contemporary dance choreography with others in order to make this study more complete.

1.6 Standard criteria of artists

Standard criteria is used for considering and selecting the artists who are the dance experts and related to the study in this article. These artists were chosen to share any information, points of view, and suggestions that would be considered, analyzed, and used for the search of the choreography methods.

7. The author's personal experience

Any situations the author used to experience or any activities that he took part in as a student, teacher, performer, choreographer and audience of the choreographic performances, dramas, and performing arts both directly and indirectly are used as one of the data sources for this study.

Data Analysis Method

1. The author analyzed the data from documents and interview together with observation of choreographs.

2. The author created a dance performance by considering each step of the choreographic process to make the performance clear and suitable.

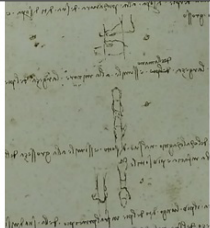

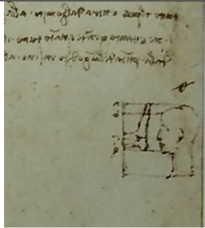

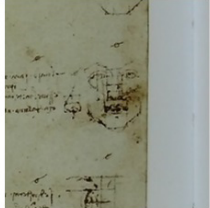
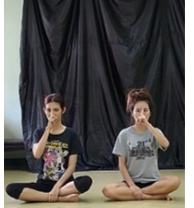
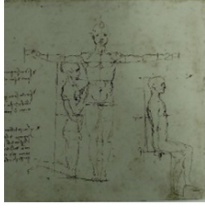

Methods for Creating a Contemporary Dance Performance from the Painting “The Vitruvian Man”

In order to search the methods for creating a contemporary dance from the painting, the author set The Vitruvian Man as a primary for the study as it is a part of the author's interest to explore the main ideas behind the painting regarding figures, shapes, and natural geometry. Specifying these items primarily becomes a paradigm or a way that leads the author to take interest in a clear design of dance styles. The author divided the performance into two acts and put them into two experiments to investigate the methods for designing a dance performance.

In the first act, the author focused on the choreography inspired by the connotation behind the topic that the author had specified, which are the body, figure, and geometry. Therefore, the data collection of choreography throughout the performance in this act was analyzed in many ways, for example, measuring and comparing body parts, developing figures or geometry into movements based on

the findings of this study as stated in this article. According to Somporn Fourrage, “Performers need to employ their movement and create concrete and clear images. The audience will follow and pay attention to the performance while they are using their imagination at the same time as the performers are doing. This is to blend the visible picture and thoughts together to create the abstract insight. As a result, the audience’s dimension can be opened to another level of imagination. Imagination is universal and unlimited” (Fourrage, 2011: 168). For the first choreography experiment, the author did the study research and brought the data into designing movements and expressions through the interpretation based on the author’s own experience as shown in the following table:

Table 1 Data analysis from documentary research to choreography. Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

An archetype from the document	Designing movements	An archetype from the document	Designing movements
 The picture of palm and sole comparison	 Designing a movement of comparing a palm and a sole	 The picture of a length of a sole and a face	 Designing a movement of comparing a sole and a face
 The picture of facial proportions	 Designing a movement of proportioning facial parts	 The picture of body figure	 Designing a movement that represents the body figure

In the choreographic experiment to present the ideas behind the painting “The Vitruvian Man”, apart from imitating the pictures and following the data which the author studied from documents and textbooks, the author also looked for the props to be accompanied in the designed performance. The experts gave suggestions concerning the use of props that “This performance is presenting a lot of abstracts. Therefore, the props may be selected and used to describe the message which the author would like to share” (Charassri, 2017: interview). Pakkaporn Pimsarn added that “Designing the props is important for the presentation through semiologic meanings to which the choreographer should occasionally pay attention to make the performance interesting” (Pimsarn, 2017: interview). Therefore, in order to make the performance clearer and more interesting along with the concern of using the objects which can communicate the ideas behind the painting and which the author intended to present through the clearer performance, the author used a masking tape and a small-size projector in designing the dance performance. It was served as a communication tool representing the content through the pictures and expressions. Based on the experiment, it is found that the two objects could present the message clearly. For instance, the masking tape was used to compare its length with height and to measure the length of each part of body as which the author had studied as shown in Picture 1. In addition, the author used a masking tape to create some geometric shapes imitated from a human being’s body movement and figures based on the ideas behind the painting “The Vitruvian Man” (Picture 2). The author also specified the directions out of the archetype (Picture 3) and presented the pictures relevant to the ideas behind the painting “The Vitruvian Man” (Picture 4).



