

Martha Graham Took Classic Ballet and Turned It Into Modern Dance. It's Still Moving Us 100 Years Later

Jacoba Urist

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Her choreography told stories in new ways and her collaborations with costume and stage designers changed the aesthetic of the art. Now, her dance company marks its first century

Photographs by ioulex

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*Xin Ying, principal dancer with Martha Graham Dance Company, wears a costume from the 1948 ballet *Diversion of Angels*. Graham designed the dress, inspired by a splash of color in a Wassily Kandinsky painting. ioulex; makeup by Deanna Melluso*

This past fall, in a sunlit studio in Manhattan’s West village, the [Martha Graham Dance Company](#) was rehearsing a production of [Cave of the Heart](#), a fiery one-act ballet created in 1946.

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Four barefoot dancers, dressed in black, reenacted the legend of Medea—a psychological study of lovesick jealousy based on an ancient Euripides play. The piece, originally titled *Serpent Heart*, begins as the sorceress is rejected by her lover, Jason, and the story follows her as she seeks vengeance. Unlike traditional ballerinas who appear weightless as they dance en pointe, supporting themselves on the tips of their extended feet, the Martha Graham dancers reflected their company’s weighty, hyper-stylized aesthetic. Their hands were cupped or clawed, their feet flexed, their backs hunched as they moved through a sparse set of prop stepping stones and an ominous, spiky metal sculpture to the soulful music of American composer [Samuel Barber](#).

Established in 1926, the Martha Graham Dance Company is the oldest professional dance troupe in the United States. As part of its worldwide centennial celebration, the company visited four European cities last fall, performing classics like *Cave of the Heart* alongside newer commissions. One of those pieces—*We the People*, created in 2024 by [choreographer Jamar Roberts](#)—depicted a protest, set to music by African American folk artist [Rhiannon Giddens](#).

Interesting Facts: What to Know About Martha Graham

Born in Pittsburgh in 1894, Martha Graham took up dancing relatively late, at the age of 22.

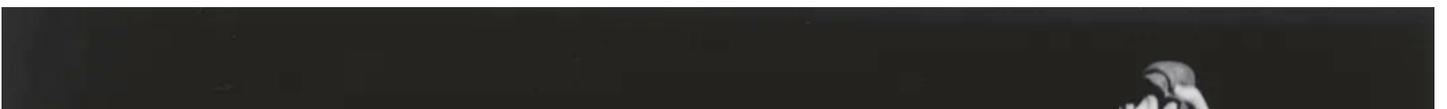
Graham was the first dancer to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Graham rejected Nazi Germany’s invitation to perform at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.





Graham's signature style involves twisting the body into unique shapes. Anne Souder rehearses the sculptural 1933 solo Ekstasis. ioulex





Graham performs 1930's Lamentation, a meditation on grief in which a seated dancer writhes inside a tube of fabric. Barbara Morgan / Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

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Lloyd Knight, a principal with the company, recently became the first man to perform this work. ioulex

Named by *Time* magazine in 1998 as the “[Dancer of the Century](#),” Graham broke from classical ballet’s rounded fluidity with sharp, angular movements conveying passion, humor and rage. She was born in 1894 in Pittsburgh, one of three daughters of a physician who specialized in treating people with nervous disorders (what we call a psychiatrist today). The family eventually moved to California, where Graham began studying at the [Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts](#). The school was experimental for its time, weaving together classical ballet training and other dance traditions from around the world.

But when Graham founded her own company in the 1920s, American artists were still mainly borrowing from European lineages. Even the inventive Denishawn School relied on the traditional ballet training and aesthetics that Graham would strip away. “We really had yet to fully develop our own forms of American self-expression,” says [Janet Eilber](#), artistic director of the Martha Graham Company since 2005. “But this is the era when the greats of American jazz emerge. [\[Aaron\] Copland](#) and [\[George\] Gershwin](#) are looking for the American sound. [Hemingway](#) and [Faulkner](#) are changing narrative fiction. What all these artists are doing in their fields, Martha was doing for dance.”



