DANCE AS NUMEN:
MAKING THE CASE FOR PARTICIPATORY MOVEMENT PROGRAMS IN TRADITIONAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Romans believed that when a deity acknowledged a place or an object, they imbued it with mysterious power, leaving behind a mystical presence. Romans called this magic residue a “numen,” literally a “nod of the head.” That nod from the gods forever marked the numinous object, providing a link between the sacred otherworld and the earthly realm – at least, until all those mortals aware of its importance forgot or died. “Numen” is a useful word, as it gives us language for the phenomenon surrounding so much of the material culture housed in museums. In their essay “Numinous Objects,” Rachel Maines and James Glynn describe artifacts’ ability to “concretize abstract memories.”¹ A numinous object, able “to absorb the significances of the world in which it lives, becomes a surviving witness of the past, almost spiritual in its ability to distill abstract events into concise and powerful narratives.”² The numen of history endows objects with a “special sociocultural magic,” conjuring awe and a feeling of connection to the “spirit” of a past era or person.³ When museums seek to give visitors a personal “encounter” with history, they strive to invoke this numinous power of associational value.

I have always been captivated by this sense of “meeting” history. As a young child, I felt that vague and delightful sense of magic when holding anything with the patina of “old.” Such numinous objects kindled my curiosity. Who else had held this talisman of the past? How did it

find its way from their hands to mine? I wanted to know everything, to search out the truth like an explorer into parts unknown. As I grew, this fascination turned into an academic focus, and now, as I pursue work in historical museums, a career. However, history was not the only arena in which I felt a strange kind of “magic” at play. I trained seriously in ballet for over a decade, spending hours in classes and rehearsals and performing everywhere from local retirement homes to the Kennedy Center. Little else matched the joy I felt when fully engaged in the movement. I encountered dance’s own kind of numen, marveling as my brain escaped from the world of thoughts and connected into a realm dictated by, and experienced via, the body. Now, I teach dance to students of all ages.

I offer this preface to explain why, during my internship at the National Museum of American History, a lecture sparked this research project. The speaker, Smithsonian Fellow Lesley Kadish, began: “Notice you are in a body. This body is in a space. And this space has a temperature, a texture, and a tone.” She shared her research on sensory learning in museums. She talked about museum visitors as having both minds and bodies to engage. Museums are intellectual, textual, and object based, but bodies are complex and learn on levels that are kinesthetic, multisensory and not always processed in the language centers of the brain. She argued for a need to bring forward our bodies’ complex way of learning and connect it to the intellectual, the textual, and the visual.  

Her research centered on scent as a means to tap into this bodily intelligence, but everything she shared resonated deeply with my experience of dance. Suddenly, I saw a connection where I’d never looked before. Dance in museums. Not as performance, but as a

“The body says what words cannot.”
- Martha Graham

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4 The description of Kadish’s research and lecture comes from two sources: my notes taken during the event and a related talk given at the Openlab Workshop Unconference on December 1, 2015. That lecture, titled “Sensory Learning in Museums” is available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUwFikKnrkg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUwFikKnrkg).
participatory act which invited visitors to “know” in this other way. To use dance as the
numinous object that leads to an experiential encounter with the past. After the lecture, I eagerly
awaited my turn to ask a question: what about movement? How did proprioception (the
kinesthetic sense which relays information about the relative position of neighboring parts of the
body and the effort used for movement) fit into this exciting space of sensory learning? Once
again, I wanted to know everything. Kadish met my enthusiasm with interest. Yes, her research
suggested a place for movement in this multisensory, embodied approach, but she was not yet
aware of anyone pursuing the topic. And so, this project began.

This paper represents the initial research conducted to answer a specific question: Could
there be a place for a movement-based, participatory, interpretive program – focused specifically
on dance – in a history museum? If so, what could that look like? Part I, “Movement-Based,
Embodied Learning,” justifies the value of this approach in the museum environment, describing
the ways in which it aligns with educational theories and research on museum visitor
preferences. Part I also explores the concept of museum visitors as “bodies in space.” Part II,
“Dance in the Museum,” dives deep into the relationship between these two worlds, revealing
kinesthetic interpretation of social dance as a largely unmet potential use, specifically in
traditional history museums. Part II also looks at the intersections of dance education and K-12
academic classes. Part III, “Program Modeling,” describes possible approaches to incorporating
dance into interpretative historical programming.

**PART I: MOVEMENT-BASED, EMBODIED LEARNING**

Kadish’s lecture informed me of the significance of multisensory learning in museums,
but I wanted to better understand how movement-based learning could be of value, as well as
how museums currently “make use” of visitors’ bodily experience. The following sections
explore: first, how providing kinesthetic experiences aligns with a visitor-centric model by offering opportunities for particular learning types and visitor preferences; and second, the roles of embodiment, immersion, and kinesthetic interpretation in museums.

**LEARNING STYLES & EXPERIENTIAL PREFERENCES IN THE VISITOR-CENTRIC MUSEUM**

The phrases “visitor-centric” and “visitor-centered” have become buzzwords in the museum field. Increasingly, institutions reinterpret their mission statements, evaluate their exhibitions, and create programs to better align with visitor-centered best practices. Although the debate regarding the true purpose and meaning of museums carries on, most institutions agree with John Falk that, at least to some extent, they “exist in order to attract and serve visitors.” As a result, museums seek to better understand the varying needs within their audiences and then to design experiences with those differences in mind. In addition to demographic data, a myriad of theoretical frameworks categorize visitors according to learning styles, motivations, and preferred experiences.

These varying models are all based in the theory of constructivism, also commonly referred to as “differentiated learning” or “meaning making.” This concept holds that individuals are not empty vessels waiting to receive information. Rather, they construct knowledge for themselves according to their personal characteristics and the context in which they are learning. Essentially, each person can learn, but may do so differently. The ways in

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which an individual best processes and retains knowledge is often called their “learning style.” Although the literature on learning styles, strategies, and motivations is complex, generally when a person’s learning style is accommodated, their level of motivation increases. This idea has filtered from formal educational systems into the museum world.

In *Interpretive Planning for Museums: Integrating Visitor Perspectives in Decision Making*, authors Marcella Wells, Barbara Butler, and Judith Koke’s discussion of museums’ changing perception of visitors reveals the influence of constructivism on the field. They note, “the perceived role of the museum visitor has moved from one of information consumer to one of knowledge constructor based on active engagement.” An acceptance of differentiated learning necessitates that museum professionals, like traditional educators, incorporate presentation methods that appeal to all learning styles. Moreover, as museums’ goals often extend beyond education into other mission-based or visitor-centered outcomes, they also must also consider other differentiators among visitors. As mentioned, museum-specific theoretical models include those focused on visitor motivations and experiential preferences.

The below will offer a brief overview of the current literature on learning styles and visitor types. Although not an exhaustive overview (an in-depth analysis of these topics could fill multiple books), a theme pertinent to this study emerges – a preference type among learners and museum visitors associated with kinesthetic experiences. This common thread provides a foundation for the discussion to follow on movement-based learning.

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LEARNING STYLES

The literature on learning styles is vast and contains many overlapping theories regarding how individuals perceive, process, and retain information, as well as under what conditions they do so most effectively. The following discussion will not present all of the available theories, nor attempt to propose a singular, comprehensive model. It instead presents a brief overview of theories frequently referenced in the conversation among educators and museums regarding learning types.

In 1979, Bernice McCarthy proposed the 4MAT system, which identifies four learning styles based on an individual’s preferred method of information processing:

- **Innovative Learners** observe and personalize. They connect new information with personal experience and want to understand information’s usefulness for daily life. Innovative Learners like to ask *why*.

- **Analytic Learners** gather information and gravitate toward reading and research. They learn well from lectures, enjoy independent research work and data analysis, and are interested in what the “experts” have to say. Analytic Learners like to ask *what*.

- **Common Sense Learners** want to try things out. They are primarily interested in how things work, enjoy experimentation, and find concrete, experiential learning to be most effective. Common Sense Learners like to ask *how*.

- **Dynamic Learners** prefer self-directed discovery that allows them to “take the extra step.” They rely heavily on intuition and seek opportunities to apply new information to additional examples or applications. They like to teach themselves and others. Dynamic Learners like to ask *what if*.
McCarty plotted the 4MAT learning model on 2 axes of “Feeling – Thinking” and “Doing – Watching” (Figure 1). Importantly, although a person may identify with one of these four styles, it does not mean they cannot function effectively in the others. However, they will likely be most motivated by and naturally gravitate toward presentations and activities which match their natural inclinations. A movement-based program would likely appeal to both Dynamic and Common Sense learners, as both groups prefer “doing.”

