

MODERN DANCE: AN AMERICAN ART

Louis Horst • Martha Graham • John Dewey •
John Martin

WHEREAS EUROPE WAS THE CENTER OF MUCH MODERN dance experimentation in the 1920s, the 1930s established the United States as the home of modern dance at its most creative. German dance withered under the Nazis. Yet even if there had been no Nazi tyranny, America would still have become a formidable power in dance, for it rapidly developed its own distinguished choreographers.

In an ideal world, America and Germany might have remained friendly rivals, each country learning from and then trying to surpass the other's choreographic achievements. But, because of the Nazis, American apologists for modern dance took pains to distance themselves from Germany.

The first issue of *Dance Observer* appeared in February 1934. This new magazine, edited by Louis Horst, was militant in its advocacy of modern dance, and in that first issue Paul Love proclaimed German dance irrelevant to America. "The mysticism is Teutonic," he said, "and the muddlement likewise." That same year in *Dance Observer*, Martha Graham sought to distinguish between American and German dance: "There is a certain beat and a certain quality in the American dance that we do not find in the German dance, for instance. The movement of our country is a large one. It is centered. The gesture is in the air. It springs from the ground *up*, rather than from the ground *out*."¹

A year later, Graham was even more fervently nationalistic: "To the American dancer I say: 'Know our country.'" She deplored the

"common practice to seek instruction in lands alien to us, fettered as we are to things European." And she resoundingly announced, "Of things American the American dance must be made."² In little more than a decade, Graham, the champion of "things American," would be famous for dances based on Greek myths. Yet her rhetoric was typical of the 1930s.

Although modern dance often provoked bewilderment, Americans were growing increasingly aware of its existence. Joseph Arnold and Paul R. Milton assembled various critical responses to the art in "Modern Dance—Today and Tomorrow," a feature published in the *American Dancer* in March 1935. Sometimes modern dance inspired mockery. Thus Russell McLaughlin summed up a Detroit performance by Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman by writing a parody of Gilbert and Sullivan:

There is rhythm in [a] rhombus that is right,
There is beauty in an elegant ellipse,
There is pleasure watching bipeds
Making parallelopipeds
With their ankles and their elbows and their hips.

But Ralph Holmes of the *Detroit Evening Times*, another writer cited by Arnold and Milton, was less jolly in his censures. For him, Humphrey and Weidman constituted "a social symptom . . . for they have the power to distill dangerous ideas into more dangerous emotions. . . . The Humphreys and the Weidmans are very, very dangerous people; they make me shudder with fear."³ In 1932, Nikolai Semenov, a Russian-born ballet teacher with a studio in Cleveland, was so dismayed at the rise of modern dance and so appalled that the Cleveland Museum of Art had invited Humphrey to appear under its auspices that he committed suicide by jumping into Niagara Falls.⁴

To outsiders, modern dance must have seemed an austere non-conformist religion. Its practitioners usually wore plain costumes and stamped on the ground with their bare feet in ritualistic fervor. No wonder Louis Horst punningly referred to the early 1930s as "the revolting period of modern dance."⁵ Moreover, modern dance was a religion divided into warring choreographic sects. The directors of modern dance groups demanded total loyalty. Shopping around to investigate other dance techniques was discouraged and to study ballet was to be guilty of heresy. (Many modern dancers sneaked off to

ballet classes, nonetheless.) Like monks and nuns, modern dancers lived in poverty. Also like monks and nuns, they were visionaries who labored for more than material rewards.

Fiercely independent the moderns may have been. Nevertheless, they shared certain convictions. Virtually all believed that the torso is the source of the dance impulse and sought flexibility in torso movements. Liking the dancing body to a tree, Elizabeth Selden called the torso the strong trunk and the arms the tree's branches.⁶ Unlike classical ballet dancers, the moderns did not try to disguise weight. Rather, acknowledging the existence of weight made subtle changes of energy possible, and lightness, when it did occur, became all the more significant.

So, too, the floor was something to dance on and return to, as well as to escape from. And the feet that stood on that floor were usually bare. Graham remarked that "putting shoes on is like wearing white gloves to keep you away from the dirty earth."⁷ To those who objected that her dances lacked grace, Graham countered that "grace in dancers is not just a decorative thing. Grace is your relationship with the world, your attitude to the people with whom and for whom you are dancing, your relationship to the stage and the space around you—the beauty your freedom, your discipline, your concentration, and your complete awareness has brought you."⁸

In addition to creating dances, Americans theorized about them. Much of their speculation was influenced by the ideas of John Dewey, one of the leading philosophers of the time. Dewey stressed art as experience, even giving that title to the influential book on esthetics he published in 1934.

