Dance Chronicle
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ldnc20

A Bold Step Forward:
Genevieve Oswald and the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library
Lynn Matluck Brooks
Available online: 07 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Lynn Matluck Brooks (2011): A Bold Step Forward: Genevieve Oswald and the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library, Dance Chronicle, 34:3, 447-486

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2011.615239

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One of the world’s most renowned centers for dance research is the Dance Collection of The New York Public Library (NYPL), and at the center of that library’s vision, founding, development, collections, prominence, and range has been Genevieve Oswald. Now called the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, it “is the largest and most comprehensive archive in the world devoted to the documentation of dance.” While many people have contributed guidance, expertise, and support to this institution, Oswald’s persistence and dedication were primary in shaping its growth, evolution, and stature.* While this essay cannot cover every one of the wide-ranging stories and achievements recounted by Oswald, now retired with the title Curator Emerita of the Dance Collection, the highlights selected touch on the development of the Dance Collection, the process of acquiring the collections, significant figures who contributed to the institution, its major achievements, and Oswald’s personal experiences in the course of her work. The following general outline of Oswald’s career serves as a chronological reference for the article’s themes.

Oswald was hired at NYPL in 1947 by the curator of the Music Division, Carleton Sprague Smith. All research libraries were

*Oswald called the creation of archives of cultural records “a bold step forward— ... a gesture which expresses how deeply communities care about their traditions, giving them an historical dimension as they preserve them in a meaningful way as an enrichment for future generations.” See Genevieve Oswald, “One Approach to the Development of a Dance Archive,” in Libraries, History, Diplomacy, and the Performing Arts: Essays in Honor of Carleton Sprague Smith (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1991), 79. Interviews for this research were conducted by Lynn Brooks and Ishani Aggarwal on May 16, 29, and 30, 2007 at Oswald’s home in Ardsley, New York, with follow-up conversations over the course of the next several years. Unless otherwise credited, all quotes are from transcriptions of these initial interviews and are cited in the text as parenthetical numbers corresponding to the page in the transcript from which the quote, sometimes slightly revised, is taken.
then located at the main branch, 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Oswald was hired as a musicologist, having recently graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a B.S. in music; at the time of her hiring, she was in the midst of graduate studies at the Juilliard School. Smith initially offered Oswald a few hours a day for work on the nascent dance archive, the rest of her time being devoted to the Music Division. After 1950, her time was devoted entirely to dance, except for her service at the Music Division reference desk and its rare-books section. By 1956, Oswald’s progress, at the Music Division, in establishing a dance archive and developing awareness of dance as a research field earned her the Capezio Award, one of many honors she has received. With the opening of Lincoln Center in 1965, the performing arts research libraries moved to what was then called the Library-Museum of the Performing Arts. In the year prior to that move, the Dance Collection had become an independent division of NYPL, at the same level as the Music Division, with its own location in the Lincoln Center library complex. Oswald retired from NYPL in 1987.

Background

Oswald’s background, while primarily in musicology and composition, prepared her for a career devoted to supporting dance. In college, Oswald wrote reviews of visiting dance companies, composed music for local theater-dance productions, organized a festival of new art that featured José Limón as well as William Schuman, participated in a theater club and in music events, and took dance classes (pp. 39, 74–77). In fact, she recalled the “wonderful dance program” at the University of North Carolina (p. 76), where modern dance teacher Jean Brownley inspired students by not only teaching technique in her classes but also keeping students up to date on the New York dance scene, reading them reports from The New York Times on the latest modern dance events (pp. 74–75). In New York, while working on music and dance materials at the Music Division of NYPL, Oswald continued her education in dance by attending performances, meeting important figures in the dance world, and hearing lectures by scholars interested in dance, including musicologists Gustave Reese and, particularly,
Curt Sachs (pp. 62, 75). Smith had helped to bring these European musicologists to the United States in 1938, saving them from the Nazi threat. Sachs, as resident musicologist at the Music Division, had a desk near Oswald’s and became her mentor. Oswald’s collecting and cataloging of the Dance Collection was itself a deep and broad education in dance, preparing her to teach dance history at New York University (1970–94), write and edit dance essays, organize dance exhibitions, and speak authoritatively on dance as well as library matters.

But, when Oswald arrived at the Music Division, the Dance Collection was barely visible. Smith told her, “We’d like to do a little something with dance. You can only do it a couple of hours a day.” The suggestion inspired Oswald with a “wonderful sense of elation, because I loved the dance” (p. 62). Smith recognized that the dance material in the Music Division should be treated as a collection of its own, and he foresaw the need to create a separate division devoted entirely to dance material and research. At this critical juncture, Oswald was guided by a prescient and mentoring director.

A start had been made prior to Oswald’s arrival: in 1933, dance-related books at the library began to be identified and placed in the Music Division. Two important dance collections were donated in the late 1930s: the Roger Pryor Dodge photographs of Vaslav Nijinsky and the Walter B. Graham collection of dance books. As additional dance books, clippings, and visual material were added, more hours were needed for the collection’s maintenance. Alan Schulman, who had devoted some time to this work in the Music Division before Oswald’s hiring, created a short catalog of dance titles. While she was aware that there were some rare and ancient dance books in the library’s Lenox and Astor Collection, Oswald initially thought that “all the great historical collections were in Europe”—and therefore unattainable. So she decided to turn to American modern dance as her first foray into collecting and thus initiated a formative influence on the Dance Collection.

Collecting

American Modern Dance

To begin this project, Oswald turned to Walter Terry, dance critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He introduced her to Ted Shawn (see Figure 1), who proved an enduring friend to the Dance Collection, donating his own material to the nascent organization and becoming a trendsetter for other modern dancers. For example, Ruth St. Denis’s life and career were represented in the collection by a donation in 1951 of archival material. Oswald recalls, “We seemed to get one collection after another during the next four years. It was very exciting to me because I had studied modern dance . . . and I was deeply impressed to meet these people” (p. 62).

Oswald actively pursued Isadora Duncan’s legacy: “I . . . tried to find out what she was doing in every month of her life, where she was, and with whom. And then I wrote down everybody’s name that I found and went to various sources including the

![Figure 1. Genevieve Oswald and Ted Shawn at the New York Public Library Dance Collection at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, with a poster for the exhibition *Ted Shawn: American Dancer* in 1950. Courtesy of Genevieve Oswald.](image-url)
telephone books of different cities and wrote to everybody whose
name I found. Eventually, we received the Irma Duncan Collection [1957] . . . . It was really magnificent” (p. 33). In late 1956,
Oswald, her husband and young son, along with dance critic Doris
Hering, went to Irma Duncan’s lovely home near Albany, New
York, and “had an Isadora Duncan afternoon.” Oswald asked,
“Irma, could you be Isadora Duncan? . . . Come into the room,
waltz, move about, dance, be her.’ And she did, and my son was
thunderstruck” (p. 47). Irma Duncan became not only a donor
and advisor, but “She would tell us who the ‘true’ Isadora Duncan
dancers were, from her point of view” (p. 33). To further docu-
ment Isadora’s work, Irma Duncan and Oswald developed a plan
for Irma “to rent a studio for six weeks, with a blue curtain, a
piano, carpet, and everything. She wanted to . . . recreate some
of the dances of which she knew the choreography cold . . . . And
then we were going to film them” (p. 33). The Ford Foundation
agreed to fund the project, an offer to which Oswald had prepared
a draft response. “And then [the Ford Foundation] made a grant
to the New York City Ballet [NYCB], and [Irma] said, ‘I wouldn’t
think of working with them, or taking their money if they would
fund the New York City Ballet,’ and she wrote them a letter telling
them so” (pp. 33–34). Thus did early rivalries interfere with doc-
umentation and collection.

Oswald sought to interest an author and a publisher in bring-
ing Duncan’s letters out for the public. Through colleague David
Erdman, editor of NYPL’s Bulletin, Oswald met Doubleday editor
Ann Freedgood. Oswald brought along copies of a few of the Dun-
can letters, which Freedgood found “wonderful” (p. 34; see also
pp. 92–93). Freedgood in turn suggested to author Francis Steeg-
muller that he stop by the Dance Collection to look at the full
set of letters, which he quietly did. Although primarily a Gustave
Flaubert scholar, he found the Duncan letters so fascinating that
he decided to write a book incorporating them: Your Isadora: The
Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig, originally published
in 1974 by NYPL. This was one of the earliest research-based books
to bring Duncan’s personal story to light.

