

Abbott Payson Usher Prize 2018

Whitney Laemmli (Columbia University)

For "A Case in Pointe: Romance and Regimentation at the New York City Ballet."

Technology and Culture 56 (January 2015): 1-27

In Laemmli's article, she focuses on the history of the pointe ballet shoe to illuminate that, while often seen as an icon of only romanticism, the shoe developed into a technology that also embodied twentieth-century, particularly American, modernist cultural values. Her work weaves together skillfully the histories of modernism, technological optimism, mass production, and labor with those of dance, artistic endeavor, the (dancer's) body, and users' experiences and practices with the pointe shoe technology. Laemmli's impressive, well-researched story places the pointe ballet shoe firmly in an extremely broad context that is enlightening not only for historians of technology but also for historians interested in a wide spectrum of sub-disciplines.

While the pointe shoe made its debut in the 1830s in France, it was the Russian-born George Ballanchine, leader of the New York City Ballet in the mid- to late-twentieth century, and creator of American ballet, who transformed it into a standard tool of the modern art. Laemmli sheds light on how this tool in Ballanchine's new style of ballet served not only to discipline the dancers' bodies but also to transform their bodies. Furthermore, Ballanchine used the shoe to groom "a new species of dancers" (p. 15). Their bodies and skills became standardized and interchangeable much like the products of Ford's assembly line. Surprisingly, Ballanchine's expectations regarding the pointe even led to labor disputes. Laemmli demonstrates clearly that Ballanchine embraced and signified the American romance with technology. She has artfully shown how this ballet shoe reveals "a great deal...about work, craft, modernism, and the aesthetic fabric of mid-century American life" (p. 23). The Abbot Payson Usher Prize Committee congratulates Whitney Laemmli for her scholarly contribution.