

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE

EDGES OF AILEY OFFERS A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EXPLORATION OF ART, MUSIC, AND DANCE AT THE WHITNEY



Celebrating the life, dances, influences, and enduring legacy of visionary artist and choreographer Alvin Ailey, this multidisciplinary exhibition opens on September 25.

New York, NY, July 23, 2024 — *Edges of Ailey*, opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on September 25, is the first large-scale museum exhibition to celebrate the life, dances, influences, adjacencies, and enduring legacy of visionary artist and choreographer Alvin Ailey (b. 1931, Rogers, TX; d. 1989, New York, NY). This dynamic showcase brings together visual art, live performance, music, a range of archival materials, and a multi-screen video installation drawn from recordings of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT) repertory to explore the full range of Ailey's personal and creative life. Presented in three parts, *Edges of Ailey* consists of an immersive exhibition in the Museum's 18,000 square-foot fifth-floor galleries, an ambitious suite of performances in the Museum's third-floor Theater, and an accompanying scholarly catalogue.

The exhibition centers on the man himself, capturing the full range of Ailey's passions, curiosities, and creativity revealed in his archives, across his dances, and within a continuum of other artists spanning nearly two centuries. These elements form a historical account, provide a constellatory survey, and unfold as a tribute to the legendary artist's life, career, and far-reaching impact on the histories of dance, Black creativity, and American culture. *Edges of Ailey* affirms the artist's place as one of the most culturally and historically significant artistic figures in the United States and the world.

"Following six years of dreaming, planning, and researching, the extravaganza that is *Edges of Ailey* finally enters the world," said Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator and Associate Director of Curatorial Programs. "Throughout this process, we have had the gift of Mr. Ailey's guidance, available to us in his notebooks, interviews, dances, and by the way he did things, to which we have kept very close, and which has shaped every aspect of this show. Until now, there have been many exhibitions in art museums about dance but none about Ailey, a true icon and unquestionably deserving subject. Along the way, every time I told someone that I was working on this project, they would share their own Ailey experience. So many of us have a story about Ailey, the dance company. Such is the extent of his importance and reach. Now audiences will have the chance to know *his* story. It is no small task to hold someone's legacy of this cultural magnitude in your hands. We have made something that aims to have the same imagination, sparkle, generosity, rigor, and daring as did he."

Edges of Ailey was developed through extensive archival research. From the sweeping holdings of performance footage, recorded interviews, notebooks, letters, choreographic notes, and drawings, to other ephemera gathered from nearly 10 sources, the archives forge a vital throughline in the gallery. A dynamic montage of Ailey's life and dances will play on loop across an 18-channel video installation, created by filmmakers Josh Begley and Kya Lou, with Edwards. This film is composed of newly digitized performance documentation, dances made for the camera, animated archival images, televised broadcasts, and contextual footage of cultural, social, political, and social events of the time. Visitors also encounter intimate displays of never-before-seen selections from Ailey's personal archive, providing a foundation for understanding everything from his daily routine and artistic thinking to the demands of touring and his grappling with being gay. Ailey's short stories and poems are shown publicly and reproduced in the catalogue for the first time.



The ways Ailey appears in the show through archives form a surround, circling the galleries, which are presented in red: walls, an archipelago of elevated platforms, customized systems of display, and curtains. This staging of deep crimson reflects Ailey's formative "blood memories" as well as the color of theater curtains and seating of the proscenium theaters in which Ailey's dances are typically performed, and the pews and carpets of many Southern Black churches.

Ailey's presence, through the video surround and his encased personal effects, envelops and thus contextualizes the selection of artworks by over 80 artists that speak to the parallel, pertinent, and often inseparable concerns of Black creativity in the United States, spanning before the Civil War up to the present. Ailey remarked: "I wanted to paint. I made watercolors. I wanted to sculpt. I wrote poetry. I wanted to write the great American novel," and described his dances as "movements full of images." Following keen interest in the visual arts, the artworks on view include painting, sculpture, prints, drawings, video, collage, and photography made before, during, and after Ailey's lifetime, with many directly connected to the choreographer while others amplify the most persistent subjects of his life and dances.

