

FIT's Ballerina Exhibit Shows the Significance of the Tutu

By Meghan Keeney

Down at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, dim lighting lusts over rows of mannequins modeling costumes from different eras of ballet. Layers of tulle, pale pink hues, and Swarovski crystals fill the exhibition room while familiar soundtracks from *Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* reverb through the air. The most recent installment at FIT, *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*, celebrates ballet's never-ending influence on the fashion industry.

The exhibition opened to the public on February 11, 2020 and is set to close on April 18.

Ballerina is an extension of a book by the same name. Patricia Mears, MFIT's deputy director, contributed a majority of the book's essays and served as the curator for the exhibit. Several motivations pushed Mears to pursue a publication and exhibit on the ballerina's connection to fashion.

"Surprisingly, there had never been a large-scale exhibition nor comprehensive publication on the subject of classical ballet's influence on fashion" says Mears.

A key inspiration for Mears behind *Ballerina* was a 1933 *Vogue* article written by Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder of the New York City Ballet. In the article, Kirstein describes dances "profound" effect on all other artforms, including fashion.

“Around that time, fashion began to change rather dramatically as full-skirted, tulle gowns dominated couture collections. Kirstein’s words helped me realize that classical ballet’s impact on high fashion had finally arrived” Mears says.

Upon entering the exhibit, the viewer is transported into a jewel-embellished time capsule of ballet costumes. There are fan-favorite costumes like Balanchine’s “Jewels.” Under fake stage lights stands three separate ensembles— one red, one green, and one white—to represent the three jewels, ruby, emerald, and diamond. Each has a different length tutu to match the feel of the choreography. The ruby costume is a short skirt to match the fiery footwork. The Emerald outfit has a romantic length tutu that floats as the dancer performs an adagio, while the diamond costume has a short saucer like tutu to showcase her legs.

Moving through the endless rows of mannequins and fabric, the spectator can read each plaque alongside each piece. Many tell of ballerinas turned models and designers. One example of this is New York City Ballet dancer Carole Divet. Once she retired from her dance career, she studied and became a fashion designer.

Similarly, Marymount Manhattan College professor and former dancer, Elena Comendador, started designing costumes when a knee injury stopped her in her tracks. While at Hartford Ballet, she started working in the wardrobe department and soon found her new calling. When it comes to dance costumes, Comendador says dancers know “what other dancers need.”

As a dancer herself, Comendador knows how much mobility is needed in a costume; while she's designing, she tries on pieces to see the line and test out movement. On the topic of ballet's influence on fashion, Comendador compares the question to the old chicken and the egg problem. Dancers are inspired by the fashion industry, and designers use dancers as their muse.

However, fashion does not always mesh well with the needs of dancers. Comendador recounts of a time that designer Valentino designed costumes for NYCB:

“Valentino came in to design and he's very much into these big red dresses, and completely ignored the shape of the body” she says. He was “so concerned with the shape of the dress that you didn't see the body at all.” Instances like these reiterate the importance of having dancers, like Comendador, in the costume shop.

Outside of the theater, there are many noticeable signs of ballet's influence, the most obvious being streetwear versions of a dancer's flat ballet shoe. As seen in the first few steps inside the *Ballerina* exhibit, dancers have been wearing variations of flat shoes since ballet started in the 17th century Royal France. According to Patricia Mears, during WWII, dance shoes “were exempt from stringent, wartime restrictions.” This leads to Diana Vreeland to introduce ballet shoes as street footwear in 1941 and for Clare McCardell to use Capezio ballet flats with her collection. Since then, the street ballet flat has evolved into a hard-sole shoe, much more durable than the typical all canvas or leather ballet slippers actually worn by ballerinas.

Ballet's impact on fashion isn't just on the runway and with luxury brands. Comendador points out that Fast fashion brands like H&M sell long Tutu skirts. Furthermore, the recent obsession of 'athleisure' stems from dance rehearsal fashion.

"What we call athletic wear, is taken from dance" says Comendador.

Mears agrees with this, adding that fashionable leggings, come from choreography pieces like Balanchine's "Black and White" ballets, where dancers wore simple black or white leotards with tights, instead of the typical sparkly tutu. Wardrobe basics, like the simple legging come from ballet culture. *Ballerina: Fashion's Modern Muse*, proves that ballet, both onstage and in the studio, has and continues to inspire fashion.

Mears says, "the revered ballerina, one of fashion's modern muses, remains a cultural icon whom we embrace to the day."