

Dancer on Wings:



Marie Taglioni in "La Sylphide" carte de visite.



Marie Taglioni as the quintessential ballerina of the Romantic era.

She taught Queen Mary of England how to curtsy. Victor Hugo dedicated a book to "her feet, to her wings." Yet her French ballet teacher complained, "Will that little hunchback ever learn to dance?"

Marie Taglioni was born in 1804, into a well-known Italian dancing family. Marie's father, Filippo Taglioni, was a dancer and choreographer who first appeared in female roles in Italy before he danced for Parisian audiences. Later, in 1803, he accepted the position of principal dancer and ballet master in Stockholm, Sweden. There he married his wife, Sophie, the daughter of Sweden's leading opera singer, Christopher Karsten, and of the Polish opera singer and actress Sophie Stebnowska.

The family moved to Vienna when Marie was young and then onto Paris to escape the dangers of the Napoleonic wars. Filippo did not live with his family in Paris, but worked in Vienna in the Karntnertor Theater, and as soon as he was settled, he sent for Marie. When she arrived, Filippo was appalled to see how ill-trained his daughter had been while studying ballet in Paris. While he sat and assessed her dancing abilities he reported that she would have to work harder than anyone had ever worked. Filippo took on the training of his daughter himself, making her practice six hours a day for six months, using a method much like the Cecchetti method that was to develop many years later. Filippo wanted a modest, light, delicate style and put emphasis on elevation and pointe technique.

The instant creation of a ballerina occurred over the course of the year 1821, and when he thought she was ready, Filippo took Marie back to Paris, where the prize was always the Paris Opéra, the place where the greatest dancers and dance-makers of the era plied their craft. Marie performed as a star at the Théâtre de l'Académie Royale de Musique of the Paris Opéra Ballet for the next ten years, with her father as her primary teacher and choreographer, while ballet continued to gain respect as a distinct art form, separate from opera. Onstage, Marie was known not only for her legendary grace in supernatural story ballets, but also for her excellent character dancing. In addition to her wild success in the ballet world, she danced in two operas, *Robert le Diable* and *Le Dieu et la Bayadère*, becoming perhaps the first bayadère (temple dancer) in ballet history.

In 1832, Marie created the title role in the celebrated and classic ballet *La Sylphide*, a part choreographed specifically for her by her father and which originated the style of the romantic ballet. Eugene Lami created her costume, which is now considered to be the standard romantic tutu. Marie wore a form-fitting bodice baring her neck and shoulders and a bell-shaped skirt created in a light, white material that ended mid-calf, and pink tights. Transparent fairy wings near the top of her shoulders helped to bewitch her audience. The shortened skirt was considered highly scandalous at the time, but Marie and her father thought it important to show off her excellent pointe work, which the long skirts hid. The romantic ballerina was meant to be an elusive, idealized creature: from her flowing white costume to the way in which she balanced delicately on her toes and fluttered across the stage, she was always just out of the hero's reach. Contributing to this image were Marie's signature postures and port de bras, which have come to exemplify Romantic ballet.

La Sylphide was set in romantic Scotland and told of forest fairies and witches, which greatly appealed to audiences in this romantic age of Keats and Byron. The product of her father's aesthetic ideals, Marie became the most ethereal dancer of the Romantic era, the embodiment of elusive spirituality and supernatural grace. It was she who transformed dancing on pointe from a mere technical trick into a sublime expression of poetic dance. Marie caused a sensation wherever she went and became the first ballet "superstar," winning great acclaim for her character roles. Women copied her hairstyle, and little girls bought *La Sylphide* dolls. Even Queen Victoria had a *La Sylphide* doll in her collection.

Marie gave her last performance in 1848 at age 44, after a 26-year career. Her retirement was short-lived, however, due to mismanagement of her funds, and she was forced to return to Paris in 1858. She became inspectrice de la danse at the Paris Opéra in 1859 and is credited with the inauguration of the institution's examination system. In 1860 she choreographed *Le Papillon* for her protégé, Emma Livry, who died after her skirt brushed against a gas jet near the stage

Prima Ballerina Marie Taglioni

by Denise Buese



Marie Taglioni in the dramatic lead in
"La Bayadère."



Marie Taglioni as a forest fairy in "La Sylphide."



Portrait of Marie Taglioni.

and caught fire. Emma played a butterfly who perished in flames, which must have made her death seem even more horrific to Marie.

Although she and her father were careful investors, their investments were wiped out during the Franco-Prussian war. The Romantic ballerina then lived in London where she taught classical dance and social dance to middle and upper class pupils. She found it difficult to make much money from this, so she had to teach almost until the day she died at age 80 in 1884.

Marie's legacy touches every ballet student today, because the pointe work that was a novelty in the early nineteenth century is now an integral part of ballet training and a definitive component of both classical and contemporary choreography. Her innovations increased the technical skill necessary to perform ballet, while her expressive performances ensured that pointe work, once thought of as merely an acrobatic trick, would become a crucial storytelling element as well. Marie Taglioni created a new standard of technique and artistry for ballet performers and audiences, and set the stage for today's talented professionals.

In his novel *Pendennis*, author William Makepeace Thackeray asked, "Will the young folks ever see anything so charming, anything so classic, any thing like Taglioni?"

Queen Victoria's Childhood Dolls

TOP: Doll representing Marie Taglioni in "La Sylphide," dressed by Baroness Lehzen in a short muslin dress complete with gossamer wings painted in white and gold.

LEFT: Doll representing Marie Taglioni in "William Tell," dressed in a short crimson silk skirt edged with bands of green and gold braid, a bodice of crimson and gold brocade with short sleeves of white muslin and an apron of muslin and lace.

