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The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Acquires Archive of Legendary Dance Artist Martha Graham

Extensive collection from the Martha Graham Dance Company features films, photographs, choreography notes, and correspondence from the seminal choreographer

May 11, 2020 - The New York Public Library of the Performing Arts has acquired the archive of Martha Graham, one of the most significant and influential voices of the modern dance movement. The multimedia collection from the Martha Graham Dance Company contains films of the groundbreaking dancer at the peak of her career, alongside photographs, choreographic notations, correspondence, and other historical materials. Today marks the 126th anniversary of Graham's birth.

The Martha Graham Dance Company, the oldest dance company in the United States, celebrated its 94th anniversary on April 18. Its archive will provide valuable insight and context for American modern dance from its earliest days through decades of discovery. Spanning 40 linear feet and featuring over 400 audio and moving image items, the collection covers the life and work of the esteemed choreographer from her childhood days to her legendary career to her creative legacy and influence through the founding of her Company.

Highlights of the collection include:

- Film of iconic Graham works including *Appalachian Spring*, *Frontier*, *Letter to the World* and *American Document*;
- Tintype family photographs from Graham's childhood;
- An extensive photograph collection of Graham's canon by photographers including Barbara Morgan and Soichi Sunami;
- Isamu Noguchi's set drawings for *Seraphic Dialogue*, including handwritten notes by Noguchi;
- Choreographic notes for *American Document*.

The Company's historic films were remastered and its extensive collection of images and documents were digitized in a three-year project funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. **Executive Director LaRue Allen said**, "We are grateful to the Mellon Foundation for making the restoration of these important objects possible and to the New York Public Library for its commitment to preserving them for future generations."

Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, has added, “We see this new home for our archives with the Jerome Robbins Collection as the ideal partner in our ongoing efforts to connect with new and varied audiences. The Library offers public access and expert curation that not only secures and celebrates the unmatched influence of Martha’s revolution in dance, but extends it into the future so that it can be explored, embraced and taken as inspiration for things that have not yet been imagined.”

“Martha Graham is a giant in the American cultural landscape. Her codification of the philosophical ideals of modern dance created a new mode of expression that still underpins the training of dancers across the globe today. The Jerome Robbins Dance Division houses the collections of Graham’s teachers, peers and acolytes so we are incredibly excited to add the archive of the Graham Company to our holdings. With this addition the Division’s collections now present an extensive understanding of the history of American modern dance and we look forward to sharing these treasures with dance artists, students and scholars for generations to come,” said **Linda Murray, Curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the Library for the Performing Arts.**

As a pioneer of 20th century dance, Graham’s career reflects the work of those who came before and those later influenced by her signature physical vocabulary and her theatrical innovations. The collection joins the impressive holdings of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, which include materials from Graham’s mentors and teachers Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, contemporaries Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, dancers in her company including Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor and Jean Erdman, and countless other greats who sought her out as a collaborator including Mikhail Baryshnikov and Rudolf Nureyev.

In honor of Martha Graham’s birthday today, and to celebrate her new home at the Library, the Martha Graham Dance Company is releasing special digital content on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram throughout the week. Its popular Martha Matinee will feature an overview of Graham’s classic from 1944, *Herodiade*, including rare footage that is part of the Library’s acquisition.

Martha Graham (May 11, 1894–April 1, 1991) has had a deep and lasting impact on American art and culture. She single-handedly defined contemporary dance as a uniquely American art form, which the nation has in turn shared with the world. During her long and illustrious career, Graham created 181 choreographic works and a dance technique that has been compared to ballet in its scope and magnitude. Her approach to dance and theater revolutionized the art form and her innovative physical vocabulary has irrevocably influenced dance worldwide.

Martha Graham founded her dance company and school in 1926. Her groundbreaking style grew from her experimentation with the elemental movements of contraction and release. By focusing on the basic activities of the human form, she enlivened the body with raw, electric emotion. The sharp, angular, and direct movements of her technique were a dramatic departure from the predominant style of the time.

During her 70 years of creating dances, Graham collaborated with and commissioned work from leading visual artists, musicians, and designers, including sculptor Isamu Noguchi, composers Aaron Copland, Louis Horst, Samuel Barber, William Schuman, Carlos Surinach, and Gian Carlo Menotti, and fashion designers Halston, Donna Karan, and Calvin Klein. Graham influenced generations of choreographers that included Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and Twyla Tharp, altering the scope of dance. Classical ballet dancers Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev, and Mikhail Baryshnikov sought her out to broaden their artistry. She taught actors including Bette Davis, Kirk Douglas, Madonna, Liza Minnelli, Gregory Peck, Tony Randall, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, and Joanne Woodward to utilize their bodies as expressive instruments.

Martha Graham's uniquely American vision and creative genius earned her numerous honors and awards. During the Bicentennial she was granted the United States' highest civilian honor, The Medal of Freedom. In 1998, *TIME* Magazine named her the "Dancer of the Century." The first dancer to perform at the White House and to act as a cultural ambassador abroad, she captured the spirit of a nation. "No artist is ahead of his time," she said. "He is his time. It is just that the others are behind the time."

The Library will process and catalog the Martha Graham archive over the next two years. It will then be available to users in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in Lincoln Center.

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About the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Founded in 1944, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division is the world's largest dance archive with an international and extensive collection that spans seven centuries. The Division provides a community space for dance professionals, researchers and the general public, offering programs and exhibitions, a dance studio for special projects, educational activities, residencies, fellowships, documentation of performances and oral histories and, of course, dance reference services, all free of charge.

About The New York Public Library For The Performing Arts

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts houses one of the world's most extensive combinations of circulating, reference, and rare archival collections in its field. These materials are available free of charge, along with a wide range of special programs, including exhibitions, seminars, and performances. An essential resource for everyone with an interest in the arts — whether professional or amateur — the Library is known particularly for its prodigious collections of non-book materials such as historic recordings, videotapes, autograph manuscripts, correspondence, sheet music, stage designs, press clippings, programs, posters and photographs. The Library is part of The New York Public Library system, which has 92 locations in the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island, and is a lead provider of free education for all.

About the Martha Graham Dance Company

The Martha Graham Dance Company has been a world leader in the evolving art form of modern dance since its founding in 1926. Today, the Company is embracing a new programming vision that showcases masterpieces by Graham alongside newly commissioned works by contemporary artists. With programs that offer a rich thematic narrative, the Company creates new platforms for contemporary dance and multiple points of access for audiences.

Since its inception, the Martha Graham Dance Company has received international acclaim from audiences in more than 50 countries throughout North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The Company has performed at the Metropolitan Opera House, Carnegie Hall, the Paris Opera House, Covent Garden, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as well as at the base of the Great Pyramids in Egypt and in the ancient Odeon of Herodes Atticus theater on the Acropolis in Athens. In addition, the Company has also produced several award-winning films broadcast on PBS and around the world. For more information about the Company, visit www.marthagraham.org.