

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 At the beginning, modern dance was a way of life, an expression of the freedom of the spirit, unfettered by outdated traditions and worn out beliefs.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

Modern dance was in its adolescence at the time of the movement for women's suffrage, Prohibition, World War I, and new movements in art. One such movement was called *expressionism*. Expressionism originated in painting, and was a subjective interpretation of the artist's personal reactions to events or objects through distortion, abstraction, or symbols. 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.

The early dance pioneers were not interested in the spectacle that had been seen in ballet, but concentrated on the ability to communicate emotional experiences. 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. Greek myths and American folklore were among the most common themes. Role and divisions like principle dancer vs. corps de ballet were thrown out, and a grouping in modern dance choreography was treated as a fluid sculpted whole. The element which best characterized modern was and still is "freedom".

CONTEMPORARY vs. MODERN

Modern dance is codified. There are specific modern dance techniques (i.e. Graham, Limon, Horton, etc.) that are unique to themselves but have many underlying similarities and themes. The pioneers of modern dance wanted to break away from traditional ballet and were mostly female (a radical change.) The modern dance movement was followed by the postmodern dance movement in the 50s and 60s which aimed to break away from the compositional constraints of modern. It included the use of chance and improvisation. Contemporary dance is a slightly more vague and broad term. It means different things to different people. Many dancers in the commercial/competition world refer to their contemporary jazz as contemporary. However, the concert world sees contemporary differently. It can be used to describe any dancing that is new, different, or untraditional. It can include elements of many kinds of dance including non-western dance forms.

Truth is, they are the same in many ways. Both forms of dance stemmed from modern dance pioneers during the turn of the 19th Century like Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. Modern Dance is a specific style of dance that is free form and stems from the core, or torso, of the body and uses elements like contact-release, floor work, fall and recovery, and improvisation. Just like a Picasso is different than a Monet, modern dance is different than ballet. Contemporary Dance is a collaborative style that includes modern, jazz, ballet, and hip hop elements.

"Contemporary vs. Modern Dance: What's the Difference?" *Oh so Urbanity*. N.p., 29 Nov. 2012. Web. 06 Aug. 2015.

PEOPLE OF INTEREST:

Isadora Duncan: was the first woman to bring modern dance to the public. 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: was known for her Oriental dances and for co-founding the Denishawn School of dance, and the Denishawn technique.

Ted Shawn: was a pioneer among male dancers. Along with co-founding the Denishawn School with Ruth St. Denis, he is also known for the opportunities he created for the male dancer. He founded his own company which only featured male dancers.

Martha Graham: was known as the mother of modern dance. Graham attended the Denishawn school and danced in their company from 1916-1923. In 1923 she left the Denishawn Company to make her independent debut. She is known for her strong theatrical dances and for creating her own technique based on contraction and release.

Doris Humphrey: 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 as one of the great teachers of choreography.

Lester Horton: was a dancer, choreographer and teacher. In 1928, Horton formed his own company in Los Angeles. He became one of the country's most influential choreographers, incorporating such diverse elements as Native American dances and modern jazz into works of striking originality and drama. He created the Horton technique.

Katherine Dunham: revolutionized American dance in the 1930's by going to the roots of black dance and rituals transforming them into significant artistic choreography that speaks to all. She was a pioneer in the use of folk and ethnic choreography and one of the founders of the anthropological dance movement. She showed the world that African American heritage is beautiful. She completed groundbreaking work on Caribbean and Brazilian dance anthropology as a new academic discipline. She is credited for bringing these Caribbean and African influences to a European-dominated dance world. She returned to the United States informed by new methods of movement and expression. Her presentation included photos, films, writings and her own demonstration which was an innovation in itself. She then created the Dunham Technique that transformed the world of dance. (kdcah.org)

Merce Cunningham: studied with Martha Graham and was a soloist with her company from 1940-1955. He formed his own company in 1953 and created the Cunningham technique. He is best known for creating chance dance, where there is no set choreography, but merely suggestions of how to move.

Jose Limon: was known for his strong masculine movement as well as lyrical movement and use of hand gestures. He studied under Doris Humphrey and used a great deal of fall and recovery in his own technique. He also created the Jose Limon Dance Company.

Alvin Ailey: studied with Lester Horton, Martha Graham and Charles Weidman. In 1958 he created his own company, the American Dance Theater, which has been internationally acclaimed and brought recognition to many African-American and Asian dancers. Typically his work combines, jazz, modern and African dance elements. Some of his greatest choreographic works include "Revelations," "Blues Suite," "Cry," and "Creation of the World."

Twyla Tharp: is known for her rhythmical movement and use of quick, twisting and strong movement in choreography. She is known to be extremely unique and versatile in her work. She created the Twyla Tharp Dance Company and is in demand by many for her choreographic ability.

MODERN VOCABULARY:

Body Halves: the movement of the right or left half of the body, while the other half is stationary or playing a supportive role

Breath: a dancer's use of inhalation and exhalation to initiate, develop, or suspend movement

Compass turn: A turn in fondu with the leg extended out to the side, with the toes in contact with the floor. Usually executed en de dans.

Contraction: drawing together two ends of a muscle to make smaller

Core/Distal: energetic relationship between the center and the limbs

Cross Lateral: the movement of opposing sides of the body working together both symmetrically and asymmetrically

Fall & Recovery: pull of gravity between that makes the body fall and then return enact position

Head/Tail: an energetic relationship between the head and the tailbone (coccyx)

Hinge: bending of the knees, maintaining a plank from shoulders to knees

Improvisation: creating movement on the spot without premeditation of what to do next

Inversion: taking a movement or a shape and turning it upside down

Jump: a transfer of weight (usually with elevation) from two legs to two legs

Leap: the transfer of weight from one leg to the other during which there is a suspended moment when both feet are off the ground

Musicality: 1) The ability of a dancer to move responsively to music. 2) Independent of music, the ability of a dancer to move with nuanced coherency where all movement materials are given specific physical and dynamic expression in and of themselves and in relationship to each other.

Release: letting go of a contraction

Spiral: an oppositional rotation of the spine and/or body

Suspension: the result of two forces pulling evenly 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

Syncopation: A character of rhythm that occurs when accents occur in unexpected paces within an otherwise predictable or repetitive pattern.

Tilt: In modern dance, a movement similar to an arabesque except that the trunk leans away from the extended leg toward the floor. Recently, often performed in jazz or contemporary dances in conjunction with a pitch.

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.

Weight: The element of one's body mass that affects movement.

Center of Gravity (Center of Weight, Center): Part of the body that is most involved with shifts of weight and necessary for producing changes of quality in the body.

Shift of Weight: Used to describe body weight when it changes place or support.