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## The History of Ballet

The ballet steps were “never just steps, they were a set of beliefs echoing, as they did, the self-image of a noble castes. “These larger connections ... were the key to an understanding of the art. How ballet began and what it became is best appreciated in light of the political and intellectual upheavals of the past three hundred years. Ballet was shaped by the Renaissance and French Classicism, by Expressionism, and Bolshevism, modernism, and the Cold War. It is really a larger story.”(Homans p.xxiv).

The French word “renaissance”, meaning rebirth, truly describes the time in Europe, spanning from the 14<sup>th</sup>- 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a time of significant social and cultural change in Europe. It was characterized by innovation, imagination and creativity. Ballet was born out of this explosion of artistic expression. Although, its earliest beginnings were in the courts of the Italian nobles, its most noteworthy history occurred in France.

When French King Henri II married the Florentine, Catherine de Medici, in 1533, the history of ballet began (Homans p. 3). At this time, the French and Italian cultures came into close alliance (Homans p. 3). The festivities of Italy were led by the princes and nobility of Milan, Florence, and Venice. There were flaming torch dancers, horse ballets were arranged in symbolic formations with heroic allegorical and exotic themes (Homans p. 4). The Italians performed dances known as “balli” and “balletti” constructing walking steps performed at balls and ceremonies. The French called them ballets.

Catherine brought the Italian influence to the French courts even after her husband’s death with her sons carrying on the tradition. The family introduced floats, chariots, and parades, all of which demonstrated meaningful stories. Because sixteenth century France suffered many civil and religious conflicts at this time, French kings thought that the festivities were a way to soothe the upheavals that were occurring at this time. These stories brought out in the ballets, signified the culture and history of the day.

Charles IX, in 1570, established The Academie de Poesie et de Musique. Its members were French poets. The poets were influenced by Neoplatonism. They felt there was a divine harmony and order that demonstrated the laws of the universe and powers of God. Meshing their own religious beliefs with these ideas, the French poets attempted to remake the Christian church through theatre and art. They felt God would be revealed through theatre and art. Music and art would also enable man to reach his fullest potential.

It was out of this very set of beliefs that dance began to evolve. Those in the Academy saw ballet as a chance to take men's passions and desires and redirect them towards a love for God (Homans p. 6). They also believed that as man danced, he would break his earthly ties and raise himself to a closeness with God.

In 1581 the Ballet comique de la Reine arose. This was a celebration of the marriage of the queen's sister, Marguerite de Valois. The dancers performed close to the audience without a stage. In contrast to the ballet de court, this was considered the first new genre of ballet. It was not just a stylish walking, it was an expression of the universe. Emerging from both humanism and the Catholic counter-Reformation, this dance was a mathematical and spiritual combination. This ballet was also meshed with French intellectual and political life. Yet, despite the religious meaning behind ballet at this time, many of the people outside of the nobility looked at these ballets as a waste of the country's resources on frivolity.

Ballet became even more central, in France, during the Thirty-Years War (1618-48). The French queen, Marie de Medici, held ballets every Sunday. Her son, King Louis XIII (1601-43) continued that tradition. He continued in dance training for many years. He created a ballet that was more instrumental. The stage was elevated and there were curtains and machinery that moved backdrops. As absolute monarchy came to power in France, the message in ballet changed. The ballet now glorified

the power of the king. The idea of this transformation was to surround performers with enchantment. This was done in order to portray the king as divine, closer to God than any other human being.

Louis XIV held a significant interest in the arts. He held many dancing roles in the performances. He was trained by a personal ballet tutor for more than 20 years. It was at this time that ballet became such an integral part of life and was forever linked to his name. Classical ballet was born out of his reign. Here ballet became a symbol of the social life of the aristocracy. The rules of the classical ballet were defined.

Louis XIV established the Royal Academy of Dance in 1661. Only those people of nobility, whom the king chose were allowed to become members. Those chosen were exempt from guild fees, regulations and taxes. Those members also held a certain status in society and had special access to the king. Music in these ballets were eliminated. The ballet had become a reflection of the Absolute Monarchy. Ballet masters "had become courtiers rather than musicians." (Homans p.17)

Not only did Louis XIV want to promote the Absolute Monarchy, but he also wanted to cause French culture to become more prevalent in other parts of Europe. His desire was to replace the humanist culture in Europe with the French language - its art, music, and dance. He also wanted French military affairs to become an integral part of European culture.

