

The American origins of modern dance: [1930-1950] from the expressive to the abstract

Attempts to approach the major dance trends

With the passing of Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan and the emergence of choreographers from the Denishawn school, the late 1920s constituted a radical turning point in the history of modern dance. The carefree roaring twenties saw strong economic growth and yet also prohibition, immigration restrictions and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

The 1929 stock market crash heralded a new era: the Great Depression. A vibrant choreographic scene grew up in New York despite the social and economic difficulties of the time. The Big Apple¹ afforded artists a tightly woven creative network, combining teachers and performers; cultural venues and commercial theaters; the white and black performing arts scenes; entertainment and sociopolitical activism; companies and collectives; private investment and institutional support.

Modern Dance: different styles, different philosophies

The second generation of modern choreographers chiefly emerged from the Denishawn School. Martha Graham², Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman strove to revitalize the movement and make it relevant to contemporary American culture. The performing arts scene saw a profusion of modern dance, while at the same time, many dancers continued to work on Broadway and in musical comedies, both for financial reasons and because versatility is deeply embedded in US arts culture.

Helen Tamiris' career illustrates this kind of American eclecticism: after training in free dance with Michel Fokine, she joined the Metropolitan Opera Ballet and also danced in musical reviews. In 1927, she terminated her commercial contracts to focus on modern dance, collaborating with Louis Horst. She founded the Repertory Dance Theater and invited emerging modern choreographers to present their work. As a modern dancer, her work dealt with social issues and sought to impact contemporary society. But when post-World War II cuts to arts funding left her without means of support, she returned to a successful Broadway career.

¹ New York became known as the Big Apple in the 1920s.

² For more on Martha Graham, see the previous section.



New styles emerged as early as the late 20s and early 30s. Martha Graham developed her technique based around contraction and release, while Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman focused on fall and recovery: the art of staying off balance! Their emphasis was on rising and falling movements tracing semi-circles and spirals according to specific rhythms within a highly developed choreographic structure. Charles Weidman honed his observation skills in order to capture human movement and bring it to stage. Together, both choreographers sought to depict contemporary American women and men steeped in the emotional zeitgeist.

***With my red fires* (1936) Doris Humphrey:
a dramatic work with universal reach**

Doris Humphrey developed the third opus of her New Dance trilogy, *With my red fires*, with Charles Weidman as part of Roosevelt's Federal One Project. This group work in two parts, created in 1936 at Bennington College, explores the dynamics of a love story between two young people kept apart by a possessive mother. Here, the ensemble constitutes an abstract representation of a moralistic society, participating in the ritual punishment of the two lovers. The score by Wallingford Riegger, an American composer who was highly active in the 1930s modern dance scene, provides complex musical variations allowing Humphrey to explore the entire range of her choreographic vocabulary, based around symmetries and asymmetries, successions and oppositions.

At once personal and universal, the work also draws on Humphrey's categories of gesture: the social gestures of human relationships; the functional gestures of work and everyday life; the ritual gestures of religion and the emotional gestures of human feeling. She made use of highly developed choreographic systems each with their own internal logic, adding expressive variations to each in order to portray the social pressures of a puritanical society and youth's desire for rebellion.

***The Moor's Pavane* (1949), José Limon:
modern retellings of myths and literary classics**

José Limon joined the Humphrey-Weidman company in 1930 after training at its school. He became a principal dancer in 1942. Born to Mexican parents who immigrated to the United States in 1915, he was an active part of the dynamic modern dance scene of the 30s and 40s, as a dancer, choreographer and trainer. He formed a strong relationship with his mentor Doris Humphrey, eventually appointing her artistic director of his own company. His approach to modern dance was similar to that of Humphrey and Graham, drawing on

demonstrative, stylized movements to express an all-encompassing, and even redemptive vision. For Limon, dancers represented specific characters enacting stories drawn from classic myths and legends. Created for the American Dance Festival in 1949, *The Moor's Pavane* is illustrative of his work. A retelling of Shakespeare's Othello, it depicts a struggle against antagonistic forces. The piece is set to Henry Purcell's powerful score: a rhythmic, musical landscape full of variations and contrasts. Othello, Iago, Desdemona and Emilia are brought to stage in an intense microcosm. The choreographic structure is based on a courtly dance, but its rigid form is gradually disrupted under the strain of intense emotion and passion. As the piece progresses, the dancers eschew gravity and symmetry, their hurried and spiraling movements reflecting the characters' psychological states as they struggle in vain to break free from their emotions.

