

[The Madame of Dance](#)

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ARTS

The Madame of Dance

This Fench-born

Vrindavanam S. Gopalakrishnan, Kerala, India

She used to be French. now, except for her name, she is much more a traditional Keralan Hindu lady, strictly adhering to the culture and traditions of this South Indian state. Thus, Ms. Louba Schild is a unique phenomenon. Her life has been dedicated to promoting and preserving the praxes of the land she has adopted. Ironically, those who would be most likely to serve this function, by virtue of their birth here, have been carried away by Westernization.

The West's influence here has reached the point that people are indifferent to the ancient ways of life which can mold a pure, healthy and spiritual society. At least, this was the impression Schild got after staying a few years in Kerala. She had come in 1968 to learn kathakali, Kerala's dramatic art of dance. "I was deeply impressed by the Vedic philosophy," she told me. "To see the divine presence in each and every creature on the Earth, and the love for nature, embodied in the culture and traditions, the love and care given to family members, the tradition of respecting the elder, all these are

absent in the West. Life becomes meaningful here. Day-to-day activities are meant to be in harmony with nature and the environment. The concept of nonviolence and tolerance influenced me a lot as well."

Apart from kathakali, she learned bharata natyam, mohiniyattom and even the martial art, kalaripayattu. "I am fortunate enough to have learned kathakali under some of the greatest exponents of the art, like the late Padmashree Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and Mangombu Sivasankara Pillai," she explains. From 1972, she performed kathakali in temples in Kerala and toured Europe giving performances, lectures and workshops.

Inspired by the Hindu way of living, she plunged into the ancient scriptures. After picking up the Natya Shastra, the traditional treatise on dance, she decided to promote it all over the world, including in Kerala itself. With assistance and support from her Guru at Atmanada Ashram (known also as Ananthavadi) on the banks of the holy river Pamba at Malakkara, she refined her vision.

Today, she is an institution, carving Indian cultural ambassadors out of her foreign students. Realizing the urgent need to preserve traditional South Indian culture and artistic values, she set up Vijnana Kala Vedi, a charitable institution, in 1977. The center's objectives are to provide foreign artists, researchers and culturally oriented tourists with an introduction to the culture of India, and to foster the artistic education of youths in Kerala. The center was created with the help and guidance of various organizations, such as UNESCO,

Sangeet Nataka Academy of India and South Zone Cultural Center.

On average, 150 people attend the center as tourists and students. Short and long-term courses are held for them. The center has become a hub of cultural tourism to the state, and it earns around Rs. one million a year, Schild states. Many who have studied at the center have received scholarships from organizations like UNESCO, Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), Sangeet Natak Academy, Alliance Francaise and even Cambridge University.

Today, Schild's Vijnana Kala Vedi imparts training to foreign and Indian students in kathakali, mohiniyattam, bharata natyam, mudras, dance make-up, carnatic vocal music, kalaripayattu, hatha yoga, wood carving, mural painting and even vegetarian cooking. Classes are also held in Sanskrit, Hindi and Malayalam languages. When asked about the irony of the Indians embracing Western ways, Schild offered, "I am sure they will realize their folly."

Vijnana Kala Vedi, Aranmula PO, Pathanamthitta, Kerala, india