Yet out of this hunger for power that the king possessed, the ballet for the first time was translated to the written page. The king was provided with five volumes of symbols, texts and dances that were used at that time in the performances. These volumes included rules of etiquette that were to be followed by the dancers and also the five ballet positions, which are still used today. Eventually, these volumes were translated into both the English and German languages. The volumes were used by ballet masters across Europe well into the Eighteenth century. (Homans p. 19) More than 300 of the dances recorded are in use even today.

The dances recorded were primarily solo or duet and performed primarily by men. Women dancers were confined to social events and queen's ballets. Clothing worn in the ballets were of the latest fashions and constructed of the most expensive fabrics. Jewelry and hairstyles followed suit. Masks or half masks were worn on the faces of the dancers. Shoes were made of silk, velvet, felt or leather. Yet, during this time religious groups had opposing opinions to ballet as an art form.

Christian religions had differing views on ballet as an art form. In 1666, the Catholic Church came against the ballet claiming that dancing "does nothing but excite the passions". (Homans p. 31) Actors and dancers were excommunicated from the Catholic Church and denied a Christian burial. Despite the opposition, ballet continued in its popularity.

One Christian sect that was not against the ballet was the Jesuits. The Jesuits saw ballet as a way to both inspire and convert believers. Jesuit schools not only taught dance, but also wrote many ballets. Their desire was to expose believers to the supernatural through dance. Through the influence King Louis had in propagating French culture throughout Europe, the history of ballet continued to unfold.

During the Enlightenment, ballet spread to Europe. England had much to do with the transformation of ballet as an art. John Weaver, born to a dance master in 1673, transformed the purpose of the ballet. Rather than elevating social hierarchies as was in France, ballet was used to eliminate them (Homans p. 55). He also believed that dance would cause men to be morally good on the inside. "Their vision of politeness as an elegant and unostentatious social style contained an instruction for a way of moving –and dancing-which we recognize even today as deeply rooted in English history and experience"(Homans p.58).

Women also emerged as the main dancers in England. Ballet, for them, served as an escape from overbearing husbands or fathers. It also provided a type of social status for women of lower birth. Many of these women danced to support their families. Hilaire-Germaine-Edgar Degas illustrated this in

his painting *The Rehearsal*. He portrayed women ballet dancers rehearsing for their performances. The women in the painting danced in order to earn money for their families. Ballet also emerged as a detailed real-life story being told through dance.

Although England had much influence on ballet, France remained the main contributor to ballet. Ballet emerged into pantomime. The dawn of the Enlightenment brought about a focus on reason and man himself became the focus. Ballets became dramas which were dark and serious on subjects such as murder, betrayal, and incest. The ballets were performed in a series of dances. These ballets focused on everyday life, stripping away the veneer of nobility and high society. Although many of these ideas were initially rejected, the fact remained that the only way to transform ballet was to change the way dancers moved. Aristocratic principles had to be overthrown. Yet this was not accomplished until the French Revolution came about. In history the ideas of the French Revolution emerged from the thinking that was prevalent during the Enlightenment.

The French Revolution brought many changes to the world of ballet. The French Revolution reinforced the idea of real life themes in dance. The absolute monarchy was rejected and again women took center stage. The costumes were simple as opposed to the aristocratic costumes worn previously. The training was vigorous. "Today, dancers take this new school for granted: its steps, training, and forms constitute what we think of as classical ballet. Yet this technique and style of movement-this classical form-grew up in a distinctly, even violently anticlassical moment...but the technique they developed survived and eventually became our own." (Holmans p.131-132).

From the Pre-Romantic and Romantic period (1800's), emerged one of the most influential ballerinas who ever lived-Marie Taglioni. Her father was a ballet master for the court opera in Vienna. Lacking the correct posture and physique, she set out to transform the world of ballet. She trained tirelessly for at least four to six hours a day striving to align her posture similarly to Greek statuary. As she worked, ballet was thrust into "two seemingly opposite directions: simplicity and

virtuosity.”(Holmans p.139). The aristocratic affect was abandoned within the Italian ballet .She was the first to dance en pointe in pink tights and shorter skirt.

