

LEVELED BOOK • U

Maria Tallchief: Prima Ballerina



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Maria Tallchief: Prima Ballerina



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Focus Question

Who was Maria Tallchief, and why
is she an important figure in ballet?

Words to Know

achievement
audition
authentic
ballet
choreographer
inducted

inspiration
precision
reservation
stereotypes
streamlined
trailblazer

Front cover: Maria Tallchief performs in *Firebird* with the New York City Ballet in 1963. Her first performance in *Firebird* in 1949 made her a star.

Title page: Tallchief poses for a portrait while in Washington D.C. in 1963.

Page 3: The Osage tribe made Maria Tallchief an Osage Princess at a ceremony held in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in 1954.

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President Clinton awards Maria Tallchief the National Medal of Arts.

A National Treasure

The date was September 29, 1999. The place was Washington, D.C. The event was the award ceremony for recipients of the National Medal of Arts. This award is the highest honor given by a U.S. president to an individual artist for outstanding achievement.

One of that year's honorees was Maria Tallchief. A tall, elegant dancer, she had taken the world of **ballet** by storm fifty years earlier. How did Maria Tallchief become the first Native American professional ballerina and the first shining star in American ballet? Her story begins on a Native American **reservation** in Oklahoma.



As a child, Betty Marie was quiet and shy.

Early Years

Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief—nicknamed Betty Marie—was born on January 24, 1925, in Fairfax, Oklahoma, on the Osage (OH-sayj) Reservation. Her father, Alexander Tall Chief, was full-blooded Osage. Oil was discovered on Osage land when he was young, and the profits made many tribal members rich. As an adult, Alexander owned a great deal of property in Fairfax.

Betty Marie's mother, Ruth Porter, came from Scottish and Irish settlers. Ruth recognized that both Betty Marie and her sister, Marjorie, had a musical gift. She encouraged them to develop it. Ruth arranged for both girls to take piano and dance lessons from an early age.



Betty Marie (left) and Marjorie (right) pose for a picture with their mother in 1930.

In 1933, when Betty Marie was eight, her mother decided that the girls needed more educational opportunities than Fairfax offered. Their father agreed. The family moved to Los Angeles and found a dance school for the girls even before buying a house. At the school, the sisters studied ballet, tap dancing, tumbling, acrobatics, and Spanish dancing.

Before long, Betty Marie and Marjorie were performing at rodeos and county fairs. Their performances included a staged Native American dance routine wearing feathered headbands, buckskin costumes, bells, and moccasins. Both girls were uncomfortable with the dance, which wasn't authentic. It emphasized the stereotypes many people had about Native Americans.

Authentic Osage Dancing

Only men were active dancers in ceremonial Osage dances. The women formed a circle around them and took small sidesteps back and forth in time with the drumbeat. While Betty Marie and Marjorie were growing up, ceremonial Native American dances were outlawed by the U.S. government. Grandma Tall Chief frequently took the girls to ceremonial Osage dances, which continued in secret.



Bronislava Nijinska (right) was the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky (left), one of the twentieth century's greatest male dancers.

At age twelve, Betty Marie's father told her to "follow one star." He insisted that she pursue either piano or dance, but not both. She chose dance because she felt the music throughout her body. She later wrote about making that choice, stating, "My life as a dancer really began." Soon after, she became a student of Bronislava Nijinska (brah-nuh-SLAH-vuh nuh-JIN-skuh), her first important ballet teacher. Betty Marie studied with Madame Nijinska from 1937 until 1942. During that time, she learned to dance with power, grace, and feeling. By the time she finished high school in 1942, she knew that ballet was the right path for her.

"I chose dance because I felt the music I loved grew inside of me in a different way than could be expressed by my hands on an instrument. It coursed through my body."

—Maria Tallchief, *Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina*

New York: A Star Is Born

When Betty Marie was a teenager, the art of ballet was still young in the United States. All the well-known ballet dancers were Russian. The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (ROOSS DU MOHN-tee KAR-loh), a touring Russian company, introduced people across the United States to ballet. The company, which was based in New York, came to Los Angeles in 1938. Betty Marie attended all their performances and was amazed.



Tallchief prepares her ballet shoes before her 1944 performance in *The Song of Norway*.

During her last year of high school, the head of the company saw her dance and recognized her talent. After graduation, she went to New York, and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo hired her as a dancer right away. Her professional dance career began without so much as an **audition**. At that point, she changed her name to Maria Tallchief.

Two years after Tallchief joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, **choreographer** George Balanchine started working with the company. Balanchine, who had studied ballet in Russia, is widely considered one of the twentieth century's most important choreographers. Building on classical ballet, which was graceful and flowing, he created a new style of American ballet. It required dancers to be very strong, quick, **streamlined**, and athletic.

George Balanchine's choreography came to life with Maria Tallchief's dancing, and she became his muse—his greatest source of **inspiration**. Balanchine and Tallchief admired each other's talent, and they married in 1946. Their marriage only lasted five years, but they continued to work together for decades.



Tallchief and Balanchine practiced ballet up to fourteen hours a day.



Tallchief wrote about her *Firebird* performance: "The city center sounded like a stadium . . . after somebody's made a touchdown."

In 1948, Balanchine became a guest choreographer with the Paris Opera Ballet. Tallchief traveled with him to France and became their first American dancer.

