



Figure 1- American Ballet Theater

**Ballet**

Ballet is a highly technical form of dance with its origins in the Italian Renaissance court, where it emerged in the late 15th century as a dance interpretation of fencing. Later ballet was developed into a very complicated dance works with mime, acting and other components that are set to music. Ballet has graceful, flowing and very precise movements with almost ethereal qualities.

## History of pointe shoes

In 1661, King Louis XIV of France founded the Royal Academy of Dance; however, women did not appear on stage until 1681. The standard women's ballet shoes at this time were heeled. Marie Camargo of the Paris Opéra Ballet was the first to wear a non-heeled shoe, to allow her the ability to do more complicated jumps. After the French Revolution, the standard ballet shoe no longer had a heel. It was flat and tied with ribbons to secure the foot. It had pleats under the toes and allowed dancers to fully extend their feet, jump, and turn.

The first dancers to rise up on their toes during this period did so with the help of an invention by Charles Didelot in 1795. His "flying machine" lifted dancers upward, allowing them to stand on their toes before leaving the ground. This lightness and ethereal quality was received well by audiences who especially liked when a dancer lingered on her toes. Due to this, choreographers looked for ways to incorporate more pointework into their pieces.

As dance extended into the 1800s, the emphasis on technical skill increased, as did the desire to dance en pointe without the aid of wires. When Marie Taglioni first danced *La Sylphide* en pointe, her shoes were nothing more than satin slippers, darned at the ends. The sole was made of leather and the sides and toe were darned to keep its shape. Dancers relied heavily on their own strength, in the feet and ankles, without the support of a hard pointe shoe. They most likely padded the toes for some comfort.

The next substantially different form of pointe shoe was found in Italy in the late 1800s. Dancers like Pierina Legnani wore pointe shoes which were not as pointed as earlier ones, having instead a sturdy, flat platform. These shoes also included a box, made of many layers of fabric, and a stronger sole. The Italian shoe style was imported into Russia where it was transformed further. They had no nails in them and were only stiffened at the toes, making them silent.

In the 1930s, Broadway dancers like Harriet Hctor wore shoes with steel shanks, allowing for "toe-tapping". (In ballet, the shank is the part of a pointe shoe used to support the arch of one's foot when dancing en pointe.[1]) This style extended into the 1950s. However, during World War II, supplies were short and pointe shoes were in

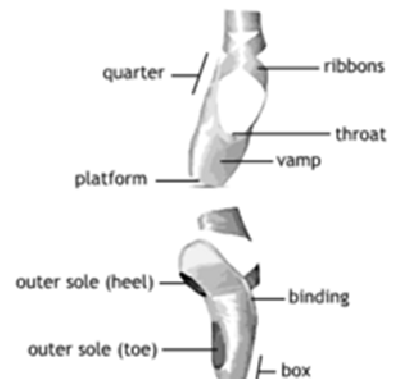


Figure 2- Pointe Shoe Parts

just as short supply. Dancers had to strengthen their feet to dance in shoes that were worn to shreds.

As shoes became harder, to cope with increasing technical demands, flexibility of shoes decreased, no longer allowing dancers to feel the floor. Experimentation with many different styles has increased over the decades resulting in a large variety of pointe shoes and styles. Though their tip is hard, it is not made of metal or steel, but simply of glue and satin.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.famousballerina.com/?tag=ballet-moves>