



The New York Public Library  
Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Guide to the

**Mura Dehn collection**

1905-1985 [bulk 1930s-1950s]

(S) \*MGZMD 483

Processed by Valerie Wingfield in 2017.

## Summary

**Creator:** Dehn, Mura

**Title:** Mura Dehn collection

**Date:** 1905-1985 [bulk 1930s-1950s]

**Size:** 3.6. linear feet (6 boxes)

**Source:** The collection was donated by Eiko Otake in 2017.

**Abstract:** Mura Dehn (1905-1987) was a dancer and filmmaker who documented African-American social jazz dancing from the 1930s to 1950s at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York. The collection consists mostly of her film works, accompanied with photographs; address books, assorted material and an artifact.

**Access:** Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:  
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

**Conditions Governing Use:** The ballet slippers are to be handled with care.

**Preferred citation:** Mura Dehn collection, (S) \*MGZMD 483. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

**Language of the Material:** Multiple languages English, French and German.

**Processing note:** Processed by Valerie Wingfield in 2017.

## Creator History

Mura Ziperovitch Dehn (1905-1987) was a dancer and filmmaker who documented African-American social jazz dancing at the Savoy Hotel ballroom in Harlem, New York from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Russian born, Dehn was trained in ballet and modern dance in the Isadora Duncan style. Dehn became captivated by Jazz upon seeing Josephine Baker perform in Paris circa 1925. In 1930, she immigrated to the United States with her then husband Adolf Dehn (1895-1968), an American painter. Dehn's visit to the Savoy Ballroom to watch jazz dancing convinced her to document it. Her studies culminated in the documentary *The Spirit Moves: A History of Black Social Dance on Film, Parts One and Two*.

As a performer and innovator throughout her life, Dehn continued to develop her dance techniques. In 1954, Dehn and James Berry (1915-1969) a vaudevillian and dancer established The *Traditional Jazz Company*. This company was active through the 1970s.

## **Custodial History**

Eiko Otake became the custodian of the collection after the death of Mura Dehn.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The Mura Dehn collection, dated c. 1905-1985 (bulk dates 1930-1950), reflects the documentary and personal life of Mura Dehn, a filmmaker and dancer.

The photographs are both personal and professional and show Dehn in Europe and the United States. Professional images include publicity shots, Dehn at rehearsals, and performing before an audience; James Berry, other dances and musicians. Notable photographers were Ferdinand Boesch, Ergy Landau, Earl Leaf and Jan Yoors.

The personal photographs stem from her childhood in Europe (possibly Vienna) to life in the United States. Dehn was photographed at social events with family and friends, enjoying vacations and travels. Most of the images were not properly identified.

Other materials include several address books, assorted notes in Russian and German, publicity and printed matter, her father's passport, a pair of Dehn's dancing slippers; and two audio tapes with music.

## **Key Terms**

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Ballet slippers  
Photographs

### **Subjects**

Dance -- United States -- History  
Jazz dance  
Modern dance  
Performing arts -- Photographs

### **Names**

Berry, James, 1914-1969  
Boesch, Ferdinand  
Dehn, Adolf, 1895-1968

Dehn, Mura  
Landau, Ergy  
Leaf, Earl  
Yours, Jan

## Container List

- b. 1 f. 1-6 Address Books c. 1970-1981
- b. 1 f. 7 Correspondence 1926-1952
- b. 1 f. 8-10 Notes (assorted)  
Dehn's notes indicate several languages were used.  
Tsiperovitch, David  
See also: Photographs
- b. 1 f. 11 Letter, Death Certificate and Passport 1945, 1948  
David Tsiperovitch (Russian spelling of surname. Mura Dehn anglicized the name to Ziperovitch.) was of the Jewish faith. Tsiperovitch's French issued passport and accompanying letter indicates that he lived in France during the Nazi occupation and was forced to quit his job as an educator due to German persecution.  
See also: Photographs
- b. 1 f. 12 Address Book (United States)  
Photographs. Dehn, Mura
- b. 1 f. 13-17 Childhood Photographs c. 1910-1915
  - b. 5 Toddler 1905-1906  
Small oval photograph in original frame.
  - b. 5 Child
  - b. 5 With Classmates  
Adult Photographs
- b. 2 f. 1 Bad Gastein Austria 1934  
Dehn pictured with first husband Adolf Dehn and her parents. Wedding date noted August 3, 1934.
- b. 2 f. 2 With Adolf Dehn 1934
- b. 2 f. 3 With Unidentified Male 1935
- b. 2 f. 4-13 Dehn, Mura c. 1920s-1980s  
Dehn's second husband Herman Thomas was photographed in many of the social settings. The files include pictures of Dehn's husband Herman Thomas.  
Dance Photographs
- b. 2 f. 14 Wears Elizabethan Clothing c. 1930  
Photo credit: S.I.M. Paris.
- b. 2 f. 15 Wears Ostrich Feather Hat c. 1930  
Photo Credit: Wilhelm Maywald. Paris
- b. 2 f. 16 Wears Harlequin Style Costume  
Photo credit: Laszlo Willinger.
- b. 2 f. 17 Wears Short Hoop Skirt c.1930  
Photo credit: Laszlo Willinger.
- b. 2 f. 18 Wears Can-Can Dress c. 1926  
Dehn posed for several publicity pictures in the Can-Can dress that includes a including a close-up of her legs. Photo credit: Ergy Landau (Paris)
- b. 2 f. 19 Wears Several Publicity Stage Clothing  
Ergy photographed Dehn in several expressive costumes and poses. Photo credit: Ergy Landau. Paris.
- b. 2 f. 20 Close-Ups c. 1927  
Dehn also engaged Landau to photograph her in a series of close-ups. Photo credit: Ergy Landau, Paris.