The exhibition is arranged thematically into sections that span an expanded Black southern imaginary that enfolds histories of the American South with those of the Caribbean, Brazil, and West Africa; the enduring practices of Black spirituality; the profound conditions and effects of Black migration; the resilience for and necessity of an intersectional Black liberation; the prominence of Black women in Ailey's life; and the robust histories and experiments of Black music; along with the myriad representations of Blackness in dance and meditations on dance after Ailey. Featured artists among Ailey include Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, Kevin Beasley, Elizabeth Catlett, Thornton Dial, Ellen Gallagher, Rashid Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Ralph Lemon, Glenn Ligon, James Little, Lois Mailou Jones, Archibald Motley, Jr., Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, Alma Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kandis Williams. Also, a recent acquisition of Eldren Bailey and new works by Karon Davis, Jennifer Packer, Mickalene Thomas, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye will be presented for the first time in honor of this landmark exhibition. Together, they form an assembly of voices and visions that share Ailey's interests and motifs—following his own desire to create a repertory of various choreographers—and when taken together reveal a richer understanding of their interrelation.

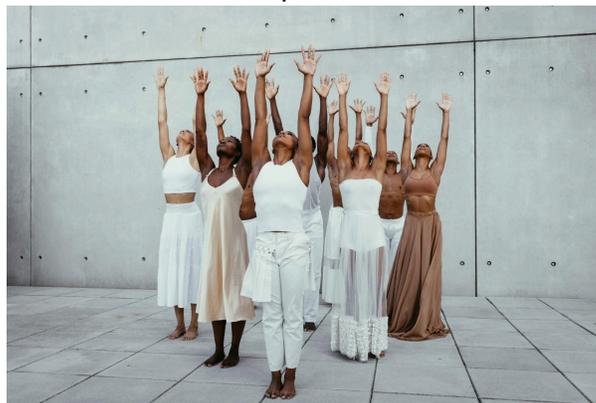
Throughout the presentation of *Edges of Ailey*, a robust live performance program in the Museum's third-floor Theater will accompany the in-gallery component. The performance series is inspired, motivated, and organized to reflect Ailey's commitment to building a platform for Black modern dancers and choreographers. The performances feature all facets of the AILEY organization in residency at the Whitney for one week each month, for a total of five weeks. This gives visitors the opportunity to experience the full scope of Ailey's world and legacy, including performances of classic and contemporary works by the two repertory

companies—Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II—as well as showcases by students from The Ailey School, workshops and education programs from Ailey Arts In Education, and classes from Ailey Extension. During the weeks AILEY is not in residence at the Museum, a series of dance commissions by leading choreographers and their collaborators is presented, including Trajal Harrell, Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon with interdisciplinary artist Kevin Beasley, Sarah Michelson, Okwui Okpokwasili with Peter Born, Will Rawls, Matthew Rushing, Yusha-Marie Sorzano, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

The *Edges of Ailey* accompanying catalogue is the first publication devoted to Alvin Ailey in over 20 years. Edited by Adrienne Edwards, the 400-page catalogue expands scholarship on Ailey's life and choreography, featuring essays by Edwards, Horace D. Ballard, Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit, Aimee Meredith Cox, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Malik Gaines, Jasmine Johnson, Joshua Lubin-Levy, Uri McMillan, Ariel Osterweis, and J Wortham, and conversations with Kyle Abraham, Claire Bishop, Masazumi Chaya, Aimee Meredith Cox, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Jennifer Homans, Judith Jamison, Sylvia Waters, Jamila Wignot, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, with an extensive chronology by CJ Salapare. The book also includes an accounting of the entirety of Ailey's choreography and reproduces selections from his personal notebooks as well as examples of his creative writing.

"*Edges of Ailey* is one of—if not the—most ambitious and complex exhibitions undertaken in the Whitney's history," said Scott Rothkopf, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney. "Now is Ailey's time and our time as an art museum to recognize his immense creative force not simply as one of the 20th century's greatest American choreographers, nor as its greatest Black choreographer, but as one of the greatest artists working in any medium anywhere in the world. This exhibition situates Ailey—and those he drew on and inspired—smack in the middle of the avant-garde, right where they belong. In so doing, it pressures and even redefines the trajectory of art history by making it contend with stories and forms it had once ignored. Ailey, quite simply, forged a capacious new mode for 'expressing the Black experience,' as he put it, and to share this legacy with our visitors is an honor."

Edges of Ailey is organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in collaboration with the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation. The exhibition is curated by Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator and Associate Director of Curatorial Programs, with Joshua Lubin-Levy, Curatorial Research Associate, and CJ Salapare, Curatorial Assistant.