Picture 1 Designing the dance styles by using the length of a masking tape and the height of the performer. Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

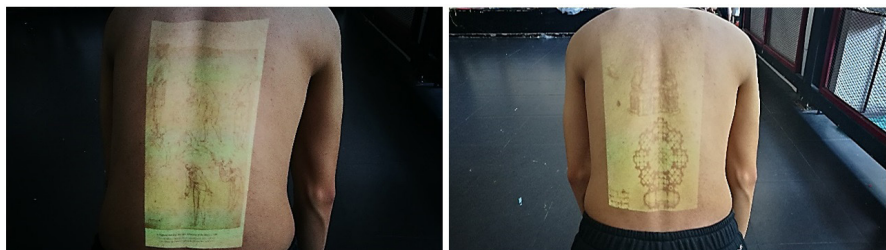


Picture 2 Designing the dance styles by creating geometric shapes. Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)



Picture 3 Archetype and direction setting of the performers in the performance.

Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)



Picture 4 Using a small-size projector in the performance.

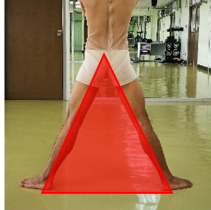




Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

In the second experiment to find the methods for designing a dance performance, the author employed the four-stage choreographic process including Improvisation, Development, Evaluation, and Assimilation to support the start of work and the processes of selection, collection, and specification for the expected results (Butterworth and Wildchut, 2009: 72-73).

Stage 1, Improvisation, is any means of generating or testing movements at all time. Improvisation may need a decision on inventing a new material or pay attention to individual's own body in the experiment. In searching for the methods for

designing the dance styles, the author found that to create a figure or geometry, if the focus is placed on choreography using a masking tape as a medium of communication, it will take long time to perform. Moreover, the interpretation of expressions, styles, and movements by having only a painting as an archetype may result in a boring performing pattern. It also limits the choreographer’s design even if the message is communicated clearly through the performance. The choreographer found that it was impossible to continue the search for the innovative dance styles. Therefore, following the ideas behind The Vitruvian Man, a complete and shapely human proportion can be used to create shapes or geometry. This can be observed in the second experiment whereby depicts the shape of circle and square. In this experiment, the author distinguished the shapes out of the painting, which are triangle, rectangle, circle, straight line, and slash line. Then, he let the performers improvising the expressions to create familiar and skillful movements truly based on the insight of the performers as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Performers’ expressions derived from the shapes: triangle, rectangle, circle, straight line, and slash line. Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

Triangle	Rectangle	Circle	Straight line and slash line
 <p>The performer spreads his legs out, making a triangle space.</p>	 <p>The performer adjoins his thumbs and forefingers to make a rectangular shape.</p>	 <p>Both performers move along the circumference.</p>	<div>  <p>Stretching an arm straightly</p> </div> <div>  <p>Stretching a leg in 45 degree angle</p> </div>

Stage 2, Development, is the phase of adjusting details in movement or creating shapes for designing the dance styles; developing movements such as extension or shortening; extending movements for the clearer, or changing a movement speed or directions. After the improvisation, the choreographer evaluated the styles and selected ones that could communicate clearly. He also adjusted the duration and weight and arranged the compositions by mainly using the concept of balance (Picture 5) which creates a symmetry following the ideas behind The Vitruvian Man.



Picture 5 Arranging compositions by using the concept of balance.