In 1983, Harvard education professor Howard Gardner published the highly influential Frames of Mind, which outlined the theory of “multiple intelligences.” Gardner was less concerned with categorizing learning types than McCarty. His theory instead critiqued the “standard psychological view of intellect: that there is a single intelligence, which can be adequately measured by IQ or other short answer tests.” He argued that human beings have a number of relatively discrete intellectual capacities. While McCarty considered how people learn across a broad variety of topics, Gardner focused on the idea that individuals may also have a predilection to a specific “what” – an intelligence related to a particular topic or skill. In the

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original edition of *Frames of Mind*, Gardner described verbal-linguistic, mathematical-logical, musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal (social), and intrapersonal (understanding of self) intelligences. In the following years, he has expanded the list, adding naturalist intelligence (“capacity to make consequential distinctions in the world of nature”), existential intelligence (intelligence of “big questions”), and pedagogical intelligence (ability to convey knowledge or skills to others). Everyone possesses all these intelligences in varying degrees, and each individual has a different intelligence profile. Although initially intended as a psychological, not educational, theory, Gardner has acknowledged two implications of “multiple intelligences” for educators: individuation and pluralization. He explains, “individuation (also termed personalization), suggests that since human beings have their own unique configuration of intelligences, we should take that into account when teaching, mentoring or nurturing.” Whenever possible, “we should teach individuals in ways that they can learn and we should assess them in a way that allows them to show what they have understood.” Pluralization “is a call for teaching consequential materials in several ways … you reach more students, because some students learn best from reading, some from building something, some from acting out a story, etc.” As Shelley Kruger Weisberg notes in *Museum Movement Techniques* (2006), this approach also has the benefit of “prob[ing] beyond socioeconomic and educational boundaries, allowing those who might not be verbal or auditory learners to be integrated into the learning process.” Moreover, through pluralization, “you show what it is like to be an expert—to

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11 Ibid.
understand something really well. Indeed, if you are limited to only one way of conveying an important concept or topic, your own understanding is probably tenuous.”

Neil Fleming’s “VARK” model is a related theory, developed in 1992 to improve learning and teaching. “VARK” contains the learning style designations most commonly recognized by the general public – visual, aural/auditory, read/write, and kinesthetic. Visual learners prefer the depiction of information in maps, charts, graphs, flowcharts, and other devices that use arrows, hierarchies, and symbolic devices to represent content relationships. Visual learners favor these alternative representations of what could have been expressed in words. Aural/auditory learners prefer to hear or speak information. They learn best from lectures, group discussions, and even speaking aloud to themselves. Aural/auditory learners often develop understanding through speaking, rather than sorting out their ideas and then speaking. Fleming notes for educators that these learners “may say again what has already been said, or ask an obvious and previously answered question. They have need to say it themselves and they learn through saying it – their way.”

Learners with a read/write preference seek information displayed as words. They understand through text-based inputs and outputs. Kinesthetic learners have a “perceptual preference related to the use of experience and practice (simulated or real).” The key for kinesthetic learners is concrete personal experience, examples, and practice. They seek demonstrations, simulations, videos of “real” things, and appreciate case studies and applied learning. They learn from the experience of doing something.

The Institute for Learning Styles Research (ILSR), a nonprofit organization “dedicated to fostering research and development of learning and teaching,” expands on the VARK model to identify seven learning modalities.16 As with VARK, each refers to a particular way “learners extract information from their surroundings through the use of their five senses.” As with all the previous authors discussed, ILSR emphasizes that individuals tend to find certain pathways most effective for their own learning and retention. The seven perceptive pathways identified by ILSR are: print (seeing printed or written words), aural (listening), haptic (sense of touch or grasp), interactive (verbalization), kinesthetic (whole body movement; direct involvement), olfactory (sense of smell and taste), and visual (seeing visual depictions like pictures and graphs). As described by Fleming, the kinesthetic learner learns by doing. They absorb information best when moving in some way or performing an action related to the lesson.17

Clearly, a movement-based learning approach would likely appeal to the “kinesthetic” categories in the multiple intelligences, VARK, and ILSR models. Helpfully for this study, ILSR distinguishes between haptic and kinesthetic. “Touch” is an oft-discussed topic in museums, and in the VARK modalities, would fall under kinesthetic. Because both kinesthetic and haptic experiences can appeal to those visitors drawn to the physical (discussed in the following section on visitor preference types), the two can be conflated in the museum context. However, there is value in considering when “touch” is most useful and when a full-body or “doing” experience would have greater impact. The kinesthetic is no more or less valuable than the haptic, but decidedly different. The Carlyle House historic home in Alexandria, VA offers an illustrative example of interpretive kinesthetic learning. A tour of home begins in the basement servant

quarters. Here, visitors find a bucket filled with resin to simulate its weight when full of water. While describing the chores of an enslaved nine-year-old girl, the docent directs visitors to lift the bucket and imagine carrying its weight up and down the narrow flights of stairs. The bucket is very heavy, and usually requires both hands to pull off the ground. The need to engage the full body to lift the object creates a kinesthetic experience, and a very particular entry point into understanding that child’s life. The visitor gains insight into the physicality of her everyday experience and a far clearer sense of the demands made on her. Similarly, imagine a hands-on cart with a miniature version of a particular machine. While the chance to hold the model may appeal to many visitors, the chance to operate a functional model (thereby providing the direct, personal, and concrete experience favored by kinesthetic learners) likely has greater impact in understanding how the machinery works. Museums should be wary of assuming that by incorporating “touch,” they meet all needs of kinesthetic learners.

VISITOR MOTIVATIONS AND PREFERENCES

As mentioned, with the ongoing emphasis on visitor-centric museums, much attention has been placed on understanding and providing for visitors’ preferences in order to improve outcomes. Outcomes can include learning (requiring attention be paid to the discussed learning types), but also enjoyment, engagement, positive social interactions, and overall satisfaction. The models in this section help museums group visitors by their preferred experiences.

In the seminal work in this field, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, John Falk attempts to create a predictive model of visitor experience. Rather than exploring demographics, Falk focuses on visitors’ identity-based motivations for attending museums. He argues that the visitor experience begins before an individual sets foot in the institution. It starts when that person chooses to satisfy one or more identity-related needs with a leisure activity. They choose
the museum because they believe its leisure opportunities match their needs at a particular time. These identity-based motivations not only justify, but also organize the visit, determining how the individual will interact with the museum. Visitor satisfaction depends on whether the experience fulfills these pre-determined goals for attending the museum.

Falk’s model identifies five visitor types:

- **The Explorer**: Explorers identify as a curious people; they visit a museum because it appeals to this sense of self. They are not subject-matter experts, but highly value learning. They often take unstructured routes through the museum, guided by whatever peaks their interest. They will likely read labels.

- **The Facilitator**: Facilitators enter the museum to “satisfy the needs of someone else and to help maximize the quality of that other person’s experience.”\(^{18}\) They tend to put the needs and curiosities of the other members of their social group first. There are two sub-categories of facilitators:
  - Parents/grandparents visiting with children. They are motivated by a desire to be perceived (by themselves and others, including the children) as good parents/grandparents.
  - Facilitating socializers visiting with other adults. Their primary goal is meaningful social interaction, often seeing the museum as “a stage setting for [a] social play to be enacted and the exhibits [as] mere props.”\(^{19}\)

- **The Experience Seeker**: Experience Seekers want to feel like they have “been there and done that.” They’re motivated by a desire to see and experience famous, iconic, and important places and things. They tend to have social motivations, rather than a content-specific interest.

- **The Professional/Hobbyist**: Professionals and Hobbyists are the smallest category of visitors. They could be museum professionals, art and antique collectors, teachers, artists, etc. Unlike Explorers, they have a specific goal or mission in mind when entering the museum.

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\(^{19}\) Ibid, 175.
• **The Recharger**: Rechargers are “in search of peace and psychological uplift.” They perceive the museum as a respite from the outside world, a place to reflect and rejuvenate. They generally have little interest in specific content or objects.

