



The New York Public Library
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

Martha Graham Dance Company records

1944-1955

(S) *MGZMD 152

Processed by Camille Reilly Meyer.

Summary

Creator: Graham, Martha

Title: Martha Graham Dance Company records

Date: 1944-1955

Size: .5 linear feet (1 box)

Source: The Martha Graham Dance Company Records were donated to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division in 1969 by Leroy Leatherman.

Abstract: Martha Graham (1894-1991) was a seminal figure in contemporary dance. Her approach to dance embodied principles of contraction and release which she merged, for the first time in dance, with architecture and sculpture on the stage. This collection of her dance company records represents only a small piece of that legacy which still continues today.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Photocopying prohibited.

Conditions Governing Use: For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

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Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Camille Reilly Meyer; Machine-readable finding aid created by Camille Reilly Meyer.

Creator History

The Martha Graham dance legacy, which embodied principles of contraction and release, was brought into prominence in 1928. The Group, as she called her dancers, were selected from the private students that Graham (11 May 1894-1 April 1991) took on while teaching dance at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Graham and her cultivated students debuted as The Group on 14 April 1929. The arrangement was such that the dance fueled classwork just as classwork influenced the dance. The Group remained an all female group until 1938. That year Erick Hawkins joined, an event eclipsed only in 1939 when Merce Cunningham became a member. This period marked a new development for dance. The fusion of sculptural elements, through Isamu Noguchi's stage designs, coalesced with dance in *Frontier* (1935). Sculpture was to the 1930s what literary content was to the 1940s. Landmark performances for the incorporation of spoken word in dance include *Letter to the World* (1940).

The company continued to evolve in other ways. Since 1934, the company rehearsed at Bennington School of the Dance. In 1941 Bennington fell apart and the company moved to teaching dance at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. That same year *Diversion of Angels* (1948) was also the first time that Graham choreographed a dance without performing in it herself. In 1950 Erick Hawkins left the company following Cunningham's earlier departure in 1945. Despite these company changes, tours and commissions continued. On two separate occasions in 1950 and 1951, the Louisville Arts Council commissioned the company to perform with the Louisville Symphony Orchestra. Later, the U.S. State Department sponsored an Asian tour in 1954. In the 1960s the company increased its male members which somewhat altered Graham's choreography toward the masculine. Her last performance occurred on 20 April 1969 for *The Lady of the House of Sleep*. Although she stopped performing, Graham spent the 1970s and 1980s preparing for her dancers to replace her. In 1975 Halston began designing her company's costumes, a task that Graham always participated in believing that the costumes contributed to the dance's expression of the mental state. Despite deteriorating health, Graham continued to choreograph but in 1977 she began using pre-existing compositions. This marked a departure from the earlier days when musical director Louis Horst composed original music for the company. In the end of her life Graham was bestowed many awards including the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur from the Paris Opera in 1984 and the Carina Ari Medal awarded in 1985 by the Princess of Sweden. Even after Graham's death in 1991, her dance tradition continues today in the Martha Graham Dance Company.

Scope and Content Note

This collection only covers the years 1944-1955. Therefore, it does not provide a full inventory of the company members including Martha Graham. It is primarily correspondence and performance information from the offices of Isadora Bennett and Richard Pleasant, publicists for Martha Graham, approximately from 1942-1958. It includes dance company press materials which discuss how for the first time architecture and sculpture were fused with dance. Additional informational value is continued in the dance analysis for *Eye of Anguish*. It examines dance for its emotive qualities. The performance materials are equally illuminating. While offering a timeline of activity in the 1940s and 1950s, they also touch upon contemporary dance issues such as the relationship between dance and music.

Arrangement: The collection is organized into 3 series and 3 sub-series. They are: Series I: Administrative Sub-series 1 - Correspondence Sub-series 2 - Performance Sub-series 3 - Professional

profiles Series II: Financial Series III: Personal

Key Terms

Names

Graham, Martha

Container List

Series I: Administrative 1944 - 1955, undated (11 folders)

This series contains historical information on the Martha Graham Dance Company.

Sub-series 1 - Correspondence
Sub-series 2 - Performance
Sub-series 3 - Professional profiles

Sub - series 1: Correspondence 1944 - 1955 (3 folders)

This subseries contains professional correspondence. Most of the letters are in exchange with Martha Graham's press representative Isadora Bennett (1900-1980) and deal with publicity matters and performance arrangements.

- b. 1 f. 1 1944 - 1949
Includes two letter from Isadora Bennett, one to Martha Graham regarding publicity work and another addressed to Erick Hawkins pertaining to personal matters, 1949.
- b. 1 f. 2 1950 - 1955
- b. 1 f. 3 Undated

Sub - series 2: Performance 1939 - 1950 (4 folders)

This subseries provides a rough timeline of the Martha Graham Dance Company in the 1940s. Additionally, this series contains a Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance program dated 1948-1949, indicating that the Company functioned not only in a touring but also in a teaching capacity. Please note that company members, not covered in this collection, are identified in the program.

- Tour history 1939 - 1950
- b. 1 f. 4 ca. 1939 - 1950
- b. 1 f. 5 Louisville Philharmonic Society 1949
- b. 1 f. 6 Undated
Includes press releases for performances at the Philadelphia Academy of Music and for dance lectures given at the Town Hall Morning Lecture Series.
- b. 1 f. 7 Program, Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance 1948 - 1949

Sub - series 3: Professional profiles 1939 - 1949, undated (4 folders)

This subseries addresses Martha Graham's treatment of dance and the company identity, in terms of a few individuals: Erick Hawkins (dancer), Simon Sadoff (pianist and musical director) and Virgil Thompson (composer). Please note that the biographies in this section are not comprehensive in their coverage of the Martha Graham Dance Company or the individual.

- b. 1 f. 8 Martha Graham Dance Company undated
Includes a draft press release that describes the Company's unique fusion of dance with sculpture, painting and architecture
- b. 1 f. 9 Martha Graham ca. 1939 - 1949
- b. 1 f. 10 Erick Hawkins and Simon Sadoff undated
- b. 1 f. 11 Virgil Thompson undated

Series II: Finances 1944 - 1948 (2 folders)

The contents in this series do not adequately represent the company's financial profile. Some information pertaining to company worth, however, may be found in the financial statement dated spring 1944.

Chronological

Series II: Finances (cont.)

- b. 1 f. 12 Financial Statement 1944
- b. 1 f. 13 Invoices 1948

Series III: Personal 1958 (1 folder)

This series contains a facsimile of Martha Graham's sister's (Jane Beers Duffey) death certificate dated 1958.

Chronological

- b. 1 f. 14 Ephemera 1958