

# The History of Ballet



*Louis XIV, King of France*

The story of ballet began five hundred years ago in Italy during the Renaissance. In those days the Italian nobles entertained important visitors with elaborate pageants of poetry, music, mime, and dance. When an Italian woman named Catherine de Medici married King Henri II and became Queen of France, she introduced this kind of entertainment to the French court.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1643, Louis XIV became King of France at the age of 5. Louis loved to dance and performed in many

of the court ballets. He created the Royal Academy of Music and Dance in 1661. It was then that the five basic positions of the feet were worked out and ballet began to develop a set technique. This is why French is used to describe ballet steps.

At that time women were not allowed to perform in ballets. Men wearing masks and women's clothing took their roles. The first ballet with parts played by women was in 1681. One of the first female dancers was Maria Camargo. Maria thought the women's costumes of the time were too heavy and bulky, so she shortened her skirts to be able to move better and wore flat shoes so she could do simple jumps.



*Maria Camargo*

In the late 1700's the world of dance experienced many changes, thanks mainly to Jean-Georges Noverre. Jean-Georges was a

great dancer and choreographer who believed that dancing should be more than just pretty movements and that it should tell a story. He taught the dancers how to use mime and facial expression to tell the story. Noverre's creation of the *ballet d'action*, or ballets that tell a story, changed ballet forever.

*La Sylphide*

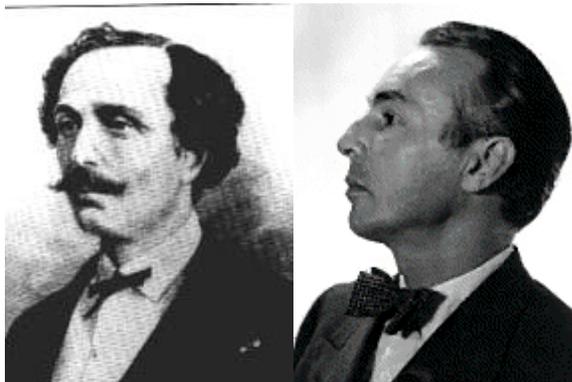


The Romantic Era of ballet began in 1832 with the production of *La Sylphide*. Women became the important figures in the stories and began dancing on their toes in what are now called "pointe shoes." The number of steps increased and the movements became more expressive and lyrical. Even the subject matter of the ballets changed. Instead of stories about heroes and myths, fairy tales and folk legends were used. The costume became the long, flowing skirt called the "romantic tutu" and the women took on a more graceful appearance.

Ballet was very popular in Russia in the mid-1800's and the Imperial Ballet in Moscow and St. Petersburg became known all over the world. Many French choreographers and dancers, including Marius Petipa, went there to work with them. Petipa stayed and created

over 60 full-length ballets, many of which are still performed today. He is considered the father of classical ballet.

The modern era of ballet started in the early 1900's when a young Russian named Serge Diaghilev moved to Paris to try out some new and exciting ideas he had about art, music, and dance. There he introduced a young choreographer named Michel Fokine, who changed ballet from pretty entertainment into a work of art. In 1911, Diaghilev formed his own company, the Russian Ballet, usually known by its French name, *Les Ballets Russes*.



*Marius Petipa*

*George Balanchine*

Classical ballet emerged in America in the 1900's. The two most important American companies, American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet, were both established in the early 1940's and New York City became the dance capital of the world. George Balanchine, of New York City Ballet, became this century's most influential choreographer. Other regional companies, including Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia, soon followed. Today, with professional ballet companies all over the country, millions of Americans enjoy the beauty and power of this

unique art form every year.