

# **Basic Choreography and Kinesthetic: Foundations, Forms, and Functions in Creative Arts**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Choreography is the backbone of dance, the art of crafting movement to convey emotion, tell stories and evoke powerful expressions. At its core, choreography relies on kinesthetics which is the awareness of body movement and position. Understanding kinesthetics is essential for any dancer, choreographer or movement artist. This section discusses the foundational principles of choreography kinesthetics, exploring the forms and functions that shape creative movement. It will examine the intricate relationship between body, space and time and how these elements combine to create meaningful dance expressions. From modern to contemporary, ballet, to hip hop, every dance style relies on a deep understanding of kinesthetics. By grasping the basic of movement, dancers can unlock new levels of expressions, creativity, and connection with their audience. Through exploration and dance practice, we hope to develop a deeper understanding of choreography kinaesthetic, empowering individuals to create and communicate through movement.

### **Conceptualisation**

Choreography and kinesthetic awareness form the bedrock of creative expression in the performing arts. At its simplest, choreography refers to the structured arrangement of movement in time and space, often associated with dance but equally applicable to theatre, film, music videos, and performance art. It embodies both the artistic vision of the choreographer and the physical realisation of the performer. As Banes and Copeland note, choreography is not simply a technical activity but a form of “movement writing” that combines artistic creativity, cultural codes, and physical vocabulary into coherent structures (Banes and Copeland 14).

Closely connected to choreography is the concept of kinesthetic or kinesthetics, which emphasises the awareness of body movement, posture, and spatial orientation. The term derives from “kinesis” (movement) and “aesthesia” (perception), suggesting a perceptual and sensory dimension to bodily experience. Kinesthetic awareness refers to the individual’s ability to sense and interpret movement both internally (within their own body) and externally (in relation to other bodies or the environment). Foster argues that kinesthetic empathy enables viewers to “feel through” a dancer’s movement, creating a visceral connection between performer and spectator (Foster 7). Thus, kinesthetic awareness is not only crucial for performers but also for cultivating affective responses in audiences.

The intersection of choreography and kinesthetic awareness is particularly significant in the broader field of creative arts. In theatre, choreographic principles govern blocking, gesture, and the physical rhythms of performance. Scholars such as Sheets-Johnstone have highlighted that movement is a primordial form of thinking; that is, an embodied cognition through which humans make sense of the world (Sheets-Johnstone 56). By situating choreography and kinesthetics within creative arts, one appreciates how they transcend dance to function as universal modalities of expression.

A historical perspective underscores this conceptualisation. Early choreographic practices were embedded in ritual and communal performance, from African masquerade dances to Greek chorus movements. These were not merely aesthetic activities but embodied modes of cultural transmission, education, and spirituality. In the modern period, pioneers such as Rudolf Laban, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham reframed choreography as both a scientific study of movement and an avant-garde artistic practice. Laban's system of movement notation, for instance, remains a cornerstone for analysing the kinesthetic dimensions of performance (Newlove and Dalby 29). His theories bridged the gap between body mechanics and expressive movement, offering tools for both artistic creation and therapeutic application.

In African contexts, choreography has always been intertwined with kinesthetic awareness through its emphasis on rhythm, communal participation, and symbolic gesture. The Nigerian scholar and choreographer Peter Badejo stresses that African dance is not only physical but also kinesthetic knowledge, in which body movement encodes history, spirituality, and collective memory (Badejo 22). Similarly, Germaine Acogny's African contemporary dance integrates traditional Senegalese forms with modern choreographic vocabularies, exemplifying the fusion of embodied cultural heritage with innovative aesthetics. Such practices reinforce the view that choreography is not a static art but a dynamic negotiation between body, culture, and imagination.

