

# Ballet

N E B R A S K A

a study guide to

momentum:

## INTERNATIONAL MASTERS

Most of us are good at something, but some people are *extra-good*. We might call them “superstars”... or “experts”... or “masters.”

This Ballet Nebraska study guide will help you learn more about two people who were extra-good at creating dances: **Marius Petipa**, who was born in France and worked in Russia; and **Charles Weidman**, who was born in Nebraska and worked throughout the United States. A person who makes up the movements used in dance is called a *choreographer* – and Marius and Charles were masters at the art of choreography.

This guide will help you learn more about them, their art form, and the world events that shaped their work.

## What is modernism?

Just as there are different time periods in history, there are different time periods or movements in the arts. One of the most exciting movements in the arts is the movement of **Modernism**, which occurred at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not that long ago. Western society went through many changes at that time and modernism was a response to those social and cultural changes including

- Industrialization and urbanization of cities
- Development of new technologies such as telephones, radios and automobiles
- Rapid growth of cities due to the railroad system
- The Great Depression
- The horrors of the First World War

Modernism was a departure from previous more traditional ways and affected all art forms including both **visual and dance arts**.



Pablo Picasso's 1910 painting Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was an early Modernist artwork. Can you see the face?

## What are the arts?

The arts are a physical manifestation of internal human creativity. They are forms of expression and include many categories including literature, performing arts, culinary arts, media arts and visual arts. Within each of those categories are sub categories. For example, a sub category of visual arts is painting and a subcategory of performing arts is dance.

Let's see if we can figure out which category each of the following forms of art belongs in?

Activity	Art form
Chocolatiering .....	(Culinary arts)
Poetry .....	(Literature)
Operas .....	(Performing Arts)
A Film or Movie.....	(Media Arts)
Sculpting .....	(Visual Arts)

Sometimes we can even blend two forms of art together: For example, comic books belong in both visual arts and literature!

## What came before modernism?

An important art movement before Modernism rose during the 1800s, when archaeologists first began excavating and studying the artifacts left behind by the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome – called the *classical civilizations*.

Scholars had always admired ancient Greek and Roman authors, philosophers and mathematicians. But now, as archaeologists began rediscovering Greek and Roman buildings, statues, and objects used in daily life, people could actually see and touch things that Greek and Roman artists had created.

Artists of the 1800s were inspired by these discoveries. They admired the concepts they saw in the ancient artworks: concepts such as clarity, harmony, and simple, elegant forms and shapes. They wanted to incorporate these ideas into their own work, creating a movement called *Classicism*.



*This 1900 photo shows the archaeological excavations at Pompeii, an ancient Roman city that had been buried by a volcanic eruption in the year 79 CE. Artists, writers, scholars, and the general public were excited by the discoveries made in these excavations.*

## Classicism in ballet: Marius Petipa and *Paquita*

Marius Petipa was born in France in 1818. His father was a professional dancer and dance teacher, and saw to it that Marius received a solid education in dance and music. Marius didn't actually like dancing much at first – but he was so talented that he appeared in his first major production at the age of 13! By the time he was 16, he was the star male dancer (*premiere danseur*) of the ballet company in Nantes. He also began choreographing and producing his own ballets.

Marius wanted to perform and study everywhere he could, so he traveled widely – to North America, Spain, and eventually to Russia, where he arrived in 1847 to work at St. Petersburg's famous Imperial Theater. By 1862 he had been named Choreographer-In-Chief, and he held that position for more than 40 years!



*Ballet Nebraska dancers model a short, highly decorated dancing dress called a tutu. The tutu is the type of costume female dancers traditionally wear for classical ballets such as *Paquita*.*

When Marius arrived, ballets at the Imperial Theater were often cluttered and complicated. But Marius was a Classicist – he wanted to make ballets with a clear structure and elegant forms. He was so successful that he is regarded today as the father of *classical ballet*.

*Paquita* is a good example of what Marius accomplished. The original French version, created in 1846, was a slow-moving, complicated story ballet. In 1881, Marius gave it a makeover, adding exciting dances that dazzled audiences with the brilliance of the choreography alone. Today, the original 1846 ballet is seldom seen – but Marius' 1881 additions are performed by ballet companies throughout the world.

# Modernism arrives in dance

By the beginning of the 20th century, Classicism was losing its appeal for some artists. They wanted to find new ways to make art, ways that reflected the changes they saw in the modern world around them. (We read about some of these changes on the first page of this guide.) The result of these artists' explorations was the style of art we now call *Modernism*.

Painters, sculptors, authors and poets were among the early advocates of Modernism – but dancers and choreographers were just as interested in Modernist ideas. Many of them – especially in the United States, where classical ballet was not as well-established as it was in Europe – wanted to invent new ways of dancing and of creating dances. The work of these pioneers came to be called *modern dance*.