Exhibition Overview – Edges of Ailey

Edges of Ailey centers Alvin Ailey, the man himself, bringing together the stories of how he came to be, what ideas preoccupied him, and who inspired him as he built his visionary choreography and company. The in-gallery installation is organized in thematic sections based on key subjects of Ailey's choreography through a dynamic grouping of artworks, which are paired with illuminating personal and creative archival materials according to their shared ideas. Artworks range from actual collaborations with Ailey to those by visual artists, musicians, dancers, and writers referenced in Ailey's notebooks and others made specifically in response to the exhibition or are signal examples selected to indicate the preponderance and consistency of these ideas among Black artists. Throughout the show there are a number of artists representing the vernacular styles of Black Southern culture in tribute to the ways in which Ailey's life and dances were also shaped by these folkways.

Drawn from his own childhood experiences in rural Texas and his family's work in homes and on the land—a reality defined in large part by itinerancy, poverty, and widespread racism shared by many Black Southerners in the United States—Ailey's recollections of these years, what he described as his “blood memories,” would become the foundation of his choreography. Through his exposure to Katherine Dunham and his later extensive travels and touring, Ailey came to know the American South as geographically much broader and culturally more multivalent, encompassing the Caribbean, Brazil, and West Africa. With the mass marketing of calypso musical and dance styles in the United States in the 1950s, Ailey incorporated into his dances these diasporic entanglements through movement, ritual, culture, and mythology, all instigated by and imagined through the ingenuity and inventiveness of Black makers and communities. Artworks by Kevin Beasley, Beverly Buchanan, Thornton Dial, David Driskell, Lois Mailou Jones, Carrie Mae Weems, Noah Purifoy, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, and more capture this imagery and pay tribute to an expansive Southern imaginary in much the same way that Ailey did through choreography.

Spirituality threads through a number of Ailey's choreographies, most notably the iconic *Revelations*, which recast the Sunday worship services of his childhood with a distinct sense of theatricality and emphatic storytelling. Black churches, like the ones Ailey and his mother attended, have been foundational to Black social, political, and educational life in the United States. Ailey expanded his interest in spirituality to encompass the breadth and diversity of a range of Black spiritual practices, including candomblé and vodou. Artists Benny Andrews, Hector Hyppolite, Clementine Hunter, Charles White, Rubem Valentim, and Hale Aspacio Woodruff also imbue the significance of Black ritual and devotion in their work and speak to the role of faith in sustaining Black people.

Water is a recurring and important motif in Ailey's choreography and his writings in countless notebooks and letters. It alludes to the Middle Passage of enslavement and the ritual of

ablution. In the early 1940s, Ailey and his mother were among the six million Black people who traveled from the rural American South to urban areas across the northern and western United States during the Great Migration. Settling in Los Angeles, Ailey and his mother, like other migrants, sought to escape the racial violence and economic precarity of Jim Crow apartheid policies. William H. Johnson, Samella Lewis, Martin Puryear, Theaster Gates, Maren Hassinger, Lonnie Holley, and Purvis Young are artists who also examine this defining moment in history, what incited the movement of a people and how Black life and culture changed as a result of it.

Ailey envisioned his dances as an embodiment of the fortitude of Black art and culture. As a gay Black man, his presence in the dance field and his choreography itself tested the very notion of freedom. During his lifetime, the question of who gets to be free was paramount—from the vestiges of enslavement to apartheid in the United States and South Africa on the one hand to the persistent homophobia and the AIDS crisis on the other, as were the acts of collective resilience in response to these injustices, including the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and gay liberation advances. Black liberation is explored in Ailey's choreography in many ways. His short stories, poems, and missives reveal a deep exploration of queerness by reflecting on the texts he read, the sources for his dances, and his personal contemplations. Considering these examinations of liberation together, Ailey sought to make Black dance, in his words, "universal" and use his company as a vehicle to support the advancement of Black choreographers, providing resources for the creation and presentation of new dances breaking down the model for what and who could excel in modern dance. Aaron Douglas, Sam Doyle, Robert Duncanson, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, Wadsworth Jarrell, Glenn Ligon, and Faith Ringgold also champion themes of Black liberation from the 1850s to today in their works.

Throughout Ailey's life, Black women were a constant presence and source of inspiration, whether they were fellow dancers and collaborators, like Maya Angelou, Carmen de Lavallade, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Sylvia Waters, or admired in his notebooks and letters, such as Marian Anderson, Billie Holliday, Nina Simone, and Bessie Smith. Chiefly among these influences was Ailey's mother, Lula, who raised him on her own and whose love and perseverance he would honor through his 1971 dance *Cry*. The solo paid homage to the labors, hopes, and tribulations of Black women and would become an emblem and "heirloom" for Black women dancers in the company, with each new performer bringing a new spin and dimension to the dance. In dances like *Cry*, *Quintet*, *Mary Lou's Mass*, and *The Mooche*, Ailey sought to render Black women as individual and multifaceted, often by way of troubling, reclaiming, or rectifying the stereotypes and caricatures that plagued them. In *Edges of Ailey*, artists Emma Amos, Elizabeth Catlett, Geoffrey Holder, Lois Mailou Jones, and Mary Lovelace O'Neal are celebrated in their own right for their depictions championing Black women in their works.

