

Pointe shoes

By Thomas Hecht



Pointe shoes, also known as toe shoes, represent an essential part of the ballet dancer's costume. The aesthetic concept of ballet calls for a long line in the leg, which is further enhanced by the nearly conical shape of a pointe shoe.

The Birth of Pointe Shoes

In the early 1700s, ballet technique developed rapidly and incorporated a new emphasis on graceful foot technique. In 1726, Marie Camargo debuted at the Paris Opéra Ballet in a performance of *Les Caractères de la Danse*, dancing in slippers instead of heeled shoes. She had also shortened her stage skirt to show off the turnout of her legs and feet. After the French Revolution in 1789, emphasis was placed on the functional aspect of stage costumes in order to facilitate the fully extended pointing of the foot during turns and jumps. Accordingly, short-soled slippers with pleats under the toes became standard footwear for ballet dancers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an increasingly challenging ballet technique, *en demi pointe*, allowed dancers to carry out multiple pirouettes and jumps. While men were identified as playing a secondary role in the performance, from this point onward ballerinas rose to the toes and contributed to a new dance aesthetic. This overt emphasis on the lightness of dancers was reflected by Marie Taglioni, who appeared *sur les pointes* in the first performance of *La Sylphide* in 1832. Some early examples of pointe shoes from this period are exhibited in the Haydn Museum in Austria.

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The introduction of pointe has related to the development of narrative ballets, allowing for and responding to ethereal elements, like the mystic sylphs in *La Sylphide* (1832), the suggestion of dramatic ethereality in *Giselle* (1841), and the enchanted swans in *Swan Lake* (1895). By the end of the nineteenth century, the pointe technique was highly developed. Being tied entirely to the growing challenge of pointe work, Pierina Legnani introduced thirty-two *fouettés* in a performance of *Swan Lake*. In 1905, toe dancing reached a new high point when Anna Pawlowa portrayed *The Dying Swan*-a three minute solo-constantly *en pointe bourrée*. Although Pawlowa is said to have used pointe shoes with wider platforms, which she was supposed to have covered up in photographs to look narrower, she brought a new dimension of pointe dance into the twentieth century.

Les Ballets Russes, which emerged from 1909 until 1929 under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev, developed ballet *en pointe* to a very high technical level. In 1931, Russian teenage ballerinas performed sixty-four *fouettés en pointe*, six unsupported pirouettes, thus setting an extremely high standard in classical ballet. Russian pointe shoes, which are said to be softer than their American or British counterparts, contributed to a growing demand for these shoes within other companies. After the end of World War I, when modern dance groups emerged, dance moved away from traditional ballet techniques and pointe work and modern dance gave rise to a new era of costuming and dance footwear, and in modern dance pointe shoes were completely abandoned.

The Making of Pointe Shoes

Traditionally, pointe shoes are sewn inside out. The shoe is only turned to the right side after the toe block has been constructed. The constructing of a pointe shoe requires a pre-cut piece of satin and lining (which will form the upper part of the shoe), and the insertion of a vamp section (which will form the sole of the shoe). Peach pink shades remain the traditional color for pointe shoes, implying the illusion of an extended leg. Pointe shoes have no right or left. The craftsman will use a special glue formula (based on a simple flour and water paste) to form the block. The shoes enter a hardening process in a hot air oven. Finally, the excess cloth is trimmed and the insole is attached with glue. The dancer herself undertakes the last step: Four pieces of ribbon are sewn onto the insides of a pair of shoes. Pointe shoe dancers usually experiment with the right placement of the ribbons in order to give maximum hold. To extend the short life of a pointe shoe, the ballerina will bake them and apply resin, floor wax, or super glue before she "breaks-in" the shoes to make them feel like a second skin. The altering caused by "breaking-in" can often shorten the life of a shoe by 50 percent.

New Technology Versus Old Traditions

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the technical requirements of ballet rapidly increased. This resulted in a demand for more elaborate

pointe shoes. A wide range of designs were on the market: from soft block shoes, which are designed for transition from soft shoes to pointe shoes, to extremely hard shoes, which give extra strength, to machine-manufactured rehearsal pointes for dance students operating on a smaller budget. About thirty-five ballet shoe manufacturers, such as Freed, Capezio, and Gaynor Minden, operate in the market, but as a result of a long history of traditional pointe shoe manufacturing with cardboard and simple flour and water paste glue, the innovative pointe shoe with unbreakable shanks produced by the U.S. ballet shoe manufacturer Gaynor Minden are ubiquitous. At the end of the twentieth century, the fashion industry picked up the idea of ribbons and look-alike pointe shoes, and designer brands such as Manolo Blahnik, Sonia Rykiel, Etro, and Blumarine have used the pointe shoe style to create "ballerina" fashion shoes.

See also [Ballet Costume](#); [Shoes](#); [Theatrical Costume](#).

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