

DUNHAM, KATHERINE.
Katherine Dunham collection, 1949-1978

Emory University
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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Dunham, Katherine.
Title: Katherine Dunham collection, 1949-1978
Call Number: Manuscript Collection No. 1328
Extent: .25 linear feet (1 box)
Abstract: Collection of material relating to African American dancer Katherine Dunham primarily containing correspondence with art historian Bernard Berenson.
Language: Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

Restrictions on Access

Unrestricted access.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction

All requests subject to limitations noted in departmental policies on reproduction.

Related Materials in Other Repositories

[Katherine Dunham papers](#), Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University Carbondale; [Bernard and Mary Berenson papers](#), Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti-The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies

Source

Purchase, 2015

Citation

[after identification of item(s)], Katherine Dunham collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Processing

Processed by Sarah Quigley, April 2015.

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Collection Description

Biographical Note

Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) was an African American dancer, choreographer, author, educator, and activist. Born in Chicago, Illinois, she began dancing at a young age, opening a dance studio for African American children while still in high school. During college at the University of Chicago, she became interested in anthropology and received several grants to study native dance and cultures of the Caribbean. She left graduate school without completing a master's degree to focus on her dance career, which often combined these Caribbean dance techniques with those of classical ballet. From the early 1930s until her retirement in 1967, Dunham traveled the world with her dance company, often speaking publicly against segregation in the United States and elsewhere. Her 1950 ballet *Southland*, which dramatized a lynching in the American south, elicited criticism from the State Department who subsequently refused to support Dunham in any of her foreign tours. In 1945, she opened the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York City where she trained students including Eartha Kitt, James Dean, Gregory Peck, Sidney Poitier, Toni Cade Bambara, and many others. In 1964, Dunham settled in East St. Louis, Illinois, and served as artist-in-residence at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. Following her retirement, she continued to teach in East St. Louis and elsewhere and remained a vocal social activist until her death in 2006.

Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) was an American art historian and expert in Renaissance art, known particularly as a pioneer in the field of art attribution. He was born Bernhard Valvrojenski in Lithuania; his family immigrated to the United States when he was ten. He grew up in the Boston area and attended the Boston University College of Liberal Arts (1883-1884) and Harvard University (1884-1887). He wrote numerous texts on Renaissance art, and became a controversial figure for his role as advisor to American art collectors and dealers. He received commissions for his advice, often creating conflicts of interest which raised questions about the veracity of his authentications and the influence of his opinion on the price of works. Berenson lived much of his adult life near Florence, Italy, on his estate, Villa I Tatti. Upon his death in 1959, he willed the property to Harvard University and they established there the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists primarily of correspondence between Katherine Dunham and Bernard Berenson from 1950-1959. The letters were transcribed by Dunham with the intention of publishing them in a volume titled "Letters of Love from I Tatti," though the project never came to fruition. They reveal the intimate friendship between Dunham and Berenson and cover a broad range of topics. In their correspondence, Dunham and Berenson discuss their individual artistic and professional pursuits, including Dunham's attempts at painting and writing, performances of her ballet *Southland* and the ensuing controversy, as well as occasional problems with members of her dance company. They also write frequently of their health: Dunham's miscarriage in 1952, her serious back injury several years later, and Berenson's declining health as he aged. Many letters from Dunham to Berenson were written while she was on tour with her company and focus on her impressions of the people and cultures of countries she visited such as Haiti, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, China, Japan, and Argentina under the leadership of Juan Peron. Several of these letters specifically discuss issues of race, for instance commentary

on Australian aboriginal oppression and differences between Asian ethnicities. Other letters deal with race and politics in America, including references to the Emmett Till murder and descriptions of atomic bomb testing in Nevada, which Dunham witnessed on two separate visits to Las Vegas.

The collection also contains several photographs of Dunham and Berenson together at Villa I Tatti in 1949. There is also a copy of "Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings," edited by Vèvè A. Clark and Margaret B. Wilkerson, and one unattributed essay in French entitled "Le Vodou Au Peristyle de la Residence Leclerc Port-au-Prince, Haiti."

Arrangement Note

Arranged in alphabetical order.

Container List

Box	Folder	Content
1	1	Book dealer's introduction to the collection, no date
1	2	Clark, Vèvè A. and Margaret B. Wilkerson [editors], "Kaiso! Katherine Dunham: An Anthology of Writings," 1978
1	3	"Le Vodou Au Peristyle de la Residence Leclerc Port-au-Prince, Haiti," no date
1	4	Letters of Love: Memo to Phillip Bloom [New York City Ballet press agent] and book prospectus, 1963
1	5	Letters of Love: Volume I, letters from Bernard Berenson to Katherine Dunham, 1950-1959
1	6	Letters of Love: Volume II, letters from Katherine Dunham to Bernard Berenson, 1950-1958
1	7	Photographs of Dunham and Berenson at Villa I Tatti, Italy, 1949 [photographer: David Lees]