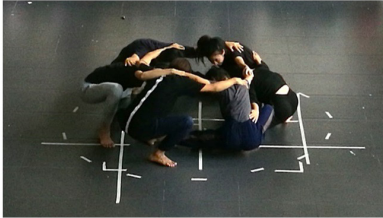



Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

For the choreographic process in the first act named “Body, Figures, Geometry” which passed through all the two experiments, the author was considering the information in the painting. Such information was analyzed, developed, and created and was brought into the start of the choreography process from the inspired painting. The use of props accompanying the dance performance to describe the ideas behind the painting creates a clear and direct communication in the performance. However, the limitation of time and movement enables the choreographer to specify the figures based on the analysis that leads to the improvisation which also enables the performers to explore the dance styles that conform to their own ability. This action creates natural and flowing movements which are clear in communication. In this stage, the author sees that it is necessary for the choreographer to include personal experience in the evaluation, enhance the expressions and movements taken from the performers, and bring those features to a further choreographic process.

During Stage 3, Evaluation, the choreographer should evaluate his/her own work regularly, both immediately during the process and when the work is completed. In designing the dance styles, it is necessary to find alternatives to solve or get rid of the problems that may occur. In every creative work, it is necessary to step forward. In this case, it may include a stop to restart. In the Evaluation stage of this experiment, the author emphasizes the evaluation of dance styles which mainly conform to the ideas behind the painting. For example, in the end of the performance, the author designed the dance styles to show the transformation of geometry that may affect the imagination of the audience which can be divided into two parts: the part in which the author had specified the style patterns and movement, and the other part in which the performers designed their own expressions while having freedom to use any directions or levels. In this stage, the author intended to point out the style creation derived from a human body parts under the concept of figure, shape, and geometry. Although the author gave freedom to the performers to improvise in this stage, he kept monitoring the propositions including the movement in circle and each angle in order to filter the postures that meet the objectives which the author expected to present.

Table 3 Author’s specified expressions and performers’ expressions.

Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphphu (2017)

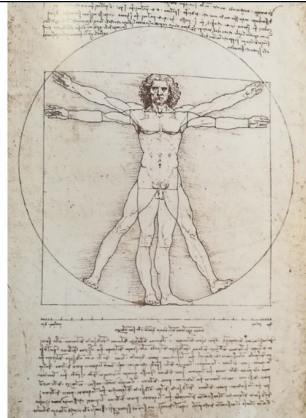

Author’s specified expressions	Performers’ expressions
	
	

Stage 4, Assimilation, is the arrangement of things with similar expressions, movements, feelings while performing a movement, and feelings caused by compound movements, to categorize into a different message or issue aimed for communication. For example, in the second act, the author had set the topic “Body and the Endless Creation” and tried out the choreographic design from the interpretation of the painting, combined with imagination and personal experience which the author sees as the origin of other created works. The author then selected the expressions that intrigue the audience’s interpretation through a post-modern dance, presented the evolution based on the painting “The Vitruvian Man” through simple postures. In the experiment to find the methods for designing a dance performance in this study, the choreographer determined that the duty of the painting is to intrigue the imagination of the choreographer only at the beginning of the process. Moreover, the choreographer is free to design the dance styles and compositions from his/her own imagination stimulus together with suggestions from the experts to enhance those styles as presented in Table 4.

From the experiments, the author continued the four-stage choreographic process. In each stage, the author managed the work as appropriate by starting from Improvisation whereby the performers were searching for the possibility in the actions along with development of different movements which the author considered conforming to the message he would like to convey. Then the author reduced what he considered ambiguous, chose simple movement patterns, categorized the performance acts, compared similarities to create continuity, and connected each part together to make it flow. All the four stages could be conducted at the same time during the choreographic process. The choreographer may need to use his/her personal experience by researching information of what to design along with choreographic experience to accelerate the work and help meet the objectives which the choreographer had set in the first place.