In this model, the likeliest candidates for a movement-based program would be explorers, followed by facilitators.

In 2014, the Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis developed an alternative model to delineate visitor experience types. They sought to uncover additional sources of diversity within their audience and then to use that research to design better visitor experiences. In reframing visitor diversity, they hoped “to help exhibition makers reflect on their own preferences, and to encourage staff in general to appreciate how their own preferences influence the decisions they make on behalf of visitors in exhibition-making and program development.” The resulting model, called IPOP, takes an approach more closely aligned to the learning styles discussed earlier. While Falk addresses why someone would seek a museum for a meaning-making experience in the first place, IPOP explains how someone makes meaning once in a museum context. Each letter in “IPOP” refers to a preferred experience type that an individual will naturally gravitate toward:

- **Ideas**: attracted to the conceptual, drawn to abstract thinking and facts
- **People**: attracted to stories and emotional connections
- **Objects**: attracted to visual language, objects, aesthetics, and craftsmanship
- **Physical**: attracted to sensory experiences, movement, and physicality

As with the learning type models, IPOP maintains that individuals can be engaged by any of these experience types, but will find one of the four most appealing. Interestingly, the model began with three categories, ideas, people, and objects, until a second “P” – physical – emerged.

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20 Ibid, 176.
from the research. Of the visitors who participated in the IPOP studies, 79 percent showed a clear preference: 18 percent tested as “Ideas” types, 18 percent as “People,” 19 percent as “Objects,” and 23 percent as “Physical.” The remaining 21 percent of visitors tended to show a combination of two types (rarely three) rather than a single preference.\(^{22}\) For this study, it’s notable that the greatest percentage of visitors showed a preference for physical. This information, combined with the several of the learning types, affirms the role for kinesthetic learning in museums.

**THE BODY IN THE MUSEUM**

This section transitions from visitor models that suggest a role for kinesthetic learning and physical experiences in museums to an examination of the ways institutions currently engage visitors’ bodies. Visiting a museum is necessarily an embodied, multisensory experience, one that can influence visitors in intentional and unintentional ways. The intentional “use” of visitors’ bodies includes both immersive experiences and kinesthetic interpretation.

**EMBODIMENT & IMMERSION**

Traditionally, museums have privileged visitors’ cognitive functions over the physical. Museums’ reliance on visual means of conveying information (both text and objects) – what the Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP) calls “occularcentrity” – points in part to museums’ origins during the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. The “focus on the visual derives from the embedded perception within modern Western culture of the intellectual value of the visual. To see something in this instance is to understand and comprehend.” Visual observation provides replicable empirical data. IPUP’s Ross Wilson argues that “through their insistence on the importance of the visual,” museums perpetuate René Descartes’ division of the

body and mind into discrete entities. Indeed, “to admit physicality into the equation would appear to suggest 'bias' and subjectivity and leave the field open to less 'rational' forms of knowledge.”

However, recent cognitive science combats Descartes’s dualism. Research points to a system of “embodied cognition,” in which the mind is not only connected to the body but the body also influences the mind. Embodied cognition has its intellectual roots in twentieth-century philosophers Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey, and has been the subject of empirical neurological research in the last few decades. A leading researcher, George Lakoff from the University of California at Berkeley, explains the importance of embodied cognition: “This is not just the innocuous and obvious claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment.”

The theory of embodied cognition aligns with current literature on the museum as an embodied experience. As individuals, we cannot choose whether to admit physicality into our understanding of the world. Similarly, museums cannot choose whether or not to “admit physicality” in designing visitor experience. Museums are inherently physical. They are actual buildings filled with tangible objects. Moreover, visitors bring their whole selves to the museum. Many of us are familiar with the fatigue and sore feet that can result from hours of walking through galleries. This physical sensation impacts the visitor experience, as can the temperature of the room, ambient noise, light levels, the smells of cleaner, carpeting, or other elements of the environment, and the weight of whatever items one carries (coats, bags, children).

25 Ibid.
As the theory of embodied cognition suggests, there are also more nuanced aspects of an embodied visitor experience beyond these examples. In *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (2014), several authors explore the implications of embodied cognition for museum visitors. Francesca Bacci and Francesco Pavani describe how visual observation of artworks and artifacts can elicit somatic reactions. When “we are particularly close to the object . . . we can activate our vestibular sensations through sight,” – meaning that our brain can “anticipate visual and auditory events as if they were already in contact with the skin . . . or feel a sensory-motor impulse when confronted with moving artworks (or even just artworks which refer to or imply motion).”26 A related article, “Multisensory Mental Simulation and Aesthetic Perception,” explains that our “aesthetic appraisal” can bring forth “internal memories of similar sensations as engendered by prior objects and experiences.”27 From looking, we can imagine a tactile or kinesthetic experience even without touching or moving, often drawing upon past physical experiences to do so. While observing, for example, a piece of wood from a sunken ship, we can imagine the rough feeling of the splintered ends under our fingers. Peter Paul Rubens’s “Dance of the Italian Villagers” (Figure 2) conveys a sense of harried, spinning movement, of running headlong into the dance, and being carried along by the fellow dancers while struggling to keep tempo.


The twisted, strained bodies in Bernini’s Rape of Proserpina (Figure 3) similarly evoke a somatic experience. We can place ourselves in the action of the scene, and imagine the pushing and pulling of the physical contest between the two figures.

Historical artifacts can function similarly. Looking at a dress that requires corseting to create a tiny waist or a pair of shoes for bound feet can cause a physical imagining of discomfort, pain, and restricted movement.

Museums can also make concerted efforts to create embodied experience or to direct movement through architecture and exhibit design, a topic explored at length by Kali Tzortzi.28 Philipp Schorch’s research on visitors’ experience of museum space points to the physical environment “as a medium in dialogue with the visitor,” one which “emerges as an integral part

of interpretative processes.” In his 2014 article titled “Museum as Embodied Experience,” architect Juhani Pallasmaa describes a memorable museum visit as “an exploration and discovery in which the visitor’s body movements, sensory experiences, associations, recollections, and imaginations contribute to the overall effect beyond what is explicitly presented and expressed.” He argues that an “exhibition turns into a personal experience” when “grasped through embodied sensation instead of offering intellectualized information or mere visual stimulation.” In other words, the physical environment not only guides movement through the museum, but also contributes to meaning making.

The architecture of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) illustrates this point. USHMM’s limestone exterior is innocuous, but as the architect James Ingo Freed explains, it’s “a pure fake.” The exterior portico is not the true entrance into the building, just a screen. After passing through this screen, there is no roof – no shelter – and the thick window girds suggest imprisonment. It is “intended to separate you from Washington in a fundamental way, as you enter an experience that is not ordinary.” Upon entering the Hall of Witness, visitors move toward a steel loading dock, reminiscent of the train stations and cattle cars victims entered on their way to concentration camps. On either side, high brick walls suggest watchtowers. The multi-story courtyard that encircles the Hall adds to the sense of surveillance. There are no windows, only glimpses of the sky. Freed shared that “all the survivors I spoke to said that everything was taken away from them—their families, their identity, their dignity—and the only

thing they held on to was a shaft of light. So I played the sun.” The Hall doesn’t follow ideal ratios – it’s too narrow for its height. It feels confining, and when filled with visitors, claustrophobic. Similar techniques create a sense of unease throughout the remainder of the museum. Freed intentionally constructed an embodied experience:

“If you don't understand it with your body, it's a failure. It is not meant to be an architectural promenade, or a walk through memory, or an exposition of emotion, but all of this. 'Odd,' or 'quiet' is not enough. It must be intestinal, visceral; it must take you in its grip.”

NMAAHC similarly uses the architecture to create an embodied experience that supports meaning making. The history exhibit begins underground, with the story of the Atlantic slave trade. Low ceilings and dim lighting allude to the hull of a boat, and narrow walkways make visitors uncomfortably crowded. The tightness of bodies in the cramped space generates heat; visitors often feel uncomfortably hot. The physical experience in this space supports the interpretive goals of the exhibit, to help visitors understand the brutality of the slave ships.

