

National Native American Hall of Fame
2019 Inductee

Maria Tallchief

Prima ballerina

Jan 24, 1925 - Apr 11, 2013



Osage

First American prima ballerina

2 50-minute class periods

SELECTED COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS Literacy SL 10-1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS Literacy SL 10-1d

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

GOALS FOR UNDERSTANDING

Students will understand

- During her dancing career, Maria Tall Chief was the greatest ballerina in American history
- Because of her father's wealth and support, Maria Tall Chief had opportunities that most Native American young people do not have
- Maria Tall Chief was an enrolled member of the Osage Nation of Oklahoma
- Maria lived a long and active life and left behind a legacy of excellence at the highest level of artistic achievement

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What career achievements made Maria Tall Chief a legendary ballerina?

What opportunities did Maria have as a child that most Native American children did not?

What types of challenges and obstacles did Maria overcome on her path to becoming America's first Prima Ballerina?

How can we utilize Maria Tall Chief's legacy to inform our own lives?

ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE

Suggested Formative Assessment of Learning Outcomes

Active listening through note taking

Small group discussion

Class discussion

Culminating Performance Assessment of Learning Outcomes

- Students will finish their own small group K/W/H/L charts
- Participate in a small group discussion
- Answer the essential questions when reporting out as a group to the class

ENTRY QUESTIONS

Who was Maria Tall Chief?

Why is she noteworthy enough to be in the National Native American Hall of Fame?

What qualities, talents and advantages allowed Maria, during her time dancing, to become the greatest ballerina in American history?

MATERIALS

Computer and internet access are required to watch the videos below. Printed materials for students is available at the end of this lesson.

4-minute interview with Maria Tall Chief, reflecting on her career experience as a Prima Ballerina.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=1B1U325Nkf0&feature=emb_logo

2-minute video about Maria Tall Chief's history and accomplishments

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=69tk1KOevE&feature=emb_logo

3-minute video tribute to Maria's dancing performances

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=oUi8H69P2OQ&feature=emb_logo

LEARNING MODALITIES

Audio/Visual: Students will watch videos of Maria Tall Chief to get a sense of who she was and what she achieved as a legendary Prima Ballerina. Maria will describe and demonstrate the remarkable skills and techniques that dancing at the highest level requires. These videos will enlighten students to historic nature of Maria's achievements, not just as a Native American, but as an American citizen in the 20th century.

Writing/Recording: Students will take notes while observing the films, identifying key concepts, sentences or statements that Maria makes during her interview. These notes will be used to complete the K/W/H/L chart in the small groups.

OVERT INSTRUCTION

- 1) The instructor will begin the lesson by creating a "K/W/H/L" Chart, which stands roughly for "What they Know/What they Want to Know/How to Research this topic/What they Learned" chart on the white board for the students contribute their voices in a classroom exercise.
- 2) The instructor will ask the class to read the short biography of Maria Tall Chief and follow that up with a 5-minute discussion in setting up the K/W/H/L chart. Using the information in the bio, the students will help the instructor begin completing the chart. Two biographies about Maria Tall Chief are attached as an addendum to this lesson.
- 3) The teacher will divide the class into groups of 4, with each person reading the longer biography article individually. Some of the words may be unfamiliar to students and searching for definitions may be a necessary part of this process.

- 4) After the reading, students will then watch the videos of Maria to hear her words and see her historic performances.
- 5) Following the video, students will spend 20 minutes answering the following questions in their small groups. Every team member will contribute, with one person recording the information on a separate sheet. This information can also be utilized for the group K/W/H/L chart.

Questions

- a. How was Maria Tall Chief's early childhood different from most Native American children?
 - b. Maria Tall Chief was America's first Prima Ballerina. What does it mean to be a Prima Ballerina?
 - c. In what ways did Maria either represent or not represent her Osage community? Why and why not?
- 6) Following the small group discussions, each group will report out on their answers, and the answers will be included into the K/W/H/L chart.
- 7) The instructor will open up the discussion to include any final thoughts, questions or insights about Maria Tall Chief and her legacy.

This concludes the first 50 minutes of the Lesson

Extension Exercises

- 1) Students who wish to continue their research on Maria Tall Chief can use class time to write an essay and focus on the following questions: How did Maria set a higher standard for American ballerinas? How did Maria's Native American heritage help her in her career? What type of qualities did Maria possess in order to achieve such a high level of excellence as a ballerina?
- 2) Excerpts from the book, Killers of the Flower Moon can read to students or provided to those who wish to follow up on the background of Maria Tall Chief. <http://knopfdoubleday.com/guide/9780307742483/killers-of-the-flower-moon/>

CRITICAL FRAMING

Instructors can provide context to Maria Tall Chief's story by describing the historical circumstances that Maria was born into. Her father's nation, the Osage, had been removed to Oklahoma along with many other tribal nations. Like most tribal communities during this era, they were poor and faced many cultural barriers, such as racism, to achieve economic success and social wellness. This was the legacy of American colonialism, where tribal nations were forcibly removed from their lands and displaced from their traditional homelands. The Osage people were one of the only groups to benefit economically from their move to Oklahoma, as oil was discovered on their land and they were able to benefit from this wealth. Maria Tall Chief benefited

greatly from this resource, as it allowed her family to move to Los Angeles and give Maria access to the best ballet schools.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION FOR ADVANCED AND EMERGING LEARNERS

Maria's story is universally compelling to all age levels and learning abilities. Utilizing both the written descriptions and the videos of her dancing allows for a multi-sensory approach for students to assimilate the information.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Elizabeth Marie "Betty" Tallchief Osage family name: *Ki He Kah Stah Tsa*; January 24, 1925 – April 11, 2013, was an American ballerina. She was considered America's first major prima ballerina, a breakthrough performer during a time when ballet was dominated by European performers and producers.

Almost from birth, Tallchief was involved in dance, starting formal lessons at age three. When she was eight, her family relocated from her birth home of Fairfax, Oklahoma, to Los Angeles, California, to advance the careers of her and her younger sister, Marjorie.

At age 17, she moved to New York City in search of a spot with a major ballet company, and, at the urging of her superiors, took the name Maria Tallchief. She spent the next five years with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, where she met legendary choreographer George Balanchine. When Balanchine co-founded what would become the New York City Ballet in 1946, Tallchief became the company's first star.

The combination of Balanchine's difficult choreography and Tallchief's passionate dancing revolutionized the ballet. Her 1949 role in *The Firebird* catapulted Tallchief to the top of the ballet world, establishing her as a prima ballerina. Her role as the Sugarplum Fairy in *The Nutcracker* transformed the ballet from obscure to America's most popular.

She traveled the world, becoming the first American to perform in Moscow's Bolshoi Theater. She made regular appearances on American TV before she retired in 1966. After retiring from dance, Tallchief was active in promoting ballet in Chicago. She served as director of ballet for the Lyric Opera of Chicago for most of the 1970s, and debuted the Chicago City Ballet in 1981.

Tall Chief was honored by the people of Oklahoma with multiple statues and an honorific day. She was inducted in the National Women's Hall of Fame and received a National Medal of Arts. In 1996, Tallchief received a Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime achievements. Her life has been the subject of multiple documentaries and biographies.