For Ailey, dance and music were art forms of and for the people, originating and enduring in homes, the streets, nightclubs, and other everyday spaces. Dancing was not merely a response to music, but rather, he saw them as parallels, each allowing an artist to express the spectrum of one's feelings and to speak from one's own experiences. The roots of Ailey's dances often stemmed from the rich history of Black musical traditions, from the stirring harmonies of gospel and spirituals to the existential tenor of the blues and soul to the improvisations and discordant rhythms of jazz. Beyond setting his dances to specific songs, Ailey often relied on melody and percussive beat first to dictate his choreographic steps and patterns. He also frequently turned to the lives of singers and musicians like Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Donnie Hathaway, Hugh Masekela, Jay McShann, Charlie Parker, and Nina Simone for inspiration. Visual artists, too, have a long history of turning to music not just for inspiration but as a symbiotic means of expression. The work of artists including Terry Adkins, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Charles Gaines, Sam Gilliam, Raph Lemon, James Little, Archibald Motley Jr., Kerry James Marshall, Betye Saar, and Bill Traylor explore the remarkable breadth, innovation, and experimentation of Black music as sources of inspiration.

Like many artists, Ailey drew inspiration from creatives across disciplines, including dance, acting, music, and literature. Luminaries of modern dance like Carmen de Lavallade, Katherine Dunham, Geoffrey Holder, Lester Horton, Pearl Primus, Talley Beatty, and Ted Shawn served as his mentors, collaborators, and examples. The dazzling scenes of Broadway, Hollywood, and theater—especially his acting teacher Stella Adler and the choreography of Jack Cole—informed his distinct sense of theatricality and the glint of entertainment in his dances. An eclectic combination of literature, poetry, and music offered him a creative continuum to absorb and build upon, including James Baldwin, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, Carson McCullers, Henry Miller, Albert Murray, and Tennessee Williams. Selections of ephemera and moving images from Ailey's archive highlight these influences and build a foundation from which his creative genius grew and matured throughout his lifetime.

In addition to those he looked up to and sought inspiration from, Ailey saw collaboration as key to creative potential. He actively brought in existing and newly commissioned works by other choreographers alongside his dances. This platform proved to be a lifeline for Black dancers and choreographers, inspired in large part by Ailey's own experiences as an emerging Black artist in New York, where he, along with his fellow Black dancers, were met with segregation and scant opportunities. Ailey's collaborations did not only fall within the purview of dance, he was also actively involved with writers, musicians, and artists like Maya Angelou, Romare Bearden, Carmen de Lavallade, Duke Ellington, Geoffrey Holder, and Langston Hughes, among others, whose ideas echoed and amplified Ailey's interests. Ailey enlisted them to dance and choreograph, as well as to create set designs, musical scores, and costumes for his dances. Various art spaces and nightlife scenes were equally fruitful sites of exchange, from the Nuyorican Poets Café in the Lower East Side, which Ailey frequented, to the famed club Studio

54, where Ailey II dancers performed for its opening night. In *Edges of Ailey*, portraits and works inspired by these many collaborators are honored alongside Ailey's own accomplishments and success.

Ailey died of AIDS-related complications on December 1, 1989. Earlier that year, he said of his company: "This is not about Alvin Ailey. It's about the future, about people going on, it's about making a place... [that] could go on. That's the high point when that happens." *Edges of Ailey* acts as a vantage point from which to reflect on this aspiration over 35 years later. The exhibition pays tribute to Ailey's life and passing by displaying the Alvin Ailey panel of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Three data visualizations by researchers Kate Elswit and Harmony Bench also map different overarching views of the organization and highlight the international reach of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, sharing new stories and highlighting the longstanding members, dance programming, and international touring of the Company that keep Ailey's legacy alive today.

Performance Overview

Edges of Ailey offers a once in a lifetime opportunity for Museum visitors to enjoy live performances by AILEY and an esteemed group of choreographers and their collaborators in the Museum's third-floor Theater. More information about individual performances and ticketing will be available starting in September. Performance tickets include same-day access to the exhibition. Reservations required and space is limited.