The subtle influences of architecture can be paired with “immersive” exhibit design. Stephen Bitgood, author of several volumes on social design in museums, defines simulated immersion as “the degree to which an exhibit effectively involves, absorbs, engrosses, or creates for visitors the experience of a particular time and place.” Researchers John Falk and Lynn Dierking suggest a related understanding of immersion in museum contexts, focusing primarily on sensory inputs. They found that immersive environments primed visitors for optimal learning,

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as the “most compelling learning experiences are all encompassing. All of an individual’s sensory channels become engaged in the experience, reducing competing information without reducing complexity.” Historic homes are an interesting case, as the physical environment is an artifact in itself, suggesting full immersion by virtue of entering the building. However, the degree to which a historic home successfully facilitates immersion depends, as Bitgood, Falk and Dierking describe, on the depth of the experience of a particular time and place and ability to engage all sensory channels. Bitgood’s definition of simulated immersion encompasses many forms, including dioramas, landscape immersion in zoos and aquariums, theme park style rides, living history sites, and theater experiences. Museum theater, defined broadly, can include presentations by professional actors and interpreters, performances of content-related plays and monologues, and first-person role-playing activities. Immersion aligns closely with the growing emphasis on visitor-centric and experiential museums. It is not a new arena for exhibit developers, as evidenced by Bitgood’s ongoing research on the topic since the 1990s. The growing use of virtual reality technologies in museums reflects a new aspect of this approach. Techniques like landscape immersion align closely with the architectural approach described at USHMM and NMAAHC. The visitor remains a relatively passive participant, perhaps only subconsciously aware of the environmental impact on their embodied experience. Alternatively, museums can invite visitors to engage intentionally in an embodied experience related to the exhibit content. A recent, successful example of this sort of immersive design featured in the

Peabody Essex Museum’s *Impressionists on the Water* (open from November 2013 to February 2014). As Ed Rodley, the museum’s Associate Director of Integrated Media, explained:

“Since a major theme of the exhibition had to do with direct experience of being on the water, we thought it would great if we could give visitors a waterline view. The exhibition has several artworks depicting studio boats. Could we make our own and figure out a way to capture some of that feeling of being an artist creating on the water?”  

To that end, the exhibit team created the interior of a studio boat, complete with two separate projection screens (Figure 4). One, placed in the “window,” featured footage of a local waterway at an appropriate vantage point; the second screen, propped on an artist’s easel, showed impressionist-style paintings “coming to life” based on the natural scene displayed in the window. Standing or sitting inside of the boat installation, the visitor could gain a sense of the cramped quarters and the gentle movement of the boat on the water, providing an entry point to imagining how those factors might have impacted an artist’s experience. This design helped communicate, in an engaging and embodied manner, the central theme of *Impressionists on the Water*, “the intimate relationship between the artists and the waterways of France.” Other museums’ interest in replicating the installation for their exhibits indicates the success of the embodied approach. Four separate

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38 Ibid.
institutions, including the Van Gogh Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, created similar studio boat installations.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{KINESTHETIC INTERPRETATION}

It is generally recognized that people retain about 10\% of what they hear, 30\% of what they read, 50\% of what they see, and 90\% of what they do.

- W.J. Lewis, \emph{Interpreting for Park Visitors}

While all museums visits are embodied experiences, and some institutions take advantage of that embodiment to enhance immersion through architecture and exhibit design, it is also possible to extend the physical experience of the museum into explicitly kinesthetic interpretive strategies. “Kinesthetic” in this context means activities that engage a visitor’s full-body (i.e., more than touch). “Interpretive strategies” refers to an approach first outlined by Freeman Tilden in his 1957 book, \emph{Interpreting Our Heritage}. Tilden describes interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media rather than simply to communicate factual information.”\textsuperscript{40} Tilden emphasizes that “the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”\textsuperscript{41} The National Association for Interpretation (formed in 1988, demonstrating the staying power and influence of Tilden’s ideas) defines the term as “a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource.”\textsuperscript{42} In \emph{The Engaging Museum} (2005), author Graham Black offers another definition: “interpretation is an approach to presenting heritage which sees to involve the audience with the ‘real thing,’ to encourage participation and, through that, to assist visitors to


\textsuperscript{40} Freeman Tilden, \emph{Interpreting Our Heritage} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 8.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 32.

\textsuperscript{42} Graham Black, \emph{The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement} (New York: Routledge, 2005): 182.
develop the skills to explore for themselves and so enhance their own understanding." 43 All these descriptions of interpretation emphasize first-hand experience as the key to meaning making. In kinesthetic interpretation, movement provides the entry point for this personal understanding. Importantly, kinesthetic interpretation does not use movement for its own sake. Design elements like flaps to lift, drawers to open, buttons to push can appeal to the kinesthetically-inclined, but have little interpretive value. In kinesthetic interpretation, movement is directly tied to the inherent meanings of the content.

The hammock installation at the USS Constitution Museum provides an illustrative example. The USS Constitution Museum incorporates two museum spaces: onboard the Constitution (a famous naval ship first used during the War of 1812) and in a traditional exhibit space onshore. The interpretation strategy on the ship shares similarities with those used by many historic homes. The museum attempts to “recreate” life onboard the ship, asking visitors to imagine themselves as nineteenth-century sailors. To reconstruct the crew’s sleeping quarters on the berth deck, the staff hung a series of rope hammocks. Allowing visitors to walk aboard the ship and to observe the hammocks would provide an embodied, immersive experience. Provocative language, like that used on the website (below), could encourage visitors to imagine the crew’s physical experience of sleeping on the ship:

“Unlike officers who slept in beds built into their cabins, sailors slept in shifts in hammocks slung on the berth deck. The hammocks were very close together, just 18” from center to center. Now imagine hundreds of men in hammocks, very close together, that have not bathed for days.” 44

43 Ibid, 185.
However, the museum went a step further, inviting visitors to climb into the hammocks. The kinesthetic, full-body experience of lying in the hammocks provided a more visceral and immediate understanding of the uncomfortable conditions onboard. It also provided an entry point to engaging more fully with traditional label text. The museum added questions and answers to the ceiling of the hammock area to reinforce their learning goals. “Do you get more than 4 hours of sleep at a time? Not if you are a sailor in 1812. Can you nap in your hammock during the day? No, you have to curl up on the wooden deck.” Staff observed that “many visitors read these short pieces of text out loud.” As part of an evaluation of the ship experience, the staff conducted exit interviews with visitors. They found that “the hammocks consistently rate as the exhibit’s most popular interactive. In observations we noticed that the hammocks are used by visitors of all ages. They are also a center for conversation, often between unrelated visitors!”\(^{45}\)

In 2006, Shelley Kruger Weisberg, a movement therapist, dance teacher and museum educator, published *Museum Movement Techniques: How to Craft a Moving Museum Experience*. The book focuses specifically on kinesthetic interpretive programming for school-aged children in art museums. While there are many individual examples of successful kinesthetic interpretation, like that at the USS Constitution Museum, *Museum Movement Techniques* is one of the only publications to discuss the concept more broadly. Weisberg provides a framework of activities and facilitation techniques for institutions to adapt to their own collections and educational goals. In making the case for such programming, Weisberg points to neurokinesiologist Jean Blaydes Madign’s finding that 85 percent of school-aged children are kinesthetic learners.\(^{46}\) Museum movement techniques “allow children to enter the visual world of the museum through motion-based learning,” providing “another dimension to

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Weisberg, 37.
create meaning and understanding for museum objects.”

This additional dimension is particularly suited to their needs as kinesthetic learners. The approach also aligns with the theories of interpretation advanced by Tilden and others. The facilitator “never instructs children how to move but rather encourages personal movement interpretation,” prompted by the various techniques. The process begins with Phillip Yenawine’s Visual Thinking Strategies. Children share their verbal responses to an artwork, and then their movement interpretations. The facilitator guides the students through various movement types, including mirroring a human or animal form’s pose, “animating” that pose with imagined movement (ex: first posing like a lion sculpture, then crawling and roaring like the lion), creating new movements inspired by an artwork’s lines, shapes, or emotive qualities, and working with other children to create a larger scene or series of movements. Specific details of the facilitation approach are discussed further in Part III.

