

Maya Deren

American, b. Ukraine, 1917–1961

-- Screenings

New Art (1948), The Film as an Art Form (1954, 1955), Legend of Maya Deren (1977), Myth and Ritual in the American Avant-Garde (1980), Ruben Cinematheque: American Avant-Garde (1991), From the Ruben Collection: American Experimental Films (2000)

-- Holdings

6 films

Escaping from increasing anti-Semitism in the Ukraine, Maya Deren (born Eleanora Derenkowsky) and her family immigrated to Syracuse, New York, in 1922. Her father was a psychiatrist and her mother oversaw her education in the United States and Switzerland. Deren's interest in words, language, and movement was profound and lasted throughout her life. After working as a writer, editor, and social activist in New York, she moved to Los Angeles in 1941 with Katherine Dunham's dance company. There she met her second husband, Alexander Hammid, an avant-garde filmmaker from Czechoslovakia who, like other European experimental filmmakers (including Hans Richter and Oskar Fischinger), had migrated to Los Angeles during World War II. Deren brought her love of language and poetry to filmmaking when she made, under Hammid's mentorship, her first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

This film marks the beginning of an American avant-garde filmmaking movement. Evoking the traditions of European trance films such as Robert Wiene's *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) (1919) and Jean Cocteau's *Le sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*) (1930), *Meshes of the Afternoon* presents the action as a dream and the main character (played by Deren) as a somnambulist caught between dreaming and waking states. It became a challenge to other American filmmakers, not only to use film creatively rather than commercially, but also to explore its potential as self-expression.¹

Meshes of the Afternoon engaged Deren's interest in ritual (introducing the now-famous sequence of four footsteps from sand to grass to pavement to carpet) as well as psychological symbolism (for example: key, knife, mirror, mask), which was popularized by Freud's dream interpretations and the advent of psychotherapy. After moving back to New York in 1943, she made four more films: *At Land* (1944); *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945); *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945–1946); and *Meditation on Violence* (1948).² Her knowledge of dance and movement continued to influence how she constructed these works, while advancing her ideas beyond *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Cutting to the images within the frame mimics the way a dancer moves and exemplifies Deren's style of using a single physical gesture as a complete film form. She created new ways to defy space and time with her montage style of building sequences based on concept rather than content.

While much of her work was concerned with ritual, from 1947 to 1955 she elaborated on this interest when she filmed ritualistic dances and voodoo ceremonies in Haiti. The footage was edited in 1985, twenty-four

years after the filmmaker's death, to become *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Though we will, of course, never know how this film would have looked if Deren had completed it herself, it retains her distinct style of filming, her portrayal of the body, her use of movement as ritualistic expression, and her interest in dream states evident in all her work. This lifelong investigation, distilled in her films and writings, became her legacy and influenced generations of experimental filmmakers.

S.M.

Notes

1. The Walker Art Center's involvement with Deren—and with filmmaking as an art form—dates to 1948, when she presented her films in a program entitled New Art. Deren, who preferred to show her work in galleries, museums, and schools rather than in traditional movie theaters, returned to the Walker in 1955 to do a lecture/demonstration and a screening of her latest film, *The Very Eye of Night* (1955).
2. These films, plus *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *The Very Eye of Night*, are in the Walker's Edmond R. Ruben Film and Video Study Collection.



Maya Deren *Meshes of the Afternoon* 1943 16mm film (black and white, sound) 18 minutes Edmond R. Ruben Film and Video Study Collection

Bits & Pieces Put Together to Present a Semblance of a Whole: Walker Art Center Collections

Joan Rothfuss and Elizabeth Carpenter

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Publications Manager

Lisa Middag

Editors

Pamela Johnson, Kathleen McLean

Designers

Andrew Blauvelt, Chad Kloepfer

Production Specialist

Greg Beckel

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