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A Brief History of American Modern Dance

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INTRODUCTION

America grew up with dance. From the American street to the stage, dance captures everyday gestures, social dances, cultural elements, social and political issues, and spiritualism. These sources—combined with independence, risk-taking, exploration, and persistence—have shaped American modern dance. With its diverse movement vocabularies, individual choreographic impulses, and social and cultural concerns, American modern dance is an irreplaceable touchstone and national treasure.

Since its birth in the early 1900s, American modern dance has been a cultural mainstay at home and a significant ambassador of American culture abroad. This genre of dance has developed as generations build on the work of, or rebel against, their mentors, creating a lineage marked by innovation. As history reveals, it is not a neatly defined style but rather a continually evolving quest to discover and share the expressive potential of human movement.

THE BEGINNING (EARLY 1900s): THE PIONEERS

American modern dance, tied to larger cultural forces, originated in idealism and rebellion guided by utopian notions of the freedom of the body and spirit, the quest for self-expression, and the vast potential of America. Its beginnings are traced to [Isadora Duncan](#) (1877-1927). Reacting against ballet spectacles and popular entertainments, she strove to discover a natural form of movement and to raise dance to a serious art form expressing ideas and emotions. Her dance connected to reforms in society, especially regarding women's rights. Although American, Duncan performed primarily in Europe where she also founded schools—the beginnings of an international network of influences.

Other innovators include [Loie Fuller](#), [Maud Allan](#), and [Ruth St. Denis](#) (1879-1968) and [Ted Shawn](#) (1891-1972). St. Denis and Shawn turned to music and other cultures for inspiration, inventing “musical visualizations” in which dance embodied qualities of the music. They choreographed, and toured, interpretations of dance genres and rituals of other cultures, including Native American, North African, Spanish, and Asian styles.

Shawn, who formed a company of male dancers,

married St. Denis and together they founded the Denishawn School in California (and later New York). They sought “new” and “natural” dance techniques, in opposition to ballet. In 1933 in Massachusetts, Shawn founded a dance retreat which became [Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival](#).

THE ROAD TO DISCOVERY (1920S-30S): THE FIRST GENERATION

Denishawn-trained dancers [Martha Graham](#) (1894-1991), [Doris Humphrey](#) (1895-1958), and [Charles Weidman](#) (1891-1972) left the school in the mid-1920s to make their own dances. They rejected the style and philosophy of their mentors, opting to create dance that was both a personal statement and an expression of American life, two recurring themes in modern dance.

Graham emphasized the “contraction” and “release” of breathing, believing dance revealed the “inner landscape” of the soul. Her repertoire included dances based on Americana such as [Frontier](#) and [Appalachian Spring](#), Greek myths ([Clytemnestra](#)), emotion ([Lamentation](#)), and history ([Seraphic Dialogue](#)). Her company and school have continued after her death.

Humphrey and Weidman founded a school and company. Humphrey's technique grew from analyzing nature. She found drama in “fall and recovery,” the body's response to gravity, elevating the discipline of choreography in the book *The Art of Making Dances*. Humphrey-Weidman drew on American subjects ([The Shakers](#)), social issues ([Lynchtown](#)), and social harmony (New Dance).

In Europe (principally Germany), Ausdruckstanz, or the dance of expression, was influencing American dance; leaders were Rudolf von Laban and his students Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman. Wigman's student [Hanya Holm](#) (1893-1992) came to the US in 1931, bringing this form.

In the 1930s, modern dance transformed from avant-garde into an accepted art form. Universities included it in physical education or performing arts departments. The [Bennington Summer School of Dance](#) at Bennington College in Vermont (1934-1942) hosted festivals—training ground for many dancers, choreographers, and teachers. Louis Horst (1884-1964), musical director and dance composition teacher, was close to Martha Graham and taught at universities, dance schools, and festivals. Universities also have been leading



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commissioners and presenters of dance. Choreographer Brenda Way founded [ODC/Dance](#) at Oberlin College in Ohio in 1971 before moving to San Francisco in 1976.