For Dewey, "science states meanings; art expresses them," and each art work is "a new object experienced as having its own unique meaning."⁹ Artworks arise out of the experiences of their creators, but they are also, in themselves, fresh experiences for their perceivers. As Dewey put it, the artist "observes the scene with meanings and values brought to his perception by prior experiences. These are . . . remade, transformed, as his new, esthetic vision takes shape. . . . Creative vision modifies these materials. They take their place in an unprecedented object of a new experience." An artwork is "so formed that it can enter into the experience of others and enable them to have more intense and more fully rounded-out experiences of their own."¹⁰

Like all too many estheticians past and present, Dewey devoted no attention to dance. Nevertheless, his theory of art as experience must have excited modern dancers, who maintained that the creative idea always determines the specific choreographic form and who believed that, ideally, each new dance should have its own unique choreographic vocabulary.

Within the dance community, John Martin propounded a major esthetic theory.¹¹ Like Dewey, Martin proclaimed the importance of experience. For Martin, "Any movement, no matter how far removed from normal experience, still conveys an impression which is related to normal experience. There is a kinesthetic response in the body of the spectator which to some extent reproduces in him the experience of the dancer."¹²

Martin believed there are two basic types of theatrical dance: spectacular and expressional. In spectacular dance the emphasis is upon what the movement looks like, rather than upon what it "says." In expressional dance, the emphasis is entirely upon what the movement "says." Among the types of dancing Martin considers spectacular are tap, exhibition adagio, nightclub "fan" and "bubble" dancing—and classical ballet. The only type of dancing that fully qualifies as expressional is modern dance.

Dance lovers may find this categorization peculiar as well as intellectually provocative. To begin with, it could be argued that all movement is expressive of *something*—if nothing else, then of a performer's delight in physical agility. And since all dances are performed by three-dimensional beings moving in time and space, even the most dramatic or emotionally revealing piece of choreography must have some sort of visual appeal. Moreover, Martin's placing of ballet into the spectacular category and reserving the expressional category solely for modern dance suggests that he is promoting his personal prejudices under the guise of impartial theorizing.

Although Martin's categorizations reflect his time and taste, his theory of how dance communicates transcends the historical era in which it was formulated. Martin was convinced that all movements convey some sort of meaning. Choreographers arrange movements to produce reactions in their audiences. These movements are kinetic stimuli, and viewers respond to them with muscular sympathy. The responses need not be overt; usually, in fact, they are not. Nevertheless, a choreographer's organizing mind and a dancer's moving

body transfer something to a spectator's receptive mind and body. Martin called this process of kinetic transfer metakinesis.

The movements that effect the transfer need not be obviously pantomimic or realistic. Rather, they create their effects through their degrees of tension and relaxation, strain and ease, weight and lightness. Often, a viewer can be unsure of a dance's literal meaning and still be moved by its power. As Pauline Koner has remarked, "The early modern dance dug way in. One was often unaware of its external design because one was so concerned with its inner meaning."¹³ Metakinesis remains a concept worth discussing. If no one can say with absolute certainty how or why dances affect audiences, John Martin at least had an inkling of what is involved in the process of kinetic communication.

CROSSCURRENTS

*Louise Kloepper • Tina Flade • Erika Thimey •
Truda Kaschmann • Fé Alf • Kurt and Grace Cornell
Graff • Trudi Schoop • Hanya Holm • Yeichi Nimura •
Gluck-Sandor • Felicia Sorel • Pauline Koner • Esther
Junger • Lester Horton • Bella Lewitzky*

AMERICAN MODERN DANCERS MAY HAVE PROCLAIMED THE Americanness of their art, yet they were exposed to varied influences. During the 1930s—before as well as after the rise of Hitler—Central European dancers settled in the United States. Americans also ventured across the Atlantic to study with such artists as Wigman or Chladek.¹

In 1930, Louise Kloepper became the first American to graduate from the Wigman School in Dresden; she taught for many years at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The next year, two other Wigman students, Tina Flade and Erika Thimey, moved to the United States. Truda Kaschmann, who had studied with Laban and Wigman, began teaching in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1933. Fé Alf, a Wigman pupil who migrated to New York in 1931, was respected as both a teacher and a dancer.

Kurt and Grace Graff, who were husband and wife, made Chicago their headquarters in the 1930s. It was also Mrs. Graff's hometown. Previously known in American dance as Grace Cornell, she had studied ballet with Adolph Bolm, Chicago's pioneering and sometimes experimental ballet master, and with Enrico Cecchetti in Italy. Then she studied modern dance with Laban in Germany and introduced his choreography to New York. As a member of Martha Graham's company in 1931, she appeared in the premiere of *Primitive Mysteries*. That year, she also danced in Edwin Strawbridge's *Le Pas d'Acier*.

In Berlin, she met and married Kurt Graff, a Laban pupil. They came to the United States in 1932, began appearing regularly in