Other first- and second-generation modern dancers gave
their material to the Dance Collection, among them Doris
Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm (p. 27). Louis
Horst, a strong supporter, donated his collection, including
original scores he had written for Martha Graham, although Graham herself “was not a friend of the collection” (p. 51). Oswald spoke with Graham, but at the time Graham “did not want a record and she said so: ‘I don’t want people snickering’—these are her words—‘snickering over me after I am dead . . . and don’t try to do anything about it.’ So, naturally, I said, ‘We can’t not do it, Martha’” (p. 51). Oswald found a way: “Quite a bit later, we became friendly with Leroy Leatherman, the Martha Graham Company administrator . . . We did a couple of favors for the company. They needed something that we could get for them.” Oswald asked Leatherman about Graham’s press scrapbooks, which she recognized as an important historical record. He lent these to the Dance Collection for filming.

To supplement this kind of collecting, and in a broad sweep to cover other important modern dancers of Graham’s generation, Oswald undertook an oral history project in 1967, initiated with a modest grant from the National Dance Guild. Oswald created what she called a “cluster system,” for which she found support through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (pp. 31–32, 79): with Graham, for example, Oswald interviewed her set designer, artist Isamu Noguchi, and composer Hunter Johnson, as well as the dancers in her works (p. 32). This cluster of interviews would “create this unit with [Graham] as the centerpiece.” Oswald found, talking to Graham and other dance artists of her stature, that “they had given so many interviews that often they told you the same things, and what you got wasn’t anything new. So the only way to find anything new about the way they worked, what their principles were, how they felt about things, was to go and talk to the people they worked with” (p. 32). The oral history movement was fairly new at this time, with Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office, under Allan Nevins, serving as a center for developing this work. Oswald trained herself in this methodology, eventually using oral history procedures, with her staff, to gather interviews for the Dance Collection (pp. 18, 69).

Doris Humphrey was another important dancer of the period whom Oswald sought to document (p. 47). Because few women at that time in the dance world had children, Humphrey and Oswald found a common bond in discussing their families, which led to a closeness valuable for dance research as well: “I would go up and have her [Humphrey] identify photographs for me,
because she was very kind and willing to do so. When we got the Denishawn collection, it seemed all mixed up. Ted Shawn had it brought down from the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA]” (p. 48), where in 1941 Lincoln Kirstein had spearheaded an attempt to create a repository and center for dance research. In 1948, after this effort failed to achieve permanent archival status, most of the material was given to the Dance Collection. Walter Terry was influential in convincing Shawn to make a first transfer. For a year after Shawn’s donation, Oswald sorted and cataloged the material, which proved so frustrating that she had to request that Shawn come to the library to help out. Their work together led to an enduring friendship (pp. 47–48). Oswald asked him about some photos she could not identify. “Every Sunday,” Shawn recalled, “we didn’t have anything to do, so we’d go down to the White Studio and we’d put [on] a headdress of this and the leggings of that and we would just dress up any old way.” He also promoted the importance of the Dance Collection to other dancers.

Charles Weidman was another Denishawn descendant who contributed significantly to the Dance Collection. “I remember, the first time I went to see Charles Weidman in his apartment, he had this terrible noisy radio on a high level—concert music, which I love. But it was so loud that I had to shout to him, ‘Charles!’” Weidman came right to the point: “If I give you the collection, who is going to answer the questions?” Oswald responded, “We will.’ We were already answering questions on his career.” He gave his collection to NYPL and became a good friend (p. 48). Jack Cole, another Denishawn student and important innovator in jazz dance, donated to the Dance Collection his complete archive of books, memorabilia, and working material. Because of his study of world dance, particularly the dances of India, his collection was unusual in its range. Oswald went to Cole’s home in California to pack and ship this precious material.

The Dance Collection played an important role in supporting the Alvin Ailey company at a critical juncture. After early successes, the company ran out of money, a fact publicized in the New York Times, which reported that Ailey would be forced to disband his company. Oswald recollects, “I called his office and asked his secretary, ‘Look, do you want us to film your repertory?’” Ailey was eager to proceed, and the whole repertory was filmed. This convinced the company’s board of the importance of sustaining
the work and “eventually they raised the money to go on” (p. 30). When asked whether he would leave his material to the Dance Collection or to NYPL’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Ailey told Oswald, “Well, I am black, but you know I am a dancer first.’ And so he said, ‘I want you to have my stuff, I really do.’” However, “what we tried to do was to share it” between the Dance Collection and the Schomburg Center (p. 88), Oswald observed.

Before beginning her work in East St. Louis, Katherine Dunham, already a celebrated dancer, befriended Oswald at the Dance Collection (p. 47). Dunham material now held at NYPL includes photographs, programs, interviews, clippings, and books. Oswald met Merce Cunningham through one of the Dance Collection’s graduate-student assistants, Bruce King, then studying at NYU and also a student and dancer with Cunningham. “Bruce said, ‘You know, you ought to invite Cunningham out to supper. Just invite him.’” This was at a point in Cunningham’s career when he was still making little money. He proved a friendly supporter, “interested in what we were doing with earlier modern dance figures” (p. 52). David Vaughan later became Cunningham’s archivist, but the Dance Collection was able to buy some of Cunningham’s material after Oswald’s retirement. Working with Paul Taylor was a different story: “I went to visit him when he had a big studio, and he lived at one end of it” (p. 53). Oswald was particularly interested in documenting and saving the various versions of Taylor’s major works that she had seen. She asked him, “Don’t you want to have people look at the variant editions of this work?” He responded, “No Gegi, that’s what I don’t want to do.” The Dance Notation Bureau (DNB) had also, at that time, been pressing Taylor to have his dances notated. Taylor eventually did permit the DNB to create scores for several of his works, and he also started filming his dances: “He understood, he knew that he had to save everything, all versions of a work. I was afraid that he was going to discard all the films except the one he preferred, destroying the earlier versions . . . . But as far as I know, he didn’t do that.”

**Ballet’s Records**

The American and international ballet worlds were flourishing at the same time that modern dance was emerging and becoming
well established. Oswald realized that the comprehensive nature of the Dance Collection should embrace all facets: concert dance in all its manifestations, classical forms from the world over, social and ritual dances, pedagogy, history, anthropology, and so on. Ballet, both that of the distant past and that unfolding as Oswald developed the collection, became an important subject of acquisition. A critical core of that collection was donated in 1955 by longtime Dance Collection friend Walter Toscanini, son of the renowned maestro Arturo Toscanini and husband of Italian ballerina Cia Fornaroli. NYPL’s online catalog summarizes this collection as “more than 3,300 rare books, and tens of thousands of libretti, scores, manuscripts, prints, photographs, clippings, and playbills.” An early and steady financial supporter of the collection, Toscanini invited Oswald and dance historian Lillian Moore to lunch, after the death of his wife, to tell them he intended to donate his remarkable collection of historical dance material to NYPL. Oswald recalled that, “barely breathing, I said to him, ‘Why aren’t you giving it to an Italian library?’ And Lillian kicked me under the table! But I did want to know that and he did tell me” (p. 88). Toscanini was impressed by the systematic collecting and cataloging that Oswald had undertaken. Oswald was delighted. Toscanini’s donation helped the Dance Collection to fulfill the future he envisioned, making possible the study, in an American library, of the great legacy of European ballet.

Toscanini’s friendship proved utterly dependable. In 1960, collector George Chaffee, a New York dance teacher and brilliant collector of dance books, prints, and related material, was in serious need of funds. Oswald, with Toscanini’s support, was able to help: “I knew that the collection was to go to Harvard—George said it was, which was fine. . . . I never thought we’d get that collection, and I never really tried. But we were really friendly with Chaffee and they [Chaffee and partner Richard Doobs] were down to the Dance Collection and I was up at their place a lot.” One memorable day,

I got a call from George Chaffee and he was weeping, and he said, “If I don’t get ten thousand dollars before tomorrow morning to pay a year’s rent, my collection is going to be taken by the sheriff and it’s going to be sold unidentified in boxes at a sheriff’s sale,” and there would be no way that it would be distributed or sold as a dance collection, since people
who go to the sheriff sales just buy things in bulk. This was incredible, this
great collection of memorabilia, all of the prints—the American prints,
... a bust of [Anna] Pavlova, the whole business was going to be lost! He
had tried Harvard Theatre Collection and others for funds. I said, “I’ll see
what I can do.” I thought, the library doesn’t have ten thousand dollars.
But, I went to the administration and asked.... George had also told me
that it was not enough for me to get the money but I had to go down and
take a check to a certain city office. I thought, “This is crazy!” (pp. 83–84)

As Oswald had expected, the library did not have the cash at hand,
so she turned to another possible resource: “I decided I would
call Walter Toscanini,” who had not only donated his magnificent
collection, but also “was a great mentor” to Oswald. This was not
an easy call to make, because competition between Toscanini and
Chaffee as collectors had created mutual suspicions.

