

Victoria Phillips, 2020. *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy*.

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Victoria Phillips' book on the involvement of Martha Graham with U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War makes an important contribution to the investigations of the role of dance that began with Naima Prevots (1998) and continued with works by Catherine Gunther Kodat (2014), Clare Croft (2015), and Cadra Peterson McDaniel (2015). Phillips provides some interesting facts and personalities that help us see a more complete picture of this aspect of America's cultural diplomacy. The book's real significance lies in its ability to raise some important questions concerning a broad range of issues related to culture and US foreign policy during the post-World War II decades.

Phillips' book combines a semi-biographical study of Graham with historical analysis of how and why Graham's modern dance productions became staples of U.S. cultural diplomacy for nearly forty years. As Phillips notes, the U.S.-supported tours of the Martha Graham Dance Company from the 1940s through the late-1980s were part of an overall program of using culture as a weapon during the Cold War: "Graham would bring the art of American modern dance, and the power of American Cold War values, to nations that the United States wanted to impress further into its cause" (2). Some of the basic themes that were accentuated through Graham's compositions were the American frontier as a symbol of individual freedom, the continuing value and meaning of religion, and the stark contrast between a democracy (that allowed such striking and often erotically charged performances) and Soviet totalitarianism (that insisted on the lock-step traditions of classical ballet). Graham's "work could be promoted as modernist, a free form disallowed by artists in the Soviet Union, independently created, and apolitical" (16).

Phillips takes us on tour with Graham and her dancers as they perform around the world. (The author also highlights another important propaganda message – Graham's dance company was ethnically and racially integrated, which served to counteract Soviet criticisms of America's race problem.) There are tales of audience reactions (negative and positive), clashes with US officials who wanted more "message" and less "art," and, of course, of Graham herself: sometimes at her best (schmoozing with diplomats and foreign elites) and occasionally at her worst (bullying her dancers and dealing with alcoholism). However, the significant contributions of this study go far beyond merely adding more stories.

First and foremost, Phillips places women at the center of her study. Naturally, Graham holds center stage, but as the book makes clear, "connections among women became paramount, even as they led to men" (29). Eleanor

Dulles, part of the Department of State's Office of German Affairs, played a key role in convincing the U.S. government to sponsor Graham's performance in West Berlin in 1957. Dance patron Bethsabée de Rothschild came to Graham's rescue on numerous occasions when money was a problem and brought her to Israel to assist the Batsheva Dance Company. And Graham always made it a point to court the friendship of first ladies from Eleanor Roosevelt to Barbara Bush. (Betty Ford had actually been a student of Graham's for a brief time.)

The chronological scope of Phillips' study is also important. Most studies of U.S. cultural diplomacy tend to focus on one particular presidential administration or decade. Graham's involvement in government-sponsored cultural programs spanned the entirety of the Cold War, from the Truman years to the fall of the Berlin Wall. We are thus able to see the twists and turns of the U.S. government's involvement with culture as a diplomatic tool, veering from enthusiastic support, to complete indifference, and back to "rediscovering" the value of culture. In turn, we also see how a particular example of cultural diplomacy could serve to deliver specific foreign policy messages at very different periods of time and under both Democrat and Republican administrations. Much of this was due to Graham's ability to adapt and compose pieces that served both her artistic interests and the wishes of the U.S. government for works that could send the desired messages to foreign audiences. Other artists and art forms came and went, but Graham remained an important figure in U.S. cultural diplomacy for over forty years.

The focus on Graham also allows us to see how the artist was neither a "tool" of American diplomacy nor a naïve performer adrift in the heady world of international relations. As Phillips argues, Graham made herself into a "cultural ambassador" with a clear understanding of how government patronage of her dance company converged with U.S. diplomatic goals as "the idea of 'the modern' became an essential part of Cold War politics and diplomacy to promote American ideology with soft-power implants. Graham stepped forward with her modern dance" (37). Graham also understood her role in what Phillips refers to as the "cocktail circuit of diplomacy." Despite the fact that the dance performances sometimes garnered mixed or negative reviews, Graham herself was the chief cultural export, charming her way through receptions, dinners, and impromptu meetings with foreign officials, members of the press, and other elites.

Phillips' study also touches on another fascinating question. She notes that Graham was often referred to as "The Picasso of Modern Dance" and that her compositions shared an affinity with the "abstract expressionism" so prevalent in the visual art of the 1950s and 1960s (8, 9). Yet, in the visual arts abstract expressionism became anathema to many government officials and numerous

art shows sent abroad were either cancelled or had artists removed because of heavy criticisms from the American public and congressmen. Picasso's work was often singled out as "subversive." This begs the question of how Graham was able to navigate these treacherous political and cultural waters without running afoul of such philistine views. (Phillips does note that two members of Congress were aghast at the sexuality – particularly what they perceived as homosexuality – of Graham's dances.)

These are just a few of the significant issues Phillips deals with in this quite readable and important piece of scholarship. While the book focuses on a single performer, the analysis of Graham serves to brilliantly reveal some essential questions about the complexities, contradictions, and meaning of US cultural diplomacy during the Cold War.

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