It is worth noting that both examples discussed in this section were designed to provide kinesthetic interpretation for children or families with children. Both the USS Constitution Museum and Weisberg apply techniques more commonly associated with children’s museums and science centers. These institutions generally favor “hands-on,” immersive, and experiential learning over displaying collections with accompanying text panels. This approach aligns with the needs of their young audiences – hence its use by Weisberg and the USS Constitution Museum to reach those groups. That said, I fear many museums leave opportunities for meaningful engagement on the table by considering kinesthetic interpretation as primarily for children. I have not found a research study to substantiate this claim with hard figures, but my

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48 Ibid, 2.
49 Ibid, 51, 7-18.
personal, anecdotal experience (and that of many other museum professionals with whom I’ve discussed the topic) suggests that many “traditional” museums relegate explicitly movement-based experiences to younger audiences. While I do not argue that all institutions should function like children’s museums (or, that museums should cease providing kinesthetic opportunities for specifically for children!), the research on learning and visitor preference types suggests that these experiences could be enjoyable and valuable for all ages. The principle of universal design applies here. By providing for the specific needs of one group, the museum gains the chance to improve the experience for all visitors. As such, museums should consider who they invite to participate in kinesthetic interpretation. For self-guided kinesthetic interactives in exhibits, does the design or signage (explicitly or subtly) suggest only children are welcome? Are facilitated, movement-based programs offered only to children? In family groups, are adults encouraged to join in (rather than observe their kids)? With this in mind, the proposed programs in Part III include a potential facilitation targeted at all ages.

**PART II: DANCE IN THE MUSEUM**

“What one has not experienced, one will never understand in print.”
- Isadora Duncan

Part I explored the theoretical foundations for and examples of kinesthetic interpretive programs; Part II will discuss the potential application of dance to this research.

After the jolt of inspiration from Kadish’s lecture, I struggled to find language to describe my own experience of this bodily knowing, separate but connected to my “thinking” brain. Thankfully, dance critic Joan Acocella succeeded where I could not. She describes the phenomenon in her beautiful article, “Imagining Dance”: 
“To all appearances, intellect does not underlie the kinetic imagination, but instead is hooked up to it in an oblique, sidelong manner, perhaps something like the hook-up between the eye and the ear. There is no question that the eye and the ear are connected, and affect each other’s functioning, yet each lives its own life, has its own neurology, its own range of sensations.”

Although the idea for a dance might come from an intellectual place, eventually “the kinetic imagination would have taken over, with its own logic, its own world of gesture and meaning.”

This article cut to the core of my interest in a dance-based interpretive program. Much like music, dance provides a unique lens into cultural history, offering a glimpse at the social mores, artistic trends, and leisure preferences of the past. It is tempting when studying dance history to believe that “the truth of a dance lies somewhere other than in the dance, that the dance is a sort of side-effect, whereas the real event is the intellectual process that supposedly underlies it.”

Take, for example, the Charleston. The dance grew out of a specific cultural moment and reflects a sense of wild abandon and sexual liberation associated with the 1920s. I can tell you this fact. I can describe how scandalous its movements were and how much fun its dancers had eschewing the rules of decorum. I can explain how the mixing of European-American and African-American movement styles in the early twentieth century created this unique dance. We can discuss ragtime dancing and the rise of jazz as precursors, or the relationship between the Charleston and shortening hemlines for women. We could talk for hours about the Charleston’s intellectual underpinnings, and we would certainly touch on a number of important and interesting historical topics. Yet, as Acocella writes,

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
“so much of life is spent in the difficult task of trying to understand things, to see *through* them to what’s on the other side. But the truths of dance are not on the other side. They are in the very bones of the dance, which our bones know how to read, if we let them.”\textsuperscript{53}

To perform the dance is to gain a completely different, and imminently personal, understanding. The expressive qualities of the movements – knock-kneed kicking, flailing arms, and bouncing bodies – communicate boisterous youthfulness in way not processed by the language centers of the brain. We don’t need skill or training to experience this expression of rowdy fun. “Our bones know how to read, if we let them.” As Acocella explains,

> “the mind can operate in completely different languages – dream, music, higher mathematics – and dance is one of those languages. Its logic is not discursive but lyric … It is a force field, an orchestration of lines of force, lines of energy, and that is the only way to start understanding it.”\textsuperscript{54}

The truth is not on the “other side.” In dance, we don’t see “through,” we live “in.” In our bodies, in the world of kinesthetic expression, in a language outside the verbal.

As museums increasingly incorporate experiential learning, dance history presents a great opportunity. Its intellectual roots spread out in a hundred directions, allowing for connections to other cultural history related topics and educational goals. Its lyric, bodily language demands participation for true understanding, representing a value-add for kinesthetic learners and those drawn to physical museum experiences. For history museums, kinesthetic interpretation of social dance offers a largely untapped source of multisensory, immersive learning directed tied to content.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 12-13.
DANCE IN MUSEUMS: CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Dance history is generally divided into two categories: social and concert. “Social dance” refers to those forms intended for socialization or recreation purposes. They do not require significant training, and often can be learned through observation. “Concert dance” includes the styles associated with professional performance and formal training, including ballet and modern dance. For this paper, I focus primarily on social dance. I see greater opportunity for connection between these dance styles and broader cultural history, as the rise and fall of popular dances reflect larger trends like changing social mores, shifting class expectations, and the impact of new forms of mass media (these themes are discussed more fully in Part III on proposed program models). Moreover, these dances are inherently more accessible to novices than concert dances.

EXHIBITS ON SOCIAL DANCE

The National Museum of the American Indian currently hosts Circle of Dance, a five-year exhibit celebrating native people’s ceremonial and social dances as “a vibrant, meaningful, and diverse form of cultural expression.”55 This definition applies more broadly to all of American social dance; however, as yet, no major historical museum has delved into the topic.

Outside of the visual arts, social dance does not have a strong presence in museums. The National Museum of Dance extends its mission only to professional dance forms. Social dance is not represented in its galleries. Other museums that include dance in their culture-focused spaces follow a similar model of zeroing in on ballet, modern concert dance, and other styles performed and choreographed by professionals in musicals and movies (e.g. Victoria and Albert Museum’s permanent Theatre & Performance galleries; National Museum of African American History &

Culture’s *Taking the Stage* exhibit). Exhibits that do incorporate social dance are found predominantly in art museums. Recent examples include the Detroit Institute of Arts’ traveling exhibition, *Dance! American Art 1830-1960*, the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s *Dance: Movement, Rhythm, Spectacle*, and the Denver Art Museum’s *Summer of Dance* (which included, among other attractions, the touring exhibition from the Denver Institute of Arts). All of these exhibits covered a broad range of dance styles, displaying the diversity of forms and cultural influences impacting dance over time. However, necessarily, their focus remained on artists’ rendering of those dances, rather than on the original participants. Also of note, all of these examples began the story in the nineteenth century (either the 1830s or the 1890s), rather than reaching further back into American history.\(^{56}\)

A small exhibit at the University of New Hampshire Library, *Gents Bow - Ladies Know How: Traditional Dance in the Monadnock Region, 1750-2015*, represents an exception to the above. Through music, artifacts, and stories, the library exhibit documented the tradition of country and community dance in a single region of New Hampshire over the last 265 years.\(^{57}\) Also of note, in the 1980s, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute hosted *Dance: A Very Social History*.\(^ {58}\) This exhibit understandably limited its scope to clothing worn in dance, but joins the library exhibit in exploring social dance through material culture (rather than solely visual arts).

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DANCE PROGRAMMING

Much of the museum programming around dance focuses on performance, rather than participation. A current trend is to invite performers and choreographers to respond to museum collections through dance. In May 2016, the Smithsonian named Dana Tai Soon Burgess as its first choreographer-in-residence. During his three-year residency at the National Portrait Gallery, he will create new works inspired by exhibitions and participate in public conversations about dance and art.\(^{59}\) The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts have all undertaken similar artist-in-residence programs.\(^{60}\) Many contemporary art museums, including the New Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Guggenheim, have begun “collecting” ephemeral dance pieces by artists-in-residence as a new kind of installation performance art.\(^{61}\) In September 2016, the Philadelphia Museum of Art hosted a symposium, titled “Museum as Score,” on the growing number of programs that treat the museum collection “like a musical or choreographic score—existing both as a historical document and as the material for an interpretive performance that could be played at any moment.”\(^{62}\) The symposium’s focus, “the intersection between


\(^{62}\) “Eighth Annual Anne D’Harnoncourt Symposium: Museum as Score,” University of Pennsylvania School of Arts & Sciences, Accessed 9 September 2016,
museological institutions and contemporary dance,” points to this trend’s primary application: professional, concert dancers as participants and visitors as observers.