I said, “Seriously, I need ten thousand dollars,” and he [Toscanini] started
to laugh.... I said, “You probably want to know what it’s for.” He said, “No,
if you call me and ask me for ten thousand dollars, I think it is dead serious,
life and death.” And I said “Yes.” So he said, “Meet me at the RCA Victor
[studios] ... in the parking lot.” ... I met him there and he smiled and
took out his checkbook and wrote a check for ten thousand dollars to the
city office downtown. And then I told him it was for the Chaffee collection,
and of course he was just jubilant. I went to George and I said, “We have
ten thousand dollars,” and we went downtown.... I said, “We do not want
to infringe on what you promised to Harvard ... but Walter Toscanini has
a right to come and look at this material,” and he agreed. Toscanini got
the most ravishing collection, ... all the American prints, the European
prints, the libretti, the playbills, the unusual items like the wonderful sta-
tues of [Marie] Taglioni and [Fanny] Elssler, and the cigarillo cases and
castanets. (pp. 83–84)

Toscanini purchased the collection and the following week had it
delivered to the library. There is also a George Chaffee collection
at the Harvard Theatre Collection.

The Diaghilev era also became the subject of collections do-
nated to or acquired by the Dance Collection. The diaries of
Vaslav Nijinsky were purchased (pp. 36, 60), while donations in-
cluded the letters of Serge Diaghilev, the archive of documents
held by Diaghilev’s secretary, Gabriel Astruc, and material from
choreographer Michel Fokine, whose son, Vitale, donated impor-
tant press material, letters, and contracts, including Diaghilev’s
communications with his company (p. 91). The archive of ballerina Nathalie Branitzka was an early donation to the library, supplying information about the off-stage life of Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo through scrapbooks and informal photographs, along with other records Branitzka provided. The hours the dancer spent at the library reviewing the material with Oswald gave the young librarian a rich education in this period of ballet history. The fine collection of Serge Denham—who directed the last of the Diaghilev successor companies, the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo, for many years—came to the library through donations by Denham’s daughter, Irina Pabst, beginning in 1974; Pabst also provided a grant for processing the material.

To supplement this growing collection on ballet history, Oswald sought microfilm copies of precious items held abroad, a goal she had identified in her initial years at the Music Division. “I wanted to get the one hundred and fifty great early works in the dance repertoire completely documented, with music, stage sets, designs, photographs or prints if they existed, with the libretti and production notes” (p. 96). Oswald’s objective was, “if you wanted to look up Swan Lake or Giselle, you not only had references to all the versions . . . that we do, but you had the libretti, stage designs, production notes, everything you could find in various European collections.” The project was realized in the 1980s. Personal assistance was essential in this process because ordering this kind of material or microfilms was a long and uncertain process at NYPL: “You ordered an item through the order department, and the order . . . would go on a list, and all the other divisions of the library had things on this list; you just moved up the list and you might get your item in ten years or you might not” (p. 42). Thus, Oswald sought assistance from mathematician and Columbia University professor Hubert Goldschmidt, son of a member of the Committee for the Dance Collection (discussed later). A dance lover, Goldschmidt went to Paris regularly. Oswald broached her plan: he would look up and report back to her on the material she sought from the various archives, and he would be free to investigate other items that came to his attention. Once Oswald had Goldschmidt’s list, she would investigate funding for whatever she

*Goldschmidt’s involvement with the Dance Committee has continued. He was, at the time of this writing, the committee’s chairman.
wished to purchase; when that was secured, she would order the material directly, with the Acquisition Department’s cooperation, and Goldschmidt would bring it back on his next trip to Europe. He first went to the Paris libraries, where he ordered copies “of every single score that was a choreography of a dance work, ballet, or social dance, and we got thousands of frames of this material on microfilm, which has largely been cataloged . . . . Then we started on the 150 ballets—to get the set designs, the music, and the stage directions” (p. 43). Oswald had, at her Ardsley apartment during our interviews, a copy of the major source she used for this project, a musicological and archival catalog of the great French archives compiled by Théodore de Lajarte, which gave some idea of the riches that were microfilmed for the Dance Collection. Oswald explained that she would comb through this text, select the ballets, and investigate where the libretti and other information could be found, often in the music department of the Bibliothèque Nationale. This project was funded largely by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a strong supporter of the Dance Collection.

Microfilms were also acquired of the outstanding P. J. S. Richardson Collection, a core of the Library and Archives of the Royal Academy of Dancing in London. While Richardson never visited NYPL himself, he corresponded with Oswald and was eager to make material from his collection available there. Oswald also wished to support scholars beginning to work in the field of “early dance”—European Renaissance and baroque dance. Unfortunately, her attempt to bring these artists and scholars together to create a set of historical film documents that could be disseminated was unsuccessful because of their rivalries (p. 9).

The ballet riches held at the Dance Collection attracted the attention of visiting ballet companies and stars, and the library served as a meeting ground for artists from all over the world. For example, during the Royal Ballet’s first American tour (1949), Oswald arranged a reception for the company at the Dance Collection. Artists from both sides of the ocean, who had been kept apart through World War II, heard speakers such as composer and conductor Constant Lambert and Ninette de Valois, founder of the Royal Ballet, which had opened in New York the previous evening. “[I]t was interesting to observe that red-haired Moira Shearer was very shy and deferential to Fonteyn because Shearer had already
danced and had gotten tremendous praise, and Fonteyn was not to dance until the next night. But everybody was there—Nora Kaye—everybody. [The American dancers] had never met these British dancers and it was just wonderful to see them meet, introduce themselves, and begin talking and laughing together quickly” (p. 57). When designs for an exhibition of sets for *The Sleeping Beauty* and other works were delayed in customs the day before the show’s opening, Oswald and other library officials went to the customs office to verify their use and arrange their release. Oswald had organized the show, “British Ballet,” which she and her then-fiancé, Dean Johnson, hung. Oswald’s efforts during this demanding period were rewarded: “Every year when she came back on tour, Ninette de Valois would visit us. She would come to the back workroom at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, sit down at the table, and say, ‘What have you got for me today?’ Perhaps I’d bring her Noverre’s stuff . . . or something of Diaghilev—letters, programs, pictures, a libretto—and she’d talk about when she’d been with the company” (p. 58).

Marie Rambert, another major figure in establishing ballet and nurturing emerging choreographers in England, also developed a warm working relationship with Oswald, who was seeking films of the work of new British choreographers, including Frederick Ashton. “I decided that I should go see Marie Rambert when I was in Europe again. Well, it was wonderful; I got to see her two years in succession and because I was married and had children, and she had the same, she walked me around and showed me all the places that had to do with her children and her marriage. It was one of the most cherished experiences of my life” (p. 59). Upon broaching her request for choreographers’ films, Oswald was delighted by Rambert’s “blithe” response: “Oh yes, why don’t you go out to Ealing Studio, I’ll call the company . . . Tomorrow morning, I’ll put you in a taxi.” The Dance Collection received about thirty-five films as a result of this venture.

Another important European company, the Royal Danish Ballet, also had a warm connection with the Dance Collection. Oswald recalled that Erik Bruhn “was there frequently. He was a friend of Lillian Moore’s, and he invited both of us up to see him perform at Jacob’s Pillow . . . and when we were down in the village of Lee, he came and had supper with us” (p. 59). Moore
generously donated years of research material, including interviews with Bruhn and memoirs of the Royal Danish Ballet, to the Dance Collection (see Figure 2). But Oswald recalled that her first encounter with the Danish dancers had been “bizarre . . . . I was sitting at my desk and I got a call from a former library employee on the staff of our press office, now at the American-Scandinavian Foundation, and she said, ‘I have got a couple of Danish dancers here and they want to dance in the United States. Can you give me any idea of what I can do with them?’” Oswald agreed to contact Ted Shawn about presenting the pair at Jacob’s Pillow. That year, 1955, Shawn offered to host the dancers in his own house and present them in performance. The next year, he invited the company. Through this kind of support for the field—“just doing whatever we were asked to do”—dance artists and donors “came to believe that we were all right, that they could give us their records, their archives, and not be afraid” (p. 59).

