



Martha Graham





Martha Graham
1894-1991

THE BASICS

Martha Graham

MARTHA GRAHAM INVENTED A REVOLUTIONARY NEW LANGUAGE OF DANCE, AN ORIGINAL WAY OF MOVING THAT SHE USED TO REVEAL THE JOYS, PASSIONS, AND SORROWS COMMON TO ALL HUMAN EXPERIENCE. SHE HAD A GENIUS FOR CONNECTING MOVEMENT WITH EMOTION.

A young Martha Graham.



Born	05.11.1894 ALLEGHANY CITY, PENNSYLVANIA
Died	04.01.1991 NEW YORK, NEW YORK
Career	MODERN DANCER/CHOREOGRAPHER



Book 5
Page 3



Martha was born on May 11, 1894, the eldest of three girls. Her sister Mary arrived in 1896, and the baby, Georgia, called Geordie, in 1900. A fourth child, a boy, died of scarlet fever before his second birthday. George Graham was fifteen years older than his wife, a soft-spoken, doll-like woman known to everyone as Jennie. Martha would watch her father sweep her mother off the floor and carry her laughing up the stairs as Jennie's long black hair cascaded down about his strong arms. Martha and her sisters were brought up strictly, with daily prayers, Sunday-school training, and regular attendance at their local Presbyterian church. The girls were expected to be polite, respectful, and obedient, to sit straight at the dinner table, to stand when spoken to by an adult, and to wear spotless less white gloves when they went to church. As proper little ladies, they had to be ever mindful of their manners. In those straitlaced days called the Victorian age around the turn of the century, nothing, it seemed, was more important than good manners.

Martha's maternal grandmother, who lived with the family, was fond of saying, "I would rather have a man with bad morals than with bad manners." Martha had her mother's enormous deep-set eyes and glossy black hair. She had her father's independent spirit and, when she did not get her own way, his quick temper. "I was a very difficult child," she admitted. "I was quite stubborn and willful even then."

As the eldest sister, the bossiest, and the most adventuresome, Martha ruled the girls' upstairs playroom. She was the ringleader, the one who told Mary and Geordie what to do and when to do it.



Martha at an early dance class.
First row, third from the left.





Martha Graham
1894-1991

EARLY LIFE



Martha dancing in her early career.

“THAT WAS MY VERY FIRST LESSON AS A DANCER.”

She was a little girl. On one particular day, she stood looking up at her father, her hands clasped tightly before her, her cheeks burning bright red with shame and humiliation.

“Martha,” said her father,
“You’re not telling me the truth, are you?”

Martha’s lips trembled. Tears welled in her eyes. Kneeling down, her father put an arm around her. “Don’t you know when you do something like this, I always know? There is always some movement that tells me you are deceiving me. You see, no matter what you say, you reveal yourself - you make fists you think I don’t notice, your back gets very straight, maybe you shuffle your feet, your eyelids drop.

Long after she had forgotten what she lied about, Martha still remembered that awful moment and her father’s words. Her movements had given her away-her hands, her feet, her eyes! It was as though her body had spoken. Looking back many years later, she said,



Book 5
Page 7



"CENSORSHIP IS THE HEIGHT OF VANITY."



Above:
Martha demonstrating
emotions as movement.

Right:
Martha continuing her
exploration of emoting
through movement.

Martha and her sisters had never been inside a real theater, but with Lizzie's help they made up plays and entertainments of their own. Wearing scarves, veils, and costumes that their mother had sewn for them, and festooned with junk jewelry, the girls turned their playroom into a make believe theater.

Once, Martha surprised everyone in the family by inviting them into her room at a certain hour to attend a show she had made up by herself. She had rigged a bedsheet from one end of the room to the other as a curtain. When the curtain was drawn, she stood there alone and sang her big number, a tricky rhyming tune that Lizzie had taught her. "I always wanted to go on the stage," she said many years later. "I knew there was a magic someplace in the world that had to do with the stage." Lizzie was a devout Roman Catholic, and she would sometimes take the Graham sisters to church with her. Martha was entranced by the music and rituals of that church, "a place of





Martha Graham
1894-1991

EARLY LIFE



Martha in one of her favorite dances.

