**Graham, Martha** **(b. 11 May 1894, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; d. 1 April 1991, New York City)**

**Summary**

In a career as dancer and choreographer that spanned the twentieth century, Martha Graham made major contributions to modernist choreography, dramaturgy, performance, costume design, and dance technique. Her illustrious collaborators—among them Aaron Copland, William Schuman, Erick Hawkins, Isamu Noguchi, Bertram Ross, and Barbara Morgan—underscored her gift of discerning what was necessary to her success. Indeed, her work was seminal in redefining concert dance as modern art alongside literature, music, and painting. To do this, Graham immersed herself in Anglo-American modernism and its roots in psychology, anthropology and cultural archaeology. But it was her work in the studio and on bodies that brought these ideas to fruition in and as dance. Some of Graham’s movement innovations include the emphasis on weight rather than flight, the contraction of the spine rather than the vertical posture, the flexed foot rather than the pointed foot, the turning in of the legs from the hips rather than the proverbial turning out, running on the knees (and related floor work), new ways of falling to the floor and returning to a vertical position, off-balance extensions of the legs and torso, the dynamic projection of energy from the pelvis, and the dramatic accentuation of gravity and tension as well as an aesthetics of discontinuity and fragmentation.

**Exposition**

Graham trained many of the major figures of American modern dance, notably Jane Dudley, Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow, Pearl Lang, Jean Erdman, May O’Donnell, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Bertram Ross, Robert Cohan, Mary Hinkson, Ethel Winter, Helen McGehee, John Butler, Stuart Hodes, Glen Tetley, Donya Feuer, and Yuriko, among others. But, as Dee Reynolds points out, her early technique classes were also laboratories for the discovery and elaboration of movement.[[1]](#endnote-1) As she trained her dancers they also effectively contributed to the development of her vocabulary and technique, which evolved over some forty years. Graham herself remained at the centre of her choreographic productions until her retirement from the stage in 1968.

She was trained at the Denishawn School and, having first partnered Ted Shawn in concert, debuted in her own work in 1926 after a short stint with The Greenwich Village Follies in New York City where she appeared in the choreography of Michio Ito. Although she danced the role of The Chosen One in Léonide Massine’s 1930 production of *Le Sacre du Printemps (Rite of Spring)* in New York, Graham’s own dances—created over sixty-five years between 1926 and 1991—were performed during her lifetime almost exclusively by the Martha Graham Dance Company.[[2]](#endnote-2) Although Graham established a long-lived institutional identity in the dance world, her choreography was easily identified as the polar opposite of the most institutional form of theatrical dancing: ballet. Motivated from deep subjective sources rather than from externally defined criteria of virtuosity, her work was nonetheless shaped by both formal and theatrical criteria.

From 1926 until 1938 she worked with an all-woman company, and produced primarily group works and solos. There was a strong sense in her early work of reducing movement to its essentials and an uncompromising aesthetic of simplicity, indicating that the materiality of movement in and for itself was decisive for her compositional process. The most impactful works of this first period, which is primarily anti-mimetic and proto-minimalist, were *Heretic* (1929), *Lamentation* (1930), and *Primitive Mysteries* (1931). Her work of this early period was indebted to the influence of her musical director Louis Horst, and in it she liberated herself from the exoticism of the Denishawn aesthetic to arrive at a much more hard-edged modernist aesthetic. In this early work Graham avoided identifying her stage presence with conventional forms of femininity as indicated by curvilinear flow. In contrast, her movement tended to be percussive, segmented, and often intentionally repetitive. She downplayed legwork and emphasized the torso, designing her costumes to bring attention to its length and articulate qualities. Her hands were frequently cupped and fingers held together. She avoided free flow in favour of what is known in movement analysis as bound flow.