## Differences between classical ballet and modern dance:

Here's a chart showing how some of the **key ideas of dance** are interpreted differently in classical ballet and modern dance:

### *Key idea: Choreographer-Performer Relationship*

- Classical ballet: The choreographer usually was a retired performer
- Modern dance: The choreographer often was the performer

### *Key idea: Movement Vocabulary*

- Classical ballet: Relies on a strict language of codified steps
- Modern dance: Choreographers create their own movement language

### *Key idea: Posture*

- Classical ballet: Dancers remain upright, with their legs turned out, as seen in classical art
- Modern dance: Dancers may sit, roll, or slide across the floor, and can even be upside down; legs remain parallel, as in natural everyday movement

### *Key idea: Use of Gravity*

- Classical ballet: Dancers must create the illusion of being weightless
- Modern dance: Dancers use grounded movements and work with gravity rather than against it

### *Key idea: Relation to Music*

- Classical ballet: Movements parallel the rhythms of the music
- Modern dance: Movements can parallel the music... or be parallel TO the music. The choreographer also may choose to accompany the movement with spoken text, natural sounds, or silence

### *Key idea: Subject of Choreography*

- Classical ballet: Stories of the elite in society or fairy tales
- Modern dance: Personal experience and emotions

### *Key idea: Clothing*

- Classical ballet: Ornate costumes and tutus with *pointe* shoes for women; *pointe* [pronounced "point"] shoes allow dancers to move on the ends of their toes for a lighter, "floating" effect
- Modern dance: Bare feet or soft shoes; free-flowing costumes in any style that suits the work



## Modernism in dance: Charles Weidman and *On My Mother's Side*

If you've ever been to a Nebraska football game in Lincoln, you'll have been very close to Charles Weidman's boyhood home.

Charles was born in Lincoln in 1901. His old neighborhood is long gone now, but the house where he grew up was somewhere in the area between Memorial Stadium and the Lied Center for Performing Arts. His father was Lincoln's fire chief, and his mother had been a champion roller skater.

At age 15, Charles saw a touring performance by the Denishawn Dance Company – then the best-known modern dance group in the United States. That performance inspired him to start studying dance in Lincoln. In 1920 he moved to Los Angeles to study at the Denishawn School, and soon was performing and touring with the Denishawn company.

Charles and another Denishawn dancer, Doris Humphrey, left in 1928 to establish their own modern dance company and school. They created a comprehensive technique of modern dance based on the body's reaction to gravity, a principle they called "fall and recovery." After Humphrey retired from performing in 1945, Charles continued to choreograph and teach until his death in 1975.

Although he was known as a strong, masculine dancer, and sometimes choreographed on serious subjects, Charles was best known for his sense of humor, his comedic works, and his invention of a technique he called "kinetic pantomime" – a seamless blend of mime and dance movement.

All of those characteristics are highlighted in Charles' most autobiographical dance, *On My Mother's Side*, which he created as a solo for himself in 1939.

It is a piece about six characters on Charles' mother's side of the family tree – two great-grandparents, two grandparents, an aunt, and Charles himself.

Charles' depiction of these characters captures the pioneer spirit and Nebraska way of life. Most of the choreography is based on real-life gestures that Charles saw his relatives using when he was growing up.

Charles was able to make this autobiographical dance because Modernism emphasizes individual creativity. Try it yourself: If you were to create movements and gestures for someone in your family, who would it be?

What mood would your choreography have? What would the music be? Happy, loud, quiet, somber, erratic? What movements would you create?



Charles included himself among the family members in *On My Mother's Side*, as the character called Sonny. This 1939 photograph by Barbara Morgan, showing him in Sonny's final pose, is the only photo known to exist of him performing *On My Mother's Side*. The photo was rediscovered in 1988, along with the original piano score and text.

# More about modernism: dance and visual arts

Modernism is a large topic that covers many areas of visual art, dance, and popular culture. Here's a selection of ideas that you can explore to learn more about it:

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## Modernism in visual arts

New artistic styles were investigated by visual artists during this time including Cubism, Expressionism, Pop Art and Social Realism/American Scene Painting or Americana. Let's see how these new techniques and ideas figure into the world of dance.

## Self-expression and innovation

IN DANCE: The quest for self-expression and freedom of movement became important to many artists during Modernism. In the world of dance, performers such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham and Ted Shawn turned to basic movements for inspiration. They used such ideas as breathing and walking to create their dance technique. Isadora Duncan spoke of her dancing as art rather than entertainment.

IN ART: During the late 1940's Jackson Pollock revolutionized the way people thought about painting by developing *expressionism*. His process involved placing raw canvases on the floor and dripping or throwing paint on top of it using both brushes and industrial materials. He broke the boundaries created in people's minds on what painting was.