"DANCE IS THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL OF THE BODY."

ceremony, mystery, and blessing," she wrote. She loved the chanting and processions, the lighted candles at the altars, the tall statues of kindly saints. In years to come the colorful pageantry of the holy rites she had witnessed as a child and kept in her memory would influence the dances she created as an adult. Her sister Mary suffered from chronic asthma. As Mary's attacks grew worse, the Grahams decided that she needed a change of climate. In 1908, when Martha was fourteen, Dr. Graham moved his family to California, a six-day journey by train. They settled in Santa Barbara, a sunny seacoast town north of Los Angeles known for its flower gardens, blue skies, and fresh ocean breezes.

Not far from their house was a broad, flat-topped cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The girls would stand at the edge of the cliff, watching the crashing waves down below and breathing in the sea air. Then, with arms spread wide, they would start to run wildly, racing across the high plateau, leaping and

As an ambitious young woman who wanted to create a new kind of dance, Martha Graham spent many hours at New York City's Central Park Zoo. She would sit on a bench across from a lion in its cage and watch the animal pace back and forth, from one side of the cage to the other. She was fascinated by the elemental power of the lion's great padding steps, by the purity of its movements. Again and again, it took four steps across the cage, turned in "a wonderful way," then took four steps back. "Finally, I learned how to walk that way," Graham recalled. "I learned from the lion the inevitability of return, the shifting of one's body."



Book 5
Page 11



bounding, their loose hair flying in the breeze. "Freedom! I ran. I fell down. I got up. I ran again," Martha remembered.

She quickly made a place for herself at Santa Barbara High, which at the time was small by today's standards. Martha's class of forty was one of the largest the school had ever had. A fast learner and an avid reader, Martha became an editor of *Olive and Gold*, the school's literary magazine. Encouraged by her teachers, who felt that she had a special gift for words and language, she wrote short stories and a two-scene play, a comedy set in the girls' locker room. Strongly athletic, she joined the girls' basketball team, wearing her hair in a single braid that swung back and forth as she dribbled across the gymnasium floor in bloomers and middy blouse. And she enrolled in a sewing class, surprising her mother and herself by becoming an accomplished seamstress. Soon she was able to cut and sew her own dresses.



Above:
Martha dancing on stage.

Right:
Martha bringing
movement to the ground.



By the time she was sixteen, Martha, at five foot two, had reached almost her full height. She had a strong, straight body, a slender neck, and black hair as shiny as a cat's fur. And while she moved with self-assurance, known more for her quiet determination than for good looks. She considered her sisters beautiful and thought of herself as plain-looking and shy. "I was not the pretty one," she recalled.

One day she was walking with her parents down a Santa Barbara street when a poster in a shop window caught her eye. She turned back for a second look. Pictured on the poster was a beautiful, richly bejeweled woman sitting cross-legged on a small throne like platform. Her eyes were half lowered. On her lips was the mysterious hint of a smile. She was a famous dancer named Ruth St. Denis, dressed for her role as the Hindu goddess Radha. The poster announced that she would be performing at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles from April 24 to 29, 1911. Martha stared at the poster transfixed, studying every detail of Ruth St. Denis's costume and appearance. Then she ran ahead to catch up with her parents. She pleaded with them to let her attend one of the dancer's performances. Dr. Graham traveled to Los Angeles often, and he agreed to take Martha with him. He made a special occasion of the event, buying her a new dress and hat and giving her a corsage of violets, which she saved and treasured for many years.

Ruth St. Denis was one of the great dancers of the time. Before seeing the poster, however, Martha had never heard of her. In fact, she had never attended a dance concert of any kind until that warm spring evening when the curtain rose in the Mason Opera House.





