


## Dancing in the archives. Choreographers' notes and drawings as sources for art history

**Pauline Chevalier**

Professor in Art History, Univesité de Tours

Former Senior Fellow at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art ✉ 

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In 1991, dance historian Laurence Louppe opened an exhibition at the Musées de Marseille, devoted to forms of dance writing, choreographers' drawings, and various notation systems, such as the Feuillet notation<sup>1</sup> (1700) and Labanotation<sup>2</sup> (1928). The accompanying catalog<sup>3</sup> revisits these often-overlooked sources, shedding light on their significance not only for the history of dance but also for the history of art. Louppe's perspective intertwines the history of choreographic notation with more freeform practices, such as sketches and informal notes that inform the creative process. Through her work, Louppe has opened up a critical space for inquiry, posing a series of compelling questions about the relationship between drawing and dance, the evolution of graphic culture, and its manifestation through gesture. While the catalog raises many important questions, it also offers a generous invitation for further research.

Since 2018, the "*Chorégraphies. Écriture et dessin, signe et image dans les processus de création et de transmission chorégraphiques (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle)*"<sup>4</sup> program I developed at

<sup>1</sup> The program takes his title from the "Chorégraphie" by Raoul Auger Feuillet, describing the writing of dance before taking on its actual definition at the end of the 18th century to designate the artwork. On the history of "Chorégraphie", see the work Marie Glon, "Les Lumières chorégraphiques: les maîtres de danse européens au cœur d'un phénomène éditorial (1700-1760)" (PhD thesis, EHESS, 2014); Marie Glon, "Faire voyager des danses et des idées: la formation d'un espace chorégraphique européen par les 'danses gravées' au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Diasporas*, no. 26 (2015): 75-91; Marie Glon, "Inventer une technique scripturaire au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : la Chorégraphie ou l'art de décrire la danse", *Artefact : l'Europe technicienne*, no. 4 (July 2016): 199-214. See also "Drawings to dance by", *Choreographies. Drawing, Dancing, 17th-21st centuries* (Paris, Liénart, MBAA, INHA, 2025), 26-35.

<sup>2</sup> See Albrecht Knust, *Dictionnaire de la cinéographie Laban*, translated by Jean Challet and Jacqueline Challet-Haas (Crépy-en-Valois: CNEM, 1992); Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of movement*, edited by Lisa Ullmann (London: Mac Donald and Evans, 1960); Rudolf Laban, *A Life for dance: reminiscences*, translated by Lisa Ullmann (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1975); Rudolf Laban, *Espace dynamique. Choreutique, vision de l'espace dynamique*, translated by Élisabeth Schwartz-Rémy (Brussels: Contredanse, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Danses tracées: dessins et notation des chorégraphes*, edited by Laurence Louppe (Paris and Marseille: Dis voir and Musées de Marseille, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> A collective research program, directed by Pauline Chevalier. Study and research coordinators: Johanna Daniel, PhD in art history (Université Lumière Lyon 2), Lou Forster, PhD in art history (EHESS), Mathilde Leichlé, research fellow (INHA) and PhD student in art history (Université Paris-Cité), Antonin Liatard, PhD in art history (Université de Bourgogne/Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve), Juan Pablo Pekarek, research fellow (INHA) and PhD student in art history (Université Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne). Scientific committee : Mathias Auclair (BnF), Laurent Barré (CND), Sarah Burkhalter (SIK-IESA), Benoît Cailmail (BnF), Marie Glon (Université Lille 3), Joël Huthwohl (BnF), Marine Kisiel (Palais Galliera - musée de la mode de la Ville de Paris), Bruno Ligore (Université Côte d'Azur), Juliette Riandey (CND), Laurence Schmidlin (Musée d'art du Valais), Laurent Sebillotte (CND).

the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA)<sup>5</sup>, has continued this exploration. Conducted in collaboration with the Centre national de la danse (CND) and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), the program's starting point was simple yet ambitious: while the relationship between dance and the visual arts has often been examined through the lens of collaborative projects between artists, what happens when we focus on the graphic practices of choreographers and performers themselves? Drawing, a practice marked by great fluidity, permeates everyday life and integrates into the preparatory work of both visual art and intellectual endeavors<sup>6</sup>. As such, the program sought to explore how drawing can become an integral part of choreographic practice –both in the creative process and in the transmission of dance over time. Taking its name from the “Chorégraphie” by Raoul Auger Feuillet (fig. 1), describing the writing of dance before its modern use for the dance artwork, this research program was developed in two stages: an exploratory phase, followed by the preparation of an exhibition presented at the Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology in Besançon, from April 18 to September 21, 2025.



Figure 1. Raoul Auger Feuillet, *Chorégraphie ou l'art de décrire la danse* (Paris, Feuillet and Brunet, 1701, p. 68-69. Paris, Institut national d'histoire de l'art library, Jacques Doucet collections, 8 RES 2457. Photo: Michael Quemener / INHA.

<sup>5</sup> The Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) conducts research programs over several years, as part of a policy of collaboration between institutions and fields of knowledge, in order to promote previously unpublished collections and art-historical working methodologies.

<sup>6</sup> See recent work on mathematical drafts, in particular see the *Emergences 2022-2026* project on mathematical drafts and the related seminar *Brouillons scientifiques*, coordinated by Emmylou Haffner (ITEM, CNRS / ENS).

## 1. Drawing and the invisible sources of dance

The intellectual status of drawing as the foundational language of the arts is a recurring theme in drawing theories. Art historian Filippo Baldinucci, in his *Vocabolario* (1681), defines drawing as “a visible demonstration, made by lines, of those things which man had previously conceived in his mind and imagined in his idea”<sup>7</sup>. A starting point for all artistic activity, this definition becomes even more complex in dance, as it encompasses both movement and a sensitive intellectual process. Reflecting on the drawings of ballet masters, dancers, and choreographers means engaging with an intellectual process that oscillates between the pencil’s gesture and the body’s movement, between image and sensation. Drawing thus lies at the core of choreographic knowledge, even if it is not always central to the artists’ direct practices. Lizzie Boubli underscores the paradox of drawing, a paradox that resonates especially outside the realm of fine art:

It is central, yet tends to fade and disappear as the work develops, builds, and refines itself, until it is transposed onto a medium destined to last. Its relationship to finality puts drawing in an untenable position, since its function is essentially utilitarian, even though it holds a primary place in theoretical writings (from Cennino Cennini in the 14th century onward)<sup>8</sup>.

