**Modern Dance, flourished 1930-1980 in the United States**

**Summary**

The term ‘modern dance’ came into common usage in the United States in the 1930s to describe a dance practice that opposed the inherited conventions of ballet and the popular conventions of jazz and tap dance. The form originated from many of the same currents that shaped the Central European movement of Ausdruckstanzin the 1910s and 1920s—the emergence of female soloists like Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman who created signature movement languages; an interest in new forms of physical culture, especially among women; parallel developments in the other arts. From 1930 to 1980 New York City was the center of modern dance and home to its leading artists, including Martha Graham*,* Doris Humphrey, José Limón*,* and MerceCunningham. Although artists and critics scripted a US-specific genealogy for modern dance during this half-century, the practice actually was in global circulation throughout these decades, as parallel movements developed in Canada, Great Britain, Australasia, Israel, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

**Exposition**

During the years before the First World War, ‘modern dancing’ in Anglo-American usage connoted the explosion of new social and theatrical dance practices after the turn of the century—from Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and the soloists Anna Pavlovaand Isadora Duncan to the gentrification of ragtime dancing promulgated by Vernon and Irene Castle.[[1]](#endnote-1) Not until the late 1910s and 1920s did ‘modern dance’ delimit a genre of theatrical dance—a usage that first appeared in German as one of several terms critics used to refer to Ausdruckstanz.[[2]](#endnote-2) It was *New York Time’s* critic JohnMartin’s extended definition of the term in his 1933 manifesto on *The Modern Dance* that solidified subsequent understandings of the term.

Based on lectures delivered in 1931-32, Martin derived his definition from what he had observed of ‘the leading dancers of the day, both American and European.’ (2) Having spent time in Germany during the 1920s, he was familiar with German dancers and critics, and at this point he considered Mary Wigman the ‘outstanding practitioner’ (59), who had advanced beyond the ‘free, personal expression of emotional experience’ (4) he attributed to Isadora Duncan. Emphasizing that ‘each dance makes its own form’ (33), he dwelled on the components of what he termed ‘essential’ (5) or ‘significant form’ (84)—designed in terms of space, time, and dynamism and conveying intention through the kinaesthetic bond between dancer and spectator. ‘The modern dance is not a system,’ Martin wrote, ‘it is a point of view’ (20).

Within a few years, however, Martin had shifted his allegiance toward American dancers. In his 1936 volume, *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance*, Martin reversed his valuations of Duncan and Wigman, now considering the American-born Duncan as influential as, if not more influential than the German-born Wigman. He considered Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman the most gifted of the dancers associated with the BenningtonSchool of the Dance, a training venue, he noted, ‘though still young is already the most important dance institution in the country’ (175-76). Among independent and younger artists, Martin singled out Helen Tamiris*,* Anna Sokolow, José Limón, and Jane Dudley*.* He also pointed to the Workers Dance League, the New Dance Group, and the Federal Dance Project as encouraging signs that the new movement of modern dance had come into its own in the United States. In other words, Martin thoroughly nationalized the movement by the mid-1930s, and many subsequent histories reiterated his reconfiguration of ‘modern dance’ as decidedly American.[[3]](#endnote-3)

In contrast to Ausdruckstanz, which had emphasized the improvisational exploration of movement qualities as a primary teaching method, American modern dance emphasized the development of codified movement vocabularies. This perhaps reflected the pragmatism of American culture, a quality noted by dancers trained in Ausdruckstanz who emigrated to the U.S. But there were other influences at work as well, for in the U.S. context modern dance had to compete with ballet, newly popular through the tours of successor companies to the Ballets Russes, and with jazz and tap, forms that reached their artistic heights at mid-century. Advocates of modern dance sought to create an alternate form of high art dance, and for this reason they promoted codified movement vocabularies akin to ballet rather than the improvisational arts of jazz, tap, and Ausdruckstanz.[[4]](#endnote-4)

