

The cover features a dark blue background with various abstract elements. In the top left, a red trapezoidal shape contains a white line drawing of a single dancer. In the top center, a pink diamond shape contains a white line drawing of a group of dancers. In the top right, a purple rectangular shape contains a white line drawing of a group of dancers. In the bottom left, a blue L-shaped structure contains a pink rectangular platform with a white line drawing of a group of dancers on top. In the bottom right, a large red circle contains a white line drawing of a group of dancers. At the very bottom center, there is a small black rectangle containing a white line drawing of a group of dancers.

Sustaining Traditional Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Edited by Rebeka Kunej
and Theresa Jill Buckland





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Ljubljana, 2025



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Sustaining Traditional Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

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Sustaining Traditional Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage is dedicated to the multifaceted exploration of dance within the paradigm of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). At its core, the volume foregrounds practices that do not merely assign a declarative position to traditional dance within communities, but actively sustain its performance, transmission, and embodied significance. Beyond theoretical discourse, this book emphasises the lived, practised, and experienced dimensions of dance heritage. The essential premise is that dance, as an intangible cultural heritage, inherently exists through embodiment. It is not solely a symbolic or representational form, but a dynamic, corporeal practice – one that lives in the bodies of dancers and the social contexts they inhabit. Understanding dance in this way requires us to go beyond treating it as a static product of the past, and instead to engage with it as a living, evolving practice embedded in the present. This is the only way to build the resilience that will ensure its future sustainability.

The succession of numerous UNESCO international conventions on heritage since 1972 – along with various regional and national instruments – has contributed to a growing global awareness of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Over the past half century, we have witnessed a shift in emphasis from monuments and material artefacts to the living, performative dimensions of culture. The adoption and ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 (UNESCO 2003) marked a pivotal moment: for the first time, heritage status was extended to cultural practices and forms of knowledge deeply rooted in embodiment and sensory experience. As Regina Bendix (2021) notes, this shift has significantly benefitted cultural practices that engage the body and the senses in profound ways. What, after all, is dance if not the embodiment of knowledge, memory, and skill – passed down within dance communities through experiential learning rather than textual transmission. Within the context of dance, the experience is inherently multisensory, encompassing tactile, auditory, visual, and olfactory senses, and most importantly, involving tacit knowledge and kinaesthetic perception.

Intangible cultural heritage is part of our identities. Safeguarding intangible heritage is challenging because it depends on knowledge, memory and skills that must be passed down through generations. This process of transmission is increasingly threatened by the pressures of contemporary life and the dynamics of modernity, which continuously reshape the contexts in which intangible heritage exists and is practised. If intangible

cultural heritage is only registered, documented, and inscribed in official inventories, it risks becoming merely a record of the past – a static memory, a testament to what once was. Intangible cultural heritage, including dance, remains truly alive only when it is actively practised and performed. However, with continued practice inevitably comes change. Safeguarding dance heritage does not imply preserving it in a fixed or fossilised form, but rather honouring ancestral traditions while recognising and accommodating the evolving needs, interpretations, and contexts of contemporary bearers. It requires an ongoing, respectful dialogue between the past and the present to live in the future.

A temporal shift in heritage discourse reveals that intangible cultural heritage is increasingly portrayed as a resource for tackling the environmental, economic, and social concerns of our times, even if the UNESCO paradigm can still be seen as an “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006). From the conventional model of conservation of relics of the past, today the UNESCO paradigm builds on the concept of safeguarding, where heritage is no longer regarded as something to be preserved, but rather reconceptualised as a project for the future.

Social anthropologist Chiara Bortolotto (2025) emphasises a critical turn in heritage discourse toward sustainable development, referring to this evolution as “the sustainabilisation” of intangible cultural heritage. This conceptual shift holds the potential to address broader societal concerns and anxieties of the contemporary era. Bortolotto asserts that “it is no longer about us protecting heritage but about heritage protecting us” (2025, 2) although her analysis primarily situates intangible heritage within the context of environmental challenges. Within the *Dance-ICH* project, we maintain that dance can likewise contribute to sustainable development. As a collective activity rooted in proximity and human warmth, dance embodies social cohesion and equity, and – through its physical and social dimensions – contributes to individual and community well-being.

The project *Dance as Intangible Cultural Heritage: New Models of Facilitating Participatory Dance Events (Dance-ICH)*¹ places particular emphasis on fostering inclusive and participatory dance practices as a means of engaging communities and sustaining intangible cultural heritage. Launched in 2022 and running until 2025, the project brought together nine partners

¹ Additional details about the project are available on the project’s official website: <https://www.dancingas-livingheritage.eu/>.

from six European countries to explore and promote the role of dance as intangible cultural heritage: the Norwegian Centre for Traditional Music and Dance (Sff) and the Museums of Southern Trøndelag (MiST) from Norway, the Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage in Flanders (CEMPER) from Belgium, the School of Physical Education and Sport Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA-SPESS) and the Hellenic Folklore Research Centre of the Academy of Athens (HFRC-AA) from Greece, the Hungarian Open Air Museum (SKANZEN) from Hungary, the ASTRA Museum from Romania, the Slovene Ethnographic Museum (SEM) and the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) from Slovenia.