Graham’s interest in the material of movement as itself expressive also had a primitivist component. ‘We must first determine what is for us the primitive’, she wrote in 1930, ‘—that expression of its [America’s] psyche only possible to an extremely cultured and integrated people’.[[3]](#endnote-3) In search of the roots of the primitive, which she thought to be a trait of contemporary American civilization, Graham became fascinated with native American culture of the southwest and Mexico. She equated contemporary urban life with indigenous culture through the notion of rhythm, a concept also discussed by Mary Austin a propos of Amerindian poetry, and the equation led to an essentialist nationalism expressed in the body. Although recognized as the most technically accomplished modern dancer of the 1930s, she remained aloof from the social ferment engendered by the Great Depression by refusing to adopt an evident left-wing position until approximately 1935 with *Panorama*, followed by *Chronicle* (1936). In 1936 she joined the American Artists Congress and spoke out on the relation of dance to world affairs. Toward the end of the decade her solo *Deep Song* (1937) in response to the Spanish Civil War, and *American Document* (1938), an anti-fascist work celebrating American democracy, introduced a new political awareness to her work. Graham’s anti-fascism brought her into the ambit of the popular front, and ultimately made her an international public figure before, during, and after the Second World War. Her State Department sponsored international tours, starting in the early 1950s, point to her skills as a cultural ambassador.

In 1938 she met Erick Hawkins who strongly influenced her personal and professional life. As she began using male dancers in her work, she leaned more toward drama with a narrative line, although her dances invariably sustained a level of ambiguity that kept them squarely within the sphere of aesthetic modernism. As the partner of Hawkins in many of her works during the 1940s, Graham developed skills as an actress that rendered her work more accessible to a general public. By the second part of the decade, her company was able to fill a Broadway theatre for a two-week season, a phenomenon previously unheard of in the field of modern dance. Graham modelled her theatrical persona during this period in part on that of her good friend, the actress Katharine Cornell; Bette Davis also claimed Graham as an influence on her movement as an actress.

Another aspect of Graham’s nativist modernism was the Americana theme she explored with the solo *Frontier* (1935) and the group dances *American Document* (1938), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Here Graham introduced references to American history that purposefully lacked historical precision or literalness. In fact, her developing dramaturgy relied heavily on a dream-like concept of events for which the centre was the psychic self-awareness of the heroine. The motifs of fate and choice were the pivot points of her dance dramas, which were driven by a tragic consciousness despite the fact that her work also could and did evince humour. *Deaths and Entrances* (1943)was the beginning of her abstract treatment of time as such, which she continued to develop in her post-war myth works. The figure of the Pioneering Woman in its manifestations across *Frontier* and *Appalachian Spring* contained a multivalent symbolism in Graham’s career as an independent woman artist, a powerful and strong-willed innovator, and a proto-feminist or exemplar of feminine consciousness. In some sense, Graham was always herself the subject of her work. That this did not seem self-indulgent to her audiences bespeaks her ability to abstract her personal concerns, and to her iconic status as a dancer embodying her own choreographic vision.

In the 1940s Graham’s work entered a dramaturgical phase in which her earlier formalism gave way to what dance critic John Martin called ‘a kind of surrealist theatre’.[[4]](#endnote-4) At the same time, she began to create works to commissioned scores for which she wrote scenarios. Strongly influenced by the analytical psychology of Carl-Gustav Jung, Graham turned to Greek myth. In works such as *Dark Meadow* (1946), *Errand into the Maze* (1947), and *Night Journey* (1948), Jungian ideas of the archetype and the collective unconscious gained currency in her work. Graham also explored post-Freudian concepts of the matriarchy and ‘Mother Right’ which her friend Erich Fromm was rethinking in his writings. Graham was a voracious reader and derived many of her ideas from literary sources, as evidenced in her *Notebooks*. In the immediate post-war period her work turned to psychosocial and psychosexual themes that frequently concealed deeply personal narratives and private rituals. She developed a mode of choreographic communication that bridged ritual and myth. In this way she evoked the power of the unconscious in spectatorship even as she struggled to endow her dances with universal as well as anti-normative significance. For example, her treatment of incest in her retelling of the Oedipus legend in *Night Journey* privileged the mother-son over the father-son relation. Her work, like that of many abstract expressionist painters, became associated with processes of introspection that tended to lend the artist a heroic identity in the battle with his or her own unconscious.

