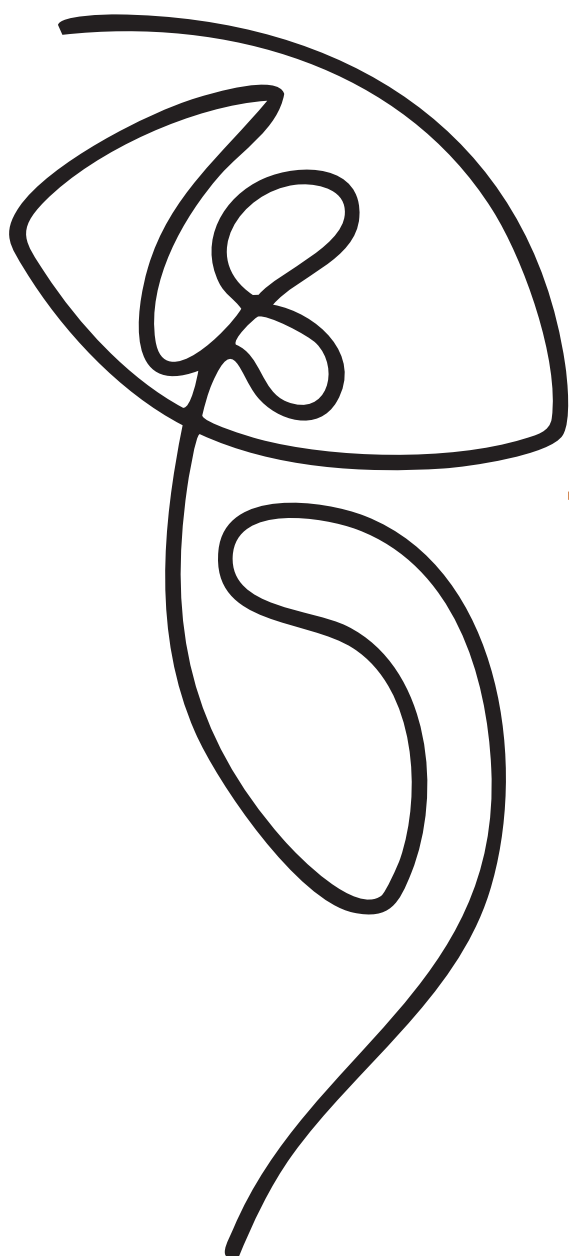


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Recensioni



Olivia Sabee

Madison U. Sowell,
Disdéri's Dancers and Carte-de-Visite Ballet Photography in the
French Second Empire
Rome, Kinetès, 2023, pp. 575

Disdéri's Dancers and Carte-de-Visite Ballet Photography in the French Second Empire is at once a catalogue of a personal collection and a scholarly monograph. Writing in the footsteps of collector Edwin Binney, whose words are touchingly echoed in the book's dedication, Sowell offers a description of the considerable collection he shares with his wife Debra Sowell. He also provides significant historical context and a scholarly argument that grounds the way the collection has been shaped. Particular attention is paid to provenance, which in this case is of special interest; unlike most *cartes-de-visite*, which contain no information about who was photographed or on what date, the Sowell images are annotated and come from the Maurice Levert collection, which includes archival or negative plate numbers, allowing for dating.

The book is divided into three parts. The first historically situates *cartes-de-visite*. Like the fictitious space of the ballet stage, the fictitious space of the photography studio provided another space in which dancers could fashion their identities; as Sowell writes, they «may be considered as posing in more than one space or place and in more than one sense».¹ The second part focuses on the emphasis on achieving *la gloire* at the Paris Opera during the period of Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte's rule (1848-1870). This segment contains numerous beautifully printed color reproductions of lithographs, providing visual documentation alongside synopses of ballets from the period, and arguing for the importance of sets and costumes in achieving political aims.

The book's third and most substantial part documents and examines individual dancers, mostly from the Paris Opera, providing biographical information as well as a plethora of iconography. As Sowell states in the book's acknowledgements, he «aims to redress a wrong by restoring complete names and personal identities to scores of female performers who suffered from popular contemporary (and often stereotypical) depictions».² On this level, the book is a tremendous resource for scholars and students of ballet during the French Second Empire. By reproducing photographs and contextualizing them, Sowell restores to historical record the lives and careers of dancers who, both during their careers and afterward, were subsumed under the category of *rat* rather than considered as artists in their own right. The situation of this overarching justification of the book's premise is

1. Madison U. Sowell, *Disdéri's Dancers and Carte-de-Visite Ballet Photography in the French Second Empire*, Rome, Kinetès, 2023, p. 41.