The *Dance-ICH* project was committed to developing approaches for facilitating participatory dance events, with the goal of strengthening connections between local dance heritage communities, museums, heritage institutions, research and academic institutions, and the broader public. Through co-creative processes, the project aimed to establish sustainable models for safeguarding dance heritage, ensuring their ongoing transmission and relevance in contemporary society.

Among outcomes, the project facilitated knowledge exchange among researchers, academics, cultural brokers and facilitators, curators and museum professionals, and dance practitioners. It included the preparation of exhibitions in which the exhibition venues – mostly museums – were transformed into dynamic arenas for dance. A key aim was also to engage and collaborate with local dance communities through case studies, in order to co-create strategies for raising awareness, ensuring respect for, and safeguarding their dance heritage.

The *Dance-ICH* project carried out multiple case studies across the partner countries, each focusing on particular dance practices and community dynamics. These studies informed both the participatory dance events and the project exhibition *Dance – Europe's Living Heritage in Motion*, which was displayed in five countries across various venues.

This monograph, as one of the *Dance-ICH* project's culminating outcomes, brings together diverse scholarly contributions that explore various dimensions of the safeguarding, interpretation, and transmission of dance as intangible cultural heritage. The chapters illuminate the multifaceted processes involved in preserving, performing, transmitting, and theorising dance heritage across a range of cultural and institutional contexts. As a result of the *Dance-ICH* project, the contributions inevitably fo-

cus on selected European contexts. The editors remain aware of the volume's inherent Eurocentric perspective and the institutionalised nature of heritage discourse shaped by the involvement of specific authors and institutions. We hope, nonetheless, that this specific collection of essays will stimulate further studies on dance as intangible cultural heritage and its sustainability which arise from differing geographies and organisations.

Egil Bakka and Georgiana Gore open this volume by interrogating the conceptual framework of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) through an analysis of its terminology through a dance-specific lens. They argue that more precise distinctions – particularly between “intervention” and “facilitation” – can enhance safeguarding strategies, especially when applied to the unique challenges posed by dance heritage. Illustrating and situating their argument through personal experiences in Norway and Benin-City, Nigeria, they conclude with brief reflections on how the work within the International Choreomundus Masters' programme related to the terminology proposed in this chapter.

The relationship between dance as intangible cultural heritage and academia is further pursued in the subsequent chapter by **Zoi N. Margari and Maria I. Koutsouba**. Focusing on the specific situation in Greece, they explore the evolving role of university-trained dance teachers as cultural mediators who bridge academic knowledge with heritage practice. Drawing on legislative and ethnographic analysis, the authors reveal how traditional dance has been institutionalised and reshaped within national heritage discourses under the influence of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Following the wide definition of heritage communities in the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, better known as the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005), they identify one important academic community which continues to be pivotal in the co-shaping of sustainable dance heritage practices within and beyond Greece.

Rebeka Kunej's chapter shifts the focus to an examination of the interplay between staged folk dance ensemble performances and socially embedded dance practices as observed at the festivals known as *veselicas* in Horjul, Slovenia. She highlights the ways in which local dance identities are constructed and negotiated as heritage representation in the absence of systematic historical documentation. Whether performed on stage or within social settings, traditional dance, in her analysis, embodies a living dialogue between artistic interpretation and communal identity. This notion

of cultural identity and its sustainability at the local level is further considered by **Dóra Pál-Kovács** who offers a detailed case study of the wedding ritual *Sárközi lakodalom* as an emblematic expression of complex heritage systems in Hungary. Through an exploration of wedding traditions that encompass traditional dance and other heritage elements, she considers how this popular local event, based on mid-twentieth century iterations, represents and sustains cultural identity in the contemporary context. Moving to a national level in Hungary, **Anna Janku** provides an overview of the Hungarian *táncház* movement, tracing its development from a grassroots initiative to an internationally recognised model for the transmission of folk dance. Her contribution highlights the multiplicity of meanings that the term *táncház* has acquired – encompassing method, institution, and community – and its evolution as a living cultural heritage phenomenon. Her chapter is followed by **Drago Kunej**'s focused study on the significant integral role in Slovenia of music and musicians in sustaining dance heritage and ensuring its continuity. Drawing on his personal experiences as a musician within this milieu and on case studies that bring the issue of reinterpretation to the fore, he argues that the interrelationship between dance and music, particularly within participatory communities, is both central to both scholarly understanding and practical safeguarding efforts. Personal involvement is also reflected in **Siri Mæland**'s presentation of three detailed case studies from Norway that illustrate shifting models of dance heritage dissemination within archival and educational contexts. Offering an insider perspective, she examines how renewal, ownership and methodological shifts shape the safeguarding of traditional dance in Norway. By analysing projects such as *Dansespor* and *Bygda Dansar*, she reflects on the ideological underpinnings and methodological tensions involved in balancing accessibility, pedagogy, and community involvement.

The next chapters are related to museological perspectives on safeguarding dance as intangible cultural heritage. Belgian heritage workers **Debora Plouy** and **Mieke Witkamp** discuss the application of sustainability assessment tools to social dance practices, adapting existing models to evaluate the viability of living heritage. Based at CEMPER (Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage) in Flanders, they argue for a safeguarding approach that empowers heritage communities to retain control over transmission while benefiting from institutional support and facilitation. This emphasis upon community agency when working with institutions is also underscored by **Tone Erlien Myrvold** whose subsequent chapter

