

A Pickpockets History Of Argentine Tango

A Pickpocket's History: The Shadowy Side of Argentine Tango

The passionate embrace, the intricate footwork, the intoxicating music – Argentine tango evokes images of romance and elegance. But beneath the shimmering surface of this sensual dance lies a less glamorous history, one intertwined with the shadowy figures of pickpockets. This article delves into the surprisingly rich connection between the rise of Argentine tango and the opportunistic skills of those who thrived in the bustling, chaotic dance halls of Buenos Aires. We'll explore the *milongas*, the social context, and the very real risks dancers faced—and sometimes exploited—in the early days of this iconic dance.

The Birth of Tango in the Underbelly of Buenos Aires

Argentine tango emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the impoverished *barrios* of Buenos Aires, a melting pot of immigrants and a breeding ground for both creativity and crime. The *milongas*, the dance halls where tango flourished, were often crowded, dimly lit, and teeming with people from all walks of life. This environment, ripe with anonymity and close physical contact, provided fertile ground for pickpockets. The dance itself, with its close embrace and swirling movements, offered the perfect cover for nimble fingers. This *criminal underworld* element, often overlooked in romanticized portrayals of tango, was undeniably a significant part of its early development.

The Social Context: Poverty, Immigration, and Opportunity

The social and economic conditions of the time played a crucial role. Massive immigration to Buenos Aires created a volatile mix of poverty, desperation, and opportunity. For many, the *milongas* offered a temporary escape from harsh realities, a place for socializing and self-expression. However, for others, the same spaces presented an opportunity to exploit the chaos and density of the crowds. Pickpocketing became a means of survival for some, while others, more organized, formed sophisticated criminal networks that operated within the dance halls. This *street crime* wasn't just a peripheral issue; it was deeply woven into the fabric of tango's origins.

Tango's Embrace: A Perfect Cover for Theft

The close-quarters nature of the tango embrace was, unfortunately, ideal for pickpockets. The intricate steps and passionate movements obscured any suspicious activity. Skilled thieves could easily slip a hand into a pocket during a turn or a close embrace, leaving their victims none the wiser until long after the dance was over. The music, loud and rhythmic, further masked the subtle sounds of thievery. This *dance-related crime* wasn't just a matter of isolated incidents; it

became a known risk for those attending milongas.

The Evolution of the Dance and the Decline of Pickpocketing

As tango transitioned from the seedy underground to a more formalized and accepted art form, the prevalence of pickpocketing within the dance halls gradually declined. The rise of more respectable milongas, improved policing, and increasing social awareness contributed to this shift. However, the historical association between tango and pickpocketing remains a fascinating and often overlooked aspect of its cultural heritage. The legacy of this connection reminds us that even the most romantic traditions can have complex and sometimes unsavory roots.

Beyond the Pickpockets: Tango's Resilience and Enduring Appeal

Despite its shadowy past, tango has endured and evolved, becoming a globally recognized art form celebrated for its elegance, passion, and complex emotional depth. The story of tango's early years, including its association with pickpocketing, highlights the rich and often contradictory tapestry of its cultural origins. It's a reminder that even seemingly glamorous traditions are rooted in complex social and historical contexts. Understanding this history enriches our appreciation for the dance itself and the enduring power of its legacy.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Q1: Were all tango dancers involved in pickpocketing?

A1: Absolutely not. The vast majority of tango dancers were not involved in criminal activity. The association between tango and pickpocketing relates to the specific social and economic context of tango's origins in the impoverished neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, where crime, including pickpocketing, was unfortunately prevalent.

Q2: Are there any famous stories or anecdotes about pickpockets and tango?

A2: While specific documented cases are scarce due to the clandestine nature of the activity, many anecdotal accounts exist. Stories passed down through generations describe skilled thieves operating seamlessly within the crowded milongas, often blending in with the passionate embrace of the dance.

Q3: How did the police respond to pickpocketing in the milongas?

A3: Police presence in early milongas was often limited or ineffective, given the chaotic nature of the dance halls and the difficulty of identifying perpetrators amidst the close dancing. However, as tango gained popularity and moved into more regulated spaces, policing improved, leading to a decline in pickpocketing within the dance halls.

Q4: Has the association between tango and pickpocketing influenced how tango is

perceived today?

A4: While the association is rarely explicitly mentioned in modern contexts, understanding the historical connection provides a deeper appreciation of the dance's origins and the multifaceted social context in which it emerged. It adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the story of tango's development.