Table 4 Dance choreography for Act 2 inspired by The Vitruvian Man

Source: Tanakorn Sunvaraphiphu (2017)

The archetype developed from the concept of figure	Dance choreography	Descriptions
		Designing dance styles by using the archetype (a model image) to intrigue imagination, compose body postures, create movements in different directions, enhance patterns and arrange compositions following the choreographer's imagination

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Methods for Designing a Contemporary Dance Performance from the Painting “The Vitruvian Man”

From the two experiments to investigate the choreography methods inspired by the painting “The Vitruvian Man”, the author found some limitations in designing the dance styles in the first stage of the experiment. As the author is interested in the researched information as seen in Table 1, it was found that it caused boredom due to undiversified expressions. It is necessary to find a way to present differently based on the experts’ suggestions, that is, by using props to make the performance interesting and to magnify the designed dance styles to be clear of its content. Of the things mentioned earlier, the author views them as weaknesses found in the beginning of the choreographic process because there were a few limitations which are considered as a frame of thoughts which block the author’s way to find the difference in designing the dance. Later, the author applied Butterworth and Wildschut’s four stages of creation into the performers’ choreographs and found that the process brought about different and unique styles, especially the Improvisation stage that is considered as a tool to

intrigue creativity. In this matter, the author had an opportunity to share his experience and point of view with the performers. It is a start point of the search for a variety of expressions to be developed, evaluated, and assimilated until they create unique styles of the work inspired by the painting “The Vitruvian Man”. These things are considered by the author as the strengths of the methods used in designing this piece of performance.

Discussion

1. From the experiment to investigate the methods for designing a dance performance from the painting, the author found that the painting is like a frame that specifies the choreographer’s imagination as it is an obviously seen archetype. The author sees this point as a weakness of this designing method. In the beginning of the choreography, the author also found the same problem. Specifying expressions following a visible pattern or feature could possibly make the created work clear in terms of presentation. However, later, the author found the work boring and consisted of many repeated styles, so the choreographer needs to find a way to solve such problem, to cut down the process, and to adjust the operation methods. One way which the author used in this study is researching data information in different sources to find the connotations behind the painting. The author then analyzed those connotations, interpreted them, and used them as a specification for the particular choreography. This specification creates unique expressions and diversity and makes the performance easy to understand and direct to the issue that the choreographer would like to express.

2. The author applied Butterworth and Wildschut’s four-stage choreographic process including Improvisation, Development, Evaluation, and Assimilation to create the dance styles which result in more different movements. The performers’ development can be seen as they play a role in sharing experience and opinion as well as creating styles generated from the performers’ own ability and ideas as shown in Table 2 and Table 3. However, in the author’s opinion, applying the four-stage choreographic process is not an easy task because such idea covers the majority and its scope is

rather broad. It is also not explained how readers should employ the stages in sequence. Therefore, to use this choreographic process, the author believes that it is necessary to rely heavily on one's personal experience like that of the author employed as one of the instruments in this study. The author considers that individuals' points of view, thoughts, and experiences are different. Things each individual wants to present or the forms of expression are therefore different, especially in terms of a design which depends on backgrounds of pedagogy, dance choreography, participation in the performance as performers and as audience, and knowledge exchange with experts. These aspects have a direct effect on choreography. As a result, the author cannot deny that personal experience is one of the essential methods used in the operation along with the four-stage choreographic process.

3. To design a dance performance from the painting, the choreographer should add his/her own imagination to the work by setting the painting as a primary. Like in this case study, the author set *The Vitruvian Man* as the core for the design process by imagining the movements of a person in the painting who is continuously making moves or at which level the movements stop. The author also figured out the straight lines, curve lines, slash lines, circles, rectangles, and triangles in the painting to use to intrigue imagination of both the choreographer and that of the performers. A problem which the author found during the process is the lack of trust in his performers. This is because the performers participating in these experiments are second-year and third-year students majoring in Performing Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University. Such matter resulted in all patterns and dance designs being limited to only one person during the choreographic process. While examining the work at particular time, it is found that the activity was considered boring and monotonous. Thus, for the next time of experiment, the author applied the Improvisation stage of the choreographic process with all performers to enable them to share personal experiences and create the dance styles from their own imagination following the specification given by the author. As a result, it created a variety of styles, expressions, and movements. The performers were able to convey a clear message and meaning and that second experiment could offer more alternatives for the author

to use. These aspects make the author realize that any limitations during the choreographic process could occur as long as the author does not trust in his performers.

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