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## Fieldnotes Dance and Movement

This guide was devised by the Community Partnerships Team at the British Museum in collaboration with performer Katie Green and former Dance United dance artists Ellen Steinmuller, Delene Gordon and Kwesi Johnson. Dance United partnered with Talking Objects Collective in 2014 to use objects to inspire choreographic development and nurture young people's awareness of cultural institutions. Focusing on the Lewis Chessmen, the young people developed a piece of choreography based on their responses to these objects, concluding with a site-specific performance in the galleries. Katie Green collaborated with the Museum in 2014 to deliver the supplementary schools workshop 'Exploring objects, sharing cultures' in response to the Roman galleries and objects associated with Cleopatra, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.



## Why use dance and movement in museums?

The **immediacy of dance** allows participants to gain an **embodied** sense of Museum objects and facilitates an authentic engagement with the collection. This **brings the objects to life** in a unique way – a lived, moved, expressed and inhabited way. It takes young people out of their usual learning environment and into **a different space, a place of enquiry, reflection and interpretation**.

Objects at the British Museum can be used as the source of initial **creative inspiration** and dance can be a tool for interpreting objects. Museum objects, especially those which are incomplete, can only tell part of a story. If young people want to tell the whole story, they have to fill in the gaps in understanding, and can do this by using the facts or by reimagining their own version of events. This interpretation is an ideal scenario for initiating creative movement exploration.

In the Museum environment there is much crossover between different facets of life and ways of **responding to the world**. Even if a young person does not ordinarily engage with dance/physical activity, or on the other hand, does not usually engage with history (for example), there is something about bringing two or more elements together that makes it more likely that he or she will be able to take something away from the experience.

Dance can be a tool for interpreting the Museum space itself and drawing on the **behaviours** that might be found there. What is important is that, even for a limited period of time, **the Museum ‘belongs’ to those young people who are given permission to interact with it in a different way**, and this experience feels all the more exciting because they aren’t ordinarily allowed to do so.

Developing the dance from its initial response to a more complex artistic expression, allows the participants to develop **a sense of empowerment and ownership of objects and their stories**.

*‘Young people produce their best material when they are playing or improvising. Setting up opportunities for them to explore their own ideas in their own way is incredibly important. When we asked the participants to reflect on their experience in the Museum, I was struck by how many of them talked about the extent to which their confidence had grown. Again, this just served to emphasise the importance not only of the themes, ideas and creative content of a session, but also everything about the way in which it was managed that could contribute to young people feeling empowered and free to create.’*

**Katie Green**

## Activities to try

**Movement observation** Visit a gallery (e.g. the Enlightenment Gallery, Room 1) to observe visitors' activities. Choose one visitor to focus on and subtly mirror their movements as they wander through the gallery. Come back together as a group and share your findings. Show gestures and movements you observed. Choose one favourite movement or gesture per person and then put all the movements together to create a 'visitors in the gallery' sequence.

Alternatively, watch the masquerade performance videos in the Africa Galleries (Room 25) and discuss: Are there any objects that change the way we move (heavy bags, headphones, etc.)? Ask pairs of young people to walk across the gallery. Then ask them to walk across imagining they are texting on a mobile phone. What's happened to their bodies? How has the phone changed their movements/pace? Walk across the gallery, this time exaggerating changes in body language, so by the end the last pair might be moving at a snail's pace. Discuss how the objects used in African masquerade performances (masks, instruments, etc.) have changed the way the people move and the power of these objects.

**Characteristics of objects** Consider how various human or animal characters in the Museum's collection would move or behave. For example, visit the Lewis Chessmen in Room 40 and examine each piece carefully, focusing on identifying status, characteristics and expressions, (e.g. aggressive, bored, powerful etc.) Write down or sketch ideas and details in the gallery. These features can be used to inform a solo movement exploration focusing on one character (in this case a chess piece).