Contemporary ballet artists began contributing material to the Dance Collection. Ruth Page, a leader in the Chicago ballet
community, donated a fine personal collection (p. 91). Much material related to the entire history of dance, and especially to the NYCB and the work of George Balanchine, came through Kirstein’s generous support and donations. Rudolf Nureyev gave a large portion of his material as well as generous financial support. Oswald recalled that “when [Nureyev] was in London, after he did his film in Australia, *Don Quijote*, we were going to have one of our benefit evenings arranged by the Dance Committee [Committee for the Dance Collection] (see below) . . . . Nureyev was wonderful. He flew over to come to our evening as our guest, and because he was performing, he flew back the same night” (p. 50). Moore had amassed an extensive archive of dance prints, libretti, and particularly a remarkable collection of Elssler memorabilia. This material came to the Dance Collection after Moore’s death in 1967.15 Her research notes, files, catalogs, and books form an integral part of the Dance Collection today, as they served also in educating Oswald during Moore’s almost daily visits to the library, where the two dance lovers became great friends.

Another memorable figure at the Dance Collection from the ballet world was Agnes de Mille, who, Oswald recalled, “became a very good friend, a really good friend. She understood exactly what we were doing. She was a born archivist.” De Mille donated films of her works and other significant material (p. 54). Unfortunately, in the late 1970s the IRS found de Mille behind in her tax payments because of controversy over whether films were choreographic documents of value. A nasty court case ensued in which Oswald was asked to support de Mille, even to testify in court. “We worked hours developing arguments about the value of the films and what she had done for American dance” (p. 55). Oswald recalled the hostility of the IRS lawyers who came to the library to interview her about de Mille’s case but refused to hear her references to dance as an art form.16 The judge decided he would admit the choreographic documents as records of value but de Mille would have to agree never to use these again in staging her works. This decision devastated de Mille emotionally and financially. Oswald was shocked not only at the decision but also at “the glee of the IRS team, who danced and clapped each other on the back, a big win for them.” De Mille stayed in close touch with Oswald and eventually donated manuscripts of her books, her correspondence, and other items.
Many other great ballet figures of the age made their way to the Dance Collection for their own research as choreographers or performers. A memorable example was a “little, slight woman in this nondescript print dress” (p. 48). She told Oswald that “Mr. Tudor said for me to come in . . . My name is Makarova and I am going to dance with the company.” Choreographer Antony Tudor had instructed Natalia Makarova to look at filmed works of his in the Dance Collection. Oswald made sure the ballerina was set up with a full collection of Tudor’s filmed work, which she carefully watched in its entirety. “She thanked us; she was always very familiar with us from then on. But, at that first visit, she didn’t look anything like a ballet dancer.” (p. 49) A few weeks later, “Tudor came and said, ‘What have you done to me? . . . You showed Makarova those old Nora Kaye movies, and she’s now got all these mannerisms that I can’t stand.’ I said, ‘But you sent her in here to look at the films!’” Although momentarily angry, Tudor proved a “great friend” to the library, eventually willing a large part of his own material to the Dance Collection along with the income from performances of some of his ballets.

Balanchine, too, was often quietly present, reading scores at the Music Division, and he knew the library as a whole. Oswald particularly recollected a visit he made to the Dance Collection while it was at 42nd Street, during a period when Tudor was choreographing for NYCB (p. 49). Balanchine requested Italian scores, ballabile from nineteenth-century Italian opera scores. The request was a pleasure to the music-trained Oswald, who provided Balanchine with a library truck full of the scores. Unfortunately, Tudor failed to appear at that meeting, which was arranged so that the two choreographers could choose a score for Tudor to choreograph. “So Balanchine, a marvelous musician, read through all the scores on the carts. He thanked me, and about three weeks later, Mr. Tudor called and he needed the same scores. So, we took the room upstairs, which had a piano in it, and he brought in a pianist and had the scores played for him.” Other ballet artists, including Jerome Robbins and Mikhail Baryshnikov, visited, appreciated, and supported the Dance Collection (p. 50).

**World Dance**

“When I first came to the Dance Collection,” Oswald recalled, “I talked with Carleton Sprague Smith and told him that I was
interested in all of dance, not just ballet, not just modern dance” (pp. 1–2). She collected material and created catalogs on popular, ritual, social, and therapeutic dance, and she was interested in global coverage. Among the greatest successes Oswald had in this breadth of coverage was the Asian Collection. Oswald’s interest in Asian dance was stimulated early in her career at NYPL by programs presented at the Museum of Natural History by Hazel Lockwood Mueller that included Asian dance (p. 1). Upon beginning her work on dance at the library, Oswald visited La Meri (Russell Meriwether Hughes), who “had a wonderful school of Asian dance at that time. It was in the old Isadora Duncan studio, which was the same studio that later would house the New York City Ballet when they first started” (p. 2). Oswald remembered La Meri as “a beautiful woman. She was a wonderful teacher; she had a tremendous core of young people, young Americans that were studying all forms of Asian dance—Indian dance, Indonesian dance.” La Meri desired to pass on her love and knowledge of Asian dance to others since, in the late 1940s, Asian teachers were not able to travel to New York. Some years later, however, La Meri told Oswald that she was giving up her studio because Asian artists were, at last, able to come to the West and teach their own dances. Indeed, Oswald’s work at the Dance Collection helped facilitate such visits.

In the mid-1970s, Porter McCray of the John D. Rockefeller III Fund invited Oswald to lunch, although the Dance Collection had never applied to the fund for support. In the middle of their elegant meal, McCray asked if she would like to create an Asian Dance Archive at NYPL. “I was stunned. I still can feel the thrill that I felt, the excitement . . . . We would be going back to some of the foundations of dance if we could do that.” McCray offered her a grant to fund creation of such an archive, along with his full support and assistance. In response to her query about his motivation for this generous offer, he said, “I think the people at the Dance Collection are passionate about dance and I feel that if we can create an archive of documents and films here we will save them for the Asian countries themselves,” since, Oswald commented, “they were engaged in other aspects of their development and much was being lost.” Oswald learned that McCray “was considered a real prince among Asians, a man of phenomenal stature, a force for the arts in Asia. His contacts ranged from presidents to dancers and teachers. When he said that he was going to help me, he did” (p. 3).
The project required that Oswald take a six-week trip through Asia. Her husband and family encouraged her to go. To prepare, Oswald hired Elizabeth Miller (later McCue). Supported and informed by McCray’s extensive Asian connections, Oswald and McCue wrote to dancers, companies, and dance authorities in every part of Asia, explaining their intentions and requesting interview appointments. After establishing a rigorous daily schedule, the time for the trip arrived. “It was New Year’s Day and I went to the airport, to the French airlines gate, and literally there was nobody there. Later, there were two passengers in the plane. It was snowing . . . . As we took off, I saw the deep snow outside and I said, ‘What am I doing here? Why am I going to Asia?’” (p. 4). The long journey’s first leg took her to Paris where, in a bleak mood, “I decided . . . I would go see when the first flight back to the United States left, and so I did.” Returning to the airport the next morning to catch a plane home, she “decided just for fun that I would go and see where the airplane to Thailand was taking off much later . . . . The plane was sitting outside this big glass window. And it was gorgeous, a beautiful airplane. The wonderful tail was painted like a Garuda [mythical Hindu bird], a bird’s tail.” Still, she was determined to fly home. “As I was turning to go back to my gate for the New York plane, I met a friend of mine from NYU, where I was teaching dance history. We were amazed to find each other and she said, ‘What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘Well, I am supposed to go to Asia but I have decided I am going back home to New York.’ She said, ‘You can’t. I will not let you get on the plane.’”

With this friend’s encouragement, Oswald boarded the plane to Thailand. “It was a Thai plane and everything was colorful silk, beautiful. This was the beginning of the New Year, when all the young Thai men were coming back from studying in Europe and they were such a handsome group.” At the Oberoi Hotel in Bangkok, Oswald prepared to make her telephone calls, struggling with “an unfriendly telephone system. I had a great big, thick book listing appointments with everyone important to dance in every city, every country I was to visit. This was the start—several hundred people, at least, in six weeks. I had to meet them all. I had a translator. It . . . was intimidating—the range of people and places was terrifying” (pp. 4–5). Oswald arrived amid political chaos: university students were demonstrating in the streets.
against food price hikes. Oswald feared that her first interview, with the Thai prime minister, would be cancelled, but she was escorted to the meeting in a private car, surrounded by soldiers. The prime minister “had been, in his youth, a dancer of the refined style and he was a great friend of Porter McCray.” He sat, oblivious to the chaos outside—it was unbelievable—for about an hour and talked to me about the refined dance, with a few members of his staff also sitting about us, and it was recorded on tape and film. Then he kindly asked what he could do” to help (p. 5).

Owing to McCray’s influence, Oswald also met with royalty, foundation heads, diplomats, and dance artists.

