

Marie, Dancing Still - A New Musical

A Closer Look

Marie's World: A (Brief) History of Ballet

Ballet is a formalized style of dance that originated in the Italian Renaissance Courts of the 15th century. The word *ballet* comes from the Italian word *ballare* which means to dance. Elaborate celebrations for the noble men and women included dance and music that created a lavish spectacle for the guests.

In 1533, when Catherine de Medici—an Italian noblewoman and a great patron of the arts—married French King Henry II, she introduced dance to the French court and began to support ballet in France. Her elaborate festivals included dance, costumes, music, song, and poetry. The costumes and headdresses were large and ornate which made it difficult for the dancers to move. Unlike the dramatic leaps and lifts we see in contemporary ballet, the dances of the *ballet de cour* (court ballet) were composed of small steps, hops, slides, and turns. The official language of ballet was codified in France over the next hundred years and is the reason that so many ballet terms are French words.



King Louis XIV as the Sun King in the *Ballet de la Nuit*



La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans
- Edgar Degas

A century later, French King Louis XIV, a passionate dancer himself, popularized the dance form and even performed in many ballets, including the role of Sun King in the *Ballet de la Nuit*. In 1661, a dance academy was established in Paris and two decades later, ballet began to move from the courts to the stage. Ballet was incorporated into opera, creating a long-standing tradition of ballet-opera in France. In the mid 1700s, ballet master Jean George Noverre introduced *ballet d'action*, a style of dance that rebelled against the ballet-opera and utilized the dance to tell a story, instead of the songs. His work marked the beginnings of the narrative ballets of the 19th century.

In the first half of the 19th century, the classical ballets, including *Giselle* and *La Sylphide* gained popularity. This is also the time when ballerinas began dancing on the tips of their toes, a dance technique known as *en pointe*. In the mid 19th century, when Marie van Goethem, the dancer in *Marie, Dancing Still*, was a young aspiring ballerina, the popularity of ballet had soared in Russia. Russian choreographers and composers created new popular ballets that are still performed today, including *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. Marie van Goethem was one of many young ballerinas known as "little rats" who trained and danced in hopes of being cast in a principal role in one of these classical ballets.

Degas' World: Paris in the mid-19th Century

The second half of the 19th century was known as the Belle Epoque ("beautiful era") in Paris. It was a time of great art, architecture, and innovation. During this time some of Paris' most iconic buildings were constructed, including the Eiffel Tower, the Paris Metro, and the Paris Opera.

It was also a time of great art. Impressionist painters including Claude Monet, Eduard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Cezanne, and Mary Cassat gained popularity and were featured in lavish art exhibitions and juried art-shows such as the Salon de Paris. While Edgar Degas kept company with these artists, he rejected the term impressionist and preferred to think of himself as a realist. Degas was a master painter and was particularly skilled at painting movement. He became known for his paintings of ballet dancers and racehorse subjects.

The statue *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* is the only sculptural work that Degas exhibited while he was alive. Nearly life-size and made of wax, real hair, and cloth, the sculpture was harshly criticized by the public when it was presented in 1881. Many marveled at the realism, yet called its subject, the young dancer Marie van Goethem, ugly.

Artist and Muse

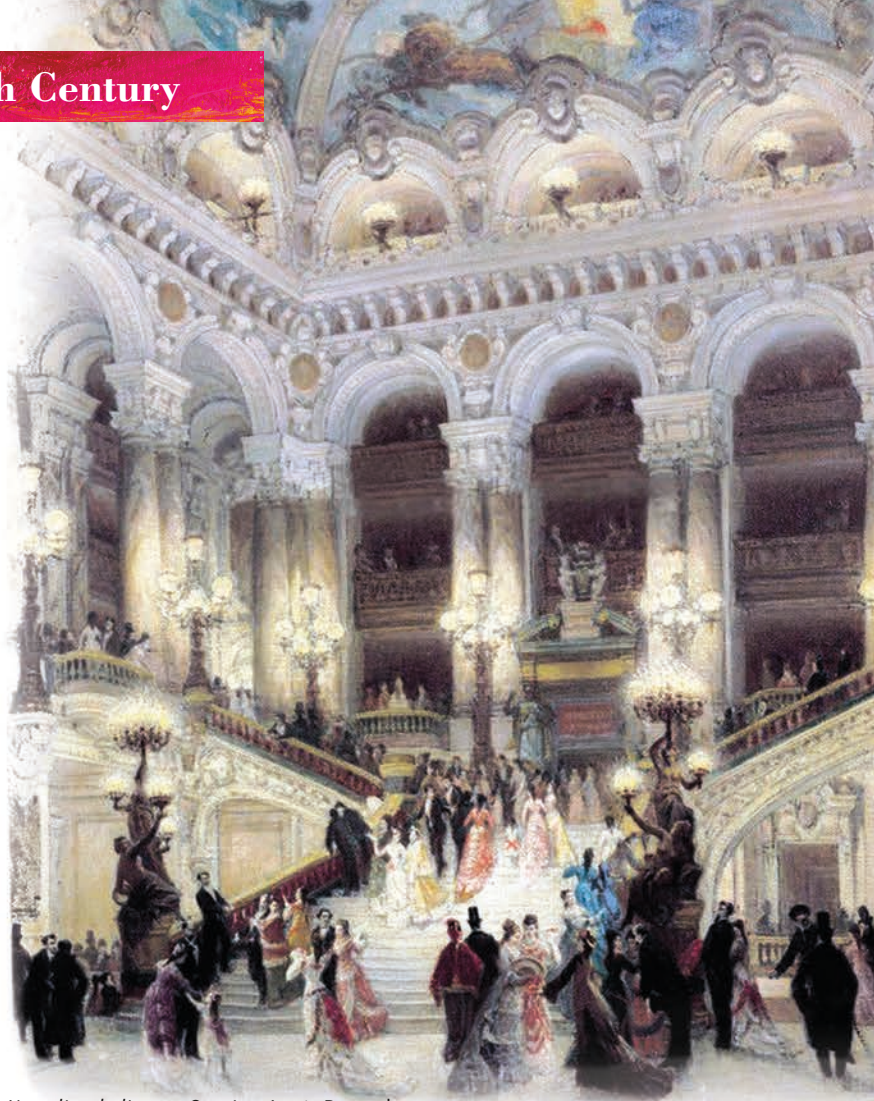
The word "muse" stems from Greek and Roman mythology and describes a Goddess who presides over the artistic disciplines of dance, music, drama, and poetry. In modern language, a muse is someone who inspires art. There has long been a close, private, and personal relationship between artists and their muses.

Often a muse is also an artist's model, but sometimes a muse is the person who sparks creativity for artists.

While in Greek and Roman mythology the muses were women, men can also be called a muse.



La Classe de danse
- Edgar Degas



L'escalier de l'opera Garnier - Louis Beroud

ART EXERCISE: FIND YOUR MUSE

PLAN Think of a person who inspires you, someone you admire, or someone you just really like. Maybe it is a family member, teacher, or a friend. Picture that person in your mind, and write down a list of words that come to you when you picture this person.

CREATE Using these words as a starting point, start to draw a picture of this person. Pay special attention to the details that make this person unique—their eyes, the shape of their face, the color of their hair. Don't worry about making the drawing perfect, just start to draw your impression of the person.

You may choose to write a song or a poem about this person. Or, you may choreograph a dance that expresses how you feel when you think of this person.

SHARE Whatever form of expression you choose, keep your muse in your mind as you create. When you're done, share your creation with your muse.