Martha sat spellbound through the performance, bewitched by the magical theater of Ruth St. Denis. "From that moment on," she recalled, "my fate was sealed. I couldn't wait to learn to dance as the goddess did." Up to then she had had no dance training at all, but she had found an idol, an ideal to strive toward. She was going to be a dancer like Ruth St. Denis. As far as her parents were concerned, this sudden new interest was nothing more than a whim, a passing fancy. To the respectable Grahams, dancing professionally on the stage was not an acceptable career for a proper young lady. Dr. Graham expected Martha to go to college, preferably to Vassar, where his own mother had studied. After college, he expected, his daughter would marry and raise a family. Martha still had two years of high school left. She dropped basketball, because she did not want to injure the legs that were now dedicated to dancing. In place of sports she took up dramatics, winning leading roles in both her junior and senior class plays. As a senior she was appointed editor-in-chief of the graduation issue of Olive and Gold. She joined the debating society and the drama club and took part in other school activities. She was photographed looking very serious.

The excitement of her class plays had only strengthened her resolve to go on the stage. When she graduated from Santa Barbara High in June 1913, she told her parents that she did not want to attend Vassar or any other academic college, as her father had in mind. She had heard about a place in Los Angeles called the Cumnock School of Expression, an experimental junior college where young people with theatrical ambitions could study both academic subjects and practical theater arts. George and Jennie Graham knew by now that their headstrong eldest daughter had a mind of her own. Martha persuaded them to let her go down to Los Angeles with her friend Marguerite Andtus - another girl from Santa Barbara, and enroll in Cumnock.

Martha was nineteen. With her usual seriousness she took courses in art and literature, along with acting, play writing, stage lighting, and for the first time dancing. Three times a week she joined a class in "dance expression," a kind of rhythmic, fluid movement also called "interpretive" or "esthetic" dancing. She and Marguerite lived in the school's dormitory under the supervision of a housemother. On weekends and holidays they rode the train home to Santa Barbara.



Martha climbing a pyramid.

A year after she entered Cumnock, Martha's father died unexpectedly of a heart attack.

"SUDDENLY, OUR WHOLE WORLD HAD SHIFTED."

She recalled, "We were left a house of women-mother, Lizzie, Geordie, Mary, and myself." While Dr. Graham did not leave a great deal of money, Martha's mother was determined to budget carefully and see to it that her daughters completed their educations.

Martha spent three years at Cumnock, graduating in 1916. She had already decided on her next move. Her idol, Ruth St. Denis, had opened a dance school in Los Angeles with her young dancer husband, Ted Shawn. Five years after first seeing the "goddess" dance, Martha mustered her courage and applied for admission to the Ruth St. Denis School of Dancing and Related Arts, better known as Denishawn.

With her father gone, Martha felt free to chart her own future course. She felt that her mother was intrigued by the idea. "She became very excited about my wanting to be a dancer," Martha wrote.





Martha on stage with dramatic lighting.



Graham's professional career began in 1916 at Denishawn, the schools and dance company founded in Los Angeles by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, where as a teenager she was introduced to a repertory and curriculum that, for the first time in the United States, explored the world's dances—folk, classical, experimental, Oriental, and American Indian. She was entranced by the religious mysticism of St. Denis, but Shawn was her major teacher; he discovered sources of dramatic power within her and then channeled them into an Aztec ballet, *Xochitl*. The dance was a tremendous success both in vaudeville and in concert performance and made her a Denishawn star.

Graham remained with Denishawn until 1923, and, although she ultimately rebelled violently against its eclecticism, she later mirrored in her own works the Orientalism that pervaded the school. She left Denishawn to become a featured dancer in the *Greenwich Village Follies* revue, where she remained for two years. In 1924 she went to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, to teach and to experiment.

Graham made her New York City debut as an independent artist in 1926. Though some of the fruits of her experiments were discernible from the first, a good many of her dances, such as *Three Gopi Maidens* and *Danse Languide*, echoed her Denishawn past. The critics found her to be graceful and lyrical. All of that changed with her 1927 concert, and, for the next decade and more, the startlingly original dances she performed were to be referred to as ugly, stark, and obscure. The exotic costumes and rich staging of Denishawn were in the past. Among the dances of her 1927 program was *Revolt*, probably the first dance of protest and social comment staged in the United States, which was set to the avant-garde music of Arthur Honegger. The audience







was not impressed; dancers and theatergoers, famous and unknown, ridiculed her. Graham herself later referred to this decade as "my period of long woolens," a reference to the plain jersey dress that she wore in many of her dances. A strong and continuing influence in her life was Louis Horst, musical director at Denishawn, who had left the school two years after Graham. He became her musical director, often composing pieces for her during her first two decades of independence; they remained close until his death in 1964. Among his most noted scores for her were those for the now historic *Frontier* (1935), a solo dance, and *Primitive Mysteries*, written for Graham and a company of female dancers.