This generous reception was repeated in other nations she visited—Bali, Japan, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. In Japan, an officer of NHK television network gave her what was to become a collection of seven hundred films (p. 6); in Jogjakarta, Java, she was treated to a performance by the prince’s professional company and introduced to the school’s teachers (p. 6). Funding through the Jerome Robbins Film Archive (see below) allowed support for filming classes of an elderly Balinese teacher whose legacy was thus preserved (p. 8). The dance films, donated by professionals in many countries, were shipped directly to the library as Oswald continued on her itinerary. She also collected manuscripts, visual material, articles, microfilms, audiotapes, and books in many languages (p. 10). In India, she visited Sangeet Natak Academy of Kerala, falling so ill during the journey that, she recalls, “I almost died on the way” (p. 7). Such famous artists as Birju Maharaj and Rukmini Devi met with and graciously assisted Oswald. The Spencer Collection at NYPL held important Asian dance manuscripts, which had resulted in a fine public exhibition, “Asian Dance Images from the Spencer Collection” in the summer of 1977. Oswald’s travels deepened and widened existing holdings.

A goal of Oswald’s trip and collecting had been to preserve Asian dance traditions that were disappearing because of modernization or political chaos. One such poignant case was that of the

*M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, thirteenth Prime Minister of Thailand (1975–1976), was of an aristocratic family. The British-educated Kukrit was a scholar of Thai culture, including dance, visual art, and literature, as well as an award-winning author and leading intellectual in Thailand. Judy Stowe, “Obituary: Kukrit Pramoj,” The Independent (London), October 11, 1995.
Khmer dance. In 1971, “When the classical Khmer company came to Brooklyn, we filmed every one of their performances. And later on, after the revolution and the destruction in that country, we were able to give the dancers who were teaching classical Khmer dance these films and those we had collected in Asia so they could continue to teach. The first time we sent them films, they were in refugee camps; the second time, they were in California where they were successfully teaching. Having these films really meant everything to them” (p. 12).

Oswald also befriended Beate Gordon, programming director of New York’s Asia Society, and the two women worked together to create a presence for Asian dance at both institutions (pp. 8–9). Under Oswald’s leadership, the library organized a two-day meeting in 1976 at which American and Asian scholars from all over the world were invited to share work, information, and plans related to the building of the Asian Archive. During that weekend, the Asian scholars attended a NYCB performance, and, as Oswald recalled, “They loved Balanchine” (p. 9). They were “almost mesmerized.”

Oswald hoped to repeat the success of the Asian Archive with other dance research areas. However, the Dance Collection had only limited success in covering dance in South America and Africa. Cultural attachés in those areas, perhaps distracted by political and economic turmoil in their nations, were less responsive to requests for help in finding dance professionals and acquiring information on their work. The Dance Collection did purchase whatever could be bought in books and films to cover these regions, however. It also developed a fairly representative archive on Native American dance (p. 17).

Yet if the success of Oswald’s Asian odyssey was not fully repeated in some other areas, that collecting experience had positive results beyond the magnificent material in NYPL (pp. 11–14). Oswald was invited to sit on the board of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in Göttingen, Germany, where she helped to raise awareness of dance and to bring Asian dance experts on board (p. 11). Musicologists and ethnologists took note of Oswald’s expertise, inviting her to speak at gatherings. She served on a committee in Pune, India, for the Archive and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology of the American Institute of Indian Studies. In Doha, Qatar, she met with Arab leaders seeking to establish a
A Bold Step Forward

This was the era of Ayatollah Khomeini’s ascension to power, a time particularly uncomfortable for an American woman to travel alone in such areas. Aside from Oswald, there was just one other woman in the group: “She was a beautiful Iraqi who lived in Paris. And there were about sixteen or seventeen sheiks, older but with some younger men in beautiful kaftans of the finest wool.” During their three days of meetings, Oswald gave a presentation on archival development. Despite her anxieties about this “male-oriented world,” she was kindly and well received.

The Chinese government also took note of Oswald’s successes. Oswald undertook a trip in 1978 with Ross Parkes, of the Martha Graham Dance Company, who taught master classes and led lecture-demonstrations. (See Figures 3, 4, and 5.) During their two-week visit to Beijing and Shanghai, Oswald met with writers, scholars, editors, and dance leaders, visited places of interest to Chinese dance, and gave lectures on American modern dance. She remembers, “When I walked into my hotel, I realized with a jolt that I was staying in the hotel that Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn had stayed in when they went there many years before.

Figure 3. Welcome ceremony for Genevieve Oswald, at the dais seated third from left, and Ross Parkes, seated second from right, in China, 1978. Courtesy of Genevieve Oswald.
That was very personal to me” (p. 13). The visit was a success: “Chinese officials had assembled about 450 young dancers and teachers of dance throughout the provinces to learn about American modern dance” through Oswald’s lectures and Parkes’s classes.
The visit concluded with a performance by participants in Parkes’s workshops.

**Visual Documentation**

Oswald made visual documentation of dance a primary concern; she sought to document “not only the history of the art, but also the choreography itself in tangible form,” that is, “the actual steps and sequence of steps.”\(^{20}\) Owing to the ephemeral nature of dance, its lack of a historically continuous notation or recording, and the paucity of written records, Oswald viewed collecting in the broadest light, embracing libretti, posters, scores, books, manuscripts, scrapbooks, oral histories, notations, prints, films, photographs, clippings, designs, playbills, and even costume items. She sought to bring these records together in one location where the researcher could find the visual, aural, descriptive, and material information on any one dance or subject. Dance as a moving art is well represented in the Jerome Robbins Film Archive. Yet her early efforts to establish this portion of the Dance Collection met with opposition from two influential and often difficult individuals: Kirstein and—ironically, considering the collection’s eventual name—Robbins.

Kirstein argued tradition as his objection to the film archive at the Dance Collection, which, by the early 1960s, had already filmed NYCB rehearsals: “He came in one day and said, ‘I see you are going to go on with the film archive,’ and I said, ‘Yes, I am.’ He said, ‘This is crazy. Dancers don’t want it.’ He stood at my door and stormed for five minutes, giving a brilliantly reasoned exposition on the way dance had been, and should be, transmitted. But he was always angry in a fond way” (pp. 71–72). After a good lunch, he returned and said, “But I suppose you are going to do it anyway.” Some years later, in Kirstein’s catalog for *A Decade of Acquisitions*, an exhibition he was organizing for NYPL, he called the Jerome Robbins Film Archive “the most useful and profound testimony to dance ever planned and executed,” a statement that Oswald found “amazing. . . . He always came around. If you were right, he saw it and told you so.”

Like Kirstein, Robbins was far from enthusiastic when Oswald approached him for support of the film archive project (p. 29). He planned to establish his own dance film library. Oswald
found seed money to begin the film library’s archive from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. A few years later, however, Robbins saw the advantage of working through an established organization and gave Oswald a grant. In 1964, he extended his support remarkably, donating a percentage of the proceeds from *Fiddler on the Roof* to maintain the film and video material, hire staff, purchase films and viewing equipment, document significant works, and develop guidelines to protect against copyright violation and plagiarism (p. 70). This gift allowed the collection to grow and be available for research use. Appropriately, the film library at the Dance Collection was named the Jerome Robbins Archive of the Recorded Moving Image,* but after his death, the entire Dance Collection was named for him—a move Oswald protests, although she reveres Robbins.†

Not only did the library purchase films of existing works, such as the many copies of Asian films that Oswald acquired in the course of her travels, but also the Dance Collection actively filmed teachers, dancers, and works to ensure that artistic and cultural legacies would not disappear.§ In the case of American professional companies, such filming presented delicate problems, particularly for the musicians’ union, which was wary that others might use their work for financial gain when the musicians were not paid royalties, a situation they had encountered before (p. 72). Oswald, a musician herself, worked sympathetically to meet the musicians’ concerns. When filming the NYCB repertory, Oswald had support from company administrators, including Kirstein and Betty Cage. Other companies, such as the Joffrey Ballet, proved equally cooperative. For these archival records, dancers performed in rehearsal clothes and films were never

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†Oswald fought against naming the Dance Collection for any individual person because she felt such a move would cause any dancer who wanted to donate material to feel that it was someone else’s collection (p. 29). The renaming occurred after Oswald’s retirement.

‡Oswald estimated, in “One Approach to the Development of a Dance Archive” (p. 83), that the Dance Collection had produced about 770 films, covering wide-ranging themes.
released commercially, but they provide an outstanding performance record of American dance companies in their prime. Moving image material covers works from all dance genres—ritual, social, children’s dance, and many other categories. It has been the most heavily used of all the Dance Collection holdings.