In contemporary discourse, choreography and kinesthetics are increasingly examined through the lenses of embodied cognition, phenomenology, and interdisciplinary performance studies. Theories of embodied cognition suggest that thought is not detached from the body but fundamentally shaped by it (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 173). This resonates with the practice of choreography, where creative ideas are generated and explored through physical improvisation rather than abstract planning. Similarly, phenomenological approaches stress the lived experience of movement, framing kinesthetic awareness as a mode of being-in-the-world (Legrand and Ravn 31). Such perspectives position choreography as both an aesthetic and philosophical practice, one that illuminates the relationship between body, mind, and society. It is safe to state therefore, that the conceptualisation of choreography and kinesthetics within creative arts highlights their dual nature as practical skills and theoretical frameworks.

### **Choreography and Kinesthetic Practice -Forms/Types/Styles**

The diversity of choreography and kinesthetic practice in creative arts manifests through multiple **forms, types, and styles**, each shaped by cultural traditions, aesthetic philosophies, and social contexts. While choreography may be broadly defined as the design of movement, the way it materialises depends on whether it emerges from ritual, artistic experimentation, social function,

or digital innovation. Understanding these variations is crucial for appreciating the full spectrum of choreographic practice and its embeddedness in human creativity.

One of the earliest and most enduring forms is **traditional and indigenous choreography**, where movement serves religious, communal, and cultural purposes. In traditional African societies, for example, dance is inseparable from social identity, with choreographic patterns reflecting community values, rites of passage, and ancestral worship. As Adinku explains, African dance emphasises collective participation, rhythmic complexity, and symbolic gestures that embody cultural narratives (Adinku 34). Similar functions are found in other world traditions, such as Indian classical dance, where codified gestures (*mudras*) convey spiritual and mythological meanings (Vatsyayan 41).

In contrast, **classical and modernist choreographies** prioritise individual artistry and technical mastery. Ballet, originating from Renaissance courts and codified in France and Russia, epitomises this form. Its emphasis on verticality, symmetry, and aesthetic beauty established a global standard of choreographic discipline. The 20th century, however, saw radical departures from this classical model. Martha Graham in the United States developed a modern dance technique based on contraction and release, foregrounding emotional intensity and psychological depth (Graham 112). Merce Cunningham, on the other hand, introduced chance procedures and abstract movement, emphasising the independence of dance from music and narrative (Copeland 78). These innovations expanded the vocabulary of choreography beyond tradition, paving the way for hybrid and experimental styles.

**Contemporary and experimental choreographies** build upon these modernist foundations but often reject rigid technique in favour of improvisation, inter-disciplinarity, and the integration of everyday movement. Choreographers like Pina Bausch blurred the boundaries between dance and theatre, while in Africa, Germaine Acogny fused traditional Senegalese dance with contemporary techniques, creating a unique style of African contemporary choreography (Acogny 59). These experimental approaches highlight choreography as an evolving practice, open to cross-cultural exchange and political expression. They also demonstrate kinesthetic sensitivity, where performers' awareness of their bodies in relation to space, audience, and environment becomes as important as technical form.

The field of dance/movement therapy, pioneered in part by Marian Chace, exemplifies how choreographic methods can be adapted for therapeutic purposes (Levy 23). These pedagogical and therapeutic forms foreground the functionality of choreography as a tool for growth and transformation rather than as a purely aesthetic product.

Another emerging type is **digital and social media choreography**, which reflects the technological shifts of the 21st century. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have popularised short, repeatable dance routines that spread globally within hours. These forms democratise choreography, enabling non-professional dancers to create and participate in shared movement vocabularies. Digital choreography blurs the lines between art and popular culture, creating a new form of kinesthetic community across virtual spaces (Bragin 91). Similarly, in contemporary Nigerian contexts, Afrobeats music videos employ choreography as a central element of visual

culture that blends traditional motifs with modern aesthetics for global consumption (Adeyemi 64).

### Functions of Choreography and Kinesthetic

Choreography and kinesthetic awareness serve multiple **functions** within the creative arts, that extend beyond aesthetic pleasure to encompass cultural, social, educational, political, and therapeutic roles. Because movement is a universal human expression, choreographic practices embody meanings that transcend verbal language, making them essential to human communication and community life. The functions of choreography thus reflect its capacity to mediate between the individual body and the collective imagination.

