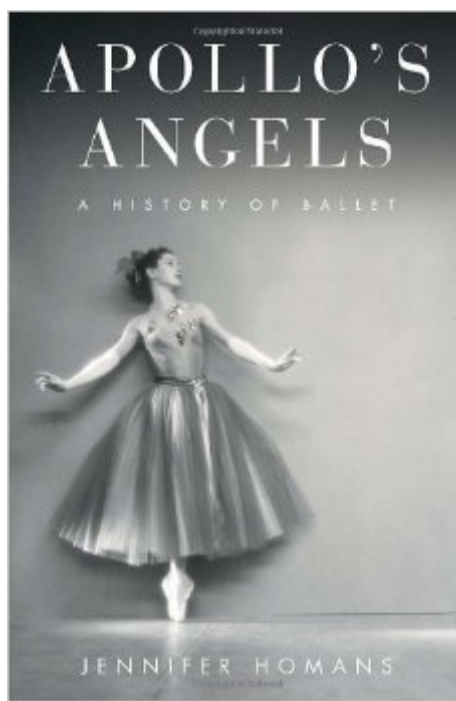


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Apollo's Angels: A History Of Ballet



Synopsis

One of The New York Times Book Review's 10 Best Books of the Year For more than four hundred years, the art of ballet has stood at the center of Western civilization. Its traditions serve as a record of our past. A ballerina dancing *The Sleeping Beauty* today is a link in a long chain of dancers stretching back to sixteenth-century Italy and France: Her graceful movements recall a lost world of courts, kings, and aristocracy, but her steps and gestures are also marked by the dramatic changes in dance and culture that followed. Ballet has been shaped by the Renaissance and Classicism, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Bolshevism, Modernism, and the Cold War. *Apollo's Angels* is a groundbreaking work—the first cultural history of ballet ever written, lavishly illustrated and beautifully told. Ballet is unique: It has no written texts or standardized notation. It is a storytelling art passed on from teacher to student. The steps are never just the steps—they are a living, breathing document of a culture and a tradition. And while ballet's language is shared by dancers everywhere, its artists have developed distinct national styles. French, Italian, Danish, Russian, English, and American traditions each have their own expression, often formed in response to political and societal upheavals. From ballet's origins in the Renaissance and the codification of its basic steps and positions under France's Louis XIV (himself an avid dancer), the art form wound its way through the courts of Europe, from Paris and Milan to Vienna and St. Petersburg. It was in Russia that dance developed into the form most familiar to American audiences: *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Nutcracker* originated at the Imperial court. In the twentieth century, émigré dancers taught their art to a generation in the United States and in Western Europe, setting off a new and radical transformation of dance. Jennifer Homans is a historian and critic who was also a professional dancer: She brings to *Apollo's Angels* a knowledge of dance born of dedicated practice. She traces the evolution of technique, choreography, and performance in clean, clear prose, drawing readers into the intricacies of the art with vivid descriptions of dances and the artists who made them. Her admiration and love for the ballet shines through on every page. *Apollo's Angels* is an authoritative work, written with a grace and elegance befitting its subject.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

From everything I heard and read prior to receiving and reading this book for myself I expected to be irritated by it. It is extremely well written and some obscure details the author brings out with great clarity. I enjoyed everything except the epilogue and even that is not as bad as what I'd feared. The author clearly thinks that the present moment in ballet is the final death knell. Print matter is supposed to be dead, the theatre is supposed to be dead, classical music is supposed to be dead... It is just too facile an assumption. Some of the points I agree with but cannot see them in such dire terms. Dancers have become universal in their technique and lots of "cookie cutter" dancers are manufactured. Some of this is very regrettable but it is the world we live in now. Globalization is not restricted in dance or anywhere else. Choreography certainly is not at the low ebb she suggests. There will not BE another Balanchine or Ashton. Get over it. So many interesting choreographers are working just now it is impossible to see enough to actually judge. Someone else will come up that grabs everyone's attention and for awhile everyone will love them and then think after that nothing they do is any good any longer. That is our fault as critics in not allowing them to develop freely and being patient in their choreographic life. Everyone wants the next great ballet!!! Great choreographers makes bad ballet sometimes but if even one is good that is enough. When Balanchine, Ashton, Tudor and the other great lions of dance were creating it was a rare opportunity that the major voices in dance were invited in to make ballets for other companies. Balanchine created only a handful of works outside NYCB and the same is true for Ashton and the Royal.

This is a lovely effort by an artist to capture the history of her art. Unfortunately, it was written by an artist and while I enjoyed the book, as a trained historian, I really did want to bash it against the walls at times. "Apollo's Angels" is billed as an expansive look at the history of ballet, but it is not that. At least, not after the first quarter or so of the book. The history presented is the party line, what dancers are taught to believe and not question. It is also quite narrow in scope, looking only at the ballet schools that toe the traditional line. The cheaper balletic entertainments and the traveling

companies that do specialty presentation are not addressed at all -- and then the author has the audacity to say that there is nothing new in ballet! Well, it's like reading only classic books and then deciding avant garde is dead. It's not good scholarship. However, the history detailing the evolution of courtly dance to the ballets that are considered classics in our own time is superb. If it's a narrow history, I will applaud the depth of the book in this one narrow area. It's fascinating to find out that ballets I know and like are much changed from their original form even when they are advertised as true classics, the stumpy speeches of dance. The author, sadly, never questions her sources or considers their bias. She wrote down the party line even when her own research should have easily shown her the logical inconsistency of it. If Italy had no balletic tradition, where were all these fabulous visiting Italian stars coming from? And, if Balanchine didn't like his dancers a particular way, why on earth do they all look the same in the included pictures. Why was there a terrible backlash against his physical ideals.

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