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***Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance***  
**Opens November 2 at the Missouri History Museum**

ST. LOUIS, September 19, 2008—Who is Katherine Dunham? The question elicits myriad responses. *Dancer, choreographer and teacher* are the most common answers. Others say *activist and anthropologist, artist and author*. Some hail her as a *scholar and star of stage and screen*. Still others say *pioneer, hero and warrior*. One will even hear Dunham described as a *Voodoo priestess*. Oprah Winfrey, unarguably the most influential woman in American media today, declared Dunham a *legend*. Dance historians salute her as the *Queen Mother of Black Dance*. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the first democratically elected president of Haiti, proclaimed her the *Spiritual Mother of Haiti*. To her only child, Dunham is simply *mother*. The truth is, Katherine Dunham is all the above and much more. On the eve of the centennial of her birth, a major museum exhibition, ***Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance***, will fully embrace and explore the many facets of the Renaissance woman known as “La Grande Katherine.”

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Organized by the **Missouri History Museum** in St. Louis, ***Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance*** sweeps aside the boundaries between theatre and museum as the visitor explores Dunham's contributions to dance and anthropology; her career that spanned decades and continents; her global activism and her enduring legacy. ***Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance*** debuts **November 2, 2008**, and runs through **November 8, 2009**.

***Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance*** is sponsored by Mary Strauss; Ken and Nancy Kranzberg; and the E. Reuben and Gladys Flora Grant Charitable Trust. Promotional support is provided by The St. Louis American.

**Katherine Dunham Biography:**

Dunham is considered one of the great dance pioneers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. She was also an educator, author and civil rights activist. Educated and trained as both an anthropologist and ballerina, Dunham's greatest contribution was introducing African and Caribbean influences to the European-dominated dance world. Today, the Dunham technique—in which the dancer incorporates traditional African dance with techniques of classical ballet and modern dance—is a part of the standard training for modern dancers. Dunham established America's first self-supporting, all-black modern dance troupe, which toured internationally from the 1940s to the '60s. During her career, she choreographed more than 90 individual dances. In the late 1960s, Dunham returned to Illinois, specifically East St. Louis, IL—which was at the time one of America's most economically challenged and crime-plagued cities. In East St. Louis, she taught dance and culture in hopes of bringing something meaningful and constructive to the youth

of East St. Louis. Although Dunham died on May 21, 2006, just weeks before her 97<sup>th</sup> birthday, her contributions to dance, civil rights and the St. Louis region remain.

**The Exhibition:**

A stunning portrait of Dunham from 1943 greets visitors upon their entrance to *Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance*. The painting by Werner Philipp captures Dunham in a reflective, quiet moment. This is one of the few times when the visitor will see Dunham at rest. Other images in the exhibition show Dunham in constant motion as she dances, teaches and battles injustice.

The exhibition is divided into **four** main categories. A **biography** section introduces the visitor to the Illinois-born girl who would grow up to be an international dance star. The other three sections each represent the geo-cultural influences from which Dunham drew inspiration: **Afro-Caribbean**, **African** and **American**. Enlarged photographs, colorful costumes, props and video vividly bring to life dance performances that were inspired by each of the three cultures. Among these performances are “Haitian Roadside,” which featured native songs such as "Chocounne," sung by Dunham herself; “Afrique,” which Dunham dedicated to the then newly-freed country of Ghana; and Scott Joplin’s opera “Treemonisha,” which received its long-overdue debut when Dunham choreographed it in the 1970s.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the recreation of the stage for “Rites de Passage,” an epic dance production, which chronicles the journey of life: Puberty, Fertility, Death and Women’s Mysteries. The costumes and props are displayed against an intricate backdrop that is both a scrim and opaque drop. Measuring 36 feet wide and 22 feet high, the “Rites de Passage” backdrop vividly evokes a

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jungle scene due to its lush, sculptural combination of sewn and appliquéd elements. It is an extraordinary example of the work of theatrical designer John Pratt, Dunham's husband of 45 years.