One of the primary functions of choreography is **artistic and aesthetic expression**. At its core, choreography provides a means of organising movement into forms that evoke beauty, harmony, tension, or abstraction. The stage, gallery, or screen becomes a canvas on which the body inscribes artistic meaning. According to Carter, choreography transforms ordinary motion into symbolic artistry, allowing movement to function as a visual language (Carter 47). Kinesthetic awareness deepens this aesthetic function by enabling performers to embody emotion, rhythm, and spatial dynamics in ways that resonate with audiences. This function affirms choreography as not only a craft of movement design but also an art form that enriches human experience through beauty and creativity.

Choreography also functions as a **mode of communication and storytelling**. Long before the invention of writing systems, communities used movement as a narrative tool to convey myths, histories, and values. In African traditions, dances often tell stories of origin, migration, or spiritual encounters that blend music, gesture, and costume into a holistic performance (Ajayi 18). Similarly, ballet narratives like *Swan Lake* or contemporary dance-theatre works articulate complex themes through choreographic sequences. Kinesthetic empathy allows audiences to “read” these narratives viscerally, making choreography a vital medium for transmitting stories and collective memory across generations.

Beyond its artistic and narrative roles, choreography serves important **social and cultural functions**. In many societies, choreographic practices are central to festivals, rituals, and community celebrations. They foster social cohesion by allowing individuals to embody collective identities. Nwakanma explains that in Igbo masquerade dances, choreographic patterns symbolise social order, spiritual mediation, and community solidarity (Nwakanma 65). On a global scale, contemporary social dances such as hip hop, salsa, or Afrobeats routines, function as markers of identity and belonging, affirming cultural pride while facilitating intercultural exchange. Choreography, in this sense, becomes a living archive of culture, encoding the values and practices of a people within bodily movement.

Choreography and kinesthetics also perform significant **educational and developmental functions**. In creative arts pedagogy, movement exercises cultivate students’ kinesthetic intelligence, critical thinking, and collaborative skills. Schools and universities often integrate choreography into drama, music, or art curricula as a way of promoting creativity and holistic learning. Hanna notes that dance education enhances spatial awareness, emotional expression, and

problem-solving, making it a vital component of 21st-century education (Hanna 74). Beyond the classroom, community-based choreographies such as Theatre for Development (TfD) projects in Africa, uses participatory movement to engage citizens in dialogue about health, governance, and social change (Abah 53). These functions underscore choreography's role as a pedagogical tool that fosters both personal and communal development.

The **political and activist function** of choreography has gained prominence in recent decades. Movements such as South Africa's *toyi-toyi* or the United States' Black Lives Matter protests have employed choreographed gestures and marches as embodied forms of resistance. Dance scholar Chaleff argues that choreography can function as a "politics of visibility," making marginalised voices and bodies central to public discourse (Chaleff 29). In Nigeria, choreographed performances during national celebrations or protests often articulate political critique, using bodily movement as a means of reclaiming public space. This function demonstrates that choreography is not merely aesthetic but also a powerful tool for activism and social transformation.

In addition to the above-discussed ones, choreography fulfils important **therapeutic and healing functions**. The field of dance/movement therapy has shown how structured movement can address psychological trauma, physical disability, and emotional imbalance. By engaging kinesthetic awareness, therapy sessions enable participants to reconnect with their bodies, release tension, and foster healing. Karkou and Meekums highlight how dance therapy contributes to mental health by integrating movement with psychological insight, particularly in contexts of trauma recovery (Karkou and Meekums 112). In indigenous African traditions, dance rituals also serve therapeutic purposes, invoking spiritual forces and communal participation to heal individuals and restore harmony within the community.