RIGHT: Doll representing Marie Taglioni in "La Bayadère," dressed by Baroness Lehzen in scarlet stomacher, scarlet tippet, and blue velvet capote with bunches of pink roses.

From *Queen Victoria's Dolls* by Frances H. Low



MARIE TAGLIONI.

Taglioni - First Dancer of Paris

Printed in Germany, ca. 1830

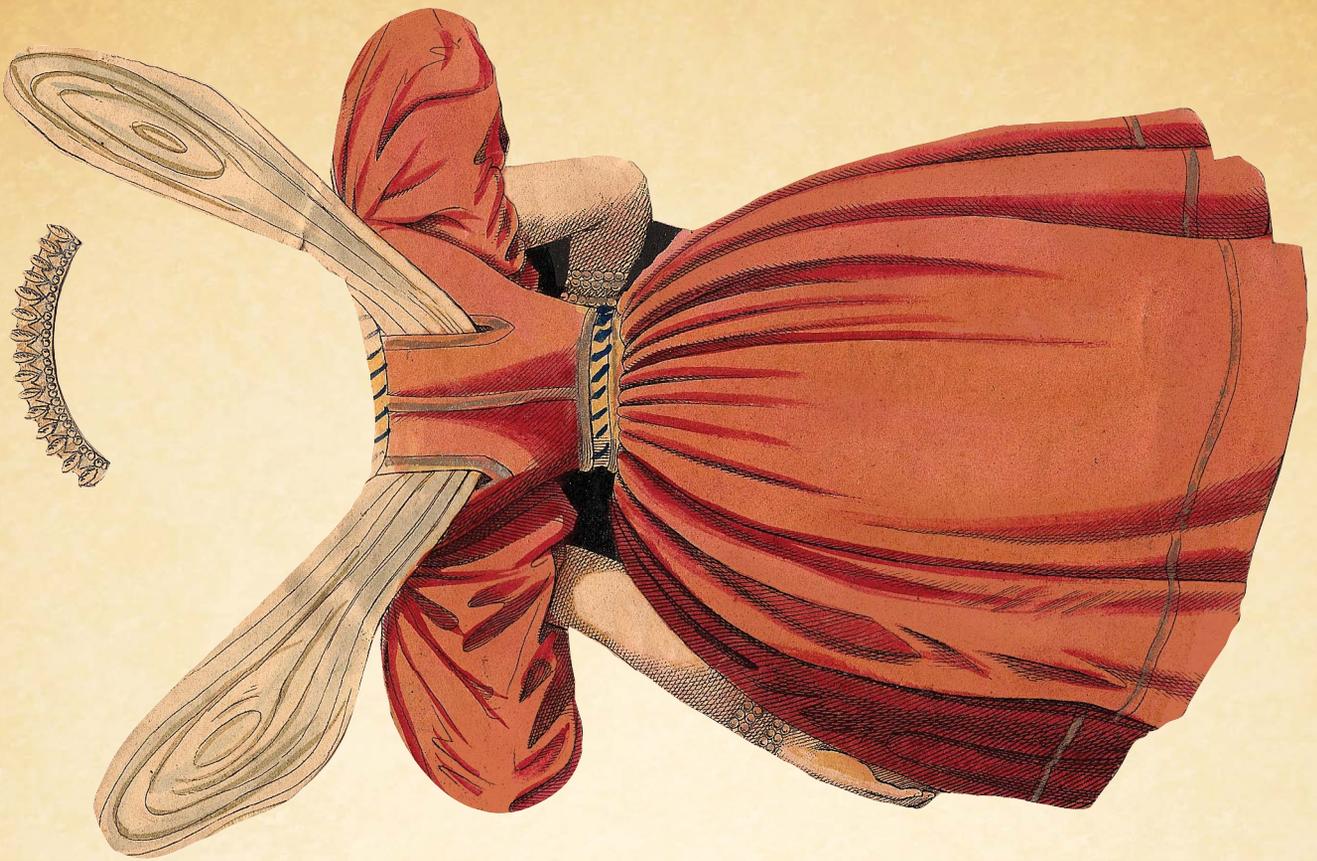
This was the first “celebrity” paper doll and represented the first ballet “superstar,” Marie Taglioni (1804-1884). Taglioni was the first ballerina to dance en pointe. Her elfin movements and her filmy costumes sparked a craze for fairyland theater, books, art and costume. The paper doll and her wardrobe are engraved and hand-colored, both front and back. Of the three known versions of the Taglioni paper doll, this is the largest (9”), and probably the first printed.

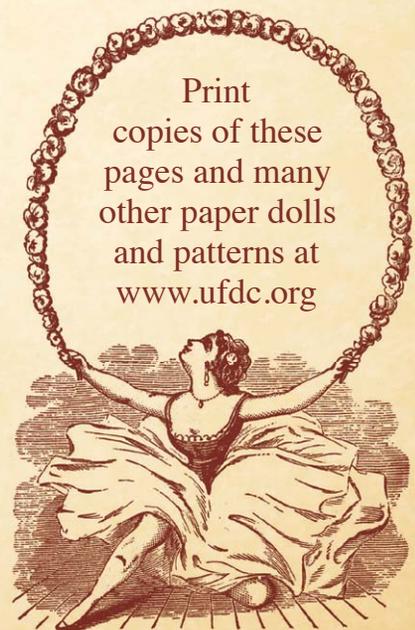
From the collection of Laurie McGill



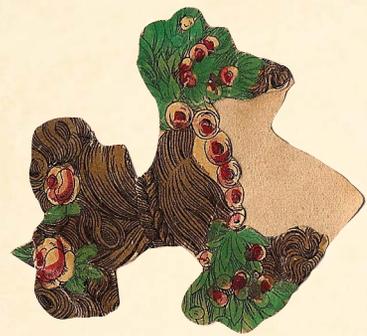








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