In 1950, in the wake of a serious knee injury and her separation from Hawkins, Graham underwent Jungian psychoanalysis with Francis Gillespy Wickes. This led to a short-lived psycho-dramatic phase in which she attempted to abandon myth for transparent introspection in *Voyage* (1953). This work was unique for being worked out in consultation with her psychoanalyst and, in the studio, through psycho-dramatic improvisation. Graham’s masterful skills as a choreographer led to a further series of brilliant ballets in the 1950s from *Canticle for Innocent Comedians* (1952) to *Seraphic Dialogue* (1955) and *Embattled Garden* (1958), all of which were company works in which she herself did not perform.

With *Clytemnestra* (1958) Graham pioneered the evening-length work, although she was handicapped by her battle with alcoholism. By 1962, her choreography entered a period of decline followed by a serious illness. Graham, however, recovered over the next few years and returned to work. During the last twenty years of her career, her presence was reinvigorated by new wave of public recognition. As members of the last company to dance alongside Graham retired, younger dancers entered the company and earlier works were revived, often without her supervision. The new works she created in these twilight years were not the masterpieces of earlier decades, although they still displayed a compelling theatricality and a skillful eye. Younger performers—notably Christine Dakin, Teresa Capucilli, and Donlin Foreman—nevertheless brought new insights to her works of the 1930s and 1940s, often with the coaching of Graham alumnae. Attention went to the company itself, which remained unstable through frequent changes in artistic and administrative leadership. But the vitality of the work and its new interpreters prevailed over time.

After Graham’s death in 1991 disputes over the ownership of her work and the rights to perform it embroiled the Martha Graham Dance Company in protracted court battles with her heir that severely curtailed for some time its activities. However, the company survived and ultimately was allowed to continue presenting her work. More recently, the company has enriched its repertoire by commissioning other choreographers to stage works inspired by Graham’s early solo *Lamentation* and by grouping Graham’s works into distinct clusters such as ‘Dance as a Weapon’ for the socially-engaged works of the 1930s and ‘Inner Landscape’ for the psychologically vivid works of the 1940s.

Graham’s legacy is manifold. Her technique is widely taught, and even more consequential is the way her movement principles have infused a broad range of modern dance pedagogies. Her works are broadly circulated, not only through stage performances by her own and other companies but also through films and photographic images. Her writings are often quoted. Although recent scholarship has demonstrated that Graham’s memoir, titled *Blood Memory*, was heavily edited by others,[[5]](#endnote-5) her letters, essays, notebooks, and the scenarios for her dances are rich, eloquent, and poetic reflections on her art.

**Mark Franko**

**Selected Works**

*Chorale* (1926)

*Revolt* (1927)

*Figure of a Saint* (1929)

*Resurrection* (1929)

*Danza* (1929)

*Heretic* (1929)

*Lamentation* (1930)

*Harlequinade* (1930)

*Primitive Mysteries* (1931)

*Bacchanale* (1931)

*Satyric Festival Song* (1932)

*Frontier* (1935)

*Panorama* (1935)

*Steps in the Street* (1936)

*Chronicle* (1936)

*Horizons* (1936)

*Deep Song* (1937)

*American Document* (1938)

*Every Soul is a Circus* (1939)

*Letter to the World* (1940)

*El Penitente* (1940)

*Deaths and Entrances* (1943)

*Appalachian Spring* (1944)

*Hérodiade* (1944)

*Dark Meadow* (1946)

*Cave of the Heart* (1946)

*Errand into the Maze* (1947)