We align with her argument, advocating for “a hermeneutics of drawing, rather than an epistemology”. Our goal is indeed to consider choreographers’ drawings through a hermeneutic lens. This approach is crucial given that drawings are often thought of as texts. They are part of the text, but not just in their codified notation. Our aim is to continuously refine the definition of drawing, in all its varied forms. Louis Marin’s analysis of Stendhal’s manuscripts will guide this investigation.

Louis Marin, art historian and semiologist, closely examined Stendhal’s *La Vie de Henri Brulard*, particularly the two volumes dotted with drawings in the margins. Marin classifies these drawings and probes their uses, distinguishing between:

The image-drawing, mimetic, which aims to represent a fragment of space and objects, for example a landscape and the scheme-drawing, which aims to signify an operation of construction: the first concerns what Kant would have called the reproductive imagination; the second, the productive imagination. [...] Between the two, we find intermediate forms such as drawings in plan, section, or elevation, and scenographic drawings, which serve as both a ground plan for the stage and a set, locating characters and even their movements –a narrative matrix that is both a reproductive image (reproducing what has never been seen) and a construction scheme (building a memorial matrix), though not precisely geometric<sup>9</sup>.

The distinctions proposed by Marin are highly relevant for our study of choreographic drawings, particularly scenographic ones. This typology, however, is not always self-evident. On many occasions, I have excluded certain drawings from the corpus precisely because they fit within the realm of scenographic drawings –between layout plans and dramaturgical paper schemes. Marin’s approach provides an important framework for examining the nuances of what constitutes a drawing, but it also prompts us to ask deeper questions about what we mean by *dance* in choreographic drawings and notes.

<sup>7</sup> Filippo Baldinucci, *Vocabolario toscano dell’ arte del disegno*, (Firenze, 1681), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Lizzie Boubli. “La critique génétique face au processus graphique à l’époque de la première modernité”, in *Epistémologie du dessin*, edited by Agnès Callu, (Lyon: Jacques André, 2020), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Marin. “Dessins et gravures dans les manuscrits de *la Vie d’Henry Brulard*”, in *Stendhal. Écritures du romantisme*, edited by Béatrice Didier and Jacques Need, (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1988), 107-125.

The Centre National de la Danse and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France<sup>10</sup> hold a significant collection of choreographers' archives, including drafts, sketches, and preparatory drawings that are directly tied to the creative process. These drawings do not depict sets or costumes but rather compositions, emotions, and instantaneous works—traces of invention that are rarely studied, let alone exhibited. This archival material is not exclusive to contemporary practices, which have been shaped by a historiographical context that has elevated the archive to a central issue in contemporary art. The archives of the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra also contain hundreds of drawings from the 18th and 19th centuries, notably the collections of André Jean Jacques Deshayes and Joseph Hansen, which together comprise nearly five hundred drawings.

Trained at the Paris Opéra, André Jean Jacques Deshayes (1777-1846)<sup>11</sup> spent part of his career in London. While the British Library preserves some of his correspondence, few of his choreographic materials remain, as many were lost in the fire at the King's Theatre, where he served as ballet master. However, the Parisian archives contain numerous elements from his time in England, as evidenced by the watermarks on English paper used for many of the drawings. The Bibliothèque de l'Opéra archives reveal a strong inclination towards notation and the precise role of drawing in dance. Alongside drawings attributed to Deshayes himself, the collection includes works by other ballet masters such as Charles-Louis Didelot (1767-1837) and manuscripts by Jean-Etienne Despréaux (1748-1820). Deshayes adhered to Jean-Georges Noverre's visual and pictorial conception of dance, which made drawing an essential tool.

In his *Lettres sur la danse* (*Letters on Dance*), Noverre offers numerous analogies between ballet and painting, dance and drawing, urging every ballet master to “throw (his) ideas on paper” (Letter IV). His terminology frequently transcends mere metaphor to establish a shared process between dance and painting, moving beyond figurative language to a tangible artistic practice. While we will not delve into Noverre's linguistic play, he repeatedly employs terms such as *esquisse* (sketch) and *dessin* (drawing) to describe both the ballet master's craft and his own writing. Of particular note is the term *composer* and its derivatives, *compositeur* and *composition*, which have been in use since Nicolas de Saint-Hubert's 1641 work<sup>12</sup>. This term resonates with the materiality of the process described by Noverre: the composition of scenic tableaux, the meticulous arrangement of groups and figures that contribute to the overall image. Here, composition originates in drawing, the common tool of both painter and ballet master.

As Noverre writes:

A composer who wants to rise above the ordinary must study painters and follow them in their various methods of composition and execution. His art serves the same purpose as theirs, whether in achieving resemblance, blending colors, employing chiaroscuro, or in grouping and draping figures, positioning them elegantly, and conveying character, fire, and expression. But how can a ballet master succeed if he does not unite all the qualities that define a great painter?<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> On the collections of these two institutions, see the texts by Laurent Sebillotte (CND), Juliette Riandey (CND), Mathias Auclair (BNF) and Joël Huthwohl (BNF) in the catalog of the exhibition resulting from the research program: *Chorégraphies. Dessiner, danser (XVIIe - XXIe siècle / Choreographies. Drawing, dancing (17th – 21st centuries))*, edited by Pauline Chevalier and Amandine Royer (Paris: Liénart, INHA and Musée des beaux-arts et d'archéologie de Besançon, 2025).

<sup>11</sup> On the André Jean Jacques Deshayes archives and collections, see Pauline Chevalier and Bruno Ligore (ed.), *Faire image : noter et dessiner la danse dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (Paris, INHA, forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Nicolas de Saint Hubert, *De la manière de composer et faire réussir les ballets*, 1641.

<sup>13</sup> J.-G. Noverre, *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets*, Lyon, Delaroche, 1760. Letter V, 68.

In 1822, André Jean Jacques Deshayes published *Idées générales sur l'Académie Royale de Musique, et plus spécialement sur la Danse*, in which he compared a *galerie de peinture* (painting gallery) to *tableaux vivants*<sup>14</sup> (living pictures):

An individual who were to assemble a considerable gallery of paintings would first and foremost need a spacious room with well-designed lighting; all the more so a theatre [...] must have a setting that is proportionate to it, and a considerable space to put them into action; [...] The Opera, as has been said a hundred times, is partly a spectacle for the eyes; it is therefore useful to neglect nothing in order to satisfy them<sup>15</sup>.



Figure 2. Charles Louis Didelot (Stockholm, 1767 – Kiev, 1837) and André Jean Jacques Deshayes (Paris, 1777 – Batignolles, 1846), Choreographic notes and drawings, between 1790 and 1810. Black ink and pencil on laid paper and wove paper. H. 27,2; L. 63,2 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, André Jean Jacques Deshayes collection, items 6 and 7. Photo: Michael Quemener / INHA.