## Rethinking the function of art

IN DANCE: In years past, dance had been either ballet or vaudeville. It was seen as mostly forms of entertainment. Modern dancers rejected that idea and started using emotions such as fear, joy and anxiety as the subject of their dances.

IN ART: Cubism was deconstruction and analyzing of objects. Instead of objects being shown from one viewpoint the artist depicts the subject from a multitude of viewpoints. It was developed as a reaction to the dehumanizing effect of industrialization in the early 1900s.

## Popular culture in the arts

IN DANCE: After World War II ended in 1945 modern choreographers such as Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey and Paul Taylor found their movement sources in 20th century dance styles. Their works fused together modern and ballet techniques with social dance such as jazz. Choreographers started using more mainstream music as can be seen in Erika Overturff's *The Diner*.

IN ART: Pop Art took place during the post war 1950's and 60's and was largely influenced by the consumer boom and the nation's renewed sense of optimism. Pop Art is brash, colorful, young and fun. Pop Art used images from

popular society such as celebrities and everyday household products. Andy Warhol & Roy Lichtenstein are two of the best known names in Pop Art.

## Americana

IN DANCE: Choreographers started to use Americans' ways of life in their choreography. Agnes de Mille's ballet *Rodeo* (1942) is a perfect example of embracing the western way of life.

IN ART: Social Realism or American Scene Painting/ Americana was a movement away from a previous interest in the elite of society. It focused on the everyday life of the working class and poor. It showcased classic images of American people, landscapes, towns and products. *American Gothic* (1930), a painting by Grant Wood, is perhaps the most famous piece of Americana. It portrays a pitchfork-holding farmer and a younger woman in front of a house. It depicts the steadfast American pioneer spirit in the face of the Great Depression.

## What you'll see in the theater

*The performance you'll see with your school group has been planned especially for students, and you'll have your teachers and assistants to help you know where to sit and when things are happening. When you go to a public performance, things may look a bit different. A ballet performance has its own customs and traditions that help make your visit to the theater special. Although each production may handle things slightly differently, here's a general guide to what you can expect:*

Before the show, people come in, find their seats, and get settled. This is a good time to read the program book, which tells you the order of the performance, lists which dancer performs each role, and gives information about the ballet and the people who made it.

The seating area of a theater is traditionally called the *house*, and the lights that let you see as you come in are called the *house lights*. When the house lights dim, it means the performance is about to begin. The curtain will not go up right away; instead, you'll hear music called the *overture*. It's a preview of the music that will be heard during the performance. It helps viewers forget about their outside distractions and get into the mood to enjoy the ballet. Once the overture ends, the curtain will rise and the dancers will begin the performance.

In addition to the dancing, changes in the music and the lighting help you follow along in the ballet. You'll notice how the music changes to match what's going on in each scene, and how the lighting changes from one scene to the next, helping to create a mood that matches the action.

Ballet performances usually have *pauses* and *intermissions*. A pause is a short break of a minute or two between two sections. The house lights will stay dim, and you should just relax and stay in your seat, because the performance will resume right away. Intermissions are longer breaks – usually 20 minutes – in which the house lights come up and the viewers can walk out into the lobby to stretch their legs and talk about the performance with their friends. The program book will tell you which breaks are pauses and which are intermissions.

You'll know the ballet is over when the music finishes and the lights fade out on the stage. But there's still one more important moment to come. The lights on the stage will come up again and the dancers will face the audience, step forward, and bow to thank the audience for attending. Often the dancers who had the most prominent roles will bow separately, and finally the whole company will bow together. After the final bow, the curtain falls and the house lights come up, signaling that it's time to leave – until your next visit to the ballet!

*While you're waiting for your next chance to attend a ballet performance, visit [balletnebraska.org](http://balletnebraska.org) to learn more about ballet, about our performers, and about our future productions.*

## In the Know...

Ballet was invented to entertain kings and queens, princes and princesses. Today, of course, everyone is welcome! But it's fun to be "in the know" about its customs and etiquette:

**Do** make sure you are ready to sit and enjoy the show in plenty of time before it starts. Try to take care of getting a drink, a tissue, bathroom breaks, etc., before you come to the theater.

**Don't** chew gum, or bring food or drinks of any kind to the theater. Also, texting, taking pictures, or using cell phones isn't allowed during the show.

**Don't** leave your seat during the show. The theater will be dark, and it's hard to get around. If it's an emergency and you absolutely have to get up, check with your teacher or chaperone.

**Do** laugh if the dancers do something funny. They like to know they're entertaining you!

**Don't** talk during the show. There's a lot happening onstage, and you don't want to miss something important!

**Do** applaud (clap) if you want to show the dancers you liked what you saw. If you've been to a stage play or to the symphony, you may have been told that you should applaud only at the end. But ballet is different: it's perfectly okay to applaud any time you see something you think is really, really good!