

MARIA TALLCHIEF

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Maria Tallchief (1925–2013) was born Elizabeth Marie Tall Chief in Fairfax, Oklahoma. Tallchief's dance career began at age three in Oklahoma and continued when her mother decided to move the family to Los Angeles to pursue careers in Hollywood. Studying under Ernest Belcher and then Madame Bronislava Nijinska, Tallchief performed her first solo at the Hollywood Bowl when she was 15 years old. After graduating from Beverly Hills High School, Tallchief moved to New York City and joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Despite her obvious talent Tallchief was initially treated poorly by Russian members of the company, and it was suggested that she change her name to Tallchieva to sound more European. Proud of her heritage, Tallchief refused, though she did officially shorten it to one word. In 1948 Tallchief became the first major American prima ballerina, dancing for New York City Ballet under the direction of George Balanchine. Keeping her title for 13 years, Tallchief danced lead roles in *Firebird*, *Orpheus*, *The Nutcracker*, and *Swan Lake*, among others. After retiring from dance in 1965, Tallchief became an instructor, and founded the Chicago City Ballet in 1981.

KEY EVENTS

Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (1942), Civil Rights Movement, American Indian Movement

KEY PEOPLE

Maria Tallchief, New York City Ballet, Osage Nation, George Balanchine

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1953, Maria Tallchief was honored in her hometown and inducted into the Osage Tribe with the title Princess Wa-Xthe-Thonba, Princess Two Standards, representing both her role as a ballerina and as a daughter of the tribe. She danced professionally with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo since 1942, and served as the prima (lead) ballerina at the New York City Ballet since 1948. Throughout the 1960s and 70s Tallchief became involved in various Native American organizations like Americans for Indian Opportunity, and was invited to dance for the television program *One World*. Fighting against Indian stereotypes, she remained steadfast in her pride in her heritage and the belief that it should be honored and preserved.

FUN FACT

Tallchief was a recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors in 1996 for her contributions to the arts. Watch a sample of her dancing the lead in *Firebird* here: <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/maria-tallchief/firebird/>.



January 16, 1956, Oklahoma Historical Society (2012.201. B1289.0033) <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc582509/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Make one copy of the document for each student (students will work individually.)
- Do not give any background or context for the image or excerpt to the students.
- Distribute one copy of the image and excerpt to each student.
- Allow students five minutes to read the text and look at the picture and note down their "notices and wonders." Sample responses could include:
 - » Notices: "I notice the picture is in black and white, maybe it is really old, I notice she talks about Oklahoma, so she's American."
 - » Wonders: "I wonder when this was?, I wonder what a prima ballerina is?"
- Generate a class list of notices and wonders and allow students to propose answers to others' questions.
- Use the biography and historical context about Maria Tallchief to fill in the holes: *who was she, what did she do, when was this, where was this, why is it significant?*

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Direct students to this section: "Above all, I wanted to be appreciated as a prima ballerina who happened to be a Native American, never as someone who was an American Indian ballerina."
- Engage students in discussion about the statement above.
 - » Why would Tallchief want to be seen as a dancer first, and then a Native American?
- Ask students to turn and talk with their partner and discuss other figures from history who might have felt the same as Maria Tallchief (because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc).
 - » Examples: Jackie Robinson, Elizabeth Blackwell, Harvey Milk, Lena Horne
- Write down answers under "Part Two" on the worksheet.
- Call on students to generate a list of historical figures they discussed.

LOCAL CONNECTION

You can visit the *Five Moons* statue, depicting Tallchief and four other Native American ballerinas who rose to prominence in the twentieth century, at the Tulsa Historical Society & Museum in Oklahoma. Learn more: <https://tulsahistory.org/visit/vintage-garden-and-five-moons-2/>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Maria Tallchief
The Digital Public Library of America
<https://dp.la/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=maria+tallchief>

Maria Tallchief
The New York Public Library Digital Collections
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?&keywords=maria+tallchief#>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Elizabeth Maria Tallchief
Oklahoma Historical Society
<http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TA006>

Maria Tallchief
National Women's History Museum
<https://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biographies/maria-tallchief>



Maria Tallchief in an advertisement for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1955, Wikimedia Commons



Maria Tallchief and Erik Bruhn from the front cover of Dance Magazine, July 1961, Wikimedia Commons



Maria Tallchief, January 16, 1956, Oklahoma Historical Society (2012.201.B1289.0033)

“The Osage tribe and the state of Oklahoma, in recognition of the distinction I’d achieved, decided to honor me in a homecoming ceremony...The day filled me with pride. I had always acknowledged my heritage. But I was living in a different world now, and it was inspiring to be reminded of my Indian roots. At the same time, proud as I was, it had always been important for me to have people understand that no concessions were ever made for me as a ballerina because of my ethnic background; the same rigorous standards that were applied to every Russian, French, English, or American dancer were equally applied to me.

Above all, I wanted to be appreciated as a prima ballerina who happened to be a Native American, never as someone who was an American Indian ballerina.”

Maria Tallchief and Larry Kaplan, Maria Tallchief: America’s Prima Ballerina, 1997 (excerpt)

Look at the picture and read the text. Write down what you notice and what you wonder. Keep in mind the 5 Ws as you are working (Who? What? Where? When? Why?)

PART 1

NOTICES	WONDERS

PART 2