The following year, Balanchine cofounded the New York City Ballet. At the time, many New Yorkers didn't think they needed an American ballet company. They changed their minds, however, when they saw Tallchief dance in Balanchine's production of *Firebird* in 1949. That role made Tallchief famous, and she eventually became the New York City Ballet's first prima ballerina, or leading female dancer. She held the title for thirteen years, until 1965.

"I think it is an innate thing in the American Indian to want to move, to want to dance. This is the way we are. We express our happiness or our sorrow in dance."

—Maria Tallchief

Tribute for the Producers Guild of America's
Celebration of Diversity awards, 2006

Balanchine created some of his most beautiful roles for Tallchief. These included roles in *Swan Lake*, *Scotch Symphony*, and the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*. Tallchief's performance as the Sugar Plum Fairy helped make ballet more popular in the United States.

While Tallchief was with the New York City Ballet, she toured with them in nineteen foreign countries. She also danced on television and had a small role as a ballerina in the musical film *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952). In addition, she was a guest dancer with the American Ballet Theatre.



Erik Bruhn partnered with Tallchief in *Swan Lake* and many other ballets.

People showered Tallchief with praise wherever she danced and demanded to see her perform more. Critics gave her strongly positive reviews for her strength, musicality, and technical **precision**. Tallchief had a fiery stage presence and was also light on her feet. She danced in a regal yet free way that set her apart from other ballerinas. Never failing to speak her mind, she was also respected for her intelligence and honesty.

Tallchief danced the role of the White Swan in Balanchine's production of *Swan Lake*.



"A ballerina takes steps given to her and makes them her own. Each individual brings something different to the same role. As an American, I believe in great individualism. That's the way I was brought up."

—Maria Tallchief

Interview in the *Des Moines Register*, 1965

Chicago: Master Teacher

In 1965, at age forty-one, Tallchief grew tired of performing and all the travel her career required. Nine years earlier, she had married Henry Paschen, who was from Chicago, Illinois, and they had a daughter together. Tallchief retired from dancing and moved to Chicago to devote time to her family.

In 1975, Tallchief became the creative director of the Chicago Lyric Opera Ballet. She founded the Chicago City Ballet in 1980 because she felt that Chicago deserved an important ballet company. She served as its creative director until 1987. Many students whose lives she touched went on to have successful ballet careers.

Maria Tallchief dances with her only child, Elise Paschen, in Chicago.



During her retirement, Tallchief also worked to preserve the work of Balanchine, who died in 1983. She felt strongly that his ballets should be danced the way he originally intended. She and several other Balanchine ballerinas recorded sections of his ballets so future students could learn from them.

In 1996, she was **inducted** into the National Women's Hall of Fame, which honors extraordinary women's achievements. The same year, she was given a Kennedy Center award. This award recognizes artists who have made outstanding contributions to American culture. She died at age eighty-eight on April 11, 2013, in Chicago. The world paid tribute to her life and work.

Maria Tallchief's Life

1925	Born on January 24	1948	Joins New York City Ballet and becomes its first prima ballerina
1933	Moves to Los Angeles with family	1949	Performs in <i>Firebird</i>
1937	Begins dance lessons with Madame Nijinska	1956	Marries Henry Paschen
1942	Graduates from high school; moves to New York City and joins the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo	1959	Daughter, Elise, born
1944	Choreographer George Balanchine joins Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo	1965	Retires from performing at age forty-one; moves to Chicago
		1980	Found the Chicago City Ballet
		2013	Dies on April 11

Legacy

Maria Tallchief was an American **trailblazer**. As the first prima ballerina from the United States, she helped inspire a new style of ballet. As professional ballet's first Native American star, she opened its doors to ethnic minorities. Her grace, talent, and achievement helped move the world of ballet forward.

A fellow dancer, Jacques d'Amboise (ZHAHK dahm-BWAHZ), once said of Tallchief, "There is one word for her: grand. She was absolutely grand."



Maria Tallchief and Jacques d'Amboise perform at the White House for a state dinner in 1964.

"Maria Tallchief took what had been a European art form and made it America's own—how fitting that a Native American woman would do that."

—President Clinton while awarding
Maria Tallchief a National Medal of Arts, 1999

Glossary

achievement (n.)	an accomplishment reached as a result of effort (p. 4)
audition (n.)	a performance by an actor, dancer, or musician done as a tryout for a new role or position (p. 8)
authentic (adj.)	done or made in the original or traditional way; not false (p. 6)
ballet (n.)	a form of dance that uses a combination of exact, formal steps and movements (p. 4)
choreographer (n.)	a person who chooses the style and arrangement of steps and moves for a dance performance (p. 9)
inducted (v.)	selected to be a part of an organization or group (p. 14)
inspiration (n.)	a good influence; something that leads to a creative thought or activity (p. 9)
precision (n.)	the quality of being exact or accurate (p. 12)
reservation (n.)	land set aside by the United States government for Native Americans (p. 4)
stereotypes (n.)	oversimplified images or ideas about a particular group of people or things that are often unfair or untrue (p. 6)
streamlined (adj.)	designed or able to move easily through water or air (p. 9)
trailblazer (n.)	a person who is the first to do something new, inspiring others to follow (p. 15)

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A *Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book*

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Connections

Writing

Watch a video clip of *Swan Lake*. Using a Venn diagram, compare ballet to another style of dance you know.

Social Studies

Create a poster to present to your class about the Osage tribe. Include details about their art, traditional clothing, where the tribe is located, and other interesting information.



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