Two years after Martha Graham’s death, a book was published with the subtitle *An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*. Not only was Graham the only woman in author Howard Gardner’s lineup, her inclusion was even more remarkable because choreographers are rarely listed among an era’s great thinkers and artists. Yet as early as the 1930s, writers identified her as a “genius” and linked her with Stravinsky and Picasso.

Between 1926 and the year of her death, Graham choreographed close to one hundred works, many of them—such as *Appalachian Spring, Night Journey, Deaths and Entrances,* and *Primitive Mysteries*—masterpieces. She changed how dancers were perceived onstage, devised new ways of moving and of structuring movement, and created a training system that continues to teach dancers to re-fashion their bodies and souls into instruments for fierce engagement. In addition to founding a company that endures today, she was instrumental in the creation of others: Israel’s Batsheva Dance Company (1964), and the London Contemporary Dance Company (1967).

Like Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), Charles Weidman (1901-1975), and others of her generation who were considered pioneers of modern dance in America, Graham aligned herself with the ideas, developments, and events of the twentieth century. As a result, during her first six decades as a dancer and a choreographer, she re-made herself and her oeuvre several times—transforming the factual and the narrative into passionate theatrical abstractions.

**Roots**

One of three daughters born to a doctor who specialized in mental disorders and a mother who claimed descent from Miles Standish, Graham spent her childhood years in two very different environments. Her upbringing in Alleghany, Pennsylvania was imbued with a propriety derived in part from the eastern climate and in part from the dictates of the Scottish Presbyterian Church her family attended. The family’s move to Santa Barbara, California, changed her life. The sunshine, ocean waves, and mild temperatures had a liberating effect on a girl of fourteen. The social climate too—with its Chinese and Spanish populations and its artistically inclined sun-seekers—differed from that of straitlaced Alleghany. It is not surprising that her choreography frequently expressed a tension between puritanism and desire, between society’s decrees and freedom of spirit.

**Professional Apprenticeship**

Graham’s early years in dance—first as a serious student and then as a performer of burgeoning talents—were spent in disguise. In 1911, she had seen Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) in a solo program of dances that evoked the mysticism of India and Ancient Egypt, and had been enthralled by the mixture of glamour and spirituality that the artist conveyed. When St. Denis and her husband, Ted Shawn (1891-1972), opened their Hollywood school, Denishawn, in 1915, Graham was among its first pupils. In the early 1920s, on a concert tour with Shawn and a Denishawn tour on the vaudeville circuit, she played, among other roles, a Javanese maiden, an Indian devadassi, a Siamese dancer, and starred as a tigerish Mexican virgin in Shawn’s Zochitl (1921). Along the way, she received an education in theatricality, including the effects of stage lighting, the play of fabric, and the ability to grasp and hold an audience’s attention.

**Becoming Martha Graham**

Graham made her professional debut as a choreographer on April 18, 1926, in New York’s 48th Street Theatre, with a company of three students from her classes at the Eastman School of Dance and Dramatic Action. Her solos, trios, and duets (many of them showing the Denishawn influence in their use of deftly managed draperies and orientalist imagery)
won considerable praise, as did her performing. But gradually a sterner element invaded her choreography. By 1928, her repertory included *Immigrant* and *Poems of 1917*, and in 1929, she introduced an all-female group of twelve in one of her first notable pieces, *Heretic*. The dance premiered seven months before the stock market crashed, but in its austerity and economy of means, it could be said to presage the ensuing Depression. The filigree lines of art nouveau had given way to angularity and uncompromising modernism.

In this change of artistic vision, Graham owed much to Louis Horst (1884-1964), the pianist and composer who had been Denishawn’s music director and became hers. While spending time in Vienna in 1925, he had become aware of the strong, personally expressive work of the German dancer-choreographer Mary Wigman (1886-1973). Graham herself—an avid reader with an intense interest in the visual arts and architecture—was attuned to the current interest in industrial design, as well as the tempo of city life and social pressures of the 1930s. She performed her innovative solo, *Lamentation* (1930), almost completely encased in a confining jersey tube. The women in *Heretic*, clad in long, dark, tightly fitting dresses and severe turbans, formed an implacable series of walls to block and menace Graham, who wore a white gown and, with spare gestures, queried and argued with their obdurate responses.

*Primitive Mysteries*, her landmark piece of 1931, with its allusion to Christian rituals among Native Americans of the Southwest, radiated a richer vision of simplicity, the support of a group for an individual, and marked Graham’s first important exploration of ritual.

*An American Vision*

Like many writers and painters of the 1930s, Graham was interested what it meant to be an American artist. A compulsion among artists to examine the country’s past and democratic roots, as well as its challenging present, arose in part as a response to the rise of fascism in Europe. Graham’s 1936 *Chronicle* and her 1937 solo *Deep Song* have been considered as reactions to the Spanish Civil War and all that Adolf Hitler’s maneuvers might presage; her opening solo in *Chronicle* was titled “Spectre 1914.”

