

**A Ballerina's Dress: The Role of Design in Dance and Society**

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Choreographer George Balanchine once said, "Ballet is woman." Indeed, ballet is a dance commonly classified as a feminine art form, requiring graceful and emotional yet strong and precise execution. When ballet began to gain traction during the Ballet Russes' Parisian debut in 1909, the dance influenced numerous creative fields, most notably fashion. It was then that ballerina's signature costume, the corseted tutu, cemented the dance scene as an important part of culture and made its performer's inspirations for beauty and glamour. The Fashion Institute of Technology's, Museum exhibition *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse* depicts the idea of the ballerina as "woman of style" arranging an array of ballet-inspired French couture, American ready-to-wear designs, and footwear that further illustrates the importance the art of ballet has on the fashion industry (Mears, 2020). Common themes seen throughout the exhibit is how dance is an important part of fashion and culture, thus becoming an avenue for society to reflect on issues such as exploitation, feminism, escapism, and diversity.

### **The Dress and the Performer**

The exhibition piece that stood out the most was a romantic style corseted tutu gown by couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga in 1950. The design was inspired by the Royal Ballet's 1946 "Sleeping Beauty" costume. The costume design features an ankle-length tulle skirt with a scalloped peplum, metal embroidered satin bodice. Balenciaga's dress silhouette is long in length and flowy towards the garments bottom, designed with intent to show the dainty movements of the feet, so it helps that the dress's form echoes the feel of such dances. "Dancers are not just performing artists; their bodies are also the instruments through which the art is created" (Mackrell, 1999). Dress as it pertains to an individual's modifications to the body is

seen through a dancer's ensemble. The significance of dress to a ballerina is it personifies not only the artistry but emphasizes of the story told through the dancers' movement.

### **Elements of Design**

The Balenciaga evening gown's, soft pink color conveys sweetness and warmth. But even with a single color, it manages to show varied and contrasting textures, and even emotions through the juxtaposition of its fabrics: the sheen of the satin may express femininity, whereas the soft and flat tulle can evoke love, and the silver metal embroidery can portray an aggressive yet edgy factor. The dress's, proportions truly highlight the feminine form: the tighter bodice emphasizes the waist, then the pronounced and ruffled Basque accentuates the hips, and lastly, the long skirt shows the daintiness of the feet. The metallic embroidery is dominant throughout the garment's bodice composition and draws the viewer's eye upwards creating rhythm. Horizontal lines that separates the corseted bodice from the layered tulle skirt creates a wider appearance enlarging the frame of the garment. Balenciaga's dress depicts an informal balance with its slanted neckline and scalloped waistline. Repetition plays a part in the ballet inspired design having embroidered paisley motifs running throughout the corseted top. The art form is beauty and strength personified in dance, and all its elements—from the ballerina's pointe shoes, dress, and to her role in a performance can add to a woman's confidence (Blakemore, 2017). These visual elements are vital to design and plays a pivotal role in embellishing the dancers' movement, heightening the realism of the dance.

Aside from ballet's fashion influence, it has also impacted society. Dance is an ever evolving art form that can be seen as a reflection of the times. As seen throughout history ballet has served as an escape for the British during World War II, when ballerina Margot Fonteyn gave

joy to her countrymen through her performances (Styles, 2014). Today, society has seen an increase in the feminist movement's stride to achieve gender equality. Although ballet is dominated by women, behind the scenes it is typically directed and choreographed by men whose influence and power has made ballet one of the most intense and competitive artistic dance form performed today. Many feminists see the negative effects ballet places on women such as eating disorders, sexual harassment, and bodily injuries; while some still find empowerment in the artistry.

One can also reflect on race and racism when discussing how the dance art form influences times we face in society today. Caucasian ballerinas once dominated the industry, and it was only in 2015 that Misty Copeland became the first African American principal dancer in the American Ballet Theater. This issue testifies to the lack of diversity in the arts and shows that society still has a long way to go in order to bring down this type of structural racism. Fortunately, the exhibit showcased many works and looks from designers who are people of color, such as Noritaka Tatehana, Victor de Souza, and Virginia Johnson. Hopefully, this will open more doors bringing more people of color to the fields of ballet and fashion. In conclusion, after exploring the Fashion Institute's museum exhibit it gave me a clearer understanding of how ballet and fashion are truly intertwined, and how they are not only limited to entertainment and aesthetics, as they have also influenced culture and society. As the performer is essential to convey the ballet's meaning so is the costume, its materials and construction must fit the dance in order to help the ballerina portray her feelings to the audience.



Cristóbal Balenciaga for Hattie Carnegie, pink silk tulle and satin evening dress with silver metal embroidery, 1950. Lent by Beverley Birks. © The Museum at FIT

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