### Elements of Choreography and kinesthetic

Choreography is structured through fundamental **elements of movement** that enable both performers and choreographers to articulate meaning, organise form, and cultivate kinesthetic awareness. While the terminology and emphasis vary across cultures and traditions, most frameworks converge on five interrelated elements: **body, space, time, energy, and relationship**. These elements are not isolated components but dynamic dimensions that interact to shape the choreographic experience. Understanding them is essential for appreciating how movement functions as both an artistic language and a mode of embodied communication.

- **Body:** The first element is the **body**, which serves as the instrument of choreography. All movement originates from bodily articulation, whether through the extension of limbs, gestures of the hands, or expressions of the face. Laban emphasised that the body is a multidimensional instrument with parts that can move in isolation or in coordinated harmony (Laban 32). In African dance traditions, the polycentric nature of the body, where different parts move simultaneously in distinct rhythms, is a defining feature (Nketia 87). Kinesthetic awareness of the body allows performers to harness posture, balance, and alignment as expressive tools, transforming physicality into artistry.

- **Space:** The second element is **space**, referring to the spatial pathways, directions, levels, and orientations through which the body moves. Space can be personal (the kinesphere surrounding the performer) or general (the stage, arena, or environment). The manipulation of space in choreography creates visual patterns, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic balance. In theatre, blocking and stage design often depend on choreographic spatial awareness, while in dance, the use of levels, from grounded floorwork to elevated leaps, produces dynamic contrasts. As Foster notes, choreographic space is not neutral but “charged with meaning through the body’s occupation and transformation of it” (Foster 41).
  
- **Time:** This is another fundamental element, encompassing rhythm, tempo, duration, and phrasing of movement. Whether aligned with music or independent of it, choreographic timing shapes the flow and perception of performance. Traditional African choreographies often emphasise polyrhythmic structures, where dancers respond to layered drum patterns with complex timing (Adinku 66). In contrast, Cunningham’s experiments with chance procedures revealed that choreography could operate independently of musical rhythm, foregrounding time as a flexible and abstract dimension (Copeland 92). Kinesthetic sensitivity to time enables performers to synchronise, contrast, or suspend movement, creating tension and release that engage audiences.
  
- **Energy:** Sometimes referred to as force or dynamics, energy refers to the quality of movement, whether sharp or smooth, sustained or percussive, light or heavy. Energy infuses movement with emotional texture and communicative power. Graham’s modern dance technique, based on contraction and release, exemplifies how energy dynamics can embody psychological intensity (Graham 124). In ritual dances, shifts in energy often mark transitions between sacred and secular dimensions, signalling changes in meaning. Kinesthetic awareness allows performers to modulate energy consciously, enhancing expressivity and affective impact.
  
- **Relationship:** It refers to the connections between bodies, objects, and environments within choreography. Movement gains meaning when situated in relational contexts: between performers (duets, ensembles), between performers and props, or between performers and audiences. Bausch’s Tanztheater, for instance, explored relationality by blending gesture, spoken text, and scenography in ways that emphasised human interactions (Servos 56). In African masquerade performances, relationships between dancers, musicians, and spectators blur traditional performer–audience boundaries, creating a participatory choreographic field (Ajayi 78). This element underscores that choreography is not only individual expression but also relational dialogue mediated through movement.

These five elements - body, space, time, energy, and relationship - constitute the **building blocks of choreography**.

### **Major Proponents and their Contributions**

The history and practice of choreography and kinesthetics have been shaped by the pioneering contributions of choreographers, theorists, and practitioners who expanded movement vocabularies, developed analytical systems, and bridged cultural traditions. These figures provide the theoretical and practical foundations upon which contemporary creative arts rest. Their contributions illustrate the global nature of choreography, while also highlighting African and Nigerian innovators who have brought indigenous movement traditions into dialogue with modern aesthetics.

