Capturing Dance From the Past:  
An Introduction

# Overview

Capturing dance from the past is not only a fascinating area of study but a rich resource that supports other dance studies, research, and choreography. The history of dance focuses on dancers, dance, and dance works and literature, and their relationships with the history, society, and culture of the times. Dance forms or genres in society and in the theater in some periods were similar, in other periods vastly different; yet often various components cross-fertilized each other in their development. This chapter provides insight into dancers, dance, and dance works within the construct of historical research. In studying the dance of a period, you look at dance as an entity within social, national, and theatrical settings.

The chapter also provides an overview of the tools for capturing dance in the past and demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of studying the history of dance. Reading about the tools to capture the past is informative, but interacting with them is engaging. Knowing how to access and use these tools helps students move toward synthesizing content into a multimedia context from which to study the history of dance. Experts in social studies say that to understand a historical era, you have to immerse yourself in it and participate in it to its fullest. In this book, this concept applies to dance history and also to general history.

# Activities and Assignments

These extensions of the content presented in the book’s introduction can be used in class.

## Activity 1. What Is Dance?

Your instructor will lead a brainstorming session with the class, asking the question *What is dance?* This discussion will help students explore what they believe about dance as a personal statement in contemporary times. Understanding dance and pointing out some of the features of today’s culture provide a springboard for gaining a perspective that they can transfer to other historical eras.

Your teacher may extend the session by asking the questions *What was dance 10 years ago? 100 years ago? 200 years ago? 500 years ago? 1,000 years ago?* One or more students in your class can collect these responses and post them. Later your class can review the responses to earlier times.

## Activity 2. Answering the Chapter’s Guiding Questions

Individually or in groups, students or the class select one or more specific time periods to practice answering the guided questions that appear throughout the chapter. If a group does the activity, student group leaders collect the answers to the guiding questions. Make a composite of the answers. For example, the individual or group can present the answers in a variety of ways, such as type a report with graphics, illustrations, or photos from books or the Internet. Create an infographic or a short media presentation with URLs, music, and dance video clips.

### Dancers

**Who** were the dancers, choreographers, or other personalities who contributed to the art form?

**Where** and **when** did they dance?

**What** were their personal and career contributions to the period?

### Dance

**What** was the dance like during this time period?

Identify and briefly describe the following:

* Major forms or dances during this historical era
* Elements of dance used in the dance form
* Formations, movement patterns, and structure of the dance
* Use of the body (as related to identity, gender, class, or power)
* Type of dance (amusement, social, community, work, military, performance, or other)

**Where,** **when,** and **why** was the dance performed?

For each dance, characterize the following:

* The people or groups of people who danced
* The place, time of year, and day the dance was performed
* Why the dance was performed at this place, time of year, and day
* A description of the occasion or event

Be attentive to gender, identity, social status or class, and the power structure as part of society and place. Identify relationships between or among the topics listed to compile a deeper landscape of society and place during a specific period.

### Significant Dance Works

**What** were the important dance works within a specific time frame?

* Identify significant dance works of the historical period.
* Where and when (place and date) were the important dance works created?
* What similarities and differences exist between the dance works produced during the historical period?

**What** makes the dance work a significant contribution to the history of dance?

During the historical period, can one or more significant dance works be considered a great work of art today?

### Dance Literature

**What** are the important works of dance literature from the time period?

**What** works of dance literature reinforced or provided theoretical support for the dance of the period?

**What** works of dance literature argued against theoretical support for dance of the period?

Did the dance literature of the time record or address identity, gender, class, or power? Provide examples and cite the primary sources.

### Studying History

**Who, what, where, when,** and **why** were the historical, political, economic, and social events that interacted in a particular place in a given time period?

**What** causes and effects can be determined as they related to history, arts, and dance?

**Who, what, where, when,** and **why** were the arts that contributed to the culture and society of the times?

**What** ideas can be understood about the people, period, dance, arts, and culture of a specific place or region?

## Activity 3. How Many Steps Away? Writing Your Dance Autobiography

Write a two-page dance autobiography. Include your dance teachers and where you studied, your performance experiences, and other important dance events. If possible, interview one or more of your dance teachers. With whom did they study? What were some of their most important influences? Do you see any of these influences in your dancing or choreography?