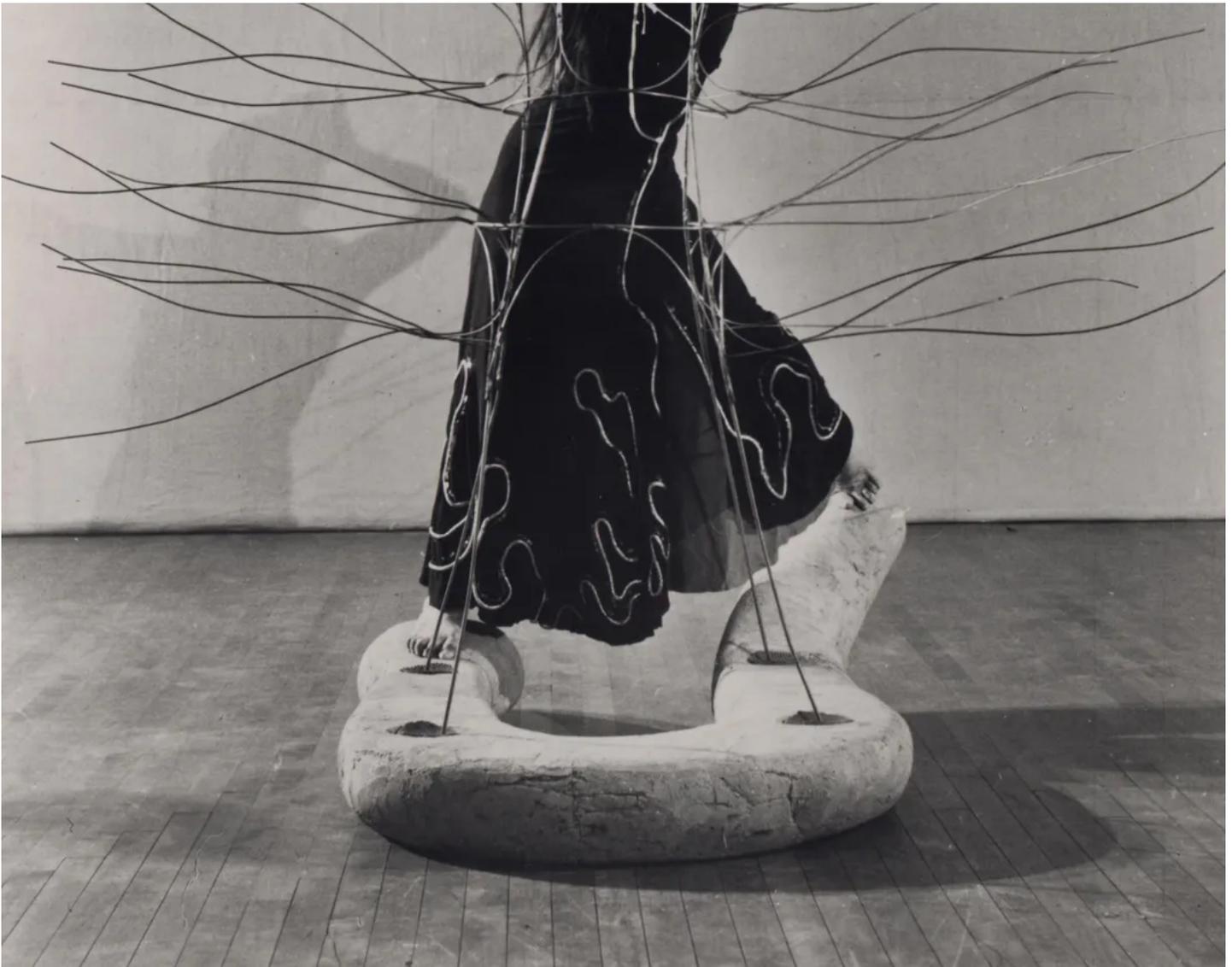
*The Furies appear to Oedipus’ mother in the 1947 *Night Journey*. From left: Meagan King, Marzia Memoli,*

Leslie Andrea Williams, Amanda Moreira and So Young An. Knight as Oedipus stands off to the far left, with Ethan Palma as Tiresias off to the far right. ioulex



Xin Ying as Medea in Cave of the Heart. Isamo Noguchi's brass Spider Dress stands onstage until the climax, when the anti-heroine slides into it and transforms into a figure of vengeance. ioulex; makeup by Deanna Melluso





Graham wears the dress in 1946. Cris Alexander / LOC / ©INFGM / ARS, NY

Graham found a crucial spark of inspiration in a new and controversial way of painting: abstraction. Rather than presenting realistic images, artists were using bold color lines and shapes to evoke an emotional response. In her memoir, [Blood Memory](#), Graham recalled seeing a painting in 1922 by [Wassily Kandinsky](#), which she described as “a streak of red going from one end to the other.” The approach validated Graham’s own artistic vision: “I knew I was not mad, that others saw the world, saw art, as I did.” She remembered thinking, “I will do that someday. I will make a dance like that.”





Moreira and King rehearse at Graham's historic West Village studio. This year, the company is moving to a new home in Times Square. ioulex

TRICKY VICKY: THE RADIO STAR WHO FOOLED THE NAZIS



In Paris last spring, the company performs Hofesh Shechter's 2022 Cave, which depicts a techno rave. Foreground: Devin Loh, Moreira and Ane Arrieta; background, Williams, Souder, Laurel Dalley Smith and King. ioulex





Williams rehearses “Spectre 1914,” the opening solo of *Chronicle*, Graham’s 1936 response to European fascism. The dancer is directed to grip, flip and wrestle the heavy fabric of her dress throughout the performance.
ioulex

Much as Pablo Picasso’s cubist figures shattered the bounds of painting to show multiple viewpoints at once, or Duke Ellington’s complex chords and rhythms transformed jazz, Graham developed a new language for her medium. By bending elbows into a hard point, shaping arms into a diagonal line and carving the torso into contraction, Graham created a sensual art form. “Because body language transcends cultures and ages,” Eilber said of the Martha Graham style, “it’s entirely recognizable, whether we’re performing in South Korea or in Cedar Rapids.”