#### **1. Rudolf Laban**

**(1879–1958): This is** Perhaps the most influential theorist of choreography/ His work transformed the study and practice of movement. Laban developed a comprehensive system of analysing and recording movement, known as *Laban Movement Analysis (LMA)*, which categorises movement in terms of body, effort, space, and shape (Laban 44). His invention of *Labanotation* offered a written system for choreographic documentation comparable to musical notation. Laban's theories not only shaped modern European dance but also found applications in theatre training, psychotherapy, sports, and education. By emphasising kinesthetic awareness, Laban positioned movement as a universal human language, influencing generations of artists and educators.

#### **2. Martha Graham (1894–1991)**

In the United States, **Martha Graham** revolutionised modern dance with her emphasis on emotional expression and psychological depth. Her technique of “contraction and release” used the body's core as the source of movement, producing choreography that conveyed inner conflicts and human struggles (Graham 128). Works such as *Appalachian Spring* exemplified her fusion of abstract movement with narrative, making choreography a vehicle for exploring cultural identity and social themes. Graham's legacy lies in her integration of kinesthetic intensity with dramatic storytelling, positioning choreography as a serious modern art form.

#### **3. Merce Cunningham (1919–2009)**

**Merce Cunningham** challenged conventional approaches to choreography by separating movement from music and narrative. Through the use of chance procedures and computer software, Cunningham foregrounded the autonomy of dance as an independent art form (Copeland 95). His collaborations with visual artists and composers such as John Cage redefined choreography as an interdisciplinary practice, emphasising the openness of movement to experimentation. Cunningham's work demonstrated that kinesthetic structures could exist without fixed storylines, reshaping contemporary understandings of choreography's possibilities.

#### 4. **Germaine Acogny (b. 1944)**

In the African context, **Germaine Acogny** is often hailed as the “mother of contemporary African dance.” She developed a technique that combines traditional Senegalese dance with modern movement principles, creating a unique African contemporary choreography that has gained international recognition (Acogny 63). Through her École des Sables in Senegal, Acogny has trained generations of dancers across Africa, emphasising kinesthetic knowledge as rooted in both cultural heritage and modern innovation. Her work demonstrates the capacity of African choreography to serve as both a preservation of tradition and a platform for global dialogue.

In Nigeria, several choreographers have made notable contributions to integrating choreography within the broader creative arts. **Hubert Ogunde (1916–1990)**, often regarded as the father of Nigerian theatre, incorporated dance and choreography into his travelling theatre productions, blending traditional Yoruba forms with modern performance structures (Adedeji 52). His choreographic practices highlighted the centrality of dance in Nigerian theatre, influencing subsequent generations of performers.

Similarly, **Peter Badejo (b. 1949)** has been instrumental in theorising African dance as both an artistic and intellectual practice. His research and performances stress that African choreography encodes philosophical and spiritual knowledge through kinesthetic expression (Badejo 38). Badejo’s contributions bridge scholarship and practice, advancing the recognition of choreography as a legitimate academic and cultural discourse.

Contemporary Nigerian choreographers such as **Qudus Onikeku** have further expanded the field by combining Yoruba dance, hip hop, and contemporary improvisation. Onikeku’s work explores memory, identity, and postcolonial realities, positioning choreography as a form of embodied philosophy (Ogunleye 77). His international performances and workshops demonstrate the global reach of Nigerian choreographic creativity.

Other figures such as **Pina Bausch** in Germany and **Alvin Ailey** in the United States also deserve mention for their contributions. Bausch’s Tanztheater combined choreography with theatrical narrative, redefining the relationship between movement and drama (Servos 59). Ailey, through his company Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, showcased African American cultural identity and heritage, particularly in works like *Revelations* (DeFrantz 112). Both choreographers highlighted the social and political dimensions of kinesthetic expression, making choreography a medium for cultural affirmation and critique.

#### **Case Studies**

To illustrate the intersections of choreography and kinesthetics, this section presents selected case studies drawn from global and African contexts. Each case demonstrates how choreography operates as both aesthetic practice and cultural expression, while kinesthetic awareness grounds creativity in embodied knowledge.