For example, one of my ballet teachers had studied and performed in Lithuania before immigrating to the United States. She studied with Vera Fokina, Michel Fokine’s wife. From Fokina, my teacher learned *Les Sylphides.* This version was different from the one I had learned from a former member of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo.

## Activity 4. Solving History’s Mysteries

Your teacher will create stations using the following or similar items and then determine how long students spend visiting each station.

* A copy of a historical notation of a dance
* A copy of dance instructions printed from the Smithsonian or another site
* A picture of a dancer in costume from the 17th century
* A picture of a dance space from another century
* A CD of music from the Renaissance played on authentic musical instruments
* A DVD or Internet source of a reconstructed dance from the early 20th century or an earlier century
* One or more computers with a word-processing document on the screen that has a series of links to various websites (e.g., companies, dancers, time lines, historical information, or interrelated arts information about various periods, such as museums, prominent dance libraries, and dance history sites)

In small groups or individually, students in your class can move from station to station around the room. Can you guess the century from which each example is taken? Can you identify the dance, the dancer, the dance notation, the dance work, and the choreographer? What clues led you to determine their answers?

### Extension

Bring to class three to five examples from the categories listed previously or related to those categories. For each example, write a paragraph to explain how you solved this history mystery (the *who, what, when, where,* and *why* of each example) and attach it with your name to the back of the document or items. For the websites, video, and music examples, be sure to include a citation list for the item you have brought to class. Your teacher will collect and number the items exhibited at learning stations around the room and then will ask students to answer the *who, what, when, where,* and *why* for each example.

## Activity 5. Personal Tools Inventory

Completing the personal tools inventory provides you with a foundation for abilities and interests. Furthermore, the summary paragraph might provide indicators for your research interests. Using the following table as a starting place, assess your personal tools inventory. Along with your personal tools inventory, turn in a one- or two-paragraph summary in which you indicate those tools that you could share with others and list at least three areas you want to learn more about. Share how you would like to learn more about these three areas. For example, you could work individually (e.g., doing a personal discovery of the tools or doing an out-of-class assignment), work in small groups (e.g., exploring and reporting to the class about particular topics), or work as a class (e.g., go on a field trip or have an expert visit the class, depending on timing and availability), or you could come up with other ideas.

**Personal Tools Inventory**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Little or no experience** | **Some experience** | **Experienced** | **Master tool user** |
| Notation systems | Labanotation Benesh Other historical systems: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |  |  |  |  |
| Video | Camera operation Filming dance techniques Video or computer interface |  |  |  |  |
| Visual arts and dance iconography | History of various visual arts Visual and aesthetic scanning Various visual images of dance from different time periods (engravings, sculpture, paintings, bas relief, lithography) |  |  |  |  |
| Oral traditions | Writing questions Interviewing Documenting Evaluation techniques |  |  |  |  |
| Media | Media (films, video, music, theater, visual) Media literacy |  |  |  |  |
| Computer technology | Word, graphic, music, and video processes |  |  |  |  |
| Internet technology | Internet search Web page design and development |  |  |  |  |
| Musical tools | Read music and scores Knowledge of music history and composers |  |  |  |  |
| Theatrical and performance tools | Set or lighting design History of theater and drama History of theatrical costuming History of dramatic styles |  |  |  |  |
| Foreign languages | Read Write Speak Translate |  |  |  |  |
| Research | Dance History Library Media (films, video, music, theater, visual) Internet |  |  |  |  |

### Extension: Community Tools Inventory

Use the following table as a needs assessment of available resources in your community. This activity will involve making a trip to college and public libraries in addition to gaining a sense of the school’s or university’s resources. On the chart, rate the available resources in your community. Do the needs assessment in teams and then average your scores into a single score. Record unique or unusual resources that may be part of the community but may not have been identified as such within the context of the history of dance. You should identify them for future study or research other communities. The inventory is just a starting place that can be modified to meet your needs.