***Trend* (1937), Hanya Holm: German woman in New York and her new experiential vision of modern dance**

Trained in Germany by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Hanya Holm taught eurythmics in Hellerau, before joining Mary Wigman's Dresden school³ as a student and teaching assistant. In the early thirties, during the company's second US tour, Wigman asked Holm to head up a new dance school in New York. There, Holm immersed herself in American culture and moved away from Wigman's more mystic approach. Highly influenced by the theories of Laban and Dalcroze, she developed a style characterized by figures of eight and gyrations. Her work explores a wide range of spacial curves and dynamic variations. In 1936 the school became the Hanya Holm School of Dance, and formed its own company.

She presented her best known work, *Trend*, at Bennington College. This epic piece for 37 dancers, speaks of human survival in the face of work alienation, egocentrism, authoritarianism and the traumas of war. The few archives available on this work reveal a balance between solo and group dance. The minimalist set, reminiscent of the work Adolphe Appia in Hellerau, was designed by Arch Lauterer. John Martin described it as "the first truly modern set design for dance". In spite of this initial success, Holm encountered numerous obstacles. This eventually led her away from the independent performing arts and towards commercial work, chiefly for Broadway as well as theatre, opera and television. Her true vocation however, remained teaching. Her approach focused on subjective experience. Unusually for her time, she refused to teach a particular style, instead encouraging students to find their own unique corporality by exploring their emotions. Several of her students were

³ For more on this topic, see the section on modern dance in Germany.

inspired to make socially conscious work, desirous to express the social and political struggles around them. Some turned to Agitprop; others created an activist dance troupe, the New Dance Group; and yet another, Alwin Nikolais, would go on to forge a new style, turning away from emotion and towards abstraction.

More than style, spectacle and emotional impact, dance is a weapon!
Dance and politics

Modern dance is often talked of in personal and cultural terms, but rarely linked to politics. This no doubt reflects a skewed vision of the creative milieu of the time, based on a restricted number of works from the period. Martha Graham for example, took a clear stand against the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a position which also drove her work *Chronicle* of the same year. As early as 1932, several dance troupes banded together under the Workers Dance League⁴: the New Dance Group (NDG), the Duncan Dancers, the Red dancers, the Nature friends, the Dance Unit and the Harlem Dance Unit. All these groups subscribed to the communist notion that art can be an effective means of emancipating the oppressed masses.

In 1932, the NDG was formed in New York by six of Hanya Holm's students during a communist gathering in Manhattan. Their slogan: "Dance is a weapon!". The collective quickly grew and several branches formed in industrial cities. It published a review entitled *Workers Theatre*. Initially founded by the sons and daughters of pre-World War I immigrants, the NDG soon became home to dancers, choreographers and teachers from a range of backgrounds⁵. In 1939, the group published its objectives, stating that "dance must be used to teach workers' children that they belong to the working class."⁶. Their goal was not just to dance but to make people dance. The group's members organized affordable classes in technique and improvisation, as well as public discussions. They created works around socio-political issues such as: poverty, racial segregation, class struggle, unemployment, pacifism, fascism and social injustice, as well as questions of Jewish identity following the Second World War. Trade unions became cultural centers for the Workers Cultural Federation, hosting classes and performances. Serious political themes were often tackled with humor and satire for the amusement of workers. While its detractors view modern dance as consigned to bourgeois culture, here it was able reach to a section of society generally cut off from the world of the performing arts.