That modern dancers typically differentiated their practice from jazz and tap, forms inflected by Africanist diaspora forms, is telling. In his survey of *America Dancing*, Martin notes the ‘excellences’ of tap dancers Fred Astaire and Bill Robinson (13), but he considers tap and other Africanist forms still at the ‘folk stage,’ ‘potentially great art…still waiting for the creative artist to use them consciously for their expressional value’ (36). Yet he overlooks the very artists who were attempting to do exactly that during the early 1930s—Hemsley Winfield*,* Edna Guy*,* CharlesWilliams*,* and Asadata Dafora*—*all of whom had staged works that realized Martin’s vision of a new and distinctively American dance. From the perspective of the present, it is clear that Martin conceptualized modern dance in terms of whiteness, investing the art of Euro-American choreographers with the complementary qualities of universality and individuality while assuming that works by choreographers of colour represented a collective racial or ethnic identity.

Over subsequent decades, choreographers from Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus to Talley Beatty*,* Janet Collins*,* Donald McKayle, Alvin Ailey, and Eleo Pomare disrupted Martin’s assumptions, widely held by critics and artists of the time, and contributed to the rich and multidimensional repertoire of Black dance. Yet it took a while for scholars to catch up with the artists and write intercultural histories of modern dance.[[5]](#endnote-5) Over the last decade, scholars have reexamined the contributions of artists such as Michio Ito and Uday Shankar to American modern dance and queried the divide between modern dance and ‘ethnic dance’ (a term that came into common usage around 1940).[[6]](#endnote-6) Indeed, scholars now recognize how American modern dance engaged in a complex reconfiguration of Asian, indigenous, and African diasporic forms, often without crediting the artists who had originated these forms.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Scholars also have probed how American modern dance performed gender and sexuality onstage. The career of Martha Graham provides an interesting example. From 1926 to 1938 Graham led an all-female company, before inviting Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham to join her ensemble; thereafter she created works for a mixed-sex company. Did the addition of men disrupt what many commentators have seen as the feminist politics of her all-female ensemble by recasting female performers in Jungian dramas that opposed the principles of masculinity and femininity? Or did the Jungian dramas continue to place female subjectivity and agency centerstage, while also providing a closet for male dancers during an ear of heightened homophobia in American culture?[[8]](#endnote-8) There are no simple answers to these questions, and similarly complex dynamics marked the works of other choreographers as well.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Beginning in the 1930s, modern dance centralized in New York City, although there were a few notable artists who based their careers elsewhere—Lester Horton in Los Angeles, Sybil Shearer in Chicago, and Anna Halprin in San Francisco. However, the major training venues were in New York City—studios led by Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm, later by Katherine Dunham, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais, Paul Taylor*,* and Alvin Ailey. An active exchange developed between these New York studios and dance programs in colleges and universities across the country: faculty typically had performed in one of these companies and trained at its affiliated studio in New York, acquiring expertise in a marketable style and technique. Their most talented students aspired to join one of these companies, perhaps later taking up a teaching position themselves. In the United States, colleges and universities have served as a major source of patronage for modern dancers, who often toured from campus to campus on what became known as ‘the gymnasium circuit.’

Modern dance in New York City took a formalist turn after the Second World War. In tandem with their colleagues in the visual arts, choreographers Alwin Nikolais, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, and Paul Taylor reacted against the representational aesthetic of their predecessors. In dance terms, this reaction against Bennington choreographers’ insistence that every movement have intention and meaning led to chance operations, multimedia spectacle, and what scholars have called an objectivist aesthetic.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the visual arts the formalist turn occasioned critic Clement Greenberg’s scripting of modernism as a progression toward medium specificity—a theory of modernism that took hold across the arts during the years of the Cold War. In the Greenbergian account of dance, successive generations of choreographers came closer and closer to the essential dimensions of dance, eliminating dependence on music, narrative, and design. This was how Jill Johnston narrated the history of modern dance in her 1967 essay ‘The New American Modern Dance,’ positioning Judson Dance Theater as the latest advance toward medium specificity, drawing parallels between Merce Cunningham and Jackson Pollock, and between Yvonne Rainer and Andy Warhol. Recalling John Martin’s manifesto on *The Modern Dance*, Johnston summarizes the ‘idea’ of Judson ‘that each dance is a new problem with its own formal requirements.’[[11]](#endnote-11)