The Deshayes collection illustrates the use of drawing in the composition of postures, group formations, and scenic tableaux, often at multiple scales (fig. 2). The ambition of these drawings is evident, with some expressing frustration over the difficulty of maintaining correct perspective, while others rigorously adhere to its rules. Some drawings incorporate collage techniques, reinforcing the material dimension of figure composition. Others depict the use of wooden mannequins, showing nude figures in simplified forms, drawn directly from studio models, which became increasingly common in the early 19th century.

At a time when ballet was evolving into an “ocular spectacle”<sup>16</sup> built upon visual imagery, the ballet master’s studio was not far removed from the painters. Drawing became an indispensable dramaturgical tool, capturing the complementarity of bodies and their complex interweaving in group formations, while also allowing choreographers to envision the spectator’s overall perspective. Some drawings are rough drafts of figures, complete with props and annotations, whereas others embody a vision of total spectacle, defying gravity with dancers soaring through clouds and horses galloping into the heavens. This fantastical dimension was fueled by advancements in stage machinery and set design, reinforcing the idea of a fully integrated spectacle where bodies and scenery together create a cohesive artistic vision.

<sup>14</sup> On the André Jean Jacques Deshayes collection and the tableau vivant, see Julie Ramos. “Du mouvement à la stase, et retour. Réflexions sur les relations entre tableau vivant et danse dans quelques dessins du fonds Deshayes”, in Chevalier and Ligore, *Faire image*. See also Bruno Ligore. “Tableaux scéniques et arabesques”, in *Chorégraphies. Dessiner, danser (XVIIe - XXIe siècle)*, edited by Pauline Chevalier et Amandine Royer, (Paris: Liénart, INHA and Musée des beaux-arts et d’archéologie de Besançon, 2025).

<sup>15</sup> André Jean Jacques Deshayes, *Idées générales sur l'Académie royale de musique. Et plus spécialement sur la danse* (Paris: Monge, 1822), 8.

<sup>16</sup> In 1841, the poet Théophile Gautier used this expression : “Le temps des spectacles purement oculaires est arrivé », Théophile Gautier, *Histoire de l’art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans* (Paris, Hetzel, 1853), t.II, 175.

From a similar perspective, but with the support of a much larger corps de ballet, drawing became an indispensable tool in the practice of Joseph Hansen (1842–1907)<sup>17</sup>, whose collection represents another major source in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra. As a ballet master in London, Moscow and Paris, Hansen developed a distinctive creative technique, exceptionally well-documented in the archives: each creation file includes drawings, some relatively succinct, others highly elaborate, spanning dozens of sheets. His preparatory pencil sketches range from simple figure studies to intricate compositions detailing the precise arrangement of corps de ballet dancers. Sometimes, mere dots and lines indicate trajectories, but more often, the figures are fully rendered, complete with props, costume details, and annotations beneath the depiction of an entire scene. For several choreographies, including *Sous les palmiers* and *Eglé la Bergère*, each drawing represents a *tableau*, explicitly designated as such by the ballet master.

Hansen's working process remained fairly consistent from one ballet to the next: he first sketched figures with minimal detail before transferring the formations of the corps de ballet onto separate sheets (fig. 3). He then refined each dancer's depiction with remarkable precision, capturing the orientation of faces, the position of feet, and the use of accessories. His confident pencil strokes range from strong, expressive lines that evoke the texture of the floor to delicate curves accentuating the movement of a calf, the fluidity of an arm, or the expressiveness of a face. Though sketches by nature, these drawings offer an abundance of useful details for visualizing the different stages of the scenic tableaux. Rather than focusing on individual steps, they emphasize the spatial configuration of the corps de ballet.



Figure 3. Joseph Hansen (Brussels, 1842 - Asnières-sur-Seine, 1907), Choreographic notes for *Sous les palmiers*, 1877. Pencil, black ink, watercolour and white gouache on laid paper. H. 20.5; L. 32 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Joseph Hansen collection, B-905 (33). Photo: Michael Quemener / INHA.

<sup>17</sup> See Jane Pritchard, "The Great Hansen": An Introduction to the Work of Joseph Hansen, a Forgotten European Choreographer of the Late Nineteenth Century, with a Chronology of His Ballets", *Dance Research*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2008), 73-139.

This period saw significant advancements in the notation of corps de ballet formations. In *Lettres sur la danse*, Noverre compares the corps de ballet to “the image of an infantry company<sup>18</sup>”. Choral dance notation explored abstraction, using sequences of points to define the coherence of geometric formations, often drawing inspiration from military treatises. This approach is evident in three sketchbooks documenting the production of *L'Excelsior*<sup>19</sup>, a monumental ballet first performed in Milan in 1881, choreographed by Luigi Manzotti (fig. 4). Here, drawing serves not only as a compositional tool but also as a means of visualization—a programmatic vision of the *tableaux*, orchestrating the ballet’s visual spectacle. These drawings requires a different approach. While the drawings in the André Jean Jacques Deshayes collection demand close attention to dancers’ postures and iconographic references, late 19th-century composition drawings align more closely with a graphic culture less concerned with kinesthetic empathy—the embodied sensation evoked by the drawing. In his *Traité de l’art de la danse* (1820), Charles Blasis instructs dancers to “draw themselves”, encouraging a continual shift between internal bodily awareness and external visualization of body schema. Drawing thus becomes a cognitive tool for understanding and observing the body. In Blasis’s work and early 19th-century dance history, drawing primarily serves as a means of representation and composition. Yet, it would be a mistake to overlook its subtle role as an instrument for bodily comprehension.

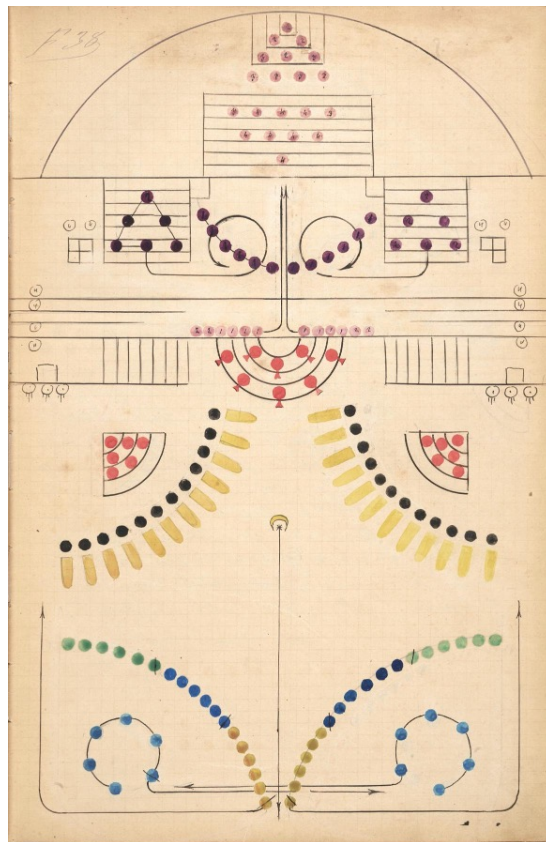


Figure 4. Eugenio Casati (dates unknown), Choreographic notations for *Excelsior*, 1881. Ink and watercolor on paper. Milan, Museo Teatrale alla Scala, library archives.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-George Noverre, “De la composition des corps de Ballets”, dans *Lettres sur les arts imitateurs en général, et la danse en particulier*, (Paris, Collin, 1807), 351.

