

# Guide to the Katherine Dunham collection

JWJ MSS 247



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October 2024

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library  
P. O. Box 208330  
New Haven, CT 06520-8330  
(203) 432-2977  
beinecke.library@yale.edu  
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

**CALL NUMBER:** JWJ MSS 247

**CREATOR:** Dunham, Katherine, 1909-2006

**TITLE:** Katherine Dunham collection

**DATES:** 1935-2002

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 2 linear feet (3 boxes)

**LANGUAGE:** The materials are chiefly in English; some materials in French, Italian, and Japanese.

**SUMMARY:** The Katherine Dunham collection consists of five separate acquisitions of material created and used by Katherine Dunham, documenting her career as a choreographer, dancer, and anthropologist. Included are correspondence between Dunham and her friend and assistant, Dorothy Gray, photographs of Dunham and other dancers, financial agreements, correspondence mostly about Dunham's touring schedule, a Langston Hughes autograph, canceled checks, a sketchbook with Dunham's diary entries from her 1958 residency in Tokyo, and programs, broadsides, headshots, promotional material, playbills, postcards, and performance photographs. Also included is an invitation and map to Habitation Leclerc, a resort owned by Katherine Dunham in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.katherinedunham>

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## Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.katherinedunham>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to [beinecke.images@yale.edu](mailto:beinecke.images@yale.edu).

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b.      box  
f.      folder

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## Administrative Information

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### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Purchased from Swann Galleries, 2021-2024.

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### Conditions Governing Access

This collection is open for research.

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### Conditions Governing Use

The Katherine Dunham collection is the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

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### Preferred Citation

Katherine Dunham collection. James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

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### Processing Information

Collections are processed to a variety of levels, depending on the work necessary to make them usable, their perceived research value, the availability of staff, competing priorities, and whether or not further accruals are expected. The library attempts to provide a basic level of preservation and access for all collections, and does more extensive processing of higher priority collections as time and resources permit. These materials have been arranged and described according to national and local standards. For more information, please refer to the Beinecke Archival Description Unit Processing Manual.

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### Related Materials

Dorothy Gray papers (JWJ MSS 386).

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## Biographical / Historical

Katherine Dunham (b. 1909) was a dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist. She founded her own dance company, choreographed for stage and film around the world, and traveled and studied dance throughout her life. Her choreography includes productions of *Cabin in the Sky*, *Tropical Revue*, *Carib Song*, *Bal Negre*, and *Aida*. In Hollywood, she and her choreography were featured in such films as *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942), *Stormy Weather* (1943), and *Pardon My Sarong* (1942). She received a degree in Social Anthropology at the University of Chicago and went on to publish many papers and memoirs, and frequently gave talks about anthropology at universities and scholarly institutions. In her lifetime, Dunham choreographed over 90 performances, created her own dance method, and established many arts and performance centers, including the Katherine Dunham School of Cultural Arts, the Katherine Dunham Performance Art Training Center and the Center for Arts and Humanities in East St. Louis, IL. Alumni of her school include Eartha Kitt, James Dean, Gregory Peck, Jose Ferrer, Jennifer Jones, Shelley Winters, Sidney Poitier, Shirley MacLaine and Warren Beatty. Katherine Dunham passed away on May 21, 2006, in New York City, NY.

## **Scope and Contents**

The Katherine Dunham collection consists of five separate acquisitions of material created and used by Katherine Dunham, documenting her career as a choreographer, dancer, and anthropologist. Included are correspondence between Dunham and her friend and assistant, Dorothy Gray, photographs of Dunham and other dancers, financial agreements, correspondence mostly about Dunham's touring schedule, a Langston Hughes autograph, canceled checks, a sketchbook with Dunham's diary entries from her 1958 residency in Tokyo, and programs, broadsides, headshots, promotional material, playbills, postcards, and performance photographs. Also included is an invitation and map to Habitation Leclerc, a resort owned by Katherine Dunham in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

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## **Arrangement**

Arranged into five series: Series I: 2021 March Acquisition, 1947 - 1962; Series II: 2021 April Acquisition, 1935 - 2002; Series III: 2021 July Acquisition, 1949 - 1956; Series IV: 2022 March Acquisition, circa 1940s; Series V: 2024 March Acquisition, undated

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## Collection Contents

### Series I: 2021 March Acquisition, 1947–1962

Series I consists of correspondence with Dorothy Gray, Dunham’s assistant and close friend.

Arranged chronologically.

b. 1, f. 1-3

Dorothy Gray correspondence

1947–1962

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**Series II: 2021 April Acquisition, 1935–2002**

Series II consists of photographs, business materials, general correspondence, programs and broadsides concerning various Dunham performances from 1947 to 1955. Also included is a sketchbook belonging to Dunham with diary entries during her time in Japan.

Arranged in original order.

b. 2, f. 1	Printed materials	1935–1966
b. 2, f. 2-3	Photographs	1950–1969
b. 2, f. 4	Agreements and statements	1943–1973
b. 2, f. 5	Correspondence	1953–1965
b. 2, f. 6	Langston Hughes autograph and canceled checks	1938–1946
b. 2, f. 7	Programs	1947–1955
b. 2, f. 8	Sketchbook	1952–1962
b. 2, f. 9	Photograph, Paramount Hotel	undated
b. 3, f. 1	Oversize photographs	1958, undated
b. 3, f. 2	Dance performance broadside	undated
b. 3, f. 3	Map	undated

### **Series III: 2021 July Acquisition, 1949–1956**

Series III consists of additional correspondence with Dorothy Gray, Dunham's assistant and close friend.

Arranged chronologically.

b. 2, f. 10

Dorothy Gray correspondence

1949–1956

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**Series IV: 2022 March Acquisition, circa 1940s**

Series IV consists of photographs and promotional material related to Dunham's performances in *Carib Song* and *Tropical Revue* in the 1940s.

Arranged by material type.

b. 2, f. 11	Performance photographs, <i>Carib Song</i>	undated
b. 2, f. 12	Promotional material, programs for <i>Tropical Revue</i> and <i>Carib Song</i>	circa 1940s

## Series V: 2024 March Acquisition, undated

Series V. consists of undated programs, promotional material and photographs for *Katherine Dunham and Her Company*.

Arranged by material type.

b. 2, f. 13	Playbill, <i>Katherine Dunham and Her Company</i>	undated
b. 2, f. 14	Performance photographs	undated

## **Selected Search Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### **Subjects**

African American dancers

### **Occupations**

Dancers -- United States -- 20th Century

### **Genres / Formats**

Manuscript maps

Photographs -- United States -- 20th Century

### **Names**

Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967