Although Rainer on occasion used the term ‘post-modern’ during the Judson years, the term did not come into widespread usage until around 1980.[[12]](#endnote-12) In that year Sally Banes published *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, historicizing Judson Dance Theater as the origins for ‘a post-modern aesthetic…that expanded and often challenged the range of purpose, materials, motivations, structures, and styles in dance’ (15). Whereas Johnston had seen Judson choreographers as the most recent innovators within modern dance, Banes believed that the Judson choreographers she profiled—Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, and Lucinda Childs—had ‘succeeded in breaking...and transcending’ the Greenbergian logic of dance modernism (19).

After 1980 other changes became apparent in US dance culture. Jazz and ballet were no longer off-limits to modern dance choreographers, as became evident in the work of Twyla Tharp, who embraced both forms within her ‘reinvention of modern dance.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Following ballet giant George Balanchine, modern dancer Mark Morris created danced equivalents to classical music.[[14]](#endnote-14) Meredith Monk blurred earlier boundaries between dance, music, and theatre, while Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Jawole Zollar blurred earlier boundaries between Black dance and modern dance.[[15]](#endnote-15) Improvisation resurfaced as an artistic strategy.[[16]](#endnote-16) At the same time the funding model of a choreographer-led company and New York-based studio became less sustainable than it was at mid-century. Thus major choreographers moved in and out of the academy, accepted commissions from and licensed their dances to other repertory companies, turned to writing and curating as well as choreographing. Dance programs in colleges and universities sought to incorporate techniques other than modern dance in their curricula. And New York no longer seemed the centre of the dance universe, as contemporary companies from abroad toured boldly experimental works, including *Butoh*, Tanztheater, revisions of South Asian dance inspired by Chandralekha and Shobana Jeyasingh, and revisions of African dance inspired by Rex Nettleford and Germaine Agogny.

Works by these artists, among many others, made clear that although advocates like John Martin nationalized modern dance at mid-century, dance modernism has moved across national boundaries since its earliest days. Parallel movements across the Americas developed in tandem with modern dance in the United States: many founders of these movements studied for a period of time in New York, and then returned home to spur the development of nationally distinct practices of dance modernism. This was true of Saida Gerrard, Nancy Lima Dent, and Françoise Sullivanin Canada; Waldeen in Mexico; Beryl McBurnie in Trinidad and Tobago; Ivy Baxter in Jamaica; and Ramiro Guerra in Cuba. And American dancers made notable contributions to the development of dance modernism in other nations: Anna Sokolow impacted developments in Mexico and Israel, Jane Dudley in Great Britain. This list does not begin to do justice to the global circulation of dance modernism that scholars are beginning to map.[[17]](#endnote-17) What remains at issue is how modern dance crafted the imagined communities of nationalism from the transnational circulation of artists, ideas, and practices.

