

Explore Your Theater

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Read the “Directions” sheets for step-by-step instructions.

SUMMARY

In this activity, children and adults will take a trip to explore the performing arts in their communities, using the suggested discussion questions.

WHY

New experiences and places help children understand how ideas connect with the real world. Learning on field trips can spark curiosity and inspire children to ask better questions about the world around them. The people children meet on field trips can encourage children to think broadly about their own futures and help them to consider other possible jobs.

TIME

- 30 minutes or more, plus travel

RECOMMENDED AGE GROUP

This activity will work best for children in kindergarten through 4th grade.

CHALLENGE WORDS

- **Concert Hall:** place where music or dance concerts are performed
- **Performance:** a public presentation
- **Venue:** a place where events of a specific type are held

GET READY

- Read *Ballet for Martha: Making Appalachian Spring* together. *Ballet for Martha* tells the story of three artists who worked together to make a treasured work of American art. For tips on reading this book together, check out the Guided Reading Activity (http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/dance/dance_reading.pdf).
- Read the Step Back in Time sheets.

More information at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.

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YOU NEED

- Directions sheets (*attached*)
- Step Back in Time sheets (*attached*)
- ThinkAbout sheets (*attached*)
- Transportation (*possibly*)
- Computer with Internet (*possibly*)
- *Ballet for Martha* book (*optional*)
- Camera or art supplies (*optional*)

More information at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.



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For adults and kids to follow together.

1. Decide on your best opportunity to see performing arts in your community.
 - Many communities have one or more dance schools. To find a dance school in your community:
 - Do an Internet or GoogleMaps (maps.google.com) search for your state or town and “dance studio.” For example, use GoogleMaps to search for “dance studio” and “Arlington,VA.”
 - Do you know someone who takes dance classes? Ask where he or she takes classes.
 - There are many places in the United States where you can see performing arts. Some of those places have many performances, and some only have a few performances each year. You’ll want to find out if you will watch a performance, or just visit the theater.
 - The following lists from Wikipedia.org might be useful starting points for your search.
 - Concert halls (sorted by state)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_concert_halls#United_States
 - Arts Centers (sorted by state)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Arts_centers_in_the_United_States
 - Opera Houses (search the list for your city or state)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_opera_houses#United_States
 - Do an Internet or GoogleMaps (maps.google.com) search for your state and “theater” or “performing arts.” For example, use Google to search for “performing arts” and “New Jersey.”
 - Your local high school or college may also have an auditorium or theater that you could explore. Consider contacting the theater or drama teacher to arrange a visit.

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2. Pick the best ThinkAbout sheet for your adventure.

3. Travel to your destination. On your way, listen to music!

4. Use your ThinkAbout sheet to explore performing arts in your area.

For more activities about Martha Graham and performing arts, visit *OurStory: An American Story in Dance and Music* (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>).

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For more information, visit the National Museum of American History website <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.

Martha Graham (1894-1991) was a dancer and **choreographer** who had a big impact on modern dance. She performed dance for over 60 years and **choreographed** more than 180 works. In fact, she was 75 years old when she danced in her last performance!

People did not always enjoy Miss Graham's dances, since she often told stories about people that weren't happy and her dances were more about telling stories than about being pretty to watch. But by the end of her career, many important people from around the world gave her awards.

For Martha Graham, dance was a way to share the feelings that have been a part of stories from many different cultures. Through her dances, she told stories about America, ancient Greece, and the Bible. But she tried not to tell these stories through **mime**, and instead focused on sharing the feelings of the characters. This idea of showing feelings through **abstract** shapes was important to many sculptors, painters, and other artists whose art is considered "modern."

Martha Graham's **collaboration** with other artists, such as sculptor Isamu Noguchi and composer Aaron Copland, showed her interest in using many kinds of art to tell a story, not just using one kind of art as a decoration for another.

Miss Graham was an especially important leader in modern dance because she made a way to describe her dance style so it could be taught to students. Many of the students she worked with became famous later on and many dancers still study her style today.



Martha Graham and her partner Erick Hawkins, posing in costume and on a set piece from *Appalachian Spring* [Library of Congress]

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Her dance style focused on the idea of breathing, with breathing in (contraction) and breathing out (release) as the two important opposites in the ways our bodies move. Her style is powerful, sharp, and sometimes sudden, instead of being soft and flowing like some dance.

She was also interested in American **folkdance** and traditional American Indian dances and used ideas from those dances to tell her stories. Miss Graham once said, "We must look to America to bring forth an art as powerful as America itself." At the same time Miss Graham was thinking about American traditions for her art, other artists were also inspired by the idea of using traditional American art styles and themes, with examples like Grandma Moses' paintings and musical theater by Rogers and Hammerstein.

These are some very simple ways of comparing ballet and modern dance.

