

Martha Graham

Dancer and Choreographer – Pioneer of Modern Dance

Martha Graham was an American dancer and choreographer regarded as one of the foremost pioneers of modern dance and is widely considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. Martha Graham invented a new language of movement, and used it to reveal the passion, the rage and the ecstasy common to human experience. She danced and choreographed for over seventy years, and during that time was the first dancer ever to perform at The White House, the first dancer ever to travel abroad as a cultural ambassador, and the first dancer ever to receive the highest civilian award, the Medal of Freedom. In her lifetime she received honors ranging from the key to the City of Paris to Japan's Imperial Order of the Precious Crown.

Martha Graham was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, a small town that is now part of Pittsburgh. She didn't take up dancing until she was in her late teens.

As soon as Martha had completed high school she was enrolled at the Cumnock School, a junior college where she could study liberal arts as well as the arts. In 1916, at the age of twenty, Martha enrolled with the Denishawn Dance School, studying under Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. She was told that she was too old to begin to dance and that her body did not have the correct build for it. But she persevered. Martha proved to be a quick study with an impressive attention to detail and she worked incredibly hard to train her body to great precision.

Martha Graham toured with the Denishawn company for years before she moved to New York in 1923 where she had some success as a dancer on Broadway with the Greenwich Village Follies. Although, she was able to make an impressive sum of money, she also felt dissatisfied. At the age of thirty she accepted a teaching position at the Eastman School of Music in New York, where she directed a newly formed dance department. She enjoyed having her own students to teach but she chafed against the limits and the bureaucracy of the school. She returned to New York City and began to teach dance out of a classroom in the back of Carnegie Hall. During this time she began to choreograph some of her earliest dances. In early 1926 she gave the first performance of her own dance company. This was an important milestone for the young dancer but even she recognized her early performances as derivative of her work with Denishawn. As she continued to choreograph, her dances increasingly became her own, each one pushing herself and the art form further.

Her early dances were not generally well-received by audiences who were not sure what they were seeing. The works were spare, powerful and modern, devoid of the dreaminess and glamour of the works of the previous decades. The dances were often based on strong, precise movement and pelvic contractions, and were charged with beauty and emotion. It was a stirring period of revolution for Graham in which she would begin to establish a new language of dance which was different from everything that preceded it and which would leave everything that came after it indelibly changed.

In 1926, the Martha Graham Centre of Contemporary Dance was established. One of her students was heiress Bethsabée de Rothschild with whom she became close friends. When Rothschild moved to Israel and established the Batsheva Dance Company in 1965, Graham became the company's first director, groomed its first generation of dancers, and created dances for the company.

In 1936, Martha Graham made her defining work, "Chronicle", which signalled the beginning of a new era in contemporary dance. The dance brought serious issues to the stage for the general public in a dramatic manner.

Graham actually despised the term "modern dance" and preferred "contemporary dance." She thought the concept of what was "modern" was constantly changing and was thus inexact as a definition.

For a majority of her life Graham resisted the recording of her dances and would not allow them to be filmed or photographed. She believed the performances should exist only live on the stage and in no other form. At one point she even burned volumes of her diaries and notes to prevent them from being seen.

Those who had the privilege of seeing her perform in her prime have attested to her precision, form and mesmerizing brilliance as a dancer on stage. Though she is arguably one of the most important choreographers in the history of dance (and perhaps one of the most important artists of the 20th century) she always said that she preferred to be known and remembered as a dancer.

She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976 by President Gerald Ford.

In 1998, Time Magazine listed her as the "Dancer of the Century" and as one of the most important people of the 20th century.

Martha Graham choreographed until her death from pneumonia in 1991 at the age of 96.