Preserving and Cataloging

Oswald’s enormous circle of acquaintances in the dance world and beyond has included scholars of music, dance, and various world cultures. Dancers and choreographers, critics and administrators, teachers and students, funders and dance lovers, writers and editors—all were part of her network and contributed to shaping the Dance Collection. Perhaps the individual most frequently named in the course of our interviews—and already mentioned in this article—was Lincoln Kirstein, co-founder of the School of American Ballet and NYCB, a dance writer, administrator, and influential arts thinker. Although Oswald experienced his famously difficult personality,21 she also came to appreciate deeply his shrewd intelligence and critical support: “If he thought you were doing a good job, he was on your side” (p. 26). While the dance archive that Kirstein had begun at the Museum of Modern Art had not flourished there, that effort eventually contributed important material to the NYPL Dance Collection. Perhaps Kirstein’s disappointing experience at MoMA made him initially skeptical of Oswald’s plans for the Dance Collection, but in due time he was so impressed with the library’s success that, “sometimes for months at a time, he would come in every day just to see who was working, doing research in the reading room” (p. 57). He had been a leader in establishing dance as a field of scholarly endeavor with his book, *Dance, a Short History of Classic Theatrical Dancing*,22 and his founding in 1942 of the periodical, *Dance Index*. As the Dance Collection acquired more rare and fragile items—books, prints, clippings, photographs, and so on—Oswald became concerned about preservation. It was Kirstein who gave the funding for a small conservation laboratory to address Oswald’s concern (p. 37). He regularly donated stock from his family’s company, Filene’s Department Store, to the Dance Collection for the purpose of maintaining the laboratory, the first in the dance field and the first at NYPL.
Kirstein also proved a supporter in another major initiative: developing what Oswald refers to as the “Dance Book Catalog” or the “ABC” (Automated Book Catalog) but which is more formally titled *Dictionary Catalog of the Dance Collection*. Although she cannot prove it, and he never admitted it, Oswald is certain that Kirstein spoke with officials at important foundations, among these the Ford Foundation’s W. McNeil Lowry, to garner funding amounting to millions of dollars for work toward this landmark catalog. Ford Foundation support for the project began in 1965 and continued as the work proceeded for ten years leading to the catalog’s publication. Funding for special Dance Collection catalogs had earlier been given by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Oswald considers the creation of the *Dictionary Catalog* to be one of her greatest contributions to the fields of dance and library science, since performing arts cataloging was in its infancy when she began work on the project. Because the Dance Collection was relatively small for an arts collection, the NYPL administration felt it was a good laboratory for experimenting with computer technology and with categories, headings, and procedures. Working in a virgin field—dance cataloging—with two computer assistants, Oswald dug into the work. She approached the Library of Congress for guidance, but found little interest there in her project. Her plan necessitated creation of a broad set of subject headings for the multiplicity of dance and the subdivisions under which dance material could be properly arranged: “I decided that what I would have to do was look at every book . . . in our collection, at the chapter and section headings and the index, where the load of information was found, and at the way that information was arranged and subdivided. After a while, I began to get a sense of it all, of the richness and variety of dance subjects” (pp. 19–20). To bring the dance headings into conformity with library practice, she explored other large subject headings, like furniture and visual art, to match formatting and categorization. “I spent six months on it. The library gave me a leave of absence to do these headings and I finally came up with 46,000 subject headings for

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*NYPL uses its own classmarks and subject headings, distinct from the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal systems. Since the Dance Collection is specialized, the precision of its subject listings is considerably greater than that afforded by systems created for general libraries.*
dance that were indeed the framework or structure for our catalog.

Oswald’s goal was to create an integrated catalog in which all material, of whatever sort (text, image, music, film, etc.), would be brought under each subject heading. She explained that “in the Dance Collection, we used dance as a mosaic. ... We wanted to have the pictures, the prints, reviews, the program, all the books and oral tapes, and everything that is relative to that production, or that person” (p. 89). Organizing and interconnecting all of this material was a monumental task. Because of the wide range covered by the collection, Oswald had to distinguish different kinds of dances from one another: “To show that they were a folk or a social dance, I put in parentheses the word ‘dance’ after it. That meant that the reference listed had information on a particular folk or social dance. For the title of a ballet or a modern dance work, I put the name of the choreographer after the title of the work. That allowed us to organize choreographic works by choreographers under the title” (p. 20). All versions of Petipa’s Swan Lake fell under ‘Swan Lake (Petipa),’ and were listed with the work’s films, books, music, reviews, photographs, and librettos. Computer cataloging was in its early stages and Oswald investigated all options then in process, from a library in Boca Raton, Florida, to IBM in New York. She developed a coding system to identify elements in each type of reference in the Dance Collection. With funding first from Ford and later from the Rockefeller Foundation, Oswald and a creative group of systems analysts and project assistants (first, Barbara Palfy and, later, Dorothy Lourdou) completed the huge job, only to discover, in proofreading, a small glitch: “Ruth St. Denis was left out [of the main catalog]; I couldn’t believe it. It was high tragedy; she would have loved it! A prank on us, perhaps?” (p. 22).

Oswald’s system for the Dictionary Catalog was groundbreaking: “If you have at hand twenty-five lithographs of Marie Taglioni—if you put them under the name of the lithographer, which you would, if you were in an art catalog—then every time a reader wanted the Taglioni material, one would have to go through twenty-five different portfolios to bring everything on Taglioni to that reader” (p. 23). Instead, Oswald cataloged all such prints under the dancer’s name, “Taglioni.” She spoke at meetings of the Special Libraries Association to introduce the field to “the
special needs of dance. . . . I remember one cataloger who said, ‘Gegi, you can’t do this. This is against library science—treason!’ But we had to.” Oswald’s innovation—thinking of the material from the standpoint of its subject matter—is a practice now standard in the library field.

The Dance Book Catalog was the first such publication in the United States converted into a computer database. It quickly entered the reference rooms of public and university libraries around the world, making the service reach of the Dance Collection as international as is the material it holds. When asked if other dance libraries have adopted the method developed by Oswald and her assistants, she replied, “Oh, yes. Not only that—this is the joyous thing—I learned one day that the director of the Library of Congress was sending a committee to look at our catalog. . . . The senior committee member came up to me and said that we had created a benchmark in the world of library science. We had successfully invaded the upper reaches of library science” (p. 23).

Exhibitions and the Committee for the Dance Collection

The Dance Collection itself was a pioneering effort; the Dictionary Catalog was a further landmark. Yet another of Oswald’s major achievements was the series of exhibitions presented by the library drawing on material she had acquired for the Dance Collection. The list is extensive and the kinds of material covered, as well as the geographic and temporal range, breathtaking.24 Oswald’s work on the Asian collection resulted, in 1977, in an exhibition of rare and unusual manuscripts (p. 10), while the visit of the Royal Ballet (1949) was honored by an exhibition of British ballet design (p. 58). The opening of the exhibition Stravinsky and the Dance (1966) was graced by the presence of the composer and his wife (p. 35).

A strong advocate of dance notation and collector of notated dance scores, Oswald arranged exhibitions on Labanotation and other forms of dance writing (1952, 1960). The Diaghilev period was beautifully represented by a show featuring the collection of Boris Kochno, the impresario’s secretary (p. 81). Some exhibitions were on themes from the distant past, such as French Court and Opera Ballet (1948) or The Jewish Dancing Master
and Theatrical Society (1986), while others were current, including The New York City Ballet (1959) and Avant-Garde Dance (1968). Exhibitions focused on significant figures of modern dance, including Shawn (1950), Horst (1984), Graham (1984), and Mary Wigman (1986), and honored renowned ballet artists such as Elssler (1951), Pavlova (1956), Marius Petipa (1958), Galina Ulanova (1962), Salvatore Viganò (1984), and Balanchine (1985).