The British Museum provides an exception to this rule. From 2012 to 2014, the museum hosted a program called “Talking Objects Collective,” which invited “young people aged 16-24 explore and respond to the Lewis Chessmen, in support of their training and education.” One student group took inspiration from the famous objects to choreograph and perform an original dance piece. They showcased their work at their graduation from the London Academy and at the museum. 63 Although the Talking Objects Collective was another concert dance program, it welcomed non-professionals to participate in a dance-based response to the collections.

Participatory dance programs that focus on social dance predominantly occur in historic homes and living history sites. Although I was not able to conduct a comprehensive survey of all such museums or programs, I did not find an example of this type of activity in a traditional history museum. Tudor Place in Washington D.C. includes eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dance in some of its student field trips and youth camps. Once a year, the Historic Village at Allaire in New Jersey holds a historic barn dance with nineteenth-century music and line dancing for all ages. A group of historic homes in Los Angeles, Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House, Sowden House, and the Grace E. Simmons Lodge, recently hosted a 1920s jazz weekend, with dance workshops and classes for adults, along with speakeasy parties, architecture tours and silent film screening. The anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of these dance


opportunities are special events. A unique exception, however, is the Denver Art Museum’s #dancelab. The following section is a detailed case study of this participatory program.

CASE STUDY: #DANCELAB

In 2016, the Denver Art Museum (DAM) launched “Summer of Dance.” The campus-wide initiative centered on four exhibits, each of which displayed different artistic representations of movement and rhythm. A variety of performances, demonstrations and programs supplemented these exhibitions. #dancelab formed the key interactive element of the initiative. DAM commissioned local dance company, Wonderbound, and the creative firm Legwork Studio to create an immersive, participatory movement experience. The final installation incorporated six semi-private booths. In each, visitors followed short videos in which Wonderbound dancers demonstrated movements derived from American dance traditions. The movements were simple and easily mirrored by visitors of all ages and skill levels. A camera in the booth captured the visitor’s actions. Legwork Studio developed a system to collect these clips and splice them together for a large-scale projection that played on the walls of the installation space. The projection showed individuals’ captured dances along with the professional demonstrations and other animated visuals, all mixed together, sped up, slowed down and reordered to match a background score. DAM encouraged visitors to take photos and videos of the projection and to share their dances on social media.

The creators of #dancelab had two goals. Garrett Ammon, the Artistic Director of Wonderbound, described these in an interview as: first, “getting people in touch with their physical selves” through “an access point…that wasn’t overwhelming”; and, second, “encouraging community.” The time spent in the movement-recording kiosks tackled the first goal, while the final projection created a shared experience for all visitors in the installation.
space. Ammon emphasized that “dance is about community” and “grew out of a social experience,” and so he hoped to help visitors “reaccess” that meaning.\footnote{“DanceLab at the Denver Art Museum 2016,” YouTube, Published 7 July 2016, Accessed 17 October 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORM82QbLKd8.}

Given these goals, #dancelab serves as a valuable case study for this project. Although not explicitly designed for historical interpretation, #dancelab represents an effective approach to breaking down the barrier between audience and performer. The installation draws the visitor into a unique and personal movement experience. The process begins with the title. “Dance” reveals the primary theme, and “lab” points to experimentation. From the start, the visitor can guess that inside there will be movement, possibly in the form of something hands-on and participatory. There’s a hashtag and no capitalization; its informal, which suggests that this space is different from a traditional art gallery space, and alludes to the use of technology. The hashtag hints specifically at social media. This choice has a marketing value, of course, as it signals to visitors that there will be something “shareable” to encounter here and gently encourages them to do so with DAM’s chosen branding. Moreover, it signals that the visitor might be able to make something inside, as social media revolves around the creation and dispersion of personalized content. Of course, no visitor is likely to analyze the title with this level of detail before entering, but the various potential associations can help prime them for what they will encounter inside. They are entering a space that will ask them to behave differently than they have done elsewhere in the museum.

Upon entrance into the installation space, the new visitor sees a huge, colorful projection of dancers on the wall. It is immediately clear that this video is not only of professionals, but of people like the visitor too. Even without any assessment of the movement quality or skill of the dancers, it is clear that there are two groups shown. The professionals all wear the same clothing
and have a uniform look – they stand out as separate from the mix of people with varying ages, dress, and appearance. The video establishes that whatever movement happens in a “dance lab” is open to all sorts. The visitor likely will see others watching themselves in the video – clearly the non-uniformed dancers are people here at the installation right now. They are participating in real time, and the new visitor can join in too.

At the center of the room is a circular space with people moving in front of screens. This set up invites visitors in – clearly this space is the source of the videos on the walls. A full isolation booth with closed curtains would remove a key visual cue that these booths are the hub of participation at #dancelab. However, it seems some level of isolation helps lower the participants’ inhibition. They are not looking at an audience of friends and strangers. They face a screen. Rather than being asked to dance freely, the program delivers a specific, tangible request to mirror the dancer moving in front of them. Although a video camera captures their “performance,” the visitor is not looking at his or herself while dancing. It is far easier to enjoy the physical experience without the presence of a mirror, which can open the door to default settings of self-criticism or self-consciousness.

After completing the brief mirroring activity, the visitor moves back into the open space of the installation to watch the video made from their “performance.” In real-time, Legwork Studio’s custom technology combines visitors’ clips with pre-recordings of Wonderbound dancers. It manipulates the videos with unexpected elements, creating gif-like loops, playing with speeds, and adding colorful animations. Many dancers move across the screen at once. It’s easy to identify one’s self or family member, but no one person is on display. Again, the set-up lowers the stakes that might contribute to self-consciousness and reluctance to engage. At this point, visitors have engaged in the full cycle of the #dancelab experience. As promised by the
exhibit title, they moved, they participated in something unique and experimental, and created something imminently shareable (many visitors record video on their phones of the large screen display). They saw the video, they danced, and then saw themselves in the video. By creating expectations and then meeting them, #dancelab enhances visitor satisfaction.

#dancelab is impressive and fun, and this close examination of the program offers valuable insights into the production of a successful dance-based museum program. That said, #dancelab required significant resources – a dedicated space in the museum; the hiring of very specialized contractors to develop new technology, compose original music, and choreograph the dances; and the purchase of display screens, motion capture video cameras, and projectors. How could similar goals be met and principles applied at a lower threshold? Moreover, how might museums accomplish this goal while not only encouraging movement, but also contributing to historical interpretation? Part III will address these questions with a series of proposed dance programs and activities.

**TEACHING THROUGH DANCE**

Although participatory, dance-based programming has remained limited in history museums, traditional educators have experimented with these techniques since the 1990s.65 Dance first entered American public schools in the early twentieth century, as a non-competitive physical education activity for girls.66 Building on the constructivist theories of John Dewey, who believed “children learn by doing—action being the test of comprehension, and imagination

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the result of the mind blending the old and familiar to make it new in experience,” late twentieth-century educators pulled dance out of the gym and into academic K-12 classes.67 This applied, interdisciplinary use of dance “facilitates learning by engaging students, giving concrete movement articulation and immediacy to abstract concepts, and promoting creativity.”68 Science teachers use these techniques to help students understand molecules’ movement patterns or to illustrate the difference between lunar and solar eclipses through planet dances.69 One third grade teacher used creative movement to help children “learn spelling words by forming letters with their bodies, forming punctuation marks and expressing the feeling of sentences through movement.”70 A high school English teacher introduced dance to her class and found her “students, literally moved by meter, leaped to a richer understanding and appreciation of poetry than I had imagined I could offer.”71 This abstract, creative movement approach aligns with that used by Weisberg in *Museum Movement Techniques*. This curriculum type “emphasizes the process of students creating dances—the path a student takes to find and solve problems in choreography and its realization—rather than the product and performance. There is more focus on the concepts behind dance: self-expression and evaluation, curiosity, exploration, skepticism, and reflection.”72 In contrast, some social studies teachers have incorporated specific dances or movement styles into classroom learning, similar to what this paper proposes for museums.73

68 Ibid, 499.
70 Ibid.
72 Dickenson, 498.
Smithsonian Folkways, the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, offers lesson plans for K-12 students with dances from Ireland, Spain, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Turkey, Lebanon, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Trinidad, and the United States. Smithsonian Folkways partnered with social studies teachers who have used these techniques in their classrooms to create the curriculums. The Kennedy Center similarly produced lesson plans on Hula, Latin dance, Russian folk dances, and American square dancing. All of these externally-produced curriculum materials meet National Core Arts Standards, as well as National Core Standards for Historical Understanding, Foreign Language, and Geography (depending on the topic). This approach provides insight into “concepts behind the dance,” but focuses more on cultural learning. As Miriam Phillips, Assistant Professor of Dance in the UMD School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies, argues, “dance is embodied culture. A culture’s dance is the encapsulated expression of their history and ethos . . . their social values, economics, environment, and belief system—all represented in their dance patterns.” Rather than using movement as an abstract means of applying other concepts, this method sees dance and the experience of embodiment as having value in and of itself.