Frontier initiated the use of decor in Graham's repertoire and marked the beginning of a long and distinguished collaboration with the noted Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, under whose influence she developed one of her most singular stage innovations, the use of sculpture, or three-

dimensional set pieces, instead of flats and drops. For Martha Graham, the dance, like the spoken drama, can explore the spiritual and emotional essence of human beings. Thus, the choreography of *Frontier* symbolized the frontier woman's achievement of mastery over an uncharted domain. In *Night Journey* (1948), a work about the Greek legendary figure Jocasta, the whole dance-drama takes place in the instant when Jocasta learns that she has mated with Oedipus, her own son, and has borne him children. The work treats Jocasta rather than Oedipus as the tragic victim, and shows her reliving the events of her life and seeking justification for her actions. In *Letter to the World* (1940), a work about Emily Dickinson, several characters are used to portray different aspects of the poet's personality. For more than 10 years Graham's dance company consisted solely of women, but her themes were beginning to call for men as well. She engaged Erick Hawkins, a ballet dancer, to join her company, and he appeared with her in a major work, *American Document*. In a career spanning more than half a century, Graham created a succession of dances, ranging from solos to large-scale creations of full-program length such as *Clytemnestra* (1958). For her themes she almost always turned to human conflicts and emotions. The settings and the eras vary, but her great gallery of danced portraits never failed to explore the inner emotional life of their characters. She created some dances from American frontier life, the most famous of which is *Appalachian Spring* (1944), with its score by Aaron Copland. Another source was Greek legend, the dances rooted in Classical Greek dramas, stories, and myths. *Cave of the Heart* (1946), based on the figure of Medea, with music by Samuel Barber, was not a dance version of the legend but rather an exposure of the Medea latent in every woman who, out of consuming jealousy, not only destroys those she loves but herself as well.



Martha and her future husband.





Martha Graham
1894-1991



Martha teaching students in her company during warm-ups.

Later works by Graham also borrowed from Greek legend, including *Errand into the Maze* (1947), an investigation of hidden fears presented through the symbols of the Minotaur and the labyrinth; *Alcestis* (1960); *Phaedra* (1962); and *Circe* (1963). Biblical themes and religious figures also inspired her: *Seraphic Dialogue* (1955; Joan of Arc), *Embattled Garden* (1958; referring to the Garden of Eden), and *Legend of Judith* (1962) and such fanciful abstractions as *Diversion of Angels* (1948) or *Acrobats of God* (1960). Her later works include *The Witch of Endor* (1965), *Cortege of Eagles* (1967), *The Archaic Hours* (1969), *Mendicants of Evening* (1973), *Lucifer* (1975), *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1978), and *Frescoes* (1980). In the early 1980s she created neoclassical dances, beginning with *Acts of Light* (1981). In 1970 she announced her retirement as a dancer, but she continued to create dances and to teach.

“I NEVER CARED MUCH FOR CHOREOGRAPHY. I THINK I ONLY STARTED TO CHOREOGRAPH SO THAT I COULD HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW OFF IN. IT CAME AS A GREAT SHOCK TO ME WHEN I STOPPED DANCING THAT I WAS HONORED FOR MY CHOREOGRAPHY AS WELL.”



Book 5
Page 25



Martha Graham
1894-1991

DEATH



Book 5
Page 27

Martha Graham died of cardiac arrest at age 96 after being treated for two months for pneumonia. Martha Graham had become ill in December after a 55-day tour of the Far East with her troupe.





WOMEN BREAKING BARRIERS