Exhibitions not only showcased acquisitions, but also served as fundraisers, many sponsored by the Committee for the Dance Collection, which Oswald and others often referred to as the “Dance Committee.”25 The NYPL Research Libraries, as public-private institutions, were funded by foundations created by philanthropists John Jacob Astor, James Lenox, and Samuel J. Tilden at the turn of the twentieth century, and they are largely dependent on ongoing private donations and grants (pp. 26–27). Oswald proved an excellent fundraiser, winning grants from such private foundations as Ford, Gould, Mellon, Pew, and Rockefeller, and from public sources such as the National Endowment for the Arts and New York State Council on the Arts. Yet funding needs were a constant concern. While working under Smith, Oswald had told him of her shortage of staff to process the material the collection had received on modern dance. A man of impressive experience and acquaintance, Smith helped Oswald to cultivate the dance interests of individuals influential in cultural circles, leading to the founding in 1957 of the prestigious and unusual Committee for the Dance Collection. Smith started with two cultural leaders, Marjorie Graff and Elizabeth Houghton, whom he invited to lunch at the Harvard Club. These passionate lovers of dance “started this committee” (p. 95), and went on to organize fundraising events, contribute money, become informed about acquisitions, and work actively to procure important donations or purchases. In addition to Graff and Houghton, the Dance Committee came to include Anne Bass, Randall Bourscheidt, Kirstein, William S. Lieberman, McCray, Terry, Pabst, Shawn, Jean

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*As part of its mission to bring dance and dance research out of the Dance Collection itself, NYPL published books or monographs in the 1960s and thereafter on dance themes ranging from Isadora Duncan to early American ballet; authors included Selma Jeanne Cohen, Irma Duncan, Marian Eames, Lillian Moore, and Christena Schlundt (Treem, “Descriptive Study,” 76–77).
Sulzberger, Toscanini, Helen Wright, and other well-placed individuals, eventually numbering in the range of ten to twenty members at a time.

The Dance Committee helped to organize benefits, public events (such as film showings or conversations with noted dance artists), exhibitions, and receptions, which publicized the collection and also secured money for such important acquisitions as the Nijinsky diaries (p. 36) and some of the Duncan collection (p. 93). Oswald called the Dance Committee members “true dance lovers. They went to the performances. They were on committees of other cultural organizations, they were very serious. They loved knowing what we were doing because they could actually visit the archive, see the conservator at work or the film being cataloged, right away” (pp. 35–36). Oswald kept members well informed of the results of their efforts, and respected their passion for dance. This kind of support was another pioneering effort of the Dance Collection; not long after establishment of the Committee for the Dance Collection, a broader, more affordable category, Friends of the Dance Collection, was created for those who wished to offer support on a smaller scale. Over time, following the Dance Committee’s model, NYPL established a Friends of the Library category for other collections (p. 38).

The Dance Committee proved crucial in the early 1970s, when the entire NYPL system experienced a financial crisis so severe that the research libraries, including the Dance Collection, nearly closed their doors. The Dance Committee rallied to organize a Gala Dance Benefit in January 1972 that brought together a wide range of artists: “This was the first time that New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre, Fonteyn—all these dancers—had ever danced on the same stage [together]. Merce Cunningham came and danced; Erick Hawkins came and danced. It was amazing, all of them on the same program, and it was due to their wanting the Dance Collection to survive” (p. 94). Others, including critic Walter Terry and Broadway choreographer Donald Saddler, also supported the event. As Oswald remarked, “It’s hard to believe. For example, Gelsey Kirkland, just beginning her career, opened the program with a pas de deux and when she came on stage, her leg trembled; it was the first time she had had that kind of exposure. And the committee found a man who was a corporate executive stationed in Atlanta, where Fonteyn was
touring. The committee got him to fly her up for that performance.” Fonteyn stated that she came to support the collection she had first seen in 1949 at the Royal Ballet’s reception there.

Teacher and Mentor

During this productive if sometimes difficult period, Oswald also taught dance history at New York University’s graduate program in dance education, an experience she found enormously stimulating.27 Who could better bring the materials of dance history to students than the curator of one of the world’s greatest dance collections? Similarly, Oswald was ideally suited to fill another role from 1977 to 1987—associate editor of NYPL’s research quarterly, Research in the Humanities, which she regards as “one of the biggest honors” of her career (p. 92). As if her plate were not sufficiently full, she wrote regularly throughout her NYPL career for newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals.

Oswald also mentored many aspiring dance scholars from her desk at the Dance Collection, where she kept abreast of the graduate theses, choreographic projects, and scholarly books underway as artists, students, and researchers worked with library material (p. 80). Lillian Moore, a pioneer in the field of dance history research, has been mentioned several times in this essay; she “was there every day”* (p. 58) and Oswald became deeply interested in her research. For example, when Moore was investigating the “Duport mystery,” she and Oswald often went together to the Woolworth’s across the street from the main library at 42nd Street: “We went over there every day and we had tea and a piece of cake and spent what must have been a hundred hours discussing Louis Duport, trying to figure out where he was in every period of his life, if he had gone back to Europe, whether there were two dancers of the same name,” and other questions (p. 78). Moore’s

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*NYPL’s online finding aid has a snapshot biography of Lillian Moore (1911–67), a professional dancer who, upon retirement from the stage, became a major dance researcher. Among her many publications are Artists of the Dance (1938); “Ballet,” in the Encyclopaedia Britannica; Bournonville and Ballet Technique with Erik Bruhn (1961); Bournonville’s London Spring (1965); The Duport Mystery (Dance Perspectives, no. 1, 1960); and Images of the Dance: Historical Treasures of the Dance Collection, 1581–1861 (1965). See http://www.nypl.org/ead/742 (accessed June 10, 2011).
enormous treasure of research notes and findings are now available at the Dance Collection. Another renowned dance historian, Ivor Guest, was a frequent visitor in his early trips to New York (p. 58), mining the Dance Collection (and other archives) to gather information for his books on the Romantic ballet in England and France.* Another important figure in this period when dance history research was still nascent—Marian Hannah Winter†—was often at the Dance Collection and occasionally, during her research travels, scouted material that Oswald might wish to acquire (pp. 58, 78). Marian Eames worked closely with Kirstein in editing Dance Index, an important journal of dance history and analysis, and, with Oswald, on exhibitions and collections at NYPL. Oswald also recalled “a scholar in Georgia named Gladys Lasky‡ who did good work and now is completely forgotten” (p. 58). This was a period when there was just a handful of dance scholars. When they could afford to do research in Europe, they would copy out by hand reams of information, which they shared with one another. They formed a close-knit, if sometimes argumentative, community. In the 1970s, a NYPL survey yielded the information that “98 percent of the books published in dance had the Dance Collection as a primary source” (p. 49)—an impressive record.

Oswald warmly acknowledges the support she received from staff, dancers, and the community at large in the work of building the Dance Collection: “This collection was not built by me. It was built by the field. And I was here. As a vigorous force, but more a guiding force.”28 That guidance shaped the material collected, its cataloging and public access, and the work of scholars


†Marian Hannah Winter published Le Théâtre du Merveilleux (1962), The Pre-Romantic Ballet (1975), and articles on ballerina Augusta Maywood, Juba and American minstrelsy, and other themes in early American dancing and mime.

‡According to Harvard’s Houghton Library, Lasky came to the United States from London in 1954, after extensive ballet training throughout Europe. She taught in Macon, Georgia, and founded the Macon Ballet Guild. She was elected a member of the Royal Academy of Ballet and served on the Georgia Arts Commission,” http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~hou01572 (accessed December 22, 2010). Several of Lasky’s articles were published in Ballet Today and The Dancing Times (London).
in the field. At the same time, as Oswald hired specialists and assistants, she mentored and trained many in the library field who went on to make important contributions. Anne Wilson Wangh, founder of the Dance Library of Israel, was among those whose objectives Oswald supported (pp. 19, 80–81). Others who worked with Oswald before moving to various library positions include Ruth Carr, who became Chief of the United States History, Local History and Genealogy Division at NYPL, and Nancy Shawcross, who became Curator of Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Following the example of the Dance Collection, dozens of other libraries began to collect and organize dance material, each enormously indebted to Oswald’s pioneering work.

While acknowledging that the “basic function” of any archive is to provide a convenient repository for “retrieving sought-for material,” Oswald has also written that “archives of records, including verbal and iconographic material, cannot help but extend the range and depth of contemporary understanding and practice.” The Dance Collection has had a profound impact on the worlds of dance, dance research, and cultural awareness through collecting, cataloging, and curating; publicizing, fundraising, and directing—skills and achievements that Oswald brought forward in the course of her career. Yet, when asked about factors or challenges that shaped or altered her vision for the Dance Collection over time, she commented, “It’s funny that you say ‘vision’ and ‘challenges.’ I came to work every day, and there was so much to do and I knew what I wanted to do. The ideas were just ‘there’ and that was the vision . . . . I knew we had to collect original designs as well as photographs, make oral tape interviews and films. I knew we had to do these various kinds of things” (pp. 78–79). Oswald saw herself as a practical doer, rather than as a visionary: “we knew what we had to do, and we just threw ourselves into it. And if there was anything that was [the cause of] our success it’s the fact that I always put a great deal of effort into figuring out what was really needed, what value it had, and when I understood the material or the problem in a fundamental way, I talked to people. We never went to anyone for money or to any foundation, unless we had thoroughly thought through what we were asking for.” This practicality and planning underlay the shaping of this remarkable dance collection.
After Retirement

Oswald was able to relinquish, with grace, the leadership of the phenomenal collection she had built and guided. Although she was asked to chair the committee to choose her successor, she refused and instead “suggested a committee to be created from the dance world.” Once Madeleine Nichols was in place as curator, in 1988, Oswald “didn’t go back for a year because I wanted Madeleine to just do it all. I knew she could” (p. 44). Clearly, Oswald’s presence at the library, even after retirement, would be a powerful force for a new chief to face, so she wisely gave plenty of elbow room to her successor. Yet it was not only for Nichols’s sake that Oswald kept her distance: “I remember the first time I went back, I had a real physical response, I had heart palpitations—to walk into that room again was quite moving to me . . . . I think I needed to stay away. I wanted to, because everybody told me that the Dance Collection was my life and I found that it wasn’t; I had a wonderful family and I knew that. I needed to stay away” (p. 100).