<sup>19</sup> See *Excelsior: Documenti e saggi*, edited by Flavia Pappacena (Rome: Di Giacomo, 1998).

This is precisely where the program's discourse is situated —between drawing as a representational tool and drawing as an analytical tool, articulated through line. These exceptional bodies of work made necessary the installation of a collaborative research process, bringing together dance scholars and art historians to develop a shared language and approach to reading the archives. While it may seem self-evident that our perception of archival materials varies depending on our disciplinary backgrounds, a deeper examination of the challenges inherent in cross-disciplinary analysis remains essential.

## 2. Analyzing drawing as dancers

The research program carried out at INHA was supported by several “research workshops”, closed to the public and attended by a dozen dance and art history scholars working directly with archival materials. One such workshop took place at the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, focusing on the André Jean Jacques Deshayes collection. I co-organized this workshop with Bruno Ligore, dance researcher, dancer, and specialist in early 19th-century dance. From the outset, we quickly aligned on the stakes of our dialogue and the value of bringing our perspectives together. Bruno Ligore contributed extensive expertise in the dance history of the period, while I proposed an approach that considered not only the materiality and iconographic references of the drawings but also the artistic treatment of dancing figures on the page.

Although we both had an intuition that this workshop could serve both research communities, I had not fully anticipated the extent of the epistemological shift it would introduce for art-historical research—while still maintaining my perspective as an art historian. Since the beginning of the program, I had regularly emphasized its grounding within a clearly defined disciplinary field: art history. The goal was not to establish a dance studies program at INHA but rather to explore a dialogue between our disciplines, using often unpublished archival materials as a starting point.

The workshop was structured in several phases: preparatory research on Deshayes' career and the various choreographers represented in the collection; selection of approximately 30 drawings for in-depth analysis; a day of exchanges with 10 researchers<sup>20</sup> in the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra's reserves; transcription of the discussions to prepare for a study day, which was ultimately followed by a publication. The workshop format was intentionally flexible, allowing for open-ended hypotheses to be shared and debated—an essential component of the research process.

What stood out most was the convergence of two distinct approaches. The drawings in the Deshayes collection capture various stages in the composition of dancers' postures and group formations, sometimes extending to elaborate scenic tableaux featuring numerous figures and set elements. Dance scholars, for instance, noted the particular way in which figures were anchored to the ground and the emphasis on elevated postures, while art historians focused on iconographic sources and the treatment of the body, drawing connections to contemporary painting, such as that of Girodet. We did not approach these drawings in the same way; rather, the juxtaposition of viewpoints helped us bridge different historical contexts and, more importantly, shift each other's perspectives.

Louis Marin, in his essay on the art-historical conversation<sup>21</sup>, writes words that resonate profoundly in this context: “In the art conversation, then, there is not just a passage to language, but a passage to the sharing of language”. The act of discussion establishes common ground, and meaningful dialogue can only emerge through a progressive understanding of one another —beyond mere impressions or personal affinities. In this sense, free-form workshops, closed to the public, provide an ideal space for constructing a shared language and create a common foundation for conversation. Gesture and movement are not approached in the same way across disciplines. It is important to recognize the work of Marina Nordera<sup>22</sup>, whose research in dance studies has consistently sought to provide historically informed readings of painting, particularly

<sup>20</sup> The researchers for this workshop were Mathias Auclair, Laurent Barré, Séverine Forlani, Lou Forster, Bénédicte Jarrasse, Marine Kisiel, Julie Ramos and Antonin Liatard.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Marin, *De l'entretien* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1997), 12.

<sup>22</sup> See Marina Nordera, “Choré-graphies : pour une épistémologie de la perception dans l'histoire de la notation en danse”, in M. del Valle, B. Maurmayr, M. Nordera and al., *Pratiques de la pensée en danse. Les Ateliers de la danse 2005-2013* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020), 51-68.

16th-century Italian painting. Without making broad claims about disciplinary misunderstandings, I want to emphasize the value of reading drawings—as well as paintings and sculptures—as a *dancer*. This is where the sharing of language becomes particularly relevant, especially when the corpus intertwines practical and epistemological concerns.

When André Jean Jacques Deshayes or Carlo Blasis drew as a means of dancing and composing, they elevated drawing to a tool of thought, one that engaged with the body. This is precisely where the historical discourse emerges: in the articulation between a somatic reading of drawing and an understanding of line, stroke, and pencil as instruments for analyzing movement. The aim of this program was to establish a model of interdisciplinarity that fosters the circulation of tools and concepts between two distinct fields of knowledge: dance research and art history. This circulation operates reciprocally, bringing movement analysis tools into conversation with drawing analysis tools through works that demonstrate their mutual interdependence. This methodological stance is deeply interdisciplinary, in the sense defined by François Dosse:

a practice of interdisciplinarity that is neither unstructured nor driven by hegemonic ambitions, but rather by a genuine effort to translate concepts into their specific operational meanings within each field of knowledge<sup>23</sup>.

This operativity becomes even more relevant when combining the languages of dance research and art history, as both disciplines share fundamental concerns. Anthropologist Sylvia Faure's work on transmission in dance—particularly the challenges of transmitting knowledge through the body<sup>24</sup>—is essential to our understanding of choreographers' drafts and drawings. These materials continually bring us back to the relationship between graphic practice and the transmission of gesture, repertoire, and technique to performers, highlighting the diverse working formats that exist between choreographers and dancers.

