Graham, Martha (1894-1991) Encyclopedia Article

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Contents

Graham, Martha (1894-1991) Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Graham, Martha (1894-1991).....3

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The greatest and most influential choreographer of modern dance, Graham built on the foundations created by American pioneers like Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and Doris Humphrey. She created and codified a dance language that stressed the downward pull of gravity and balance—and, along with it she identified a series of gestures and movements to express particular emotions in dance. Early in her career she explored American experience in such works as *Steps in the Streets* (1936) about homelessness, *El Pentitente* (1940) about a religious cult in the Southwest, and a Shaker wedding in *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Later, Graham explored the spiritual and psychological meaning of classical myths like, for example, the myth of Oedipus in *Night Journey* (1944) and *Clytemnestra* (1958). She began dancing in 1916 and retired as a dancer in 1970, although she continued to choreograph for her company until her death at 96.

Martha Graham

Further Reading:

de Mille, Agnes. *The Life and Work of Martha Graham.* New York, Random House Vintage Books, 1991.