*Night Journey* (1947)

*Diversion of Angels* (1948)

*Canticle for Innocent Comedians* (1952)

*Voyage* (1953)

*Seraphic Diaglogue* (1955)

*Clytemnestra* (1958)

*Embattled Garden* (1958)

*Episodes* (1959)

*Acrobats of God* (1960)

*Phaedra* (1962)

*Secular Games* (1962)

*Legend of Judith* (1962)

*Circe* (1963)

*Acts of Light* (1981)

*The Rite of Spring* (1984)

*Maple Leaf Rag* (1990)

**Artist’s Writings**

Graham, M. (1930) ‘Seeking an American Art of the Dance’. In *Revolt in the Arts,* ed. O. M. Sayler. New York: Brentano’s, 249-56.

Graham, M. (1941) ‘A Modern Dancer’s Primer for Action’. In *Dance: A Modern Educational Technique*, ed. F.R. Rogers. New York: Macmillan, 178-187.

Graham, M. (1942) ‘Dance Libretto: American Document’, *Theatre Arts* 26 (6): 565-74.

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Graham, M. (1991). *Blood memory: An autobiography*. New York: Doubleday.

**References and Further Reading**

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Movement System (1926-1992)’, *Dance Research* 17 (2): 9-46.

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Commodity of Cold-War Cultural Exchange in Asia, 1955 and 1974’, *Dance*

*Chronicle* 33: 44-81

Reynolds, D. (2007) *Rhythmic Subjects: Uses of Energy in the Dances of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham*. Hampshire: Dance Books.

Shea-Murphy, J. (2007) *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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**Visual Documentation**

Houseman, J. (1996) *Three by Martha Graham,* Princeton NJ: Dance Horizons.

[Includes *Cortege of Eagles*, *Acrobats of God*, and *Seraphic Dialogue*.]

Morgan, B. (1980) *Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs*, Dobb’s Ferry NY: Morgan & Morgan.

Morris, F. (1991) *Five Dances by Martha Graham*, Paris: Amaya Distributors. Includes *El Penitente*, *Steps in the Street*, *Diversion of Angels*, *Herodiade,* and *Maple Leaf Rag*.

Tatge, C. (1994) *Martha Graham: The Dance Revealed*, New York: WNET.

Bauer, N. (2007) *Martha Graham: Dance on Film,* Irvington NY: Criterion. Includes *A* *Dancer’s World*, *Appalachian Spring*, *Night Journey* from 1957-1961 with additional material.

**Paratextual Materials**

*Martha Graham in Lamentation, No. 4* (photo by Herta Moselsio), Library of Congress

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200154215/default.html>

*Martha Graham in Letter to the World, No. 1* (photo by Barbara Morgan), Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200153777#about-this-item>

Please note that photographs by Barbara Morgan are now at UCLA. Photographs from this source should be credited as follows:

Barbara and Willard Morgan Photographs and Papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

**Notes**

1. ‘There was no clear separation in this early period between choreography and technique classes: the classes were a laboratory where Graham worked out technical solutions to choreographical problems’. D. Reynolds (2002) ‘A Technique for Power: Reconfiguring Economies of Energy in Martha Graham’s Early Work’, *Dance Research* 20 (1): 3-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the early 1950s Graham allowed some of her works to be performed by the Batsheva Dance Company in Israel. In recent years the company has licensed Graham’s works to other groups, both to professional companies and to university dance ensembles. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. M. Graham (1930) ‘Seeking an American Art of Dance’, in *Revolt in the Arts,* ed. O. M. Sayler (New York: Brentano’s), 253. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Untitled review in *The New York Times* (January 22, 1941), clipping, the Martha Graham Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, box 218, folder 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. V. Phillips (2013) ‘Martha Graham’s Gilded Cage: *Blood Memory, An*

   *Autobiography* (1991)’, *Dance Research Journal* 45 (2): 61-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)