

# Nancy G. Heller: Dancer, Art Historian, Author, Teacher and Center City Resident

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Best known locally as a dance reviewer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Center City resident Nancy G. Heller, doesn't just write about dance, she dances—she even performed flamenco and other folk dances at her own wedding in the Great Hall at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Heller grew up in Los Angeles and State College, PA, surrounded by the arts. Her late father was Jules Heller, a well-known printmaker, art educator, author, professional jazz pianist and amateur tango dancer. Inspired by her father, Heller studied modern and folk dancing, organized her own folk dance club in high school and taught folk dancing at a summer camp in New Jersey at 17. After seeing José Greco, the famous flamenco dancer, live on the Ed Sullivan Show and a flamenco dancer perform at a modern dance class, Heller developed a passion for Spanish dance. "I was intrigued by the exciting, complicated rhythms and found the dances exotic and dramatic." In 1984, in Washington DC, Heller joined The Spanish Dance Theatre, a new dance troupe founded by a South African dancer who trained her in flamenco, and she performed professionally with them for 14 years.

A professor at the University of the Arts, Heller earned her Ph.D. from Rutgers University in modern art history. She taught at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland and was a Smithsonian Predoctoral Fellow at the Hirshhorn Museum. At a 2004 conference on art depicting dancers, sponsored by The American Academy in Rome, the organizers were hard-pressed to find speakers who were both dance and art historians, and Heller was uniquely qualified.

Heller has written many books on art. The Amazon review of her popular book *Why a Painting is Like a Pizza: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Modern Art*, published in 2002, says, "Heller shows us how we can refine analytical tools we already possess to understand and enjoy even the most unfamiliar paintings and sculptures." Among her other books on art are *Women Artists: An Illustrated History* and *Imaging Dance: Visual Representation of Dancers and Dancing*.

Heller had the opportunity to combine her expertise in art and dance in March 2012 when she gave a lecture on the painting of Ruth St. Denis by Robert Henri as part of

the Art-At-Lunch series at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Her lecture style is lively and informative and filled with anecdotes and illustrations. Popular on the lecture circuit, she has been a guest lecturer since 1982 at universities and museums in Rome, London, Seville and Cluj, Romania, and throughout the United States. She primarily speaks on the history of women artists, art censorship, modern Spanish art and abstract art, and she will research a specialized subject area on request. For example, she recently lectured to the group Operadocs, local physicians and patrons of the Opera Company of Philadelphia, on the topic of Spanish dance scenes in two operas.

Heller has studied, taught and performed folk dances originating in Europe and Israel, and, since 1971 has studied and reviewed all kinds of dance, including Spanish dances, ballet, modern dance, tap, salsa, Bharatnatyam (South Indian classical dance), Brazilian samba, and African and Japanese dances, and other world forms in New York, Washington DC, Philadelphia and London. She was the American



Center City resident Nancy Heller is an expert in art and dance.

correspondent for *Flamenco International Magazine*, an editor at the National Gallery of Art and a writer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She has won many awards, grants and prizes including a Certificate of Excellence from the American Association of University Women for a magazine cover story on Georgia O'Keeffe.

To read her dance reviews in the Philadelphia Inquirer, go to [www.philly.com](http://www.philly.com) and search Nancy G. Heller.

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