Other highlights of the exhibition include personal items belonging to Dunham: masks used in ceremonies and sacred rituals from around the globe; scrapbooks chronicling Dunham's career, global travels and significant events in world of dance; sequined Haitian Vodun (Voodoo) flags; a Haitian "Tree of Life" sculpture fashioned from a flattened steel oil container; artwork from Dunham's personal collection; dance programs; photographs; documents and more. Excerpts from oral history interviews offer an insider's perspective on what it was like to dance and work alongside Dunham.

In honor of Dunham's dedication to worldwide social justice issues, the exhibition features "Get Involved Kiosks" with online information about organizations that are currently addressing issues for which Dunham herself crusaded, including civil rights, healthcare and parity within the arts. Visitors are encouraged to explore ways in which to get involved with organizations. By doing so, they can keep alive Dunham's dreams of a just and safe world.

### **The Katherine Dunham Collection**

Dunham was an international icon, and any number of cultural institutions could have mounted an exhibition celebrating her life. Yet, it is fitting that the **Missouri History Museum** is doing so. Dunham resided in East St. Louis from the late 1960s through 2000. Her continuing influence on the area is profound, including her Performing Arts Training Center, the Dunham Dynamic Museum and the countless men and women she inspired with her teachings.

Dunham donated a substantial portion of her personal and professional items to the **Missouri History Museum** in 1991. This collection made the **Missouri History**

**Museum** one of only three significant repositories of Dunham material. (The other two institutions with noteworthy Dunham collections are the Dunham Dynamic Museum in East St. Louis, IL and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.)

Dr. Robert R. Archibald, president of the Missouri History Museum, says, “It is my privilege to be able to claim a personal relationship with Katherine Dunham. She was a fascinating woman, with stories enough for several lifetimes. She had a true appreciation of both the past and the future and how we at the **Missouri History Museum** were concerned with the past and future of our community.”

**Public Programs:**

Throughout the run of the exhibition, the **Missouri History Museum** will offer a variety of Dunham-related programs for all ages. To celebrate the opening of *Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance*, the Denver-based Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble will perform “Katherine Dunham...She Lives!” on November 7, 8 and 9, 2008. Ticket prices for the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble are currently on sale. Tickets are \$40 for Missouri History Museum members; \$50 for the general public.

Visit the museum’s website ([www.mohistory.org](http://www.mohistory.org)) for up-to-date-information regarding additional Dunham-related programming.

**Admission:**

Admission to *Katherine Dunham: Beyond the Dance* is \$7 for adults; \$5 for seniors/students/groups; \$3 for children (ages 6-12). Children five years old and younger are free. Group reservations (minimum of 10 individuals) are available by calling 314-361-9017 or 800-916-8212. **Missouri History Museum** members receive complimentary admission to the exhibition based upon level of membership. The exhibition is **free** to the general public on Tuesdays.

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### **Hours and General Information:**

The **Missouri History Museum** is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Wednesday through Monday; Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the **Missouri History Museum** observes Summer Hours (Wednesday through Monday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Tuesday: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.). The museum is closed Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. For general museum information, call (314) 746-4599 or visit our interactive Web site at [www.mohistory.org](http://www.mohistory.org).

### **Location and Travel Information:**

The **Missouri History Museum** is located at Lindell and DeBaliviere in Forest Park, near the Forest Park-DeBaliviere MetroLink station. Visit [www.metrostlouis.org](http://www.metrostlouis.org) for public transportation information, or [www.getaroundstl.com](http://www.getaroundstl.com) for general travel information. Due to highway construction, the Missouri Department of Transportation offers Map My Trip, an online tool to assist travelers (<http://dist6.modot.mo.gov/mapmytrip>).

### **The Missouri History Museum:**

The **Missouri History Museum** has been active in the St. Louis community since 1866. Founding members established the organization “for the purpose of saving from oblivion the early history of the city and state.” The museum operates the **Missouri History Museum in Forest Park** and the **Library and Research Center** at 225 South Skinker Boulevard near the Washington University campus.

*For more information, visit [www.mohistory.org](http://www.mohistory.org) or call 314/746-4599.*

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