Concurrently, African Americans were creating a distinct voice in American modern dance. During the Harlem Renaissance, also a time of strained racial tensions, [Hemsley Winfield \(1906-1934\)](#), [Edna Guy \(1907-1982\)](#) (who also studied at Denishawn), and the Sierra Leonian [Asadata Dafora \(1890-1965\)](#) choreographed, produced, and presented dance, theater, and opera. Winfield and Guy presented a performance in 1931 in New York City titled *The first Negro dance recital in America*, and Dafora featured African influences in dance dramas.

[Katherine Dunham \(1909-2006\)](#) formed the modern dance company Ballet Negre. She researched dances of the Caribbean African diaspora, particularly Haiti. Her influential technique drew on African dance; she founded a school active in community development in East St. Louis, Illinois, and brought stories of her heritage to the stage. Examples include *L'Ag'Ya*, *Barrelhouse Blues*, and choreography for the film *Stormy Weather*. She influenced choreographers in the black tradition such as [Talley Beatty \(Mourner's Bench\)](#), [Syvilla Fort](#), and [Walter Nicks](#). Dunham technique remains important.

[Helen Tamiris \(1905-1966\)](#), while not African American, was renowned for her choreographic series *Negro Spirituals*. The New Dance Group, founded by Holm's students, focused on social issues. The group expanded to include Humphrey-Weidman and the black tradition. The [Lester Horton \(1906-1953\)](#) Dance Theater drew on movement styles of ethnic groups in Los Angeles, California, and was one of the first racially-integrated US dance companies.

THE MANY FACES OF AMERICAN MODERN DANCE (1940S-50S): THE SECOND GENERATION

In the 1950s, dancers from the major companies formed troupes. In the Graham tradition, these include: [Pearl Lang](#), [Sophie Maslow](#), and [Jane Dudley](#); in the Humphrey-Weidman tradition: José Limón, Sybil Shearer, and Katherine Litz; and in the Holm tradition: Valerie Bettis, Alwin Nikolais, and his student Murray Louis.

[José Limón \(1908-1972\)](#) set many Humphrey dances on his company. Limón drew on his Mex-

ican heritage (*La Malinche, Carlota*); other noted works include *The Moor's Pavane* and *There is a Time*. The work of [Alwin Nikolais \(1912-1993\)](#) and Murray Louis (b. 1926) reflects the German influence of their teacher Holm, but is renowned for dance theater using props, costumes, lighting, and effects to transform the body. Others radically departed from their dance roots. Principal among these were three of Graham's major dancers: [Merce Cunningham](#), [Erick Hawkins](#), and [Paul Taylor](#).

[Merce Cunningham \(1919-2009\)](#), an experimentalist fascinated with actions, sounds, movement, and the unexpected, left the Graham company in 1945 and formed his own company in 1952 to develop an [abstract style](#) independent of narrative. Cunningham and composer [John Cage](#) introduced radical methods for making dance such as the use of chance procedures. Music, costume, and set design were divorced from movement. Cunningham innovated to the end, choreographing at 90, using computer software to generate movement ideas, and new music by Radiohead. Cunningham first performed in 1952 at BAM, which presented Cunningham's *Nearly Ninety* a few months before his death in 2009.

[Erick Hawkins \(1909-1994\)](#) developed movement inspired by nature, the antithesis of the tension in Graham's technique. [Paul Taylor \(b. 1930\)](#) evolved a technique of free-flowing, loping movements. His dances span an eclectic range: abstract with complex patterning or musical lyricism, as well as narratives filled with wit, satire, or serious social and psychological commentary.

[Pearl Primus \(1919-1994\)](#) made agile and daring dances telling of African-American culture and life, such as *Hard Time Blues* about sharecropping and *Fanga*, based on a traditional Liberian dance; she studied West African dance. Inspired or trained by Dunham and peers, [Alvin Ailey](#), who collaborated with Carmen De Lavallade to form the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, emerged in the 1950s.

SAY "NO" TO DANCE AND DANCE AS CULTURAL IDENTITY (1960S)

The 1960s brought social rebellion in the US. Modern dance mirrored and influenced this. Some Cunningham dancers, for instance, rejected his emphasis on technique, and emerged as the post-modernists.