September 25–29: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II

October 4–6: Trajal Harrell

October 10–12: Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE

November 1–3: Matthew Rushing

November 7–9: Yusha-Marie Sorzano

November 16: Bill T. Jones

November 20–24: Ailey II

December 13–15: Will Rawls

December 18–22: Ailey II

January 9–11: Sarah Michelson

January 17–19: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

January 22–26: Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, and The Ailey School

February 6–8: Okwui Okpokwasili and Peter Born

February 7: Ralph Lemon and Kevin Beasley

Tickets

Starting Tuesday, July 23, visitors can purchase timed tickets for the in-gallery exhibition *Edges of Ailey*, on view September 25, 2024–February 9, 2025. Member previews run from September

19 to 23. More ticketing information is available on whitney.org. Performance tickets for *Edges of Ailey* will be available starting in September. Performance tickets include same-day access to the exhibition and will be available on whitney.org. Theater space is limited.

Press Preview

The Whitney Museum will host a press preview on Wednesday, September 18, 10 am–2 pm. [RSVP to the press preview by filling out this form](#). A photography and broadcast hour will start at 9 am and requires advance registration. Please reach out to pressoffice@whitney.org for any questions about the photography and broadcast hour. Remarks by Scott Rothkopf, the Alice Pratt Brown Director; AILEY; and Adrienne Edwards, Engell Speyer Family Senior Curator and Associate Director of Curatorial Programs, will begin at 10:30 am.

Catalogue

The accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Edges of Ailey*, is the first scholarly publication in 20 years to focus on the legendary artist and choreographer Alvin Ailey. Published by the Whitney and distributed by Yale University Press, this catalogue is edited by Adrienne Edwards and includes essays by Horace D. Ballard, Harmony Bench and Kate Elswit, Aimee Meredith Cox, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Adrienne Edwards, Malik Gaines, Jasmine Johnson, Joshua Lubin-Levy, Uri McMillan, Ariel Osterweis, and J Wortham as well as a chronology by CJ Salapare. Conversations feature renowned Ailey company figures, contemporary artists, and scholars, including Kyle Abraham, Claire Bishop, Masazumi Chaya, Aimee Meredith Cox, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Jennifer Homans, Judith Jamison, Sylvia Waters, Jamila Wignot, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar are also included. The publication features more than 400 illustrations, including previously unpublished archival materials. Copies are available for purchase in the Whitney shop, online, and at bookstores (\$65.00).

Free Public Programs

A series of free in-person and virtual public programs will be offered in conjunction with *Edges of Ailey*. More information about these programs and how to register will be available on the Museum's [website](#) as details are confirmed.

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This exhibition is also sponsored by



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ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and

program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum's Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum's website](#).

ABOUT AILEY

Founded by Alvin Ailey in 1958 and forged during a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater uplifts the African American experience while transcending boundaries of race, faith, and nationality with its universal humanity. Recognized as a vital “American Cultural Ambassador to the World,” it is one of the most acclaimed dance companies worldwide having performed in more than seventy countries on six continents. The AILEY organization also includes Ailey II (1974), a second performing company of emerging young dancers and innovative choreographers; The Ailey School (1969), one of the most extensive dance training programs in the world; Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs (1992), which brings dance into a wide range of classrooms and communities of all ages, and lives of people of all ages; and Ailey Extension (200R5), offering dance and fitness classes to the general public, which began with the opening of AILEY's permanent home in New York City—The Joan Weill Center for Dance—the nation's largest building dedicated to dance. For more information, visit alvinailey.org.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater returns to New York City Center December 4 - January 5, with its annual, five-week holiday season celebrating Legacy in Motion. The Company's extraordinary dancers will bring to life world premieres and new productions by a number of choreographers for whom Alvin Ailey paved the way, including the 25th anniversary of Ronald K. Brown's blockbuster *Grace*, a rapturous work in which the secular and sacred meet, connecting African and American dance. Tickets on sale September 10. A national tour to over 20 cities will follow, February – May 2025. For further info, email: aileypress@alvinailey.org

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

Image credits:

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Alvin Ailey. Photo by John Lindquist. © Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University

Jack Mitchell, Alvin Ailey, Myrna White, James Truitte, Ella Thompson, Minnie Marshall, and Don Martin in "Revelations", 1961. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. © Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. and Smithsonian Institution

Normand Maxon, Alvin Ailey, c. 1950-1960. Courtesy the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

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