### **Alvin Ailey's "Revelations" (1960)**

Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* remains one of the most performed modern dance works worldwide. Inspired by African American spirituals, gospel, and blues, the choreography embodies resilience, hope, and cultural memory (DeFrantz 102). Ailey employed expansive gestures, grounded movement, and ensemble patterns to express collective identity. The kinesthetic power of the work resides in its accessibility, audiences "feel" the rhythms and emotions regardless of cultural background. *Revelations* illustrates choreography as both a celebration of heritage and a universal language of the human body.

### **Germaine Acogny and the École des Sables (Senegal)**

Germaine Acogny's work at École des Sables represents a landmark in the fusion of African traditional dance with contemporary techniques. Through choreographic pieces such as *Yewa* and *Fagaala*, Acogny incorporates Yoruba and Senegalese forms while engaging modern compositional structures (Acogny 69). Her pedagogy emphasises kinesthetic listening, teaching dancers to internalise rhythm, space, and flow as cultural archives. This case underscores the role of choreography in cultural preservation and innovation, positioning African dance within the global canon.

### **Qudus Onikeku's "Spirit Child" (2019)**

Nigerian choreographer Qudus Onikeku's *Spirit Child* interrogates postcolonial identity and memory by blending Yoruba dance, hip hop, and improvisation. The work engages kinesthetic energy to evoke ancestral presence, creating an embodied dialogue between past and present (Ogunleye 75). Onikeku's choreography demonstrates how movement can carry philosophical depth, enabling dance to function as a site of decolonial critique. The audience's empathetic engagement reflects kinesthetic knowledge as relational, transcending mere aesthetics.

### **Pina Bausch's "Tanztheater Wuppertal"**

Pina Bausch's Tanztheater productions, such as *Café Müller* (1978), fused theatrical narrative with choreographic invention, creating emotionally charged experiences. Through repetition, fragmented gestures, and dramatic staging, Bausch revealed the kinesthetic as affective resonance, audiences sense vulnerability through the dancers' bodies (Servos 118). This case highlights choreography as dramaturgy, where movement structures human emotions and social commentary.

### **Hubert Ogunde and Nigerian Theatre**

Hubert Ogunde's travelling theatre integrated dance and choreography as a central element of storytelling. Productions like *Yoruba Ronu* (1964) used choreographed sequences rooted in Yoruba ritual performance to advance socio-political critique (Adedeji 54). Ogunde's case demonstrates the African theatrical model, where choreography and kinesthetics are inseparable from music, drama, and cultural commentary. His contribution provides a template for interdisciplinary creativity in the Nigerian context.

## Conclusion

The exploration of choreography and kinesthetics in the context of creative arts underscores their centrality as both foundations and dynamic forces of artistic expression. Choreography, understood as the conscious structuring of movement, provides order, rhythm, and thematic coherence to artistic creation, while kinesthetics, embodied awareness of motion, grounds this structuring in the lived experience of the human body. Together, they reveal dance not simply as entertainment but as a communicative practice, a cultural archive, and a form of embodied knowledge.

The chapter has shown how diverse **forms, types, and styles** of choreography, from classical ballet to contemporary African dance, demonstrate the adaptability of movement vocabularies across contexts. Similarly, the **functions** of choreography and kinesthetics are multiple: they preserve cultural memory, foster identity, educate communities, and provide therapeutic, aesthetic, and spiritual enrichment. As explored through the **elements** of space, time, energy, and flow, choreography is not merely a set of steps but a compositional grammar of embodied meaning.

Ultimately, the synergy between choreography and kinesthetics affirms that movement is knowledge, an embodied epistemology that communicates beyond verbal language. For creative arts, this recognition broadens the field's interpretive frameworks, enabling scholars and practitioners to understand performance as both artistic product and lived experience. By situating choreography and kinesthetics at the heart of cultural expression, the chapter provides a foundation for appreciating dance as a vital mode of inquiry, identity-making, and human connection in the 21st century and beyond.

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