**Spatial movement exercise** Visit a gallery with objects on display that have intricate patterns and enough space (for example, Room 34). Working in pairs, choose one of the lines, shapes, or patterns young people see in an object. Use non-sticky tape (electrical tape or washi tape) they should draw out the selected line or pattern on the floor, or use large tablet paper to sketch these. From this pattern, choose different parts of your body to draw the shape in space with movement. This will help pairs create a movement phrase and duets. Share duets and discuss.

**Objects coming to life** Ask young people to work in pairs and select one of two roles: the 'sculptor' or the 'sculpture' (or the clay ready to be moulded into shape). The 'sculptor' recreates a selected statue/bust (from Room 70, for example) by manipulating their partner into a static pose or position. Then ask young people to bring these reimagined sculptures to life, finding ways to move with them and in some cases building more of a story for those characters.

**Themes/words** Encourage young people to respond to the quality of the object or what the object represents. For example, ask young people to respond to the theme of power (e.g. in the Roman Empire), and explore how we could embody this particular theme (for example: deciding how power might feel in our bodies, and therefore how it might make us move). Or as another example you could explore the idea of loyalty (between Mark Antony and Julius Caesar for example) using Museum objects (from coins to rings). Use this as a warm-up activity where participants develop a series of ways in which they can physically support each other.

Use this information to improvise movement vocabulary consisting of sharp strong movements with all parts of the body, and share it in groups so it can be used to create scenes (for example, two opposing armies performing their 'power' movement towards and around each other, as if they are marking their territory). Participants can engage with the idea of status, hierarchy and competition between political opponents, and use these themes to set up a movement task. For example, a group of four dancers travel across the gallery space as if in a race, trying to get one step ahead of each other and to leave others behind.

**Responding to places where objects are located** Look at where objects are situated in the Museum – from glass cases to figures in the Great Court. Ask young people to design a procession of movements. Begin by asking them to work in small groups among objects that inspire them (so they could be seen to be ‘coming to life’), and then to move along the centre aisle of the gallery, the main thoroughfare for movement through the space.



## Practical tips

Respective collections need to be chosen according to their **relevance** to the young people as well as how they offer themselves to be explored through movement. Think about your object in focus. **Be creative and don't assume interests!**

Work with handling collections (borrowed from Museum learning teams or using everyday objects found in a classroom or studio) if possible. Being able to **handle items** reintroduces the tactile into an environment that young people can often associate with not getting too close and not touching. That's why handling collection objects can be useful in setting the tone for a project aimed at engaging with collections in a new way.

Where possible, find a workshop space you can use for warming up, to try things out away from the gallery, and as a place to talk about **shared expectations** for behaviour before moving into the gallery space.

Write about, film or photograph work in progress and come back to this **documentation**, especially if working over a longer period of time. This documentation is more effective when the young people are involved in producing it.

Prepare young people for what to expect when other Museum visitors **are sharing the same space** as them.

If an opportunity arises to co-produce a project or performance with the Museum, it is important to recognise that gallery spaces can often be restrictive to movement and dance activities. **Health and safety** is an issue particularly regarding objects and visitors in the space, so we suggest low-impact movements and concise and unobtrusive floorwork. Thorough planning will help to eradicate these issues.

Group leaders should introduce themselves and what they are planning to do during their project to Museum and gallery staff. By working closely with **Museum staff** they will better understand the potential challenges of a space (e.g. times when tours might be happening and areas that are out of bounds). Discuss the benefits of working in an unusual space, and create opportunities for Museum staff to share their knowledge with the young people.

*'The immediacy of dance allows the objects to be explored through embodied expression bringing them to life in a unique way. Being in charge of creating their own dance and creative movement responses participants gain a greater sense of self-awareness and improved communication skills, which in turn facilitates an overall sense of empowerment. This increased confidence is an invaluable learning outcome, especially for working with a marginalised population.'*

**Ellen Steinmuller**