The influential [Judson Period \(1962-1968\)](#) was named after the venue for avant-garde performers,



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Judson Church in New York City. These revolutionaries, including [David Gordon](#), [Yvonne Rainer](#), [Trisha Brown](#), [Steve Paxton](#), and [Deborah Hay](#), came together in movement workshops led by Cunningham accompanist Robert Dunn, presenting their first concert in 1962 at Judson Church. Other choreographers include [Meredith Monk](#), [Lucinda Childs](#), and [Kenneth King](#).

[Yvonne Rainer](#) (b. 1934) summed up post-modernist concerns in her 1965 “[No Manifesto](#).” Rainer’s [Trio A](#) exemplifies the minimalism that Judson choreographers sought; they questioned the very nature of dance, and viewed movement as problem solving, not self-expression. They used non-dancers, everyday movement, and performed in unconventional spaces, blurring the boundaries between performers and audiences. Steve Paxton and others developed contact improvisation—the give and take of weight between movers.

The 1960s raised questions: Should modern dance explore movement, personal or cultural expression, storytelling, or political/cultural issues? Should movement be natural or artificial (skilled and virtuosic)?

African Americans—Ailey, [Donald McKayle](#), Beatty, and others—insisted that dance was to communicate to people, who are part of the process. The 1960s Civil Rights Movement inspired black choreographers, including [Jeraldine Blunden](#) who founded the [Dayton Contemporary Dance Company](#) in 1968. [Eleo Pomare](#), [Rod Rodgers](#), [Ishmael Houston Jones](#), [Blondell Cummings](#), and [Gus Solomons Jr.](#), however, were influenced by Judson.

In the 1960s, [Alvin Ailey’s](#) (1931-1989) company rose to prominence with his distinctive choreography incorporating historical and contemporary themes. Since then, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed in over 70 countries, including as the first African-American company to represent the United States abroad through a State Department sponsored tour to Russia in 1970. Ailey’s works about African American culture—[Blues Suite](#) and [Revelations](#)—brought fame. [Revelations](#) depicts the strains of segregation and the role of faith. The repertory includes a wide spectrum of choreographers. For more than 50 years, the company and The Ailey School have presented works by Dunham, Primus, Beatty, and McKayle, and contemporary dance makers such as [George Faison](#), [Camille Brown](#), [Ulysses Dove](#), [Jawole Willa Jo Zollar](#), [Ronald K. Brown](#), and [Rennie Harris](#).

Ethnic identity in dance was a growing trend. Graham disciples Maslow and Lang drew on Jewish culture, and Asian Americans such as [Kei Takei](#) cited Japanese movement and themes.

LATE MODERNISM AND MELDING STYLES (1970S)

1960s experimentalists continued in the 1970s. Judson members including Paxton, Gordon, Rainer, and Brown were The Grand Union, extending the Judson philosophy. There were two camps of modern dance: technical, and anti-dance/technique. [Lar Lubovitch](#), [Jennifer Muller](#), [Lucinda Childs](#), and [Twyla Tharp](#) choreographed dances requiring technique. For others,—[Meredith Monk](#), [Martha Clarke](#), [Elizabeth Streb](#), [Pilobolus](#), and [Anna Halprin](#)—the intention was to reinvent the idea of dance.

Many 1960s-70s choreographers experimenting with non-dance aesthetics evolved to embrace virtuosic movement, narrative, and ballet, including Brown, Childs, and Tharp. ODC/Dance “was one of the first American companies to return, after a decade of pedestrian exploration, to virtuosic technique and narrative content in avant-garde dance.

[Trisha Brown](#) (b. 1936) formed her company in 1970. Her playful, unpredictable choreography ranges from site-specific work to choreography for full-length operas. Collaborators included artist Robert Rauschenberg and composer Laurie Anderson.

[Twyla Tharp](#) (b. 1941) brought back what was rejected by the Judsonites – virtuosity in dance technique, melding ballet with modern dance. [Deuce Coupe](#), set to pop music of the Beach Boys, juxtaposed six company members and 14 ballet dancers.