**Community Tools Inventory**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Tool type** | **1 (lowest)** | **2** | **3** | **4 (highest)** |
| ***Libraries*** | | | | |
| Public |  |  |  |  |
| School |  |  |  |  |
| College or university: |  |  |  |  |
| *Books* |  |  |  |  |
| *Media* |  |  |  |  |
| *Music* |  |  |  |  |
| *Special collections* |  |  |  |  |
| *Online libraries* |  |  |  |  |
| ***Museums*** | | | | |
| Historical societies and museums |  |  |  |  |
| Cultural collections |  |  |  |  |
| Online museums |  |  |  |  |
| Dance museums |  |  |  |  |
| Cultural dance collections |  |  |  |  |
| ***Community*** | | | | |
| Festivals |  |  |  |  |
| International fairs |  |  |  |  |
| Dance and arts events: |  |  |  |  |
| *Local performances* |  |  |  |  |
| *Artists in residence* |  |  |  |  |
| *Professional performances* |  |  |  |  |
| *Master classes* |  |  |  |  |
| *Lectures* |  |  |  |  |
| Dancers |  |  |  |  |
| Choreographers |  |  |  |  |
| Artistic directors |  |  |  |  |
| Authors |  |  |  |  |
| Critics |  |  |  |  |
| Dance media specialists |  |  |  |  |
| Dance presenters or producers |  |  |  |  |
| ***Dance and other performing groups*** | | | | |
| Ballet |  |  |  |  |
| Contact improvisation |  |  |  |  |
| Cultural dance forms |  |  |  |  |
| Folk dance |  |  |  |  |
| Jazz dance |  |  |  |  |
| Modern dance |  |  |  |  |
| Social dance |  |  |  |  |
| Tap dance |  |  |  |  |
| Hip-hop |  |  |  |  |
| Other dance forms or styles |  |  |  |  |
| ***Dance instruction*** | | | | |
| Ballet |  |  |  |  |
| Contact improvisation |  |  |  |  |
| Cultural dance forms |  |  |  |  |
| Folk dance |  |  |  |  |
| Historical dance |  |  |  |  |
| Jazz dance |  |  |  |  |
| Modern dance |  |  |  |  |
| Social dance |  |  |  |  |
| Tap dance |  |  |  |  |
| Hip-hop |  |  |  |  |
| Other dance forms or styles |  |  |  |  |
| ***Performing arts instruction*** | | | | |
| Drama |  |  |  |  |
| Music |  |  |  |  |
| Musical theater |  |  |  |  |
| Theater design (scenic, lighting, and costume design) |  |  |  |  |
| Video, television, and media arts |  |  |  |  |
| Visual arts |  |  |  |  |

## Activity 6. History Highlights

Each chapter in the book has sections titled History Highlight. These sections present interesting facts about the time period discussed in the chapter. For this activity, two students will serve as collectors. Using these elements in the book as a guide, you can write or e-mail your own history highlights or history trivia to the collectors. As the class goes through the history of dance, each person contributes at least two highlights or trivia items. These items could be incorporated into dance history time lines; a bulletin board that features dancers, dance, and significant dance works from a particular era; or on a class web page.

## Activity 7. Oral History

Visit the list of oral history project participants at the New York Public Library at [www.nypl.org/node/81134](http://www.nypl.org/node/81134).

Select a dancer, choreographer, or personality from the list of oral histories.

Read the information about the dancer and the interviews. For example, you might find Eugene Loring, 20th-century American dancer and choreographer for stage and screen, here: <http://catalog.nypl.org/record=b12118548>

Listen to the person’s history, then write a one-page summary of the oral history.

Paragraph 1: Write a short biography of the person (use *who, what, where, when*, and *why*).

Paragraph 2: Write a summary of the person’s oral history recording.

The oral history page includes additional links with dancers and choreographers. You should explore some of these people as well because they worked with your subject.

Review figure 1.2 in the textbook to help you frame this person’s role within an historical era and place.

Find a photo of the person and/or an important dance or choreographic work, and attach it to your report.

Paragraph 3: Explain what you think about this person’s role in an era or place in the history of dance.

Support your opinion with facts from additional research about the person and their role or contribution to the history of dance.

### More to Explore

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division is described at [www.nypl.org/about/divisions/jerome-robbins-dance-division](http://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/jerome-robbins-dance-division). This page provides a starting point to learn about the extensive holdings of the library that can help you research in the future.

## Activity 8. Favorite Film

Think of one of your favorite films that is set in the past. Imagine yourself in that time or place. Who would you be? What would your life be like? What has happened recently that is of historical, economic, or political importance? What do you do for fun? What is your style of clothing? What is your favorite music? What dances do you participate in or perform?

To get a sense of a time period, search for a website that describes a time you would like to have lived in and write a one-page description of yourself during that period.