Research on arts education, which includes dance, points to a strong positive impact. Multiple studies demonstrate that arts engagement correlates with higher test scores, better attendance, and greater success in academic course work, including for students identified as “children-at-risk.” Fewer studies delve into specific research on dance education in classrooms.

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These studies, as described in the National Dance Education Organization’s 2013 “Evidence: A Report on the Impact of Dance in the K-12 Setting,” are primarily anecdotal and qualitative. Further research is needed, but nearly eighteen separate reports on successful dance programs in the last fifteen years suggest positive outcomes. To date, the field also lacks publication of best practice documents. Most lesson plans use the National Core Arts Standards for Dance for learning outcome benchmarks, but do not build off an established set of methodologies.

**PART III: PROGRAM MODELS**

**KEY PRINCIPLES**

A facilitated, participatory social dance program would draw on many of the key principles described in Parts I and II:

- **Provide visitors with a first-hand, embodied experience of historical dances.** As a movement-based program intended to benefit all visitors, but particularly those with kinesthetic/physical preferences, the emphasis should be on *doing* rather than watching. *Museum Movement Techniques* presents a successful example of applying abstract movement in museums, and many K-12 school programs that incorporate movement use a similar approach. However, this research sought to uncover an opportunity for dance-based programming. Weisberg conducted a small survey among museums with

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movement programs and found that all “regarded movement as a spontaneous, free way to move, whereas dance is viewed as a formal arrangement of movement.” The proposed models for testing in this paper land somewhere in the middle of these definitions. Although visitors will not be expected to demonstrate skill acquisition or learn complex choreography, the proposed programs are grounded in specific movement traditions with the belief that exposing visitors to those dance styles offers a unique historical encounter. The goal is not purely self-inspired creative movement.

- **Advance social dance as a useful lens into cultural history.** Although social dance does not have a strong presence in traditional historical museums, it connects to major themes in American history. There is an opportunity to further related learning outcomes through the creative application of dance programming.

- **Use interpretation best practices,** including:
  - Information is not interpretation. “Interpretation is revelation based on information.” Facilitators will be deeply knowledgeable about the subject, but will not attempt to transmit all their knowledge to the visitor.
  - The chief aim is not instruction, but provocation. In the context of dance instruction, this points to the need to communicate the “feeling” of a movement style over teaching technique. The facilitator will not inform visitors that they are performing correctly or incorrectly. Rather, they will suggest additions or offer new prompts.
  - Interpretation gives visitors the power to select. It is the visitor’s choice to participate and to do so for as long as they wish. The informal learning

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environment of the museum is a value-add in this scenario, as it allows for this free-choice.

• **Make it fun.** The #dancelab case study provided an instructive example, particularly in the ways DAM primed visitors for a unique experience and then followed through with an exciting and dynamic activity. Relatedly…

• **Reduce self-consciousness.** Dance is not an activity all, or even most, visitors may initially feel comfortable engaging in. Consider ways to “lower the stakes” of participation so that the fun can begin. The facilitator’s tone should be warm, welcoming, and informal.

• **Adopt a culturally sensitive approach.** Consider the appropriateness of particular dance styles for this type of programming. The instructor should feel comfortable representing the movement style. Issues of race, gender, religion, etc. should be thought through carefully in the planning process. Be open to feedback and dissenting views.

• **Test, test, test!** This research suggests potential for a participatory, dance-based, facilitated interpretive program in traditional history museums. Based on my study of dance history, experience conducting facilitated interpretation in museums, and ten years of working as a dance educator, the following section proposes an example model for such a program. However, any future effort to apply this research will have to adapt to both institutional and visitor responses and needs. I fully expect iteration and formative evaluation work to improve the proposal.

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**SUGGESTED MODELS FOR TESTING**

**THE CHARLESTON**

**Historical Background:** The Charleston took advantage of the freedom of movement offered by flapper fashion. The young female icons of 1920s culture abandoned the restrictive corsets and heavy petticoats of yesteryear, and shortened their hemlines above the knee. These changes made possible (for the female partner) the Charleston’s uninhibited and improvised style, characterized by flailing arms and wild kicking. Some dance halls and speakeasies made accommodations for ladies who still wore corsets during the day, allowing them to “park” the undergarments in the cloakroom for an evening of unencumbered dancing. In addition, many of the Charleston’s movements intentionally called attention to the newly revealed knees. Dancers squeezed their knees together, kicking their lower legs out at an angle. Another popular (and sexually suggestive) step, “the bees knees,” involved bending over to place the hands on the knees while opening and closing the legs.

**Facilitation Approach:** Unstructured (i.e., the facilitator is stationed on the museum floor, and visitors are welcome to walk up freely. There is not a structured group activity like in a tour or field trip program. This approach is similar to the one used by Kadish in her research). It could also be adapted to a structured program for school groups, but I would be particularly interested to learn whether a program like this could work on an open museum floor.

**Audience:** Social groups and families with children (All are welcome, but I suspect these are the likeliest candidates to participate).

**Desired Outcomes:** Visitors connect the Charleston’s movement style to fashion and cultural trends of the 1920s. Visitors experience movement style of the Charleston.
Materials: Prompting item(s): image, video, object – discussed below, cart/counter to place prompting item(s) and any signage on (will also indicate to visitors that you are “open for business” with something to offer)

Program:

• Briefly describe activity. Example: “We’re talking about 1920s dancing today. Have you heard of the Charleston?”

• Ease into activity. Begin with Visual Thinking Strategy with a related image, video, or object (depending on collection; in this case, the related object could be a clothing item to draw out observations about the type of movement afforded by it). When facilitator paraphrases and reiterates visitors’ verbal expressions, can begin incorporating movement – mimicking the poses or elements of the dance that the visitor called attention to.

• Invite the visitor to mimic part of the pose/movement. They can mirror you or the image/video. At this stage, do not launch into a full movement (unless the visitor expresses desire to do so). Layer in interpretive information – explaining the freedom of movement, the wild abandon associated with the dance, blending of African American and European American movement styles (like with the jazz music danced to), how it expressed a particular ethos of the era.

• Having described the dance style, you can ask the visitor what other types of movements they think could be part of the Charleston. This question may be most appropriate for grade school aged children, who tend to be more comfortable playing with movement than older children and adults. Feel free to read the situation and adapt if you feel others seem open to this line of inquiry. Ask the child to show you the movements they
describe. You can add in suggestions as needed/appropriate (bouncing, shaking/windmilling arms, kicking, making circles).

- Ask the visitor if they would like to learn the Charleston. Move so that you are standing next to the visitor, not in front of them. You will always be doing the movement with the visitor, never instructing then observing. Steps you can use:
  - The Rock Step: Step right foot forward, touch left toe forward, step left foot back, touch right toe back
  - Arms: swinging arms side to side (arms remain bent at elbow, u-shaped movement), jazz hands, finger wiggles, chicken wings (bend arms at elbow, wave up and down); can incorporate shoulder movement (up and down), can combine with the rock step
  - Knees and toes: stand with heels close together and toes apart, knees bent; shift toes in and heels out; repeat, pick up speed; can explain African origins of this movement
  - Bees knees: stand legs hip-width apart, bend knees and place hands on knees; push knees together and cross hands so that right hand on left knee and left hand on right knee; open knees keeping arms and hands crossed; push knees together again, this time moving hands back to original position; repeat; pick up speed

**Time:** 5-7 minutes
RAGTIME DANCES

Historical Background: At the turn of the century, ragtime music grew increasingly popular. Ragtime had hybrid origins. Its earliest composers were African American men like Scott Joplin and Joseph Lamb. Joplin, Lamb, and others combined the structure of European-derived jigs and marches with African rhythms. The resulting high-speed, syncopated piano music dominated dance floors from the 1890s through World War I. Dances performed to ragtime music similarly blended cultural influences. From European/European-American dance came the closed hold position, like that used by couples waltzing or dancing the polka. Ragtime dances increased the sexual nature of the embrace, with partners pressing their cheeks, arms, chests, and hips (or sometimes all of the above!) together as they moved. African traditions inspired the “breakaways,” in which the partners separated from one another in the middle of the dance. These segments often took the form of silly, animal-like movements. Dancers flapped their elbows like wings, outstretched their arms while brandishing pretend claws, or held each other’s necks while hopping around. These boisterous movements gave the dances their animal names – the Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, and Bunny Hug, among others. In addition to the close physical contact and breakaways, rhythmic play and improvisation characterized ragtime dances. Dancers stomped and clapped, added small kicks or slides to the ends of measures, and wiggled and bounced in whatever manner suited them. The result was a new, and wholly American, music and dance, reflective of the various working class groups who created it.