Sylvia Faure's initial research focused on dancer training at the Conservatoire de Saint-Étienne, in France, comparing academic ballet and contemporary dance curricula. She describes the different phases of motor learning for classical dancers as follows:

The logic of the discipline broadly corresponds to the three phases of motor learning defined by Fitts and presented in the work of Marielle Cadopi and Andrée Bonnery. In the first phase, the teacher presents a model, and the beginner forms a visual image of it. By repeating the movement multiple times, the dancer constructs an 'information pattern'—a general schema of action. In the second phase (the associative phase), the movement is refined to achieve coordination and regularity, to the point that it appears almost automated. This automation is facilitated when performance conditions remain stable. At this stage of mastery, students make extensive use of the mirror. Finally, in the last phase (the autonomous phase), conscious control of the movement is no longer required, allowing attention to shift to other tasks<sup>25</sup>.

Faure then contrasts two distinct approaches: on the one hand, the externalization of movement through an objective, "legible" body, shaped according to visual models—whether the teacher's gaze or the studio mirror in classical ballet; on the other hand, the emphasis in contemporary dance on internal sensation, which minimizes reliance on visual models. While this distinction is constantly nuanced, it remains crucial in understanding the fundamental rupture brought about by modernity in dance. The underlying mechanisms at play are directly tied to questions of representation, particularly in the tension between figuration and abstraction.

<sup>23</sup> François Dosse, *Le pari biographique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 419.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Faure, *Apprendre par corps. Socio-anthropologie des techniques de danse* (Paris: La Dispute, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Faure, *Processus de transmission et d'appropriation des savoir-faire de la danse classique et contemporaine* (Lyon: Université de Lyon, 1994), 131-134.

When Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker describes choreographic creation as “the embodiment of an abstraction<sup>26</sup>”, she situates her work within a creative model akin to that of abstract art—not devoid of real-world referents, but rooted primarily in conceptual thinking rather than in direct visual representation. Thus, we must be cautious in associating choreographers’ sketches and notebooks too readily with the realm of image-making and representation, as they often operate through entirely different modalities—sometimes even in deliberate opposition to representation. Drawing functions in a radically distinct manner, existing in the fluid continuum between body and thought, extending beyond mere visual transcription into a space where movement and cognition merge.

### 3. Drawing as a tool for analyzing movement: A challenge for art history

If I had to choose a single collection to summarize this part of the research program, it would undoubtedly be the thousand drawings by Rudolf Laban held at the *National Resource Center for Dance* at the University of Surrey in Guildford, England. The collections of the *Centre National de la Danse* and the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* have contributed significantly to this research, offering remarkable sources for art-historical study, including notebooks, such as those of ballet mistress Léone Mail, assistant to Serge Lifar, and important archives of choreographic scores, such as those of Lucinda Childs<sup>27</sup>. Numerous private collections have also been examined, but the thousands of Laban’s drawings have sparked a reflection that extends far beyond the study of choreographers’ sketches.

The University of Surrey (National Research Center for Dance) holds an extensive archive of Laban’s work, ranging from his drawings for *Choreutique* to his studies on labor, gesture, and industry in England before his death in 1958. These archives include dance-related drawings, working notes where drawings serve as a support for theoretical discourse, as well as personal sketches made during vacations or in family settings. The act of drawing appears as a constant impulse in his work, revealing a recurring methodological approach across his theoretical pursuits: a thought process constructed simultaneously through verbal language and line. Anthropologist Tim Ingold reminds us that “the hand that writes does not stop drawing”<sup>28</sup>. This back-and-forth between writing and drawing is not merely a graphic exercise; it reflects a cognitive process in which intuition and idea continuously inform each other. Writing is a form of graphic expression that originates from drawing, yet while verbal language allows a developing thought to be articulated, drawing provides the necessary framework to transform intuition into concept.

Rudolf Laban studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris between 1901 and 1902 and employed graphic representation as a tool for exploring and analyzing movement in various ways. Carol-Lynne Moore<sup>29</sup> distinguishes between two categories of his drawings: those related to choreutics—focusing on body movements in space, particularly around the icosahedron—and those pertaining to eukinetics, which examine the qualities and dynamics of gesture. In the first case, drawing serves as a means to grasp the different directions of movement in space and their possible combinations, visualizing the “piece of space”<sup>30</sup> that movement structures. In the second, Laban depicts dancers in relation to spatial forms and bodily energy. Moore highlights an alternation “between a biomorphic view of space and movement form and a geometric, architectonic vision”. This duality is reinforced by his precise use of graphic techniques to support his theoretical approach. A close examination of his drawings reveals his meticulous attention to pencil types and line qualities—whether hard or soft leads, firm strokes, or delicate lines barely grazing the page. His drawing technique itself reflects an acute awareness of gesture and the

<sup>26</sup> Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, *Incarner une abstraction* (Arles and Paris, Actes Sud / Le Collège de France, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> On Lucinda Childs’ scores and drawing practice, see: Lou Forster, “Page à la main : Lucinda Childs et les pratiques de danse lettrée” (PhD, EHESS, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Tim Ingold, *A Brief History of Lines* (Brussels: Zones Sensibles, 2011), 163.

<sup>29</sup> Carol-Lynne Moore, *The Harmonic structure of Movement, Music, and Dance, According to Rudolf Laban. An examination of His Unpublished Writings and Drawings* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 99.

<sup>30</sup> One of the drawings preserved at the NRCD shows “A piece of space” (L/C/1/115) above it.

body's involvement in the graphic process, as seen in his use of pastels, colored pencils, and even lithographic stone (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Rudolf Laban (Bratislava, 1879 - Weybridge, 1958). *Figure study*, 1912. Lithograph on paper. Zürich, Kunsthhaus, Graphische Sammlung, legs Suzanne Perrottet, inv. 0043.

Laban's theory of the four factors (weight, space, time and flow) defines dance space not as an empty void but as a "constitutive force". As Laurence Louppe states in her *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*: "The dancer lives from space and from what space constructs in him"<sup>31</sup>. She contrasts Laban's conception of space—one sculpted and shaped by the dancer's body—with the structured, measured, and pre-existing space of surveyors and geometers, where bodies are assigned fixed positions within a checkerboard-like framework. While one could argue that the surveyor also produces space, this distinction is crucial for understanding the graphic challenges posed by Laban's approach. How can we visually represent space as a material force rather than a mere location? Rather than focusing on dynamic forms, moving figures, or directional paths, Laban sought to materialize a dynamic space whose density is integral to dance itself. His experiments with volume, particularly through the icosahedron, illustrate this pursuit. Yet beyond geometric exploration, hundreds of his drawings attempt to convey the density of space through line and pencil alone. More than simply delineating figures

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine* (Brussels: Contredanse, 2004), 178.

or contours, Laban engaged in an extensive, decades-long graphic investigation –pencil in hand– not merely to *represent* space but to evoke its presence.

