

# Beginning Modern History

**Definition:** There is no concise definition for modern dance, nor should there be, unless it is broad enough to include all the diverse approaches existing now/and likely to exist in the future. Modern was a rebellion against classical ballet and its codified technique. Modern dance, sometimes referred to as *contemporary dance*, has no boundaries or limitations for its style of creation. In fact, the freedom that is inherent in modern has strongly influenced contemporary choreography of ballet and jazz.

**Brief History:** In the twentieth century a new dance had emerged, and was classified as “modern”. It was called "modern" because it broke away from the traditions and the disciplines of ballet from the 19th century. At the beginning, modern dance was a way of life, an expression of the freedom of the spirit, unfettered by outdated traditions and worn out beliefs. It aimed to communicate to each individual some emotional state, idea or situation which one could identify with or relate to their own experiences.

Modern dancers in the beginning attempted to rediscover natural movement and wanted to break away from the rigidity of ballet. They also felt that ballet technique did not communicate their primary purpose, therefore they wanted to create a dance art that could speak to the humanity of modern man. Modern dance did not rely upon pantomime or storyline.

Modern dance bases its technique on natural movement. This includes not only the use of the body in its rhythmic, dynamic and linear function, but also in an enormous amount of gesture or pedestrian movement.

As modern dance began to be established, the rest of the stage arts were gradually added. New music or unusual accompaniment was added. Whole dances were supported by percussion only, or with new sounds from old instruments, and at times music was even dispensed with altogether. Sometimes the dancer would make vocal sounds and use that as their music.

Modern dancers have been particularly enterprising in the way that they are constantly searching out new themes. They dance about social or personal problems; they translate plays, poems, and novels. They also use subject matter from folklore and religious themes.

## **Important People:**

**Isadora Duncan** (1877-1927): was the first woman to bring modern dance to the public. Some consider her to be the creator of modern dance. She was the first to break away from classical ballet. She changed the costume from rigid to free and flowing like her movement and was the first to dance barefoot.

**Ruth St. Denis** (1879-1968): was known and for introducing Eastern ideas into modern dance, and for co-founding the Denishawn School, known as the “cradle of American modern dance”, as well as the Denishawn Technique.

**Ted Shawn** (1891-1972): was a pioneer among male dancers. Along with co-founding the Denishawn School with his wife, Ruth St. Denis, he is also known for the opportunities he created for male dancers. He founded his own company which only featured male dancers. A very famous piece of advice that Shawn used to give to his dancers was "When in doubt, twirl."

**Martha Graham** (1894-1991): is well-known for her impact on Modern dance. Graham attended the Denishawn School and danced in their company from 1916-1923. In 1923 she left Denishawn to make her independent debut. She is known for her strong dramatic dances and for creating her own technique based on contraction and release.

**Doris Humphrey** (1895-1958): was a featured soloist with the Denishawn Company. She was known for creating her own technique based on fall and recovery and for helping to found the Juilliard Dance Theater. She is considered one of the great teachers of choreography, and authored a book on the topic, called *The Art of Making Dances*.

**Lester Horton** (1906-1953): was a dancer, choreographer and teacher. In 1932, Horton formed his own company, The Lester Horton Dancers, in Los Angeles. He became one of the country's most influential choreographers, incorporating such diverse elements as Native American dances, Japanese arm movements, and Afro-Caribbean hip circles into works of striking originality and drama. He created the Horton technique which is still studied today.