Photographs. Dehn, Mura (cont.)  
Dance Photographs (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 21 **Avant Garde Costume 1930**  
Photo credit: [Ben M.] Rabinovitch. N.Y. Signed by Rabinovitch.
  - b. 2 f. 22 **Wears Constructed Mask And Costume c. 1930**  
Photo credit: De Camp Studio, New York.
  - b. 2 f. 23 **Wears Leotard Outfit c. 1930s**  
Photo credit: De Camp Studio, New York.
  - b. 2 f. 24 **Wears Performance Costumes 1932**  
Photo credit: Lester V. Bergman. Brooklyn, New York.
  - b. 2 f. 25 **Dancing 1938**
  - b. 2 f. 26 **Tiger Dance Performance**  
The file holds three photographs including one with the audience in the background. The location is identified as Tanglewood, New Jersey.
  - b. 2 f. 27 **Dance Performance Costume**  
Photo credit: Earl Leaf.
  - b. 2 f. 28 **Dance Rehearsal With Performers And Musicians**  
Photo credit: Earl Leaf.
  - b. 2 f. 29 **Dances In Ramon Valdiosera's Excelsior Production**  
Photo credit: Earl Leaf.
  - b. 2 f. 30 **Dances With Carl Hall**  
Carl Hall (died 1999) was an African-American singer, actor and musical arranger.
  - b. 2 f. 31 **Various Performance Costumes c. 1945**  
Photo credit: Ergy Landau. Paris.
  - b. 2 f. 32 **Close-Up 1947**  
Photo credit: Blackstone Studios, NYC.
  - b. 2 f. 33 **Multiple Shots (Proofs Only)**  
Photo credit: Pan-American Photographic Services, NYC.  
**Portrait Shots (Proofs Only)**  
Photo credit: Volpe Studios, NYC.
  - b. 2 f. 36 **Dehn, Mura Wears Crown**
  - b. 2 f. 37 **Dehn, Mura Interviews Unidentified Choreographer or Dancer**  
Photo credit: Marc and Evelyn Bernheim., NYC.
  - b. 2 f. 38 **Event Honoring Dehn c. 1975**  
Photo credit: Vincent R. Brown.
- Other Artists Photographs**
- b. 2 f. 39 **Berry, James**
  - b. 2 f. 40 **Peach, Georgia 1962**  
Verso of photograph. The Queen of Gospel Singers. (Sister Clara Hudmon (1899-1966).
  - b. 2 f. 41 **Dance Performances By Couples (Savoy Ballroom?)**
  - b. 2 f. 42 ***The Spirit Moves***
  - b. 2 f. 43 **Dance Performers (Harlem?)**
  - b. 2 f. 44 **Unidentified Male Dancer c. 1940**
- Family and Friends**
- b. 3 f. 1-6 **Tsiperovitch, David 1925-1955**  
David Tsiperovitch (Russian spelling of surname) was Mura Dehn's father. The photographs indicate that Tsiperovitch (Jewish Faith) lived in Paris during the Nazi Occupation.
  - b. 3 f. 7 **Tsiperovitch, David and Son**

Photographs. Dehn, Mura (cont.)  
Family and Friends (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 8 Tsiperovitch (Mother?)
- b. 3 f. 9-12 Tsiperovitch, Odette 1926-1929  
Odette Tsiperovitch was Mura Dehn's sister-in-law.
- b. 3 f. 13-22 Relatives and Friends 1920s-1980s  
Many of the photographs are unidentified.
- b. 4 f. 1-4 Relatives, Friends and Outdoor Scenes 1960s-1980s
  - b. 5 Relatives and Friends 1940s  
There are six Photomatic Phone Booth pictures that also include Mura Dehn.
  - b. 4 f. 5 Photograph Booklets
  - b. 4 f. 7 Negatives
  - b. 4 f. 8 Poster. Authentic Jazz Dance By Mura Dehn c. 1965  
Authentic Jazz Dance Film, Lecture and Tours.
- Printed Matter
  - b. 4 f. 9 Jazz Profound. James Berry With Mura Dehn 1977
  - b. 4 f. 10 *Grossberg, Mimi. Kleinkunst Aus Amerika* 1964
  - b. 4 f. 11 Publicity. The Spirit Moves Me 1981
    - b. 6 Ballet Slippers