⁴ The Workers Dance League became the New Dance League in 1935. Here again modern dance is referred to as "new dance".

⁵ Including, Sophie Maslow, Anna Sokolow, Jean Erdman and Jane Dudley – all from the Martha Graham Dance Company –; Bill Bales and Joe Gifford from the Humphrey-Weidman troupe; Eve Gentry and Mary Anthony who, founding members of the group, first worked with Hanya Holm.

⁶ See *Dance is a weapon 1932-1955*, published by C. Rousier, Pantin, CND, 2008, p.18.

***Time is money (1934), Jane Dudley:
an ode to unsung workers***

A dancer with Martha Graham's Company and a teacher at the Graham school, Jane Dudley, joined the NDG and, along with two other dancers, founded the Dudley-Maslow-Bales Trio. "Tick tock, time is money. Tick tock safety first. And haste is waste. And all the mangled limbs of time, charred bodies, slag in white-hot steel, the rotting teeth, the TB faces, the yellow-green decaying skins of time! Time is money...". To this poem by proletariat writer Sol Funaroff, Dudley choreographed a work denouncing workers' alienation and the frenetic rhythm and pace set by capitalism. Instead of music, the piece was danced to the ambient sounds of trade union halls and concert theaters and to the powerful words of poem itself, dictating the rhythm of the dancers' repetitive movements. The poem was not only part of the performance and an inspiration for the activist dancers, but also a way of addressing an increasingly recurrent question: is it possible to dance an experience that is not your own, while maintaining authenticity and avoiding the trap of generalizations?

Companies, collectives, schools, summer programs and beyond: teaching and sharing styles, ideas and cultures

The 1930s put an end to the idea that modern dance must express the issues of its time and consist of particular, defined, teachable techniques. Ted Shawn closed the Denishawn school in 1932 to open Jacob's Pillow, providing summer classes and performance programs. The NDG also gave classes and performances over summer in establishments run by the communist, socialist or Jewish organizations, such as Kinderland, Unity and Taminent. From 1934 to 1942, summer sessions at Bennington College's Bennington School of Dance taught students various styles and techniques as well as Louis Horst's dance composition method. In 1947, this program moved to Connecticut College, where the American Dance Festival began in the following year. For over forty years, from 1941 to 1984, Hanya Holm developed her own summer workshops in Colorado Springs. These various events helped forge precious ties with professors in psychical education, who would go on to open departments of modern dance within their universities.

In addition to summer courses, many modern choreographers founded their own schools or otherwise taught throughout the year. Teaching provided both a financial stop gap for dancers and a pool of young talent for companies. But in the 1930s, the world of dance was not exempt from segregation: "new dance" was largely practiced by white dancers. Few black dancers were able to join modern dance classes or companies, with the exception of those of Lester Horton on the West Coast. A sign of the changing times, in the 1940s, the Workers



Dance League would begin to train African American dancers, welcome ethnic diversity and offer classes in African and Caribbean dance styles. Black Modern Dance was about to come into its own.

Ongoing political engagement in modern dance, from communist ideals to the New Deal: the 1940s and civil rights