She remained available for phone calls or consultations initiated by library staff or by the Dance Committee, since her depth of knowledge of the collection was unmatched, but she relinquished any sense of control. Over time, changes were made, such as creating a combined reading room for the three performing arts research collections: “It was difficult to go back when the changes were made that are there now, because I had fought strenuously in the early plans for the building in 1964 against having common reading rooms” (p. 101). Oswald had wished to retain “the individual nature of the collections,” despite early pressures toward “a more generalized approach.” She feared the possibility of losing the expertise of specialized dance librarians handling Dance Collection material. In the recent reorganization such dance specialists are still available, fortunately, since each collection has its own information desk and staff.

After her retirement, devoting time to her family was a priority, but Oswald did not leave the dance world bereft of her knowledge and energy. She became deeply involved in another wide-ranging venture to support dance: the World Dance Alliance (WDA). Oswald involved the network of dance leaders she had developed, in her decades of Dance Collection work, to help create an umbrella organization that would bring together dancers
from every field, nation, and interest group to share information, concerns, experience, and contacts. She worked closely with Carl Wolz,* to form this new service organization, the seed for which was germinated at a joint conference of the American Dance Guild and the Congress on Research in Dance at the University of Hawaii in 1978.31 The vision was, again, global and all-embracing, from theater dance to folk forms, from ballroom to books. “I’ve always felt that there was a need for a dance organization that would bring together the different groups, the different kinds of dance. It upset me that dance people in the erudite performing areas of dance really didn’t appreciate the Dance Masters of America and the work they do, the conference that they have had every year for dance teachers. . . . I was concerned that there was no interchange between the various groups” (p. 101).

From 1989 to 1994, Oswald served as coordinator and first president of the WDA Americas Center. In June of 1993 the first General Assembly of American nations met at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center, with attendees from the United Nations along with 150 dance representatives including teachers, scholars, administrators, dancers of all kinds, and government officials from thirteen nations in South and Central America and the Caribbean, fifteen states in the United States, and four Canadian provinces.32 Oswald recalled the “fantastic success” of the gathering (p. 102), which took three years to plan. The WDA’s goal was to become a member organization of UNESCO, a non-governmental organization. The Americas Center continues its worldwide dance outreach and gatherings and participates in WDA Global Assemblies as well.33

Oswald has continued to serve the dance field in the 1990s and 2000s, sitting on the editorial boards of the Göttingen Encyclopaedia Cinematographica and Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts, and on boards for several dance and library associations. After retirement from the Dance Collection, she remained active at conferences, presenting papers and moderating

*Carl Wolz, a Juilliard-trained dancer, founded the Dance Department at the University of Hawaii, was dean of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, and taught at Japan’s Women’s College of Physical Education and at Washington University in St. Louis. He led the World Dance Alliance Asia-Pacific Center for several years. See http://www.wda-ap.org/wda-ap/wda/Carl%20Wolz.htm (accessed December 21, 2010).
panels for such organizations as the International Theatre Institute (Essen, 1988), International Festival of Dance Academies (Hong Kong, 1989 and 1990), Society of Dance History Scholars (1991, 1992, 1994), Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisbon, 1992), and others. Throughout her career, and continuing into her retirement, Oswald’s lively range of interests, depth of knowledge, network of acquaintances, and engaging personality have made her a sought-after and esteemed participant at gatherings large and small, informal and official.

From the vantage point of a long, productive retirement, Oswald looks back on her life’s work with both satisfaction and concern. The Dance Collection is a rich and renowned resource used by dancers and scholars from the world over, acknowledged as “the most impressive of all” dance research facilities anywhere. Shortly after her retirement, Oswald commented that the creation and proliferation of archives like the Dance Collection would allow us to “begin to ask the great questions: How does dance fit into society, and where does society fit into dance?” To help dancers and researchers to both ask and answer such questions, she had undertaken decades of a “vast program of collection” in order “to pierce the myth of illiteracy that has surrounded dance and provide a continuing history for this elusive art.” Where do we stand now in meeting this goal?

While the Dance Collection has been much used by dancers, choreographers, and researchers, Oswald commented, “One of the great disappointments to me is that we struggled so hard to have in-depth research materials like the kind that could be found in great European libraries, but I don’t know whether they are being used as they might be” (p. 45), since dance history books are not being widely published. Oswald cites several glaring lacunae: “there is no biography of the great Taglioni ... There is no history of the Taglioni family, which is a spectacular story. We have a tremendous archive in microfilm of Gasparo Angiolini, a celebrated choreographer who was the Balanchine of his day, all of his works ... And nobody seems to want to do it.”

Because the dance research field was nascent when Oswald began her work, she directly nurtured and encouraged dance scholars. “We always talked about wanting to have a great historical library, but now we are not using it as much as we might” (p. 45). A few themes—gender-related analyses, Balanchine—seem to have
attracted publication interest, but many important figures, periods, and issues in dance history have been little studied. While recognizing that the dance field “refreshes, renews, and strengthens itself” (p. 95), Oswald is dismayed that historical material—books, prints, letters, clippings, programs, and so on—are much less used than films, which constitute 80 percent of requests submitted at the Dance Collection. Oswald reflects that, early in her career, Bournonville was little known to the dance world, but owing to the work of several fine dance scholars, “Bournonville has risen out of the ashes and . . . we now know all about him” (p. 96). Other figures, also important and influential, “are just waiting” to be brought to light as he was. An encouraging development in the dance research world is the small but vibrant movement in early dance reconstruction, since many dancers who do this work are also deeply knowledgeable about the dances’ contexts. Yet few are also widely published scholars.

Oswald wondered if the publishing houses are partly responsible for this discouraging picture: “One of the most revealing statistics I learned some years ago was that there are more books published in one week on film [than] there are on dance in a whole year” (p. 45). Is there too little of any worth proposed to the publishers? Does a book subject have to be current, trendy, or popular to be published? Are people unwilling to spend years in research with little hope of achieving publication? Another issue she identified “is that many people don’t have languages needed for much historical research; that’s a great problem” (p. 97).

On a bright note, Oswald is pleased with the greater seriousness given to documentation of their work by contemporary dancers and companies. “I think it’s so much better than when we started” (p. 99). Similarly, other libraries—whether devoted exclusively to dance or incorporating dance into broader collections—are now able, largely owing to the groundbreaking work of Oswald at the library, to collect and catalog material that documents dance, often with a focus on dance types, choreographers, companies, or productions particular to the location of the library.

From documenting today’s cutting-edge dance troupes to restoring the reputations of history’s dancing masters, and from the most classical choreography to purely recreational dance forms, the Dance Collection reflects the depth and range of
Oswald’s inquiring mind and intrepid collecting. Oswald’s vigor, curiosity, drive, and intelligence helped to shape this outstanding collection of dance research material. A remarkable legacy by a remarkable woman!

I offer my deepest gratitude to Genevieve Oswald for her generosity in these interviews and in reading versions of the essay, to which she offered comments and corrections. Many thanks also to Barbara Palfy for important information and editing.

Notes


20. Oswald, “One Approach,” 80. In this essay, Oswald estimated that 97 per cent of the Dance Collection’s holdings are nonprint materials.
21. See Duberman, The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein, for ample evidence of this point.
24. Some information on exhibitions is from “Genevieve Oswald: Biography (Selected).”


33. For the Americas Center, see http://www.wda-americas.net/; for the Asia-Pacific Center, see http://www.wda-ap.org/wda-ap/wda-ap.htm; and for Europe, see http://www.wda-europe.net/engchisiamo (all sites accessed December 21, 2010).