Q5: Are there any modern-day parallels to this historical connection between dance and crime?

A5: While not directly comparable, the concept of using a public gathering or event as a cover for criminal activity continues to exist in various forms today. Crowded events provide opportunities for theft and other crimes, reminding us that vigilance remains crucial in any social setting.

Q6: How does acknowledging this history enrich our understanding of Argentine Tango?

A6: By acknowledging the historical association between tango and pickpocketing, we gain a more nuanced and complete understanding of the dance's origins. It moves beyond a romanticized portrayal and presents a more realistic picture of the social, economic, and cultural conditions that shaped this iconic art form. It adds depth and complexity to the narrative, enriching its overall appreciation.

Q7: Where can I learn more about the history of Argentine Tango?

A7: Many excellent books and documentaries explore the history of Argentine tango in detail. Searching for titles focused on the social history of tango in Buenos Aires will lead you to valuable resources providing further insight into its fascinating and complex past.

A Pickpocket's History of Argentine Tango: A Shadowy Dance

The graceful sway of Argentine tango, a dance synonymous with passion, intimacy, and intense emotion, holds a hidden history. Beyond the passionate imagery projected on stage and in widely-known culture, lies a captivating narrative entwined with the dark side of Buenos Aires' past: the world of pickpockets. This article investigates the surprising connection between these two seemingly unrelated elements, revealing how the tango's early development was inextricably linked to the city's criminal underclass.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw Buenos Aires experiencing rapid urbanization and substantial social change. Massive immigration, primarily from Europe and particularly Italy, drove a thriving population and created a intricate social system. This rapid growth also resulted to prevalent poverty and crime, with the city's densely populated slums becoming breeding grounds for various criminal enterprises. Pickpocketing, in precise, thrived in this environment, often operating amongst the crowded taverns and dance halls that defined the city's nightlife.

Tango, born from the melting pot of diverse cultural influences, emerged from these very same social spaces. Initially viewed as a vulgar and disreputable dance form, it reflected the unpolished

reality of the city's marginalized populations. The proximate physical contact demanded by the dance, with its sweeping movements and fast changes of position, provided the ideal cover for pickpockets.

Imagine a dense *milonga* (tango social dance), bodies gliding to the rhythmic music. The adept pickpocket, merging seamlessly with the crowd, could easily manipulate the dancers' attention, distracting them while slyly relieving them of their belongings. The dance itself, with its complex steps and close proximity, allowed for the subtle execution of these illegal acts, leaving victims often oblivious of their loss until much later.

This association wasn't merely a coincidence. Many accounts from the era portray pickpockets deliberately using tango as a method of their trade. They would move with their victims, employing the dance's energetic movements to hide their actions. The near proximity and speedy shifts permitted them to quickly lift wallets, watches, or other belongings without arousing doubt.

The well-known "compadritos," youthful tough guys who controlled the city's underworld, were frequently associated with tango. Their aggressive style of dancing, characterized by abrupt movements and defiant gestures, perfectly camouflaged their larceny activities.

However, as tango evolved and gained wider acceptance, its association with the illegal element gradually decreased. The dance transitioned from the rough-and-tumble *milongas* of the slums to more sophisticated venues, attracting a more heterogeneous audience. The emphasis shifted from its underground origins to its artistic qualities.

Today, Argentine tango is a globally celebrated dance form, a symbol of passion, elegance, and artistic identity. Yet, its hidden past, inextricably linked to the city's underworld and the skill of pickpocketing, remains a intriguing aspect of its rich and layered history. Understanding this unusual connection provides a deeper appreciation of the dance's origins and its evolution from the margins of society to the worldwide stage.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

1. **Q: Is it still common for pickpockets to use tango as a cover today?** A: No. The association between tango and pickpocketing is primarily a historical phenomenon. While pickpocketing sadly persists in crowded areas, it's no longer linked to tango in any significant way.
2. **Q: What other criminal activities were common in the early tango era?** A: Besides pickpocketing, other crimes prevalent during the early tango era in Buenos Aires included gambling, prostitution, and various forms of street crime related to poverty and social inequality.
3. **Q: How did tango's image change over time?** A: Tango's initial reputation as a rough and immoral dance gradually evolved. As it gained popularity, it became more refined and associated with artistry and cultural expression, shedding its criminal associations.
4. **Q: Why is understanding this history important?** A: Understanding the historical context of tango, including its association with pickpocketing, provides a richer and more nuanced

appreciation of its development and evolution, highlighting the complex social forces that shaped its identity.

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