The effect on France was radical. Paintings and lithographs reflected the transformation that took place. These pieces of art illustrated the strength required as well as the femininity included in the dances of this time. The paintings of Edgar Degas entitled *The Dancing Class*, *Dance Class at the Opera*, *The Dance Class*, and *The Star* illustrate the transformation in style which had taken place. When Marie made her debut at the Paris Opera in 1827, she was received with tremendous praise. She had revolutionized the world of classical ballet. The French Revolution was coming to an end bringing a desire for reconciliation in France. Taglioni’s movements brought in old world movements combined with a whole new range of ideas. Her performance in the ballet *La Sylphide* during the Romantic period “marked a shift in gender roles, as women stole the spotlight.”(Holmans p.165). It was after this time that the Russian ballet made its contributions.

Following the Romantic period, Russian classical ballet emerged in St. Petersburg. This ballet emerged from a strong French influence. Peter the Great, the czar of Russia, adopted and implemented European, especially French culture in Russia. St. Petersburg was modeled after the city of Versailles in France, with gardens and vistas measured to match the original city. He encouraged his courtiers to speak French. Western dress was also mandated. As classical ballet came to Russia, there was a strong “desire to imitate and absorb, to acquire the grace and elegance and cultural forms of the French aristocracy”. This remained a “fundamental aspiration. Its prestige owed everything to its foreign, and especially Parisian, stature.”(Holmans p. 247) The ballets of this era combined a modeling of French elegance along with the French military institutions. Ballets, choreographed by French ballet masters, illustrated full-scale battles with dancers arrayed in symmetrical formation adorning elegant Parisian-like costumes.

The French influence of ballet in Russia was also evident in the ballet leaders that arrived in St. Petersburg during the Romantic period. In 1801, the French-trained ballet master Charles-Louis Dielot was appointed to direct the Imperial ballet in St. Petersburg. His ballets included a dance for two with male and female dancers performing a solo. In 1847, Marius Petipa arrived in St. Petersburg from Paris. Although from Italy, he held strong French influence. His ballets were mistakenly Parisian.

Three ballets performed today were written at this time in St. Petersburg-*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. All three were heavily influenced by French culture. *The Sleeping Beauty* was based on the French ballet *La Belle au bois dormant*, choreographed by Marius Petipa. *The Nutcracker* was set in France during the Directory-the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. *Swan Lake* set the stage for the famous Ballet Russes in Paris created by Sergei Diaghilev. These companies had strong Russian and French influences. They had their greatest successes in the French capital and gleaned from “the city’s artistic traditions and anarchic chic (Holman’s p. 290). The company performed between 1909 and 1929 and was the most influential ballet company of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Male dancers returned to the forefront as well as expressiveness and the rise of the individual in dance. Although the dancers traveled throughout Europe with costumes and scenery designed by master artists, no city was more important to its success than Paris. Paris elevated ballet to the pinnacle of modernism in art. The Ballet Russes in Paris were also responsible, through their travel, for the spread of ballet to many other cultures.

The true key to the success of the Ballet Russes was the effect on London’s elite, specifically artists and intellectuals. The Royal Ballet opened in England in 1926, again elevating classical ballet to new heights. Sir Frederick Ashton, choreographer, and Dame Margot Fonteyn, one of the world’s most famous ballerinas made many contributions to dance. The dances Ashton created maintained the classical form, yet also had a modern feel.



Russian culture, for the second time, was affected by the Ballet Russes of Paris. In 1934, the former Mariinsky Ballet in St. Petersburg, Russia, was renamed the Kirov Ballet. Although destroyed from within by Communist authorities, it produced some of the most influential dancers including Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Baryshnikov. The company was also responsible for embracing the New York City Ballet when the American company did a tour in Russia. Thus ballet exploded in America as well as throughout the world.

Ballet in America took a very unique turn. Up until this time, classical ballet was in the forefront. "It was a lavish, aristocratic court art, - and hierarchal – elite art with no pretense to egalitarianism." (Holmans, p.448). Ballet had grown in societies that embraced the nobility, not only of birth, but of character, very much in contrast to America's love of equality for all men. Ballet had also had a Catholic history as opposed to America, which held Puritan values. Further still, classical ballet had been state-supported as an art. Its purpose was to elevate kings and tsars. America had been founded to free its citizens from oppressive rule that had dominated European life. The arts in America were considered a private entity. (Holmans p. 448-449).