At the heart of Graham’s approach is a technique of contraction and release. Deep, focused breathing forms the source of this choreography, which manipulates the pelvic muscles to create signature curved moves. To train, dancers master rhythmic abdominal and diaphragmatic exercises before transitioning the technique to standing and ultimately moving through space.

“Graham’s technique is so raw,” said Xin Ying, a principal dancer with the company, who came to attend the Martha Graham School from Sichuan, China, in 2010 with barely any modern dance training. While she had some early difficulty understanding English, she easily grasped Graham’s theatricalized body movements. “Martha wants you to use your emotions, push your breathing to an extreme,” she said. “When you cry, for example, you’re not using regular breathing. You’re either sobbing or laughing, contracting your abdominal muscles.”

During the European tour last fall, Xin danced the lead role of Medea in *Cave of the Heart*. In key portions of the dance, Xin wore designer Isamu Noguchi’s iconic *Spider Dress*, a full-body sculpture created for the original 1940s production. The cage-like costume is physically demanding for the dancer wearing it. The dress is unwieldy: Eilber says a performer “must hold it perfectly horizontal as she steps across the stage” to project vengeance and triumph, and make sure the prongs don’t get tangled in her skirt. As Eilber puts it, “The choreography calls for her to make the whole dress shiver, shake with emotion, but she can’t shake too hard, or the spines break off!”





Principal dancer Xin Ying in her dressing room getting ready for a performance of Cave of the Heart at Châtelet theater in Paris. ioulex



The company performs 1948's Diversion of Angels in Paris. Above, Xin and Souder. ioulex



Dancers wearing different colors represent various stages of love, from adolescence to maturity in [Diversion of Angels](#). Above, Palma, Williams, Antonio Leone and Memoli. [ioulex](#)

While classical ballet portrays graceful figures like princesses and swans, Graham often focused on messy anti-heroines like Medea. Her source material ranged from Greek mythology and the Hebrew Bible to the Brontë sisters and the American frontier. In 1936, after declining an invitation from Nazi Germany to represent the United States at an international dance festival held during the Berlin Olympics, Graham unveiled [Chronicle](#), her response to European fascism, at the Guild Theater in New York City. In one scene, a cadre of black-clad female dancers march in lockstep around a dominant woman in white. Perhaps Graham's most famous work is the 1944 [Appalachian Spring](#). Unlike many of her other pieces, this story of a newlywed pioneer couple on their wedding day is hopeful and easy to follow, with a Copland score that incorporates the familiar Shaker tune "[Simple Gifts](#)."





Principal dancer Lloyd Knight in his dressing room at Châtelet theater in Paris. ioulex





Lloyd Knight, principal dancer with Martha Graham Dance Company, wears Isamu Noguchi's brass Spider Dress from *Cave of the Heart* (1946) at the company's studio in New York City's West Village. ioulex; makeup by Deanna Melluso



In Paris, Souder and Memoli perform “Steps in the Street,” the second part of *Chronicle*. Subtitled “Devastation – Homelessness – Exile,” the scene captures the spirit of displacement. ioulex

In 1976, Graham became the first dancer to receive a [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#), from President Gerald Ford. (Betty Ford, the first lady, was a former Graham student.) Thirty-five years after Graham's death in 1991, her influence continues to spread, not only through her company but through former students like Alvin Ailey and Merce Cunningham, who created renowned companies of their own. Generations of celebrities, from [Bette Davis](#) and Kirk Douglas to Madonna, studied with Graham so they could learn how to use their bodies as instruments. Graham also had a profound influence on costume and set design through her collaborations with some of the most imaginative artists of her era. A [current centennial exhibition](#) at The Church, an arts center in Sag Harbor, New York, showcases items from Graham's productions, including sets by Noguchi and costumes by designers Halston and Donna Karan.





Knight as Medea's lover, Jason, in Cave of the Heart. "The use of contraction and release is something that gets started in your pelvis," he says of the Martha Graham technique. "And it grows higher and higher and higher." ioulex; makeup by Deanna Melluso

At the fall rehearsal, Lloyd Knight, a British-born principal dancer with the company, was preparing for his role as Medea's lover, Jason, whose rejection of the sorceress sets off the tragic chain of events. "One of the greatest things about Graham's work is you get a full experience," Knight said, describing the production's music, costumes and set design. "You get the Graham choreography, but also everything on the stage is heightened. It's the highest art all coming together."

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