Americans interpreted ragtime and the animal dances as entirely modern, but also, despite their cross-cultural origins, distinctively black. This labeling played out in the identity politics of the dances. For African Americans newly arrived in Northern cities, participation in ragtime dances reaffirmed their place as “modern” people who had abandoned their previous lives in the
rural South. It also offered a sense of community, and indeed a communal activity, in the face of that abandonment. The first European Americans to adopt ragtime dance were recent immigrants living in the same Northern cities. For them, dancing movements understood as black affirmed their new identities as American citizens.

Soon, ragtime dancing spread to a larger audience outside of urban working class environments. Making the leap to the mass market, however, required adaptation and assistance. Professional dance instructors saw an opportunity to increase business by teaching “refined” versions of animal dances. These dance instructors, like the famous Vernon and Irene Castle, sanitized the wild ragtime dances for white middle- and upper-class clientele wary of African American movements but invested in seeing themselves as “modern” people. They collectively called the adapted styles, which included the foxtrot, tango, and other “modern dances.” All essentially were modified versions of the one-step, a very simple dance in which the partners walked and spun in time to the music. Dancers performed the modern dances to ragtime music, but without the hip movements, sexual suggestiveness, and animal imitations associated with “blackness.” The resulting movement styles shared some of the improvisation and playfulness of the animal dances (playing with tempo, bouncing style), but with a far more reserved and formal approach. The marketing of these new dances through instruction manuals, theatrical shows, in-person classes, and special celebrity-branded products turned social dance into big business for the first time.

**Facilitation Approach:** Structured as part of a school field trip or tour. Ideally held in separate space from main museum floor, so can play music and allow movement around the room.

**Audience:** Ages 7-11. Ideal group size 10-16 children.
**Desired Outcomes:** Visitors compare the style of animal dances to the sanitized “modern dances.” Visitors experience movement style of the animal and “modern” dances.

**Materials:** Ragtime music (suggested tracks below) and CD player/speaker/etc; Masking tape (to mark out spaces to stand on the floor); prompting images/videos of dancers performing animal dances and of Irene and Vernon Castle

**Suggested tracks:**
- “Grizzly Bear Rag,” George Botsford (for animal dances)
- “Frog Legs Rag,” James Scott (for animal dances)
- “Champagne Rag,” Joseph Lamb (for animal dances)
- “Maple Leaf Rag,” Scott Joplin (for animal dances)
- “The Entertainer,” Scott Joplin (for animal dances)
- “The Castle Walk,” Europe’s Society Orchestra (for “modern dances”)

**Program:**

- Provide overview of what to expect. Give each student a place to stand where they will have plenty of room to move. Pre-marking out spots with masking tape can avoid wasting time getting students sufficiently spread out; also can organize and settle kids to have them return to their spots if they get rowdy or overexcited. Announce any rules [ex: to keep hands to oneself, to use “walking feet” (i.e. no running)].

- Warm up with gentle stretches (head, shoulder, and arm isolations; reaching to the sky and to toes) and “silly shakes” (shaking all over and stopping in a pose when the facilitator calls out “Freeze!”). Play a ragtime song for these warm ups; ask if any of the students know what kind of music it is; discuss what “ragtime” music refers to (time period: 1890s-1910s; fast tempo; piano; with older students, can discuss syncopation).
• Gather students closer together. You can ask how they think Americans danced in 1900. Using pictures of animal dances and the Castles, lead Visual Thinking Strategies. Do not share specific information about the dances at this point. Goal is to get students observing and thinking about the potential movement styles. When facilitator paraphrases and reiterates visitors’ verbal expressions, can begin incorporating movement – mimicking the poses or elements of the dance that the visitor called attention to. Ask the students to copy you when you do so.

• Have students return to their spots in the room. Explain that now we’re going to try one of the dances from the first set of pictures. Share the name of a dance (Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, Bunny Hug, Camel Walk). When the music starts they should do whatever they think it might look like. Play music by Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, or others. Give the students 1-2 minutes to improvise the dance. You should join in, mimicking their movements and encouraging their movement decisions. Call out “freeze” and have them return to their spots at the end. Explain that young people loved these dances because they were silly; for older students, can include more content related to African American and immigrant communities. They really did hold their arms out like claws and dance like bears, flap their wings like turkeys, and hop like bunnies. They shook their hips, spun in circles, and kicked their legs. In between these steps, the dancers stomped and clapped, beat their hands on their legs, and slid from side to side. Animal dances were fun because you could do whatever you wanted. Play another song for a second improvisation session. Again, give them a dance name and let them dance freely. This time, at a break in the song, call out for stomping and clapping, then to return to their animal dance.
• Return to spots in the room. Sit down to briefly discuss the “modern dances.” Not everyone liked that the animal dances were so silly and free. Some people thought they were too wild. But ragtime music was so popular that everyone wanted to be able to dance to it. So some dance teachers came up with new dances and called them “modern dances.”

Irene and Vernon Castle were the most famous teachers – so famous that a song was written for them (“The Castle Walk”). They had a set of rules for their dances (Figure 5) – read selections aloud from this document.

• Have the group stand up. Tell them you’re going to play “The Castle Walk.” They can dance however they would like, but you’ll be watching to see if they break the Castles’ rules. Again, allow for 1-2 minutes of improvisation. Call out the rules if you see any violations (this should be done in a warm, funny manner – not a critical one!)

• Ask the group to sit down in their spots. Discuss and reflect on the experience. What type of dancing could they do once all the rules applied? (some of the answers likely will be “walking” – elaborate on this to say that most of the “modern dances” were different versions of the one step, which was basically walking with a partner). Which type of

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**CASTLE HOUSE SUGGESTIONS FOR CORRECT DANCING**

Do not wriggle the shoulders.
Do not shake the hips.
Do not twist the body.
Do not flounce the elbows.
Do not pump the arms.
Do not hop—glide instead.
Avoid low, fantastic, and acrobatic dips.
Stand far enough away from each other to allow free movement of the body in order to dance gracefully and comfortably.

The gentleman should rest his hand lightly against the lady’s back, touching her with the finger-tips and wrist only, or, if preferred, with the inside of the wrist and the back of the thumb.

The gentleman’s left hand and forearm should be held up in the air parallel with his body, with the hand extended, holding the lady’s hand lightly on his palm. The arm should never be straightened out.

Remember you are at a social gathering, and not in a gymnasium.

Drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion.

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*Figure 5: Souvenir program, titled “Castle House Suggestions for Correct Dancing,” from Vernon and Irene Castle’s first American tour in 1914*
dancing did they like best? If asked about the type of dancing they thought Americans did in 1900, follow up to discuss whether the ragtime dances matched up?

**Time:** 20-30 minutes

## CONCLUSION

I believe that participatory, dance-based interpretive programming can provide an “encounter with the past,” a numinous experience. Anecdotally, this type of experience seems to be available almost exclusively via special events hosted at historic house museums and living history sites. However, nothing in the research suggests that a similar approach could not be taken up as a regular program offering in traditional, purpose-built history museums. Parts I and II of this paper established key principles to consider in developing any participatory, kinesthetic interpretation programs based on social dance history. While acknowledging that learning and visitor preference types can be fluid or overlapping, this movement-based approach has the potential to engage kinesthetic learners and those who are drawn to physical experiences in museums. The next step in this research is to test an experiential, dance history program like the hypothetical examples described in Part III on a museum floor with real visitors and with actual desired learning outcomes.
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