

# Five Decades of Dance History

By

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The 20th century has been an important and vital era in the history of Western Dance and the most significant occurrence was the emergence of what came to be called Modern Dance. It began to happen with the advent of Isadora Duncan, born 100 years ago this month, who revolutionized the dance of her time and is now considered to be the “mother” of 20th century dance. The “natural” and “interpretive” dance which evolved in the second and third decades were her direct descendants and the “modern dance” of the ’30s and beyond was undoubtedly related to Duncan’s freedom of expression and movement.

In the ’20s the influential college teachers of dance were Gertrude Colby of Columbia University Teachers College, who taught what was called “natural dancing” and was my teacher, and Margaret H’Doubler, who taught “interpretive dancing” at the University of Wisconsin and established the first dance major there in 1926. The most popular of the very few American dance companies was the Denishawn Company, an eclectic group, headed by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, three of whose members were to leave the company and inaugurate the modern dance movement during the latter half of this decade.

A momentous time for both concert and educational dance was the decade of the ’30s. The Bennington College Summer School of Dance was established in 1934. Here, the four pioneers of Modern Dance, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, all ex-Denishawn dancers, and Hanya Holm, representing Mary Wigman and the German dance, with their companies, taught aspiring dancers and secondary and college dance teachers the essentials of modern dance. In another sphere, John Martin was appointed permanent dance critic of *The New York Times* and wrote several books on the new dance.

Against some opposition, dance education established its own section in the American Physical Education Association in 1932 with Mary O’Donnell as the first elected chairperson. The first book on *Dancing in the Elementary Schools*, edited by Dorothy LaSalle, was published in the Research Quarterly of that organization. and then by A.S. Barnes in 1933.

In the first half of the ’40s, World War II took precedence over everything and many dancers and teachers went into service. In the second half of the decade, The Connecticut College Summer School of Dance was established following the pattern of Bennington, (which was discontinued during the War), and it is still an important center for summer study. José Limón returned from service, formed his own company, and under the artistic direction of Doris Humphrey, (who, because of an arthritic hip could no longer dance), began to extend his great skill as a dancer into notable choreography. Martha Graham brought more men into her company and made some of her greatest group dances. It was during this decade, as well, that two of our most noted American ballet companies, The American Ballet Theatre and The New York City Ballet began to be formed.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the second generation of modern dancers. Many left their early teachers to strike out on their own and to use their dance heritage in different ways. While the first generation of modern dance choreographers was mostly women, the second was mostly men, some departing widely from the style and method of their former teachers. Black and Oriental faces appear in dance companies, with the moderns leading the way; dance majors and minors begin to be established in some of the larger universities; and the trend toward moving dance out of the Women’s Physical Education Department begins. In the 1960s, Dance finally achieves status as a major art, and is now listed as one of the five divisions of art expression with drama, literature, music, and the visual arts. Another example of this change in status is that quality magazines now have permanent dance critics.

Professional dance companies, directed by Blacks make their appearance during this time and add their rich heritage to American Dance. And after several decades of mutual antagonism, ballet and modern dance grow closer together, each borrowing from the other's elaborate technique, and ballet companies borrowing notable modern dances to extend their repertoires. This is made possible by the advent of dance notation, which begins to have extensive use. Lastly, new fields, related to dance open up, just in time to take care of the alarming number of majors emerging from our universities, the large majority of whom expect to join a New York company immediately upon graduation. Besides teaching, the areas of dance therapy, production, criticism, management, lighting design, may absorb some of these dancers after the stars in their eyes have been somewhat dimmed.