

# Ballet History

**Definition:** (From *History of the Dance in Art and Education* by Richard Kraus and Sarah Chapman)

"The term 'ballet' came to mean a form of theatrical storytelling through dance. The Encyclopedia of Diderot, published in France about 1772 says, 'Ballet is action explained by a dance...specifically theatrical, spectacular, and done to be seen...'"

Characteristics of ballet include rotation or turnout, a lifted, high center of gravity, and little floor work, if any.



## Brief History:

Ballet is the oldest form of western dance art that exists today. The strict rules and movement patterns of ballet are derived from the Italian court dances of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The courts of Europe were swept with the creation of new musical forms. The creation of the new music insured new forms of entertainment beyond the traditional court dances, thus the rise of ballet in France. Historians credit the "Ballet Comique de la Reine" as the first ballet performed in 1581. It was an elaborate production depicting the celebration of the marriage between the mother queen, Catherine de Medici, and Henry II.

In 1661, because of his tremendous love for dance, King Louis XIV, affectionately known as "The Sun King," asked his ballet master to establish rules for the study of ballet. Some of what we recognize today as the positions of the feet and arms, as well as other movement patterns, are a result of those rules. At this time, King Louis XIV also began the Academie Royale de Danse as the first formal ballet school in one of the rooms of the Louvre.

There are three schools or methods of ballet: French, Russian, and Cecchetti. We study mainly the French school of ballet, though there are some parts of the Cecchetti method that we will also cover. The French school was known for its elegance and soft, graceful movements, rather than technical virtuosity. Its influence spread throughout Europe and is the basis of all ballet training.



Some notable ballet choreographers and dancers after the Sun King include: Marie Taglioni (first en pointe), Marius Petipa, Sergei Diaghilev, Margot Fonteyn, Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Rudolf Nureyev, George Balanchine, and Mikhail Baryshnikov, to name a few.

## Contemporary Ballet: (from Wikipedia.com)

Contemporary ballet is a form of dance, which incorporates elements of both classical ballet and modern dance. It takes its technique and use of pointe work from classical ballet, although it permits a greater range of movement that may not adhere to the strict body lines set forth by schools of ballet technique. Many of its concepts come from the ideas and innovations of 20th century modern dance, including floor work, balletic movements and turn-in of the legs.