**Bennington School of the Dance (1934-1942)**

**Summary**

Bennington School of the Danceserved as a highly influential training program, creative laboratory and performance venue for early modern dance. Founded by Martha Hill, Mary Josephine Shelly and Bennington College President Robert Devore Leigh in 1934 on the campus in southwestern Vermont, the school thrived over nine, six-week summer sessions from 1934 to 1942, including one term held at Mills College in California in 1939. Designed to promote and consolidate knowledge of the nascent art form of American modern dance, the Bennington School also became an incubator for the production and presentation of new works by modern dance’s most distinguished exponents: choreographers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Hanya Holm were among its earliest and most consistent faculty members. Dance critic John Martin, composer and advisor Louis Horst, and stage and lighting designer Arch Lauterer were also important faculty members. The program’s guiding philosophy proposed that to be viable, a dance education must be associated with exposure to its best artists, sharply distinguishing itself from the competing model formulated by Margaret H’Doubler at the University of Wisconsin, where the study of dance was viewed as an educational end in itself. The Bennington School gave way to the Connecticut College School of Dance and eventually the American Dance Festival.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

The Bennington School of the Dance arose on the campus of Bennington College, a small liberal arts college located a few miles from the town of Bennington, Vermont. Founded in 1932 as a private college for women, the school championed the ideals of John Dewey and the rising progressive education movement. Among the distinguishing characteristics of Bennington’s educational philosophy, the school espoused a connection between learning and doing, eschewed a required curriculum, encouraging learners to pursue individual trajectories, and obliged students to enrich their academic studies with a two-month fieldwork term off-campus each winter.

In keeping with its innovative educational platform, Bennington was among the first U.S. colleges to fully integrate the visual and performing arts as equals among other established subjects in its liberal arts curriculum. Prior to the opening of the school, president-elect Leigh had solicited the employment of Martha Hill, a young faculty member at New York University and former member of the Martha Graham Dance Company, to build a dance program at the college. Hill’s deeply held beliefs about the importance of the emerging field of modern dance aligned with Bennington’s progressive educational agenda, yielding the summer experience that gathered preeminent dance artists of the day as faculty and served to disseminate their aesthetic principles and secure their artistic reputations. Over its nine sessions, the program attracted more than 1,000 students from a wide geographical distribution. In keeping with the ethos of an elite private women’s college, the Bennington School drew mostly white, college-educated women. Around two-thirds were open-minded educators who would return to seed the discipline in their respective locations and institutions. The remaining third were aspiring dance artists, many of whom would become choreographers in their own right or join the expanding companies of the choreographers featured at the school.

The summer sessions at Bennington served an important function in bringing together the somewhat factious collection of strong-minded aesthetic rivals in the emerging field, placing them into contact within a bucolic environment that reduced the stresses of making headway under the financial and spatial constraints of New York City. The school, which was self-supporting and not part of a degree program, not only paid the artists a salary, but also provided food, lodging and spaces for rehearsal and performance. In this way, Bennington School of the Dance consolidated the emerging art form through both the cross-fertilization of ideas and through the recognition that these artists, single-minded though they remained, shared a common goal in advancing the ideals and building a patronage for the new modernist form of dance in the United States.

Bennington organizers Hill and Shelly viewed modern dance as a point of view rather than a codified system, and by bringing together many of its chief progenitors, created an environment in which difference was acknowledged as a critical element of the new dance, yet one in which individual voices could flourish as part of a coherent movement. Abiding modernist values shared by the program’s participants included a belief in dance as an independent art form, an emphasis on formal concerns, a commitment to experimentation, and an allegiance to the primacy of the individual voice. The Bennington curriculum featured courses in the various developing modern techniques, production and music for dance. Moreover, it was here that dance composition, taught by Horst and Hill, found its early footing as an academic subject of study, as did dance history and criticism, taught by *New York Times* dance critic, John Martin. With so many physical education teachers participating in the summer sessions, a network that became known as ‘the gymnasium circuit’ evolved, providing touring opportunities for the primary artists and further dispersing the Bennington ethos. Thus, the structure and curriculum of the Bennington School of the Dance became a blueprint often reproduced in higher education, one that would persist until the later decades of the twentieth century.

**Legacy**

During the second summer of the program in 1935, the school began to use the term ‘festival’ in its publicity announcements, which pointed to the presentation of new works that would become a hallmark of the summer sessions. Forty-two premieres were presented during the Bennington summers, most of them involving original musical compositions. Many new dances that would become a part of the modernist canon were created and premiered here, adding to the growing modern dance repertoire and including such iconic works as Graham’s *American Document* (1938) and *Letter to the World* (1940), Humphrey’s *Passacaglia in C minor* (1938), Holm’s *Trend* (1937)and Weidman’s *Quest* (1936). In addition, the festival tenet of the summer sessions would become the guiding framework for the educational and presenting institutions that succeeded the Bennington School of the Dance as it evolved into the American Dance Festival, first at Connecticut College (1948-1978) and then at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

By the time the Bennington School of the Dance had ended, the once insurgent modern dance had gained wider acceptance as a serious subject in higher education, in print media and in the public consciousness. Its primary artistic practitioners had established their own careers, and its founders had made their respective marks in the educational realm, with Martha Hill adapting the Bennington template first at Connecticut College and then at the Julliard School. An extraordinary roster of students, teachers and artists who had passed through the program expanded the Bennington School’s sphere of influence into circles that still resonate in the present.

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**References and Further Reading**

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**Digital Collections**

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**Paratexts**

Martha Graham and Company at Bennington, 1934; Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival

[http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures/bennington572.jpg](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=cfI9vpKHt0KFU1AJyGvhdN4E5dfDGdEIwJqs91NIrAx0RJSocgDltiIuUTUmmg-fJ7Yx3zn6JOw.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.danceheritage.org%2ftreasures%2fbennington572.jpg" \t "_blank)

Martha Hill teaching at Bennington in 1937; student is Betty Ford; in the public domain

[http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/images/avproj/pop-ups/H0069-1.html](https://collaborate.northwestern.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=cfI9vpKHt0KFU1AJyGvhdN4E5dfDGdEIwJqs91NIrAx0RJSocgDltiIuUTUmmg-fJ7Yx3zn6JOw.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.fordlibrarymuseum.gov%2fimages%2favproj%2fpop-ups%2fH0069-1.html" \t "_blank)