

Ballet History

In all its beauty, ballet is an art form based on standardized movements, stylized steps and time-honored techniques that have been passed down by dancers for more than 300 years. Music and dance combine to create an unspoken language where dancers use their bodies to beautifully tell a story.



Courts and Kings

The term “ballet” is derived from an Italian word—*ballare*—which means “to dance”. Ballet, as we know it, first evolved during the 15th Century as a theatrical form of entertainment for Italian royalty. History has it that ballet was first performed in Italy in the early 1600s. Way back when, dancers often performed between scenes of an opera to entertain fidgety audiences. Rather kingly affairs, elaborate court ballets evolved in Europe during the 1500s and 1600s to lavishly entertain the aristocracy. The court ballet reached a crescendo during the reign of King Louis XIV of France, who ruled from 1643 to 1715. In fact, it is believed that his title of the “Sun King” was derived from a role *he* himself danced in a ballet!



Early Ballet Schools

King Louis XIV established the first dance school when he founded the *Academie Royale de Danse* in Paris in 1661, which would become the *Paris Opera Ballet*. Overweight and out of shape, the king retired from dancing in 1670 but remained a grandiose patron of the arts. By this time, the court ballet faded away as professionally trained dancers took the stage. In the beginning, all dancers were male. Men wearing masks danced the

women's roles onstage. The first professional female dancers performed in 1681 in a ballet called *Le Triomphe de l'Amour*.

Ballet Term Basics

Ballet vocabulary and terminology is firmly rooted in the French language. Many original steps and positions first taught at King Louis XIV's school are the same today. The five basic ballet positions were created by French ballet choreographer and teacher Pierre Beauchamp in the 1600s. These arm and leg positions helped the dancers to gracefully balance. Most ballet steps and combinations begin with one of these basic positions. All of the basic positions require the dancer to "turn out" their legs and feet. This takes years of training and practice.

Ballet Comes to America

Ballet flourished in Italy, France, England and Russia long before it took center stage in America. The art of ballet was made famous in this country by Russian choreographer and dancer George Balanchine. Born in Russia in 1904, Balanchine studied dance at the *Russian Imperial Ballet School* and music at the *Conservatory* in St. Petersburg, Russia. He performed in and staged ballets in Europe before coming to America. In 1934, he and Lincoln Kirstein founded the *School of American Ballet* in New York City before establishing the *New York City Ballet* in 1948. Balanchine is universally credited with introducing the art of ballet to America and increasing its popularity. In 1954, he choreographed his own version of *The Nutcracker* for his *New York City Ballet* company. Much loved by audiences, *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker* is still staged annually during the holiday season and has become an American tradition.