Laban's graphic experiments were deeply influenced by his readings of Euclid, Kepler, Leibniz, Bernoulli, and Plato, forming the foundation of what he termed *choreutics* –"the study of harmonic relationships between space and body movement"<sup>32</sup>. Dancer and notator Elisabeth Schwartz<sup>33</sup> identifies the impact of 16th- and 17th-century mathematics on Laban's geometrization of movement, linking it to the 20th-century modernist concept of "tensional deployment":

Laban proposes a dynamic analysis of the spatial phenomena of points, lines, volumes, and shapes, based on the notion of tensions, forces, and directional and qualitative vectors organized into polarities.

These tensions and forces are first analyzed graphically, in an interplay between drawing and theorization, through what Laban termed "shadow-forms" and "trace-forms". The pencil becomes an analytical tool for exploring space, employing techniques borrowed from the visual arts –flat surfaces, modeling, geometric lines, and perspective effects. If drawing is thought in action, then Laban's drawing embodies both historiographical and plastic thought. His experiments bear traces of his observations, influenced by figures ranging from Kepler to Matisse to Paul Klee.

The development of *choreutics*, inherently tied to drawing, forms the basis of Laban's conceptualization of the sign in his work on lateralization and directional movement. A small notebook, known as *Carnet n°2*<sup>34</sup>, illustrates this process of gradual abstraction, reducing curves into symbols. Plastic signs, shadows, free-flowing curves, and structured, well-defined symbols coexist on the same page. However, this exploratory graphic dimension is here restricted to monochrome or bi-chrome pencil work, differing significantly from other series of drawings found in the archives. While Laban created numerous sketches of landscapes, friends, and vacation scenes, it was his studies on representing body volumes that stood out.

Three colored pencil drawings<sup>35</sup> depict a nude woman seated on her left foot, her right leg slightly bent, left arm raised and bent backward in a dynamic pose, head tilted back. Each drawing captures the exact same posture, a recurring approach in Laban's series, which often include three to ten variations of the same pose or grouping. Although we cannot determine the precise sequence in which they were created, they were likely drawn within the same day or over a few days as part of an experiment exploring the perception of space through the fusion of body and environment. In two of the drawings, Laban outlines a rectangular frame around the figure. One rendering employs strong shadows, creating a sense of volume in the figure's form, while the other treats shadows as flat areas, integrating them on the same plane as the background and the illuminated portions of the body and surrounding space. The rapid pencil strokes unify the composition, aligning with Laban's intent. This multi-stage study seeks to explore methods of flattening bodily forms onto the pictorial surface, first using solid color, then through line. The third drawing consists of black contour lines defining the body, complemented by swift pencil strokes and a color palette of pink, blue, and green. Laban's treatment of line, color, and pattern suggests an affinity with Matisse –one might even trace a connection to *Le Grand Bois* (1906).

Laban himself was a printmaker, and several of his lithographs from 1906 exhibit a keen attention to movement within the grain and pencil marks left on the lithographic plate. His advertising illustrations further reveal the influence of woodcut techniques, particularly in his handling of mass, contour lines, and shadow. Archival material from Suzanne Perrottet,

<sup>32</sup> See Elisabeth Schwartz, interview with Pauline Chevalier, Centre national de la danse, April 2024 (the full length video will be available on the website Numéridanse).

<sup>33</sup> Rudolf Laban, *Espace dynamique. Choreutique, vision de l'espace dynamique*, trans. Élisabeth Schwartz-Rémy (Brussels: Contredanse, 2003), 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Choreutics, Carnet n°2*, Guilford, Université du Surrey, National Resource Center for Dance, Rudolf Laban Archives, L/E/11/35.

<sup>35</sup> Guildford, Université du Surrey, National Resource Center for Dance, Rudolf Laban Archives, L/C/3/99, L/C/3/101 and L/C/3/102.

housed at the Kunsthau Library in Zurich, provides numerous examples of Laban's graphic experiments. His deep curiosity for visual techniques and his extensive experimentation underscore a genuine pleasure in drawing —one that ultimately catalyzed his approach to analyzing movement through line.

In *Vu du geste*, Christine Roquet defines movement analysis as a fundamental skill for dancers —an ability to read gestures, both one's own and those of others. This is not merely a semiotic reading but rather a *sensitive* and *intelligible* understanding of gesture and movement:

Among the endogenous knowledge developed within the off-piste practices mentioned above, we hypothesize that movement analysis offers itself as the *princeps* knowledge. How is the danced gesture expressive? Can we 'read' this expressiveness? What does it mean to 'read gesture'? How do we go about it, and with what tools?<sup>36</sup>.

We propose that drawing is one such tool —a means of reading and understanding gesture. The cognitive power of drawing has been highlighted multiple times, particularly in relation to the observational skills it demands. Horst Bredekamp's reflections on Charles Darwin's third drawing in his 1837 notebooks are especially relevant here:

To inscribe this reversal in both drawing and text, at this pivotal moment in the history of science, Darwin wrote the words 'I think' above the sketch, thus defining the medium as a membrane of thought. The image is not merely a derivative or an illustration but an active support for the intellectual process. 'I think': thus writes the thinker, and thus speaks the sketch<sup>37</sup>.

If Rudolf Laban's drawings allowed him to think —through gesture— about the density of space, then drawing techniques also shaped his exploration of movement dynamics. This aligns with what many choreographers expressed during the research program: their relationship to drawing is not based on images or the stick figures that populate certain notebooks. Rather, drawing captures a state of the body, a sensation —something that, at first glance, may appear meaningless to the historian's eye. The drawing becomes a receptacle for a fleeting insight, materializing it in a way that allows the artist to later rediscover it upon revisiting the lines in their notebook. This raises an important question: what place should these artifacts occupy in art history?

#### 4. Exhibiting dance archives: Artifacts in motion

The collective research on choreographers' notes and drawings —complemented by an analysis of dance's technical iconography in treatises and manuals— has proven to be a remarkably rich field of study for art history. This richness is also due to the nature of these sources themselves. These are archival materials, consulted with the care and attention required for historical documents. Yet, they also bear the traces of their use and handling —marks that cannot be ignored. From the scores of 18th-century contredanses to Lucinda Childs' dancers' files, or the notebooks of Volmir Cordeiro, Andy De Groat or Janine Solane<sup>38</sup>, to name just a few, the drawings are always drawings meant for dance. Their very format reflects this purpose: whether large, heavy volumes meant to rest on a piano or flexible booklets designed to be held in the palm of a hand —or even referenced in motion, balanced on a bent knee.

