

## **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 At the beginning, modern dance was a way of life, an expression of the freedom of the spirit, unfettered by outdated traditions and worn out beliefs.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.



## Beginning Modern Dance Vocabulary

**Agility** – Nimble, ability to change movement quickly

**Arch** - A curved formation of the body. Can be done to the side or with either the upper or lower back.

**Balance** - Forces upon the body and its parts are equal

**Breath**-Dancer's use of inhalation and exhalation to initiate, develop, or suspend movement

**Contraction**- Drawing together two ends of a muscle to make it shorter

**Coordination** - Ability to make muscles perform together

**Extension** - Stretching or elongating the limbs or torso

**Fall & Recovery**- pull of gravity between lying flat and the body standing erect

**Muscle Memory:** The ability to physically remember and

repeat body actions or forms. Often muscle memory comes with repeated practice with proper execution. Learning to dance with proper technique takes practice and dedication to doing the movements correctly each time, training your body to remember to continue to do the movements correctly when you're not thinking about the execution.



**Musicality:** The ability of a dancer to move responsively to music

**Prance:** The transfer of weight from one foot to the other by lifting the leg in front of the body with a bent knee, pushing off of the ground by lifting the heel, then the ball of the foot, then the toes, then switching feet, landing in reverse: toe, ball, heel.

**Release**- letting go of a contraction

**Spiral**- an oppositional rotation of the spine and/or body

**Suspension**-the result of two forces pulling equally in opposite directions

**Sustain**-movement is smooth, continuous and has no accents or stops

**Swing**- Movement is pendulum-like; starts with a beginning accent, pulls along the path of an arc, and then pauses momentarily before repeating

**Triplet**- A walking step in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time in the pattern: down, up, up, where the dancer starts the first walk in a plié and then on relevé for the second two steps before repeating. Feet are in parallel.