Since 1944, when it was founded as a separate department of The New York Public Library, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division has creatively explored many ways in which dance, an art that exists in the moment of performance, can be recorded, preserved, made accessible, and, most importantly, kept alive. In the words of the Division’s founder, Genevieve Oswald, its mission is to create “tangible records for an intangible art” (Oswald, 1968).

Books, of which the JRDD holds some 42,000 as of 2012, represent only 3 percent of a collection that also includes film, video, notation scores, set and costume designs, sound recordings, oral histories, artworks, clippings, programs, photographs, and archival manuscript material ranging from correspondence and financial records to choreographic notes. The collection encompasses every kind of dance: ballet, modern, historical, tap, social and folk, ethnic and rituals, and related movement arts. Its treasures include everything from Vaslav Nijinsky’s original diary to a film of George Balanchine dancing Don Quixote with the young Suzanne Farrell to a collection of exquisite nineteenth century dance cards from European ballrooms.

As the world’s largest and most comprehensive archive of dance materials, the JRDD is a vital presence in the dance community as well as the scholarly world, assisting choreographers and companies to revive historical works and maintain their own legacies. In addition to collecting material, the JRDD creates its own recordings through the Documenting and Preserving Live Performance program, as well as new oral histories with major figures in the dance world. Donors to the JRDD collection have included dance companies, performing arts venues, choreographers, dancers, scholars and writers, and dance lovers.

History
The Dance Division has grown from modest beginnings and helped to pioneer the very concept of a dance library. The seminal figure in the founding of the department was librarian Genevieve Oswald, who oversaw the collection from its inception and became the first Division Chief when Dance was made an independent division of the library in 1964; it had previously been part of the Music Division. (Until its formal name change in 1999, the division was known as the Dance Collection.) That same year, writer and scholar Lillian Moore, a long-time patron and supporter, described the Dance Division’s home in a corner of the music division in the main New York Public Library building at 5th Ave. and 42nd Street: the 20-foot-square room had two tables with room for 16 readers. A year later, in 1965, the Dance Division moved to the new Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, where it gained space for collections, staff, and patrons. Eventually, as the Division and technology changed, its public areas included viewing and listening stations and computers that provide access to online catalogs and research databases.

As one of the research divisions of the vast New York Public Library, the Dance Division shares the resources of the larger institution including technology, equipment, and ever-growing space in both physical and digital repositories. The JRDD’s physical materials are available to researchers only on-site at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy & Lewis B. Cullman Center, though circulating materials relating to dance, music, and theater are available in the same building. This location is convenient for the many students and artists based at Lincoln Center, and at other schools and companies in New York, but the Dance Division also draws visitors from around the country and around the world.

Genevieve Oswald retired as curator of the Dance Division in 1987. Her successors have
been Dorothy Lourdou (acting curator, 1987-1988), Madeleine Nichols (1988-2005), Patricia Rader (acting curator, 2005-2006), Michelle Potter (2006-2008), and Jan Schmidt (2008-the present). Throughout its life, the JRDD has flourished thanks to the dedication of its staff members, some of them former or current dancers and choreographers, who combine knowledge and love of dance with professional expertise in cataloging, archival processing, preservation, collection development, oral history, video production, and reference services. The JRDD also benefits from the contributions of volunteers, many with extensive backgrounds in dance, and the support of two organizations, the Committee for the Dance Division and the Friends of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, which provide financial support, creative guidance, and outreach to the dance world and the community of dance lovers.

As part of The New York Public Library, which is supported by both public and private funds, the Dance Division is intimately tied to the city where it resides. In 1971, a library-wide financial crisis threatened the Dance Division with severe reductions in service and staff. The crisis was widely publicized, and the dance world rallied with a fund-raising gala. A committee headed by Donald Saddler produced a program of ballet and modern dance, which was presented at New York City Center on January 24, 1972. In addition to raising money, the gala demonstrated the Dance Division’s vital importance to the dance community, and the degree to which it was valued both by those who used its resources and by those who gave their own collections and trusted the library to preserve their legacies.

