

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Katherine Dunham

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Dunham, Katherine
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 17, 2000 and February 11, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2000 and 2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:16:56).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Choreographer, dancer, and dance instructor Katherine Dunham (1909 - 2006 ) is credited with introducing international audiences to African aesthetics and establishing African dance as a true art form. Called the “Matriarch of Black Dance,” her groundbreaking repertoire combined innovative interpretations of Caribbean dances, traditional ballet, African rituals and African American rhythms to create the Dunham Technique, which she performed with her dance troupe in venues around the world. Dunham was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 17, 2000 and February 11, 2001, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2000_020
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Legendary dancer, choreographer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham was born June 22, 1909, to an African American father and French-Canadian mother who died when she was young. At an early age, Dunham became interested in dance. However, she did not seriously pursue a career in the profession until she was a student at the University of Chicago.

During her studies, Dunham attended a lecture on anthropology, where she was introduced to the concept of dance as a cultural symbol. Intrigued by this theory, Dunham began to study African roots of dance and, in 1935, she traveled to the Caribbean for field research. Dunham was exposed to sacred ritual dances performed by people on the islands of Haiti and Jamaica. She returned to the United States in 1936 informed by new methods of movement and expression, which she incorporated into techniques that transformed the world of dance.

In 1940, she formed the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, which became the premier facility for training dancers. Alumnae include Eartha Kitt, Marlon Brando and Julie Belafonte. Dunham is credited with introducing international audiences to African aesthetics and establishing African dance as a true art form. Called the “Matriarch of Black Dance,” her groundbreaking repertoire combined innovative interpretations of Caribbean dances, traditional ballet, African rituals and African American rhythms to create the Dunham Technique, which she performed with her dance troupe in venues around the world. Her many original works include L’ag’ya, Shango and Bal Negre. She also choreographed and appeared in Broadway musicals, operas and the film Cabin in the Sky. The Dunham troupe toured for two decades, stirring audiences around the globe with their dynamic and highly theatrical performances. These experiences provided ample material for the numerous books, articles and

short stories Dunham authored.

Dunham accepted a position at Southern Illinois University in East St. Louis in the 1960s. During her tenure, she secured funding for the Performing Arts Training Center, where she introduced a program designed to channel the energy of the community's youth away from gangs and into dance. Dunham was always a formidable advocate for racial equality, boycotting segregated venues in the United States and using her performances to highlight discrimination. She made national headlines by staging a hunger strike to protest the U.S. government's repatriation policy for Haitian immigrants.

Throughout her distinguished career, Dunham earned numerous honorary doctorates, awards and honors. She was the recipient of a Kennedy Center Honors Award, the Plaque d'Honneur Haitian-American Chamber of Commerce Award, and a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Dunham passed away on Sunday, May 21, 2006 at the age of 96.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Katherine Dunham was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on December 17, 2000 and February 11, 2001, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Choreographer, dancer, and dance instructor Katherine Dunham (1909 - 2006 ) is credited with introducing international audiences to African aesthetics and establishing African dance as a true art form. Called the "Matriarch of Black Dance," her groundbreaking repertoire combined innovative interpretations of Caribbean dances, traditional ballet, African rituals and African American rhythms to create the Dunham Technique, which she performed with her dance troupe in venues around the world.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Dunham, Katherine

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Dunham, Katherine--Interviews

African American dance teachers--Interviews.

African American dancers--Interviews.

African American choreographers--Interviews.

**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Katherine Dunham Company

Katherine Dunham Company

Katherine Dunham Company

**Occupations:**

Dancer

Choreographer

Dance Instructor

**HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

**Administrative Information**

**Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

## Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, December 17, 2000 and February 11, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:24 ?

Pioneer choreographer Katherine Dunham shares memories of her family in this interview, including her parents, her brother, her grandmother and her aunt. She also discusses her parents' age difference and interracial marriage. She discusses moving as a young child from Glen Ellyn to Chicago, Illinois. Finally, she describes her own personality

African American families--Illinois.

Racially mixed people.

Childhood and youth--Illinois--Chicago.

Brothers and sisters.

African American fathers.

African American mothers.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Pioneer Choreographer Katherine Dunham discusses her brother and his influences on her. She talks about her interests in both anthropology and dance and how her travels to the Caribbean in 1935 allowed her to merge the two. She talks about why she formed her own dance company and, subsequently, her own dance technique. Dunham also mentions her relocation to New York in 1939, her first marriage, and why she accepts the Voodoo religion.

Brothers and sisters.

Anthropology.  
Choreography and dance.  
Travel--Caribbean.  
Voodooism.  
New York (N.Y.).

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:25  
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Pioneer choreographer Katherine Dunham shares memories of her experiences and travels with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company. She also describes the Katherine Dunham Dance Technique. Additionally, she also talks about her favorite works and the importance of dance. Dunham discusses her second marriage and the adoption of her daughter. She discusses her work in Haiti and the hopes that she has for the future of the country. Finally, she briefly discusses her mentor, her sex appeal, and her move to East St. Louis, Illinois.

Katherine Dunham Company.  
Choreography and dance.  
Haiti--Social conditions.  
Mentoring.  
East Saint Louis (Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:57  
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Pioneer choreographer Katherine Dunham discusses her life's work and the things that she hopes to continue doing. She describes the value of art for all people and her hopes for African Americans. Finally, she discusses her legacy and shares a multitude of personal photographs

Choreography and dance.  
Art and society.  
Photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_002\_005, TRT: 0:31:12  
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This is an interview with Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, conducted on 2/11/2001. It was slated like a separate interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_002\_006, TRT: 0:31:11  
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This is an interview with Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, conducted on 2/11/2001. It was slated like a separate interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_002\_007, TRT: 0:12:06  
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This is an interview with Marie-Christine Dunham Pratt, conducted on 2/11/2001. It was slated like a separate interview.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_002\_008, TRT: 0:31:09  
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This is an interview with Madeline Preston, conducted on February 11, 2001. Prescott was a dancer in the Katherine Dunham Company from 1956 to 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section A2000\_020\_002\_009, TRT: 0:31:13  
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This is an interview with Madeline Preston, conducted on February 11, 2001. Prescott was a dancer in the Katherine Dunham Company from 1956 to 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Katherine Dunham, Section  
A2000\_020\_Dunham\_Katherine\_06\_MED\_001, TRT: 0:04:55

Katherine Dunham