Martha Graham electrified the world with a new form of dance that came to symbolize the modern era. In Graham’s world, the tightly controlled positions of classical ballet, the painful pointe shoes, and the stiff tutus were a thing of the past. Her movement was about freedom, expression, and energy. Barefoot and in flowing skirts, Graham thrilled audiences with dances filled with energy and emotion, on subjects ranging from ancient religion to modern art. Over her lifetime—nearly 70 years on the stage—Graham transformed the art of dance. So radical were her contributions that one critic joked, “If Martha Graham ever gave birth, it would be to a cube.” To this day, she is known as the mother of modern dance.

Graham was born in 1894 in Pittsburgh. When she was 14, she moved with her family to Santa Barbara, California. While Graham was an athletic child, she did not discover dance until her teens. At 16, she visited the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles, where she saw the ballet dancer Ruth St. Denis. Graham was so inspired by St. Denis’s performance that she decided to become a dancer herself.

Six years later, Graham enrolled in the Denishawn school in Los Angeles, which was founded by Ruth St. Denis and her husband, Ted Shawn. She worked mainly with Shawn, who helped her improve her technique. Shawn also created a dance for Graham, Xochital, in which she danced the role of an Aztec maiden. With her emotionally charged performance, Graham gained wide critical approval.
After eight years at Denishawn, Graham had developed into a mature and technically accomplished dancer. She was now ready to make her mark on the world.

Graham danced at the Greenwich Village Follies in New York City, where she was able to create her own dances. Yet she longed for even greater freedom. At the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, she found her chance. Graham was given complete control over both her classes and the entire program. It was here that she began creating the experimental works that would mark her career.

Also at this time, Graham began to develop her own theories about dance. “I wanted to begin not with characters or ideas, but with movements,” she said. “I wanted significant movement. I did not want it to be beautiful or fluid. I wanted it to be fraught with inner meaning, with excitement and surge.”

Graham believed that classical ballet’s concern with beauty and grace overlooked the connection between movement and the most basic human emotions. She wanted to return dance to a more emotional state, a state where all aspects of human experience are expressed. Graham’s dances featured sharp and violent movements, such as jolts, trembling, and falls. In these wild and chaotic movements, Graham attempted to “chart the graph of the heart.”

In 1927, Graham opened her own school, the Martha Graham School of Dance, in New York City. She also started a dance company. Like other artists in the 1930s, Graham examined social problems in her work. Many of her early pieces of this period, including Immigrant, Vision of Apocalypse, Lamentation, and Revolt, dealt with important social issues. During the Great Depression, Graham did not use sets in her dances, and most of the costumes she made herself.
After the hardships of the Great Depression lessened in 1933, Graham reinvented not only movement in dance but also set design. In *Frontier*, one of the company’s early pieces about a pioneer woman, Graham worked with Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi. In Noguchi’s set design, three-dimensional sculpture replaced the traditional flat backdrops that appear at the back of a stage. The effect, combined with Graham’s striking movements, was bold, beautiful, and haunting. Graham also worked on sound design with Louis Horst, a close friend and important influence throughout her career.

Shortly after *Frontier*, the young ballet dancer Erick Hawkins joined the company. Hawkins and Graham appeared together in *American Document*, a piece she created for a performance at the White House in 1938. For the next ten years, Hawkins would dance in many of Graham’s greatest pieces, such as *Appalachian Spring*. Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, Graham created pieces based on Greek myths, including *Cave of the Heart*, in which she danced the role of Medea.

In 1955, Graham presented one of her most powerful works, *Seraphic Dialogue*. In this piece, Graham told the story of Joan of Arc. Modern dance was closely related to the women’s movement. Because of this, Graham felt a strong desire to portray the lives and accomplishments of both great and ordinary women. It is no wonder, then, that Graham had been invited by Eleanor Roosevelt to dance at the White House. Over the course of her career, Graham danced there for eight presidents.

Martha Graham danced her last piece, *Cortège of Eagles*, when she was 76 years old. But a life without dance was impossible for her, and she continued to teach and create new pieces for the rest of her life. In 1991, while creating a dance called *The Eye of the Goddess* for the Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Martha Graham died at the age of 96.
Like all great artists, Graham pushed the boundaries of her art to invent something new. Picasso had done it in painting; and Frank Lloyd Wright, in architecture. But until Martha Graham, no artist had ever challenged traditional ideas about dance.

Her style is now part of the common vocabulary of dancers everywhere, and her influence has spread far beyond the world of dance. She is one of the stars of twentieth-century art.

**Martha Graham's Major Works**

- **1927** Lamentation
- **1931** Primitive Mysteries
- **1935** Frontier
- **1940**
- **1944** Appalachian Spring
- **1959** Episodes
- **1984** Rite of Spring