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Notes

1. J.E. Crawford Flitch’s *Modern Dancing and Dancers* (1912) surveys ‘the modern renaissance of dancing’ (203), citing ‘the revival of classical dancing’ (103) by Isadora Duncan and Maud Allan, the repertory of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, even the ‘revival of the Morris dance’ (203) by Cecil Sharp. That same year Caroline and Charles Caffin published *Dancing and Dancers of Today: The Modern Revival of Dancing as an Art,* profiling Duncan, Allan, Ruth St. Denis, Anna Pavlova, and Grete Wiesenthal, along with the Ballets Russes and the revival of folk dance in New York public schools. Two years later Irene and Vernon Castle published *Modern Dancing* (1914), a primer on how to properly execute the One Step, the Castle Walk, and the tango, the origins of what we now call modern ballroom dancing. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Critic Hans Brandenburg introduced the term ‘modern dance,’ constructing a genealogy from Isadora Duncan, Grete Wiesenthal, Ruth St. Denis, Clotilde von Derp, and Alexander Sacharoff to Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman in his survey *Der Moderne* *Tanz*, a volume that went through three editions from 1913 to 1921. Yet the term ‘der moderne Tanz’ did not become standard usage over the course of the 1920s, when many alternate terms were used. See entry on Ausdruckstanz. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Dance Observer* (1934-1964), the house organ for modern dance founded by Louis Horst, also played a crucial role in Americanizing the movement. Nationalized histories include M. Lloyd (1949) *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, New York: Alfred Knopf; S. J. Cohen, ed. (1966) *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; M. Siegel (1979) *The Shapes of Change: Images of American Dance*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin; and J. Foulkes (2002) *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. In the Americanized narratives of modern dance, Denishawn—the school and company led by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn from 1915 to 1931—played a crucial role as an incubator for the movement, since it was where Graham, Humphrey, and Weidman launched their professional careers.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For accounts of how German-trained dancers adapted to the U.S. dance scene in the 1930s, see T. Randall (2012) ‘Hanya Holm and an American *Tanzgemeinschaft,’* in *New German Dance Studies*, eds. S. Manning and L. Ruprecht, Chicago: University of Illinois Press: 79-98 and S. Manning (2007) ‘*Ausdruckstanz* across the Atlantic,’ in *Dance Discourses: Keywords in Dance Research*, eds. S. Franco and M. Nordera, London and New York: Routledge, 46-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Inspired by the Black Arts movement, the historiography of Black dance, written from the 1960s through the 1980s, incorporated choreographers from Winfield to Pomare within a continuum of social and theatrical dance forms. Around 1990 artists and critics critiqued the Black Arts historiography for overly essentializing Black identity and in so doing opened the way for more integrated histories. See the entry on Black dance for changing usages of the term. Also see B. Dixon Gottschild (1996) *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Westport: Greenwood Press; J. Perpener (2001) *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press; T. F. DeFrantz, ed. (2002) *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press; S. Manning (2004) *Modern Dance, Negro Dance:* *Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Y. Wong (2009) ‘Artistic Utopias: Michio Ito and the Trope of the International,’ in *Worlding Dance*, ed. S.L. Foster, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 144-62 and R. Rossen (2014) *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and* *Postmodern Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See J. Shea-Murphy (2007) *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; A. Kraut (2008) *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; P. Srinivasan (2012) *Sweating Saris:* *Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See R. Burt (1995) *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, London: Routledge, 110-18; S. Banes (1998) *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage*, New York: Routledge, 157-67; R. Kowal (2010) *How to do Things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar* *America*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 57-72; M. Franko (2012) *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work*, New York: Oxford University Press; V. Thoms (2013) *Martha Graham: Gender and the Haunting of a Dance Pioneer*, Bristol: Intellect. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See essays by S.L. Foster, J.L. Foulkes, and S. Manning in J. Desmond (2001) *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In her 2006 study *A Game for Dancers: Performing* *Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* Gay Morris uses the term ‘objectivist.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Johnston’s essay is much anthologized. This quotation comes from the reprint in *Salmagundi* no. 33-34 (spring-summer 1976), 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In her 1974 volume documenting her work to date, Rainer only once uses the term ‘post-modern’ (77). See Y. Rainer (1974) *Work 1961-73*, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See M. Siegel (2006) *Howling Near Heaven: Twyla Tharp and the Reinvention of Modern Dance,* New York: St. Martin’s Press. Cf. the subtitle of R. Copeland (2004) *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*, New York: Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See J. Acocella (1993) *Mark Morris*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See D. Jowitt, ed. (1997) *Meredith Monk*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; B. T. Jones (1995) *Last Night on Earth*, New York: Pantheon Books; R. Lemon (2000) *Geography: Art/Race/Exile*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; R. Lemon (2004) *Tree: Belief/Culture/Balance*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; R. Lemon (2013) *Come Home Charley Patton*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; N. George-Graves (2010) *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. S. Foster (2002) *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The first comprehensive attempt to trace the global circulation of modern dance and related practices is found in S. Ross and A.C. Lindgren, eds., (2015) *The Modernist World*, London: Routledge. The country entries in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. S.J. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) chronicle dance modernism nation by nation. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)