In the black dance tradition, individualism grew.

[Dianne McIntyre’s](#) (b. 1946) company [Sounds in Motion](#) emerged in the 1970s, telling stories (slavery, the northern migration of blacks) through music and movement. [Zollar](#), founder of [Urban Bush Women](#), studied with McIntyre. Other strong voices include [Joel Hall Dancers](#), [Joan Myers Brown \(Philadanco\)](#), [Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble](#), [Ann Williams \(Dallas Black Dance Theatre\)](#), and [Garth Fagan Dance](#).



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DIVERSE AESTHETICS AND DANCING PERSONAL HISTORIES (1980S ON)

In the 1980s-90s, modern choreographers focused on their own histories and issues of identity, or moved in a multidisciplinary context with text, music, set/ costume design, and new technology.

The [Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company](#) was formed in 1983 with elements of contact improvisation, personal narrative, social commentary, text, pure movement, and more. Many works draw on African-American history including [Fondly Do We Hope... Fervently Do We Pray](#) (on US president Abraham Lincoln). Jones tackles difficult topics; [Still/Here](#) explores survival in the face of AIDS (which claimed Zane's life).

[Mark Morris](#) (b. 1956) founded the Mark Morris Dance Group in 1980 and is celebrated for diverse repertory and his musicality. His works range from whimsical solos to full-length abstract works, to choreography for ballet and opera companies. Full-length works include [The Hard Nut](#) (an update of The Nutcracker), [L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato](#), and [Mozart Dances](#).

Early modern dance defined itself in opposition to ballet but over the decades, modern dance and ballet influenced each other. Major modern choreographers like Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, and Trisha Brown frequently create works for ballet and opera. In the past, modern dancers like Holm and Tamiris choreographed for Broadway; today modern dance has a renewed impact on Broadway as Twyla Tharp, Garth Fagan, [Karole Armitage](#), and Bill T. Jones are creating award-winning choreography for musicals.

Today, many groundbreaking choreographers and companies—Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, Twyla Tharp, Mark Morris, Trisha Brown, and Alvin Ailey—continue to exert influence. Hundreds of modern dance choreographers create work in the US and abroad. Notable American modern dance makers include [Susan Marshall](#), [Sarah Michelson](#), [Bebe Miller](#), [John Jasperse](#), [Eiko & Koma](#), [Wally Cardona](#), [Jane Comfort](#), [David Parsons](#), [David Dorfman](#), [Liz Lerman](#), [Annie B-Parson](#), [Stephen Petronio](#), [Tere O'Connor](#), [Reggie Wilson](#), [Yanira Castro](#), [Miguel Gutierrez](#), [Nora Chipaumire](#), [Kyle Abraham](#), [Aszure Barton](#), [Brian Brooks](#), [Rashaun Mitchell](#), [Liz Gerring](#), [Cynthia Oliver](#), [Yasuko Yoshiki](#), and many more.

Today, international exchange has accelerated, enriching the world of dance. Influences on

American dance include Japanese Butoh, German tanztheater, classical Indian dance, Chinese dance, and capoeira. Contemporary black choreographers have expanded their scope, collaborating with African companies.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS MODERN DANCE?

The term modern dance encompasses a wide variety of styles and content; some themes or characteristics recur in its history. What emerges is that modern dance is more a point of view than a movement vocabulary or style. There are general movement preferences—the expressive potential of the torso or acknowledging rather than defying gravity—but even these are not universal. Modern dance is not defined in terms of mastering a vocabulary, but as a mode of expression. Innovation, personal and/or cultural identity, and social relevance are resonant themes.

The motivation to choreograph may be simply to move, tell a story, or make a point. The genre embraces technical virtuosity and natural, everyday movements. Modern dance's inclusiveness incorporates ideas and influences from other cultures. As its history makes clear, modern dance is in constant motion, changing and reinventing itself, valuing reinterpretation, self-expression and innovation, as it powerfully illuminates the human condition. Twyla Tharp sums it up: *"Modern is not less, modern is more. It's everything that has been done plus."*



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