One of the Dance Division’s generous long-time supporters was Jerome Robbins, who recalled the importance of The New York Public Library in his own childhood. On his death in 1998, Robbins willed his entire personal archive to the library, along with additional financial support from The Jerome Robbins Foundation, and in 1999 the Dance Division was named in his honor. Since his death, Robbins’s papers, artworks, and large collection of video, film, and audio recordings have been processed and cataloged. The Jerome Robbins Foundation and the Robbins Rights Trust maintain a close and supportive relationship with the JRDD.

**JRDD Collections**
Some highlights of the Dance Division’s major collections include video and paper collections of modern dance pioneers Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and the Denishawn Company; choreographers Agnes de Mille, Ruth Page, and Jerome Robbins; dancers Rudolf Nureyev, Alexandra Danilova, and Mikhail Baryshnikov; writers Lincoln Kirstein and Lillian Moore; and companies and venues the Merce Cunningham Dance Foundation, Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, American Ballet Theatre, and New York City Ballet. An early gift to the Division, the Cia Fornaroli Collection, is a treasure trove of materials relating to nineteenth century Italian ballet, in the form of rare books, libretti, manuscripts, prints, and playbills. Ongoing partnerships with venues including the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Dance Theatre Workshop, and Works & Process at the Guggenheim keep the JRDD current with the cutting edge of dance and performance arts. In the twenty-first century, the JRDD has partnered with Core of Culture to create a database and digital archive of dance from the Kingdom of Bhutan. The JRDD maintains ties to other dance libraries and dance research organizations both nationally and internationally.

Moving image materials are a significant part of the JRDD’s assets. The collection began in 1965, when Jerome Robbins donated six cans of film and a small, ongoing percentage of his royalties from *Fiddler on the Roof* to establish what would eventually be named the Jerome Robbins Archive of the Recorded Moving Image, and grow to encompass 22,000 titles. Significantly, its purpose was not only to preserve archival
film and video, but to create new recordings. Since 1965, the original documentation program has recorded over a thousand dance performances in collaboration with numerous companies, artists, and presenters. The moving image archive also responds to the challenges of preserving old, deteriorated, or obsolete formats of video, drawing on the expertise and equipment of an on-site lab where fragile videos can be transferred to stable formats.

Another major component of the JRDD is the Oral History Project, which was founded in 1974, initially recording interviews with eight towering figures in the dance world: Frederick Ashton, George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Léonide Massine, Alexandra Danilova, Alicia Markova, Ninette de Valois, and Lucia Chase. Since its beginnings, the project has gone on to record oral histories with writers, historians, administrators, and technical artists, as well as dancers and choreographers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the project developed a special focus on recording interviews with artists living with AIDS. Responding to gaps in written scholarship about dance, the oral history project creates opportunities for artists to speak at length and in depth, openly and thoughtfully, about their careers and their views of dance. The interviews, which are transcribed and also preserved as sound recordings, create important primary source material for scholars and students.

In addition to providing regular reference services for researchers and access to its collections, with all the behind-the-scenes processing work that entails, the JRDD shares its treasures with the public through exhibitions and public programs. Along with the rest of the library world, the JRDD is moving into an increasingly digital future, which provides new opportunities and challenges for both preserving and providing access to archival collections. The Dance Division is exploring ways for digital material to be made available to patrons online, in secure and researchable settings, and is embracing the benefits of interconnectedness among institutions made possible by digitization and the internet. Even as platforms and resources evolve, the heart of the Dance Division will remain its intimate relationship with the dance community, which will ensure the continual growth and active use of its treasured collections.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see Selected Resources for Further Research.

Imogen Sara Smith is the Project Manager for the Dance Heritage Coalition, and has almost ten years’ experience working in dance archives. As an independent film scholar, she is the author of In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City, and Buster Keaton: the Persistence of Comedy, and she writes regularly on film and the arts for a variety of journals and websites.