"Ballet came to America through vaudeville, variety shows, musicals, and (later) film, through kick lines, gymnastic routines, and spectacles of beautiful girls. (Holmans p. 449). During the 1st and 2nd World Wars there was an influx of talented individuals who having fled Nazi and Soviet regimes, migrated to America. These individuals brought with them many artistic ideas. Following the Cold War, the government played more of a role in American society. The government began to become involved in promoting the arts in America. The National Cultural Center and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts were established. John Rockefeller, an American millionaire, organized a ballet company, called the American Ballet Caravan, which toured abroad. Although this company did not last, it was responsible for the establishment of the famous New York City Ballet.

In order to fund the company, many realized that ballet mattered. It had to remain relevant to evolving American culture. Ballet was then brought down to relate to the common man, as dances became more radical. Those responsible for these companies also saw that ballet had to be relevant to future generations-namely children. Free ballet performances were offered for children to view. By the mid 1960's classical ballet had taken off.

By the 1970's, because at that time there was an emphasis on self-expression, there were many changes brought to the world of ballet. Ballet became mixed with rock and roll, film, and popular culture. The new generation of choreographers pressed to integrate classical and contemporary dance forms.

Thus modern ballet emerged. Mikhail Baryshnikov, a Russian, ballet dancer, brought modern ballet to new levels. Ballet became associated with natural, freeing movements, with a looser technique. Ballets became pantomimes and were later incorporated into many musicals. Modern dance is an art form associated with free movement and relaxed technique .Instead of pointe shoes, ballet shoes are worn on the feet. The knees are bent rather than straight within many of the steps. As a result of modern ballet, classical ballet suffered a slow decline.

In the present day, many of those knowledgeable in classical ballet have died. Familiarity with the art is almost nonexistent. Artists of today appear conflicted between the past and the present. Contemporary dancers seem unable to hold an audience. "We are left with a paradox. We revere great ballets; we know – we remember that ballet can be,...'our civilization'. Yet inside today's brand-new theaters, a tradition is in crisis, unfocused and uncertain." (Holmans p. 547). "Ballet's fine manners and implicitly aristocratic airs, its white swans, regal splendor, and beautiful women on pointe (pedestals), seem woefully outmoded, the province of dead white men and society ladies in long ago places.

(Holmans p. 548). Ballet has been influenced by many cultures over many centuries, yet presently ballet, as an art, is losing its footing, but why?

What is the state of ballet today? Many see ballet as a dying art, not relatable to the cultures of today. One main issue is the lack of diversity in ballet. For centuries, ballet had been dominated by Europeans. With the world becoming more diverse, ballet must become more diverse and financially accessible to the average viewer. While ballet has a long way to go in addressing these issues, there are many dancers who are actively attempting to bring change.

Misty Copeland became the third African American female soloist at the American Ballet Theater in 2007. She has spoken openly about racism in the world of ballet. Yuan Yuan Tan is a principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet. In the late 1990's she became the first Chinese dancer to be promoted to that level. Kayla Rowser is a dancer at the Nashville Ballet who is outspoken about the importance of diversity in ballet. She has worked extensively with Project Plie, a project aimed at increasing racial and ethnic representation in ballet. Evelyn Cisneros is the first Hispanic prima ballerina in the U.S. Shiori Kase, born in Tokyo is a soloist with the National Ballet. Michaela DePrince, born in Sierra Leone and adopted by an American family, entered the world of ballet at the age of eight. She has gone on to win a position in the Dutch National Junior Company. These few, along with many others, are striving to make ballet relevant to a changing audience.

Ballet has evolved over the centuries, from its beginnings in the French courts, through the Enlightenment, the Romantic period as well as through the spread of the art form to England, Russia, and finally, to America. From its beginnings, ballet has conformed to many diverse cultures. Ballet forms have changed from classical to more modern expressions. Women ballerinas, as well as couples, have emerged as lead dancers. Ballets have reflected many historical events and have been transformed through these events. Ballet will continue to evolve and embrace the diverse world that exists today.

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