In 1933, Roosevelt's New Deal established the Works Progress Administration and its program to employ artists: Federal Project Number One. The program was a boon to world of dance. Dancers from the NDG took part in it, chiefly for financial support, while continuing to work within trade unions. In the 1930s, various dance organizations cropped up, mixing, overlapping and working together towards the common, idealistic goal of dance as political engagement. The New Deal was by no means universally popular, some seeing it as a manifestation of communist party ideology. The Theater Project, so beneficial to dancers, came under fire for similar reasons. International tensions were rising, and the Spanish civil war was the subject of several works and fundraising performances. The Theater Project was terminated in 1939 and the NDG was at its lowest point until Executive Director Judith Delman undertook reforms. The group's training program was modified to include the Graham and Humphrey-Weidman techniques, as well as classical ballet, folk dance and dance composition. The group retained strong, pro-working class political convictions, but their performances were opened up to wider audiences. Questions of civil rights were theoretically integrated into the New Deal, however these rights were not upheld in the Southern States and the oppression of African Americans became a prevalent theme for the NDG. This can be seen in Jan Dudley's work *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938) and Charles Weidman's *Lynch town* (1938). The group welcomed its first African American choreographers in the early 1940s: Pearl Primus through a scholarship and later Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty and Jean Léon Destiné. During this period, the United States became increasingly involved in the Second World War and nationalist sentiment rose, influencing the collective as it professionalized. In 1941, *American Dances* was created. The NDG gave free classes to the children of soldiers and performed on military bases. In 1944, it became a professional company and entered into the American capitalist system, although its members remained dissenting artists.

Hard time blues (1945), Pearl Primus

Black Modern dance⁷ emerges to express African American history and perspectives

Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham are considered the pioneers of African American modern dance. Both were fascinated by the ethnological and anthropological aspects of dance. Their research helped nourish their vision of modern dance, through the reactivation and transformation of traditional dances from Black and multi-ethnic African and Caribbean cultures. In their hands, modern dance became a means to express the humanity, living conditions and culture of peoples too often abused since slavery. Primus' best known solo was choreographed to the poem *Strange Fruit* by Abel Meeropol, which speaks of the horrors of lynching. The poem was put to music and sung by Billie Holiday in 1939. In Primus' 1943 work, the dancer plays a woman remembering witnessing a lynching as the poem is read aloud. Here again, poetry is used to bolster the work's political engagement and denounce injustice. In 1945, she created *Hard time blues*, a dance about the poverty and solitude of African American sharecroppers in the South, set to a blues song by Josh White. Known for his anti-segregationist songs and supported by Roosevelt, Josh White sang about the suffering of poor sharecroppers. *Hard time blues* ends like this: "Now your landlord comes around when your rent is due, and if you aint got his money he'll take your home from you. He'll take your mule, your horse, he'll even take your cow. Says 'get off of my land, you're no good no how.'".

Post 1945 - recognition, cultural diplomacy and a new aesthetic: new generations emerge

Strengthened both politically and economically by its World War II victory, the United States, known as the "world's policeman", embarked on a cold war with the USSR. Anti-communist sentiments were high and McCarthyists bent on rooting out "un-American activities". The FBI classified dancer Sophie Maslow as a "Level C security problem". Two laws, in 1946 and 1948, established the basis for American cultural diplomacy: American classical ballet was supposed to beat the Russians at their own game, and modern dance was held up as a pure American invention, celebrating individual freedom and creativity. Several dancers who once belonged to collectives, expressed this cultural individualism by founding independent

⁷ From the 1930s up until the 1960s the term "Negro dance" was used to describe African American dance. We have opted to use a different term in order to situate this text within the research that continued throughout the 1960s.

companies under their own names. It was at this time that Martha Graham's company toured Asia and the Middle East, funded by the State Department and private donors. American dance had become a diplomatic export. The Batsheva Dance Company in Tel-Aviv, born of a close collaboration between Bethsabée de Rothschild and Martha Graham, was one product of this cultural outreach. Anna Sokolow, a former Graham company dancer, would also play a key role in the development of modern dance in Israel.

As the 1940s drew to a close, a new generation of dancers challenged the idea of modern dance as theatrical, expressive and emotive. Their choreography broke with tradition and a new abstract style swept through America. Abstraction was a fresh choreographic approach, liberating dance once and for all from the constraints of storytelling, emotional expression and representation. Movement took centre stage: dancers explored space, time, colors and shapes, with no attempt to depict, describe or evoke anything beyond the movement itself. The dancers became abstract moving figures, ageless, genderless, and free from cultural identity. Audiences were invited to form their own interpretations and reactions to the sensory stimulus presented on stage, without reference to traditional theatrical conventions.