<sup>36</sup> Christine Roquet, *Vu du geste* (Pantin: Centre national de la danse, 2019), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Horst Bredekamp, *Darwin's corals. Premiers modèles de l'évolution et tradition de l'histoire naturelle*, translated by Christian Joschke (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2008), 40.

<sup>38</sup> The Centre national de la danse holds rich collections and archival material from Lucinda Childs (born 1940), Andy De Groat (1947-2019), Janine Solane (1912-2006) and many choreographers, some well studied during the research program. For more information on the CND archives, see Laurent Sebillotte, *Archives de la danse* (Pantin, 2025).



Figure 6. Kellom Tomlinson (1690-1753) and George Bickham the Elder (engraver) (1684-1758), Plate XV from *The Art of Dancing Explained by Reading and Figures: Whereby the Manner of Performing the Steps is Made Easy by a New and Familiar Method: Being the Original Work, First Design'd in the Year 1724, and Now Published by Kellom Tomlinson, Dancing-Master London, 1735*. Hand-coloured sheet print. H. 22; L. 18 cm. New York, The New York Public Library, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, \*MGZFD Art 2.

The many archival discoveries made through this program led to the desire to share these works and documents with a broader audience, ultimately paying tribute to Laurence Louppe's original 1991 approach. But how to exhibit drawings without overlooking the dance? In a magnificent 1735 treatise (fig. 6), ballet master Kellom Tomlinson describes the prints in his book as "fine pictures" that, while primarily serving a practical function in dance by depicting dancers, Feuillet notation scores, and musical compositions, also possess aesthetic qualities. He suggests that these images could just as easily be framed and displayed on a wall. Similarly, both choreographers' drawings and technical dance images elicit a particular graphic curiosity—an appreciation of their beauty as objects, as well as the mystery they seem to contain. Yet, the presence of the body is

everywhere, for those who know how to see it: whether in the physical traces of use –like the worn pages of a ballet score for *Giselle* transcribed in *Sténochorégraphie* by Arthur Saint-Léon (fig. 7)– or in the crumpled pages of a choreographer's notebook.

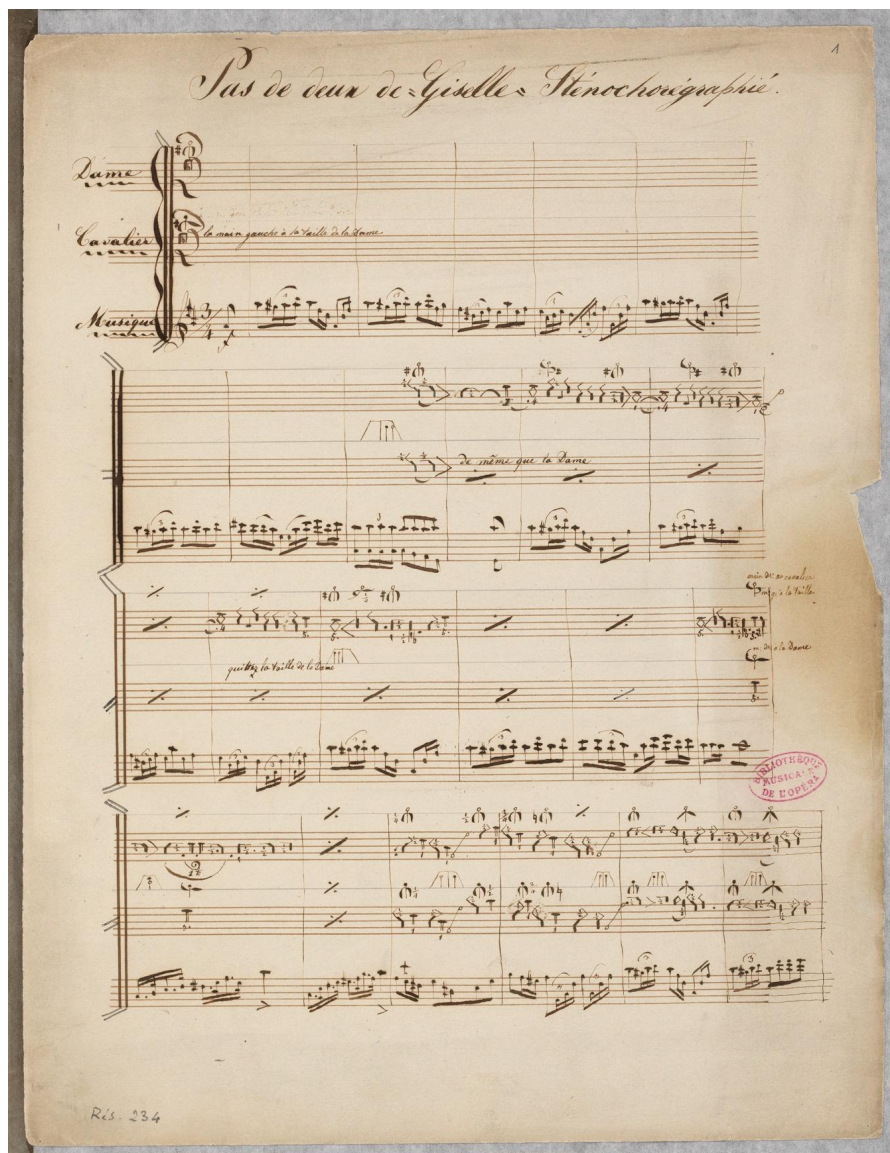


Figure 7. Arthur Saint-Léon (Paris, 1821-1870), *Giselle: pas de deux sténochorégraphié*. Brown ink on wove paper, H. 35.8; L. 27.6 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, Opéra Library and Museum, RES-234.

Beyond the physical wear, different ways of reading these documents emerge: layers that must be superimposed to capture the full range of a dancer's movements, small cards to be arranged, or large orchestral scores to be unfolded. The formats themselves shape the experience, but so do the techniques of drawing and line-making, offering new insights into gesture. Dance historian Marie Glon, a specialist in Feuillet notation in the early 18th century, provides a detailed analysis in the exhibition catalog<sup>39</sup>, explaining how the somatic experience

<sup>39</sup> Marie Glon, "Drawings to dance by", *Choreographies*, 34.

of reading a score differs from engaging with a copperplate print or a woodcut. The latter, with its deeply impressed lines, evokes a tangible sense of grounding and physicality—a sensation distinct from other printed or drawn representations. This observation is crucial, as it underscores the extent to which the act of reading drawings, images, and artworks is also a bodily and sensory experience, connected to that “motor attention” so central to Jean Starobinski’s theory<sup>40</sup>.