In her epochal 1935 *Frontier*, with music by Horst, Graham suggested both a pioneer woman claiming the wilderness and an artist claiming her independent artistic territory. *Frontier*’s set, by Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), consisted of a homely fence, set within a V of white ropes to convey a limitless perspective. And throughout the 1930s, she made dances that conveyed wide horizons, undiscovered possibilities, and the onward march of those with the ability to see them.

In developing her dances, Graham also developed a training system to make her women dancers stand for humanity. Stamina and strength were required for their repeated jumping, their thrusting gestures, their ability to drop to the floor and return to standing in seconds. She built a system referred to as “contraction and release”—an image of recoiling and advancing, in which a sudden caving-in of the ribcage, as if in response to a blow or a sudden gasp, was followed by an expansion and an intake of breath. It was an optimistic image; every fall contained the seeds of its recovery.

*Adventures in Narrative*

Graham’s 1938 *American Document* brought together strands she had been working on for the past five years. Using the format of a minstrel show in a highly abstract manner, she presented “episodes” that alluded to the displacement of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, set against historical texts recited by an “Interlocutor.”

*American Document* also brought a man, Erick Hawkins, into her company and into her private life. His advent brought the possibility of new
themes that dealt with desire, competition, and jealousy. Following Hawkins came Merce Cunningham and other men. Between 1938 and 1944, in addition to making solos for herself, Graham explored devices for devising dramas—some lighthearted, some dark—that didn’t progress in a linear fashion. In Every Soul is a Circus (1939), domestic drama entered the Big Top, with Graham herself as an indecisive Empress of the Arena and Hawkins as the Ringmaster. In El Penitente (1940), a trio for herself, Hawkins, and Cunningham, she drew on her visits to the American Southwest to create a little village play within a dance, in which the Temptation in the Garden merges with the Crucifixion. Deaths and Entrances (1943) wove enigmatic, dreamlike passages related to the Brontë sisters, and Appalachian Spring (1944)—the last and greatest of her “American dances,” with its Noguchi décor and notable score by Aaron Copland (1900–1990)—centered on a pioneer wedding, with glimpses into a couple’s possible future.

Mythic Voyages
In these dramatic dances and later ones, Graham often dealt with multiple personae (usually played by different dancers): for example, the two aspects of Emily Dickinson—one who spoke and one who danced—in Letter to the World; the three “remembered children” in Deaths and Entrances; the mature heroine and her younger self in Clytemnестra (1958); and the three aspects of Joan of Arc in Seraphic Dialogue (1963). This strategy helped to give her works a kind of cinematic fluidity; it can be seen, too, in relation to Cubism, with its ability to depict past and present simultaneously and intertwined.

Also intertwined with and embedded in Graham’s works were her own histories and dilemmas. In Herodiade, made the same year as Appalachian Spring, she first presented the image of a heroine at some liminal stage of her life—a threshold that she has to cross in order to arrive at her destiny. In almost all the dances that she made thereafter—with the exception of beautiful, lyrical pieces, such as Diversion of Angels (1948), in which she did not appear—she presented her own female version of the archetypal hero she discovered in the writings of Carl Jung: the artist-heroine who descends into the depths of her unconscious, battles her fears, and emerges into the light. Graham’s movement vocabulary became less forthright, although no less powerful. The dancers’ bodies twisted and torqued to convey indecision or anguish.

In many of these works, Graham aligned herself with towering figures from Greek mythology: Medea in Cave of the Heart (1946), Jocasta in Night Journey (1947), Theseus battling the Minotaur in the duet Errand into the Maze (1947), the eponymous heroines of Alcestis (1960) and Phaedra (1962). It was perhaps her abiding interest in Japanese Noh drama that led her to make use of memory in telling these tales. Often the protagonist begins by looking into the past to examine her feelings and decisions, a device that promotes a narrative texture as flexible as that of film with its flashbacks and flash-forwards, its montages and dissolves.

Although Graham regularly choreographed works that displayed the prowess of her superb dancers and in which she did not appear, performing was vital to her. She had turned seventy-four when she made her last appearance on stage in May of 1968 in The Lady of the House of Sleep, having already created for other company dancers roles she once would have assumed herself. Mary Hinkson took on the title role in Circe (1963); Ethel Winter was Cleopatra in One More Gaudy Night (1961).

During the 1960s, Graham’s creative genius was contending with an addiction to alcohol that culminated in a serious illness requiring several hospitalizations. Only a few of the nineteen dances she made between 1960 and 1969 could be ranked with her masterpieces. The same could also be said of the dances she made after
she recovered in 1973 and resumed control of her company, although at least two pieces, *Acts of Light* (1981) and *Rite of Spring* (1984) received considerable praise, and her last work, the light-hearted *Maple Leaf Rag* (1990), has endured. She continued to make dances, however, and to groom young dancers, right up to the end. And during her final years, she revived great works from her past and saw to it that these were filmed. Her company had been acclaimed in Europe and Asia, and she continued to receive honors. In the last decade of her life, she received an important award every year from organizations around the world eager to salute a creative genius who had reinvented dance in the twentieth century.

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