	Ballet	Modern Dance
When?	Started around 1600s	Started around 1920s and 1930s
Where?	Mostly developed in Europe	Mostly developed in America
For Example?	<i>The Nutcracker</i>	<i>Appalachian Spring</i>

Abstract: using elements of form (as color, line, or texture) with little or no attempt at creating a realistic picture

Choreography: the art of arranging dances (A choreographer is an artist who arranges dances.)

Collaboration: working with others

Folkdance: a traditional dance that was started by common people from specific a region or country

Mime: acting out the movements and gestures used by a person in a specific situation or while doing a specific thing

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ThinkAbout for Exploring a Dance Studio

BEFORE YOUR TRIP

- Find out what styles of dance are taught at this studio.
- Many dance studios have special “Open House” days when people are invited to take a free class. Other studios allow new students to take a class for free or watch one or two classes. Find out the policy of the studio you will visit.

DURING YOUR TRIP

- Count the people in the studio. How many students and teachers are there?
- How many rooms are there at the studio? Is there a room where students can change into costumes or dancing outfits? How many steps does it take to walk around the dance classroom?
- Are there any pictures on display of past performances? If so, guess how old the dancers are. Describe some of the costumes you see. Do the pictures show any scenery or set pieces?
- Watch the dancers and the teacher(s). In words, how would you describe their movements?
- Listen to the music that is used during class. Can you name any of the instruments you hear? Does the music have words?
- Ask if there are any rules for the dancers. For example, what outfits can they wear to class? Or what happens if they are late for class?

AFTER YOUR TRIP

- Draw a picture of one of the dancers or movements that was especially interesting to you.
- In the class you saw, did any of the dance movements look like movements in *Appalachian Spring* or the book *Ballet for Martha*? Look through the book or watch the video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1y-NEdTj-g>) to compare.

Tip The dance *Appalachian Spring* lasts more than 20 minutes. This video will begin toward the middle of the dance. Martha Graham is the woman who dances with the man in this video.

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ThinkAbout for Exploring A Performance Venue

BEFORE YOUR TRIP

- Check to see if the performance venue will be hosting any performances soon. If you think you could schedule a visit to see a free performance, or pay for tickets, you might want to use the ThinkAbout sheet on the following page.
- You'll want to contact the performance venue to arrange a visit. Many major venues offer official tours, but smaller venues may not have anything scheduled. Some may offer visits during dress rehearsals at no charge. See if the performance venue has a website with contact information or a general information phone number in the phone book.

DURING YOUR TRIP

- How many stages are at the venue? How many steps does it take to walk around the largest stage?
- What kinds of performances take place in this venue?
- Are there any pictures on display of past performances? If so, describe some of the costumes you see. Do the pictures show any scenery or set pieces?
- How many people can sit in the audience in this venue?

Tip Performers call it a “packed house” when there is an audience member in each seat of the theater.

- Find or ask about the following places in the theater: dressing room, lighting booth, ticket sales, stage wings, stage door, orchestra pit.

AFTER YOUR TRIP

- Draw a picture of one part of the venue that was especially interesting to you, or what you think it would look like to be performing on the stage in front of a “packed house?”
- Imagine a story about going to the venue to see a performance or being a performer at that venue. Which of the places in the theater would you visit? What feelings would you have?

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ThinkAbout for Watching a Live Performance

The Kennedy Center also has outstanding guides for families watching live performances. Consider exploring their recommendations at <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/students/kc-connections/visiting-the-kc/elementary-school-audiences.aspx> and <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/families/out-about.aspx>.

BEFORE YOUR TRIP

- Do you need a ticket to watch your performance? If so, be sure to order tickets. Take a close look at the tickets. What information is included?
- Find out if there will be a break, or intermission, during the performance.
- What kind of performance are you going to see? See if you can preview the music or the dance by finding a clip online.

DURING YOUR TRIP

- As you find your seat in the theater, see if you can guess how many other seats there are. How many rows are there? And how many seats are there in each row?
- Look at the program together. For the first piece, or the first piece after the intermission, see if the program says how many people will be a part of the next scene or song. Count those people as they step onto the stage.
- Take a look at the lights on the stage. Are there lights coming from up above the stage, to the sides, or from the very back of the theater?
- During intermission or right after the show, draw a picture of what the stage looks like. Is there a set, like Isamu Noguchi made for Martha Graham's ballet? Are there seats for the performers?

AFTER YOUR TRIP

- Draw a picture of one part of the performance that was especially interesting to you, or what you think it would look like to be performing on the stage in front of a “packed house.”

Tip Performers call it a “packed house” when there is an audience member in each seat of the theater.

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Teacher Guide

Read the “Directions” and “Parent Guide” sheets for step-by-step instructions.

OBJECTIVES

The students will be better able to:

- Describe one or more aspect of performing arts.
- Use observation skills to learn about a place.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

- Drawing or story reflects accurate details of the experience.

STANDARDS

National Standards for Arts Education (K-4)

Dance, Standard 3: Understanding dance as a way to create and communicate meaning

Dance, Standard 7: Making connections between dance and other disciplines

More information at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/dance/>.