Beyond the richness of the corpus, it is these very qualities of drawing—shared across research in both dance and art history—that the program and the resulting exhibition sought to highlight. The Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology in Besançon, the city that welcomed one of the very first exhibition on dance notation in France in 1982, is presenting about 350 artifacts from more than 200 artworks: drawings, notebooks, sketches, associated with videos, painting, sculptures as well as interviews with artists and choreographers. By presenting the original works in their actual formats and material forms, both in the exhibition and in a catalog that required specialized photography to capture the texture of the notebooks<sup>41</sup>, we aimed to cultivate in viewers a heightened material and kinetic awareness. These artifacts, temporarily displayed behind glass before returning to storage shelves or even dance studios, occupy a unique space as both heritage objects and living, moving records. Their presence in an exhibition reaffirmed the necessity of bridging different fields of knowledge—bringing research and practice into an essential dialogue, even within art history. Exhibitions also offer a powerful way to challenge assumptions about public reception. While it may be relatively easy to argue for the need to view dance works from a dancer’s perspective, how can this need be communicated in a way that builds confidence in works that quite literally make you want to move—while also encouraging viewers to interpret them through motion? This has been a recurring issue while setting up the exhibition with my colleague and curator for the graphic arts Amandine Royer. How can we make people understand and dance—knowing that the two work together?

When Andy Warhol used a Fox Trot manual in 1962 to borrow a technical diagram of a few scaled dance steps transposed onto the floor, he was playing with the operability of images—images designed to be danced. Having previously worked for *Dance Magazine*, Warhol was familiar with the dance diagrams used in both instructional manuals and the magazine itself: footprints, arrows, and other didactic tools used for teaching ballroom dance. He went on to create a series of paintings, *Dance Diagrams*, which were almost exact reproductions of textbook pages—a kind of printed ready-made, made ready for dancing. The first painting in the series, now housed in Frankfurt, reproduces a page illustrating the “Double Twinkle” step for the male dancer. The original 1956 *Dance Guild* manual (fig. 8) featured cut-out silhouettes of male and female feet at the end of the book—intended to be copied and arranged on the floor so that the steps could be physically reproduced. Warhol thus transposed not only a technical drawing, but also an instructional project onto canvases meant to be exhibited on the floor. Their debut at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1962, and later exhibitions, notably at the Pittsburgh Museum, sparked a desire among viewers to decode the numbering and try out the steps. The graphics convey movement as they extend from the page to the space of the exhibition.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Starobinski, *La beauté du monde. La littérature et les arts* (Paris, Quarto Gallimard, 2016), 1130.

<sup>41</sup> Several photographic campaigns at the INHA, the CND and BNF were funded by the INHA for the catalogue, with artist photographer Michael Quemener.

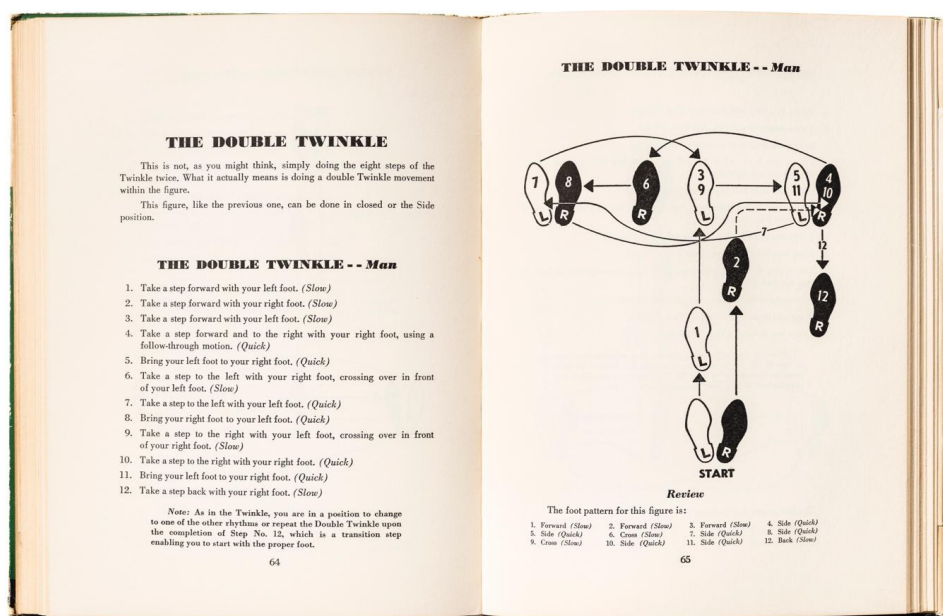


Figure 8. American Dance Guild, *Fox Trot Made Easy*, 1956. H. 26; L. 18.7 cm, Printed book accompanied by two 45 rpm vinyl records. Private collection. Photo: Michael Quemener / INHA.

This operative power of technical drawing is also evident in the exhibition itself—in the circulation of these manuals and their use in dance classes. These are images created for dancing, paradoxically through their *lack* of mimetic representation. They do not depict bodies but instead produce dance through a visual code: numbers, arrows, and a graphic protocol waiting to be deciphered. What is truly at stake is the act of decoding these images—both in the research project led by the INHA and in the resulting exhibition.

Warhol's emphasis on the performative potential of images is especially powerful here, as it draws on the operability of a graphic system that dates back to the 1830s—or even earlier, if we consider 16th-century fencing manuals that used numbered footprints. Yet the complete absence of the human form, with dance visualized solely through foot placements, remained a hallmark of the 19th century and inspired various experiments from the 1900s to the 1910s. In this respect, the exhibition becomes a *mise en abyme* of the research itself, which focuses on how print culture evolved as a means of transmitting embodied knowledge. Transmission through print is not self-evident. The exhibition explores how movement is gradually constructed through graphic means, and how such visual devices served as models for its curatorial design. Although the subject is complex and scholarly, it raises simple, fundamental questions: how can dance be transmitted other than from body to body? The question resonates in everyday practices, from dance tutorials printed on vinyl and CD sleeves to video games like *Just Dance* in recent years.

Rather than presenting dance directly, the exhibition highlights how paper, drawing, marks, pencils, and books have served as vehicles of movement—accompanying choreographic creation and its transmission. While the museum offers a rich array of educational programs, the documents on display—books, scores, drawings, as well as paintings and sculptures—testify to a written and visual practice that, through its format, graphic design, and material presence, holds the power to inspire movement. And this is undoubtedly where the line between exhibition and catalog is drawn. The work carried out with Éditions Liénart and a photographic campaign to document the materiality of the scores, drawings, and works from the INHA, the CND and the BNF also makes it possible to document, through the book, these formats for dancing, thus closing a loop of research but not a field that still remains partly unexplored in terms of the variety of sources and practices of dance drawings.

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