Martha Graham

Sarah Row
“Movement is generated from three places: the action of contraction and release, the pelvis, and the emotional inner self.”
Early Life

Graham was born into a strict Presbyterian Family on May 11, 1894 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Her father, George, was a doctor who used physical movements to help cure certain illnesses. Her parents didn't fully support her dancing career. When she was fourteen, she moved to Santa Barbara and attended the first dance performance of her life starring Ruth St. Denis. Graham immediately fell in love with the art and began taking classes with Ruth St. Denis in the mid 1910's.
After leaving Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham began creating her own pieces. In 1926, the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance was established. On April 18, 1926, she debuted her first company concert. Her pieces were heavily influenced by Denishawn.

Her choreography consisted of jarring, violent, spastic and trembling movements. She believed that “these physical expressions gave outlet to spiritual and emotional undercurrents that were entirely ignored in other Western dance forms.”
Some of Graham’s most impressive works include “Frontier,” “Appalachian Spring,” “Seraphic Dialogue” and “Lamentation.” All of these works utilized the Delsartean principle of tension and relaxation—what Graham termed “contraction and release.”

While Martha Graham was choreographing many pieces, the country was going through the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Great Depression and then the Spanish Civil War. Chronicle was a piece Graham created influenced by the series of serious current events in the late 1920 and the early 1930’s. Chronicle was a dark piece centered around cultural isolation and depression with costumes and accompaniment to add to the theme.
Impact on Modern Dance

Graham’s impact and contribution to dance was so large, an entire technique style was created. Her technique was appropriately called Graham technique.

Graham technique, which is still taught worldwide today, not only consisted of contraction and release but also opposition in the body. Graham’s “contraction and release”, much like Doris Humphrey’s “fall and rebound”, is still a vital concept in modern dance.

Contraction and release introduced the concept of moving using the pelvis muscles. Graham’s choreography and technique also consisted of exaggeration of basic or natural human movements. Her movement vocabulary focused on “connections between the physical and emotional meanings of ‘power’, ‘control’, and ‘vulnerability’.”
Martha Graham originally did not want her dances to be filmed because she believed “that live performances should only exist on stage as they are experienced.” As she aged she began allowing more of her pieces to be filmed in order to preserve them.
Video demonstrating Martha Graham's "spiral"

Video clip of Martha Graham's "Lamentation"
Personal Life

Martha Graham married Erick Hawkins in 1948 after he had been in her company for ten years. In 1951, he left her company before they divorced in 1954.
Continued Success

Martha Graham’s studio attracted attention and she began connecting with people who were able to film and create music for her pieces.

Louis Horst, a musician, came on as the company’s musical director and stayed with Graham for nearly her entire career.
Retirement

After Graham retired from dancing, she became extremely depressed. She hated watching young dancers perform her pieces. She developed an alcohol addiction. As her health rapidly declined she attempted to end her life.

In 1972, after being released from the hospital, she quit drinking, reorganized her company, and went on to choreograph ten new ballets and many revivals. Her final piece was created a year before her death in 1990 when she was 95 years old.
Martha Graham on Retirement Years

In *Blood Memory* she wrote, “It wasn't until years after I had relinquished a ballet that I could bear to watch someone else dance it. I believe in never looking back, never indulging in nostalgia, or reminiscing. Yet how can you avoid it when you look on stage and see a dancer made up to look as you did thirty years ago, dancing a ballet you created with someone you were then deeply in love with, your husband? I think that is a circle of hell Dante omitted. [When I stopped dancing] I had lost my will to live. I stayed home alone, ate very little, and drank too much and brooded. My face was ruined, and people say I looked odd, which I agreed with. Finally my system just gave in. I was in the hospital for a long time, much of it in a coma.”
Death

She continued choreographing and dancing until her death on April 1st, 1991. She died in New York City from pneumonia. She was cremated, and her ashes were spread over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico.
Impact on Modern Dance

Graham’s influence on dance had been compared to Picasso’s influence on art. For her achievements, Graham has been awarded many honorable mentions. She was the first dancer to perform in the White House and to win the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Her contributions to modern dance are still appreciated today. Many artists use Graham’s technique for example, Merce Cunningham, Lester Horton, and Paul Taylor were all strongly influenced by Graham. Her artistic purpose in dance altered the views that people had on developing modern dance. Martha Graham, being the “Mother of Modern Dance”, gave modern dance a place in dance history.


Martha Graham technique class accompaniment