***Tensile Involvement (1953), Alwin Nikolais:
an experiment in total abstract theater***

“When dealing with space, its best not to think of it as an invisible void, but rather a living, vibrant canvas, filled with sounds and luminous waves, bombarded by invisible particles.”⁸ Making the invisible, visible: Alwin Nikolais' explored a kind of choreography absolved from representing human experience, with its baggage of emotions and passions. He wanted to break with the approach of the second generation of modern dancers and bring audiences into direct contact with form and *motion*: the deep and palpable motivation behind movement. His eclectic career, insatiable taste for new experiences and creativity would lead him to experiment with abstraction. Abstract choreography emerged in the work of Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus School in late 1920s Germany. With Nikolais, we see this approach in the hands of an American choreographer, a student of Hanya Holm, initially fascinated by Mary Wigman's expressionist dance. Nikolais saw choreographic works as cohesive, multifaceted wholes, in which each element – dance, music, costumes, set design, lighting etc.- held equal importance. He would learn the not only the skills of choreography, but also composing, costume design, set design and lighting. He created an original on-stage universe, taking advantage of new technological discoveries in sound, image projection,

⁸Nikolais Alwin, *Le Geste unique* (translated by. M.Lawton), Paris, Coll. Linearis, Ed. Deuxième époque, 2018, p.68.

lighting and textiles. *Tensile Involvement* (1953) is one of his earliest pieces. It demonstrates the fundamental principles underlying his work: Einstein's theory that there are no fixed points in space, Marshall McLuhan's claim that "the medium is the message" and the use of apparently genderless dancers as multidirectional, moving shapes. Nikolais' credo: "Motion not emotion" comes to life through a series of living tableaux. The dancers move through spatial vectors traced by elastic ribbons, in a display of the sensorial power of danced movement and its impact on the environment, with the dancers representing neither characters nor emotions.

***Rainforest* (1968), Merce Cunningham (1919-2009):
Chance, abstraction and egalitarian collaborations**

Merce Cunningham formed his company in 1953 at Black Mountain College, an experimental university in North Carolina, founded by exiled teachers from the Bauhaus school. At the same college, one year prior, John Cage presented his history-making performance work *Untitled event*. The two met in the late 1930s and John Cage would have a lasting impact on Cunningham's work. Although he was trained by Martha Graham and the second man to join her company, Cunningham would go on to take a diametrically opposed approach to choreography. His work focused on space and introduced the element of chance as a way of escaping habitual human modes of thought throughout the creative process; from the dance itself to the overall performance. Dance, music and visual art were all created separately as stand-alone works then juxtaposed unchanged on stage. He worked regularly with composers John Cage and David Tudor, with costume and set designers Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and video artists, Charles Atlas and Elliot Caplan. His choreography requires dancers to move their bodies in precise and complex patterns, necessitating complete focus. There is no room interpretation in the form of individual emotional expression, instead, a disparate range of visions and sensations are conjured up through abstraction.

As the title suggests, *Rainforest* is a work inspired by tropical nature. For the set, Andy Warhol provided metalized, helium-filled plastic pillows, previously used for his *Silver Clouds* installation. Dressed in flesh-colored stockings and unitards, the dancers' artificial nakedness stands out against the floating cushions. For this work, David Tudor created his first composition for the company, which would later be presented as a series of independent soundscapes. The three works: choreographic, sculptural and auditory, were presented simultaneously. For the first time in the history of dance, a new relationship between different artistic disciplines emerged. Each work was treated as equal and independent but juxtaposed in a shared time-space. In this way, Cunningham and Cage brought the principles of Zen philosophy to the performing arts!

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There are a great many documentary resources on this period. This bibliography is designed to enable the reader to learn more, access picture archives and read first hand accounts from artists and their contemporaries. These are mainly French language resources, however where translations are lacking, English references are given.

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Credits

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Text and bibliography selection

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Production

Maison de la Danse

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