“Dancing the Dream” Opens Oct. 4 at the National Portrait Gallery

Exhibition Showcases Innovation in American Dance As America’s Culture in Motion

“Dancing the Dream” will portray how the extraordinary opportunity of American life has been featured in Broadway shows and Hollywood films, as well as modern, classical and contemporary dance during the past 100 years. The exhibition tells the stories of performers, choreographers and impresarios who harnessed America’s diversity into dance styles that defined the national experience: Dance captured American culture in motion. The National Portrait Gallery will open the Smithsonian’s first exhibition on American dance Oct. 4. It will run through July 13, 2014.

From the era of live performance to today’s media age, the exhibition will primarily use the National Portrait Gallery’s remarkable collections to chronicle how dance conveyed the dynamism and innovation that fueled the personality of American culture in the past 100 years. In addition to dramatic photographs and posters of key figures ranging from Isadora Duncan to Beyoncé, the exhibition will create the thrill of movement through stunning video installations. Dance as live performance will also play an integral role in the exhibition experience: For the first time at the Smithsonian, a dance company will be in residence, rehearsing in the exhibition galleries this fall with performances later during the exhibition.

“American culture fosters innovation and creativity,” said Kim Sajet, director of the National Portrait Gallery. “These characteristics are well demonstrated in the constantly evolving styles of dance and those who have created this distinctive American form.”

Dance accompanied immigrants to the New World, but the sights and sounds of the American experience beat with the pulse of the new. Newness demanded innovation, and the fleeting nature of dance incorporated change effortlessly. Opportunity flowed freely, and American dance incorporated the hope and creative freedom of the American Dream.
The sense of the new injected a unique identity into American ballet, modern dance and contemporary choreography. It was conveyed to audiences through live stage performances and on screen, initially through film, then TV, then on the dedicated cable channel MTV in the 1980s and 1990s. Now dance is increasingly being broadcast to today’s audiences on reality TV shows and via YouTube.


The exhibition includes nearly 70 images of such iconic figures as Fred Astaire, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Beyoncé, Agnes de Mille, Isadora Duncan, Lady Gaga, Savion Glover, Michael Jackson, Gene Kelly, Madonna and Rudolph Valentino. The show also features such legendary choreographers as Alvin Ailey, George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Mark Morris, Jerome Robbins and Twyla Tharp. The ability of dance to express American culture in motion will be enhanced by dynamic large-scale video installations shown throughout the exhibition.

One of the most innovative elements of “Dancing the Dream” is the Portrait Gallery’s collaboration with the Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company, recognized as one of the preeminent dance companies in the nation. In preparation for the world premiere of a work choreographed by DTSB, the company will rehearse in the exhibition space Oct. 5, 12, 19, 26 and Nov. 2 from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. (as well as select dates in March and April). These rehearsals will be open to the public and streamed live. Feedback from museum visitors and internet viewers will help shape two site-specific works, which will be based on the museum’s collection and focus on the changing face of America. The result will be two hour-long works that will be performed for the public in the museum’s Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard Nov. 16, and in April 2014.

Support was made possible through a grant from the Smithsonian Women’s Committee.

National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story. The National Portrait Gallery, part of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000. Website: npg.si.edu.

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