



A comprehensive guide to ballroom etiquette for modern ladies and gentlemen

Marianka Swain dons her Emily Post hat to dispense dance wisdom

From the relative civility of tea dances in traditional venues and supervised activities at reputable studios to the more risqué club affairs lasting until the small hours, the modern world of social ballroom is a complex affair with a bewildering array of unspoken codes of conduct.

How, then, to navigate these treacherous waters without unintentionally offending – or indeed encouraging – those you encounter? Of course, you must be sensitive to the subtle variations of tone indicated by venue and society, but you can exhibit class in whichever situation you find yourself by remembering these fundamentals of etiquette.

The art of presentation

Your outward appearance should not be dictated merely by fashion or practicality; it is a means of projecting your best self to others. If you are unsure of the level of dress, the key word is moderation. Both excessive formality and excessive informality may be off-putting, the former intimidating or suggesting high levels of self-regard, the latter disrespectful.

Remember to avoid stifling clothing – perspiration should not be inflicted upon strangers – and do not invite attention to your masculine or feminine charms unless that is your driving reason for attendance.

May I have this dance?

This simple phrase should be employed with tact and care. Be sensitive to the relative numbers of leaders and followers, disparity of experience between you and the person you approach and the appropriateness of claiming someone, particularly if they have a regular partner in the vicinity.

Should you need to decline someone's request, do your utmost to spare their feelings. If your reason is likely to offend (for example, the lady or gentleman in question has an unfortunate reputation for treading on people's toes, either literally or figuratively), offer a polite alternative, such as tiredness, a desire to socialise or a rapidly filling dance card.

Successful social engagement

Once on the floor, read your partner as diligently as you would

The Times; their responses will indicate whether you have successfully gauged their preferred level of technique and physical intimacy, and whether you have struck the right balance between gracious conversation and attention to movement.

If they signal willingness for a repeat performance, weigh that against courteousness to others and the situation you are in – it is disrespectful to maintain a partnership against the wishes of a teacher – and indeed your personal preference.

Should this willingness extend to socialising off the floor, ensure you have similar intentions before proceeding and consider the effect it may have upon your interaction as dancers. Finding the right partner in life can of course be as rewarding as finding the right partner in dance, but the relative importance of the two shall be left to the discretion of the individual.

Above all, consider that you are engaging not only with a partner, but with everyone in the room. The ballroom world is the truest test of social integration, and those who pass shall win eternal respect and admiration. ●