2. *Ivi*, p. 51.

the one area that might have been strengthened by engaging in further dialogue with some of the contemporary scholarship that calls these stereotyped depictions into question: most notable here are Emmanuelle Delattre-Destemberg's dissertation and Bénédicte Jarasse's 2017 monograph. Nevertheless, the book's strength is the depth and detail of its primary source research, based on *livrets* and contracts (though the contracts are held at the Archives nationales in Pierrefitte, not at the Bibliothèque Musée de l'Opéra, as the book indicates) as well as baptismal records, in addition to the numerous varieties of iconography.

The book's third part opens with a reproduction of a *carte mosaïque*, another technique patented by Disdéri. This image merges the portraits of 68 dancers from the Paris Opera, placing Marie Taglioni at its pinnacle and other star dancers close by. From here, Sowell offers a sort of dictionary of dancers, from Virginie Blache Alexandre (1845-1901) to Brunette Wal (1844-1911). While star dancers number among those documented by Sowell, in the spirit of his aim to restore the careers of those lesser known in the annals of history, I will briefly mention three dancers who are not household names:

The entry on Marie Balson (c. 1846-?) epitomizes the challenges in documenting the life of dancers known as *rats* at the Opera but nevertheless succeeds in tracing certain aspects of Balson's career and life. It opens with a commentary on the "witty but patently sexist article" by Henri Chabrilat from the *Journal amusant* in 1868. Here, Sowell locates Balson among the Opera's *quadrilles*; Chabrilat refers to her simply by the color of her hair. Sowell's research reveals Balson's regular raises and her promotion through the ranks of the *quadrilles*. The single *carte-de-visite* of Balson in the Sowell collection, reprinted here, shows her in what is likely a costume for one of Prince Djalma's *suivantes* in the Marie Taglioni's ballet *Le Papillon* (1860). Health problems seem to have derailed Balson's career or perhaps even led to her death; 1868 letters from her father and a doctor document that she was anemic, and following the date of the letters, documentation of her dancing ceases to appear.

The life of Irène-Nathalie Jousse (1842-before 1922), demonstrates an alternative path to advancement than that of the *vedette*; Jousse, who joined the Opera's ranks at age 13, was promoted to the "corps de coryphées mimes") in 1863, where she remained for the final three years of her career. Jousse performed in numerous roles *en travesti*, and while never appearing as a soloist, she occasionally appeared in small groups. In addition to her 12-year performance career, Jousse was a mother; three of her children died at birth or shortly thereafter, one survived to adulthood. Her first two pregnancies occurred during her employment at the Opera and the latter two afterward.

The entry on Félix Kschesinski (1821-1905), father of the *prima ballerina assoluta* Mathilda Kschesinska (1872-1971), underscores the transnational movement of dancers and choreographers that propelled innovation in nineteenth-century ballet but also how stereotypes related to national origin shaped dance criticism. Kschesinski, born in Warsaw, where he became a full-time employee of the Warsaw Ballet in 1838 before moving to St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater, specialized in character dances. During a visit to Paris in the summer of 1862, one critic, whom Sowell quotes, criticized his dancing as excessive, and that as a result, argued that "art [was] lost."

The volume closes with a guide to identifying the legs that Disdéri reproduced in

another *carte mosaïque*, this one entitled *Les Jambes de l'Opéra*.³ The image essentializes the dancers, “reduced to legs without heads or busts.” Yet by pairing the small white painted letters with dancers’ names, Sowell closes the volume with a gesture that speaks to his overall intention—to reconnect the anonymized dancers of the Paris Opera’s corps de ballet with their names and their personal and artistic histories, restoring them to their place within the historical narrative of the Paris Opera, of cultural, political, and artistic priorities under Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, of the burgeoning technological and artistic advances by which Disdéri made his name, the history of labor in nineteenth-century Europe, and (in many cases) women’s history.

3. Ivi, p. 568.



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