

White, women and the world of ballet

Greek fashion, muslin cloth and combustible ballerinas – Michelle Potter takes you through the history of the innocent white tutu

The ballet paintings, drawings and sculptures of the French artist Edgar Degas are known to us all. His dancers are captured in the studio, in the wings, backstage, on stage. We see them resting, practising, taking class, performing. They are shown from many angles: from the orchestra pit, from boxes, as long shots, as close-ups. They wear a soft skirt reaching just below the knee. It has layers of fabric pushing it out into a bell shape and often there is a sash at the waist, which is tied in a bow at the back. Most of his dancers also wear a signature band of ribbon at the neck. The dress has a low cut bodice with, occasionally, a short, frilled sleeve. More often than not the costume is white. White is the iconic colour of a dancers' tutu, whether long or short, and Degas captured it for us forever.

But the image of the ballet dancer in a gauzy white dress probably has its origins over a century before Degas took out his pastels, charcoal and oils to record the life of a Parisian dancer in the 1870s. We may never be sure of the exact moment when a soft, white dress became the familiar costume of the ballet dancer, but we do know that in 1734 the French dancer Marie Sallé appeared in *Pigmalion*, a work she choreographed and in which she took the role of a beautiful statue that comes to life and dances with the sculptor who created it. Sallé caused a stir because of the outrageous costume she wore – outrageous for the times that is. She shortened her skirt so that her ankles could be seen and removed parts of the restrictive ballet costume she was used to wearing so that she had more freedom to move. A French newspaper, *Le Mercure*, reported: *She dared to appear, without panniers, without skirt, without foundation, without a single ornament on her head; she was dressed, with corset and underskirt, only in a simple skirt of muslin swathed in folds in the style of a Greek statue.*

The arrival in the West of the fabric called muslin, of which Sallé's revolutionary costume was made, was an important development. Muslin, a fine, woven white cotton, was probably first made in Mosul, a city in present day Iraq. But it was also widely made in India and was imported to England in the late seventeenth century. White muslin became the fabric of choice for the fashionable woman.

Muslin was washable and it fell gracefully like the folds of the costumes on the Greek statues that were unearthed when the ruins of the ancient city of Pompeii were excavated. White clothing also indicated status. A white garment was hard to keep clean so the well-dressed woman in a pristine white outfit was clearly rich enough to have many dresses in her wardrobe. Since ballet costuming at the time followed fashion trends, white also became the colour of the new, free-flowing ballet dresses.

Soon the white, Greek-inspired dress had given way to the long, white Romantic costume as worn by the Sylphide and her attendants in *La Sylphide*. This costume was a little shorter than the one worn by Sallé but not yet as short as that worn by a Degas dancer. Many think that this long, white, bell-shaped dress made of layers of muslin, or a variety of muslin called tarlatan, was designed especially for *La Sylphide*. This is probably not so. Ivor Guest, the British dance historian, suggests that the sylph costumes may never have been designed at all. No-one has been able to find the design drawings for the sylphs from this ballet, although costume designs for the rest of the characters are in the archives of the Paris Opera. Guest and others speculate that instructions for making what was simply an unremarkable style of costume for the day may well have been just written on a piece of paper and then thrown out. We know too that this kind of costume was part of the normal classroom wear for dancers even before the premiere of *La Sylphide*. In 1820, twelve years before *La Sylphide* took the stage, the acclaimed teacher, Carlo Blasis, wrote: *The dress worn by the pupils at their lessons... is composed of bodice and skirt of white muslin, a black sash being worn around the waist.* In fact, the long white Romantic dress that eventually became an iconic part of ballet costuming probably just evolved over several years.

But if the dresses for *La Sylphide* just evolved rather than being consciously designed, the influence these costumes had on the future of ballet was immense. 'This new style brought an excess of white gauze, tulle and tarlatan', wrote the French commentator Théophile Gautier in *La Presse* in 1844. 'White was just about the only colour used.'



The widespread use of the long, white Romantic costume in the years after *La Sylphide* gave the ballet world the now familiar term 'ballet blanc' or 'white ballet'. In the Romantic 'ballet blanc', of which the second acts of *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* are the best known examples in current repertoire, rows or groupings of dancers in long white dresses embodied the spirit of the Romantic period, showing the era's interest in the ethereal and in the ideal of female beauty. We can see a twentieth-century reincarnation of the form in George Balanchine's *Serenade* (1934).

The skirt of the Romantic ballet's most famous costume was progressively shortened until by the end of the nineteenth century it looked like the tutu we know today. As this change occurred, the essentially Romantic term 'ballet blanc' was absorbed into contemporary ballet vocabulary and now the term can refer to any ballet or part of a ballet in which the major form of costuming is a white tutu: The Kingdom of the Shades scene from Marius Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877), most of the many versions of *Swan Lake* (Acts II and IV) from the late nineteenth century onwards, Serge Lifar's *Suite en blanc* (1943), George Balanchine's *Symphony in C* (1947), Harald Lander's *Etudes* (1948), Stanton Welch's *Velocity* (2003), Adrian Burnett's *Relic* (2005), and many others. *Suite en blanc* is a particularly interesting example as its costuming, which has both long and short white tutus, crosses the centuries.

But, while we celebrate this white heritage as it has been passed down to us over the centuries, we should not forget the less romantic side of the era that brought the 'ballet blanc' into being. If we look again at Degas' paintings we notice that his dancers are without exception female. The men in his ballet paintings are musicians, teachers and admirers (who were also undoubtedly lovers in a lot of cases). In fact, so great was the Romantic emphasis on the female dancer as an ideal figure that the male dancer as performer almost slipped out of view and many male roles were danced by women dressed as men. Some critics, such as Gautier's colleague Jules Janin, even went so far as to write in 1832:

In no circumstances do I recognise a man's right to dance in public. But the life of a female dancer in the nineteenth century, at least for the corps de ballet, seems to have been anything but romantic and most female dancers occupied quite a low position on the social scale. One young English dancer wrote to *The Era* in 1877 saying: *Tights, shoes and muslin dresses take over one pound to pay for out of our money. We have to do all this for nothing. We have to rehearse from ten in the morning until five, then sometimes in the evening; and then you have your own dresses to make. What time have you except when you ought to be asleep? If you are five minutes late in the morning you are fined, and at the same time you are starving, and you have to depend on your landlord to let you run on a bit, or pawn all you have got, or do something else, and that is our lot in life.*

Coupled with this was the fact that the new muslin fabric, which was so influential in the rise of the 'ballet blanc', was highly combustible. There are many documented cases of dancers dying from burns received when their costumes caught fire from the newly-invented gas lighting that illuminated the stage. The case of Emma Livry, rising young star of the Paris Opera, is probably the best known. In 1863 Livry died of burns after her costume caught fire from a side light while she was standing in the wings during a rehearsal. She was twenty.

Happily, today's female dancers perform in a safer and more secure environment than they did in the Romantic era. White does, however, continue to be the iconic colour of a classical dancer's tutu and the 'ballet blanc' remains one of the art form's most enduring styles. The term also continues to carry with it high expectations and high ideals. We look on it as a means by which the choreographer can create some of the most exciting and brilliant displays of ballet technique, and we revel in the fact that the contemporary 'ballet blanc' now usually showcases the energy and vitality of both male and female performers.

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This story was published in our souvenir programme for the triple bill *White* in 2005. Our souvenir programmes are on sale in the foyer, providing interesting background information on our productions and their history. They contain beautiful imagery of current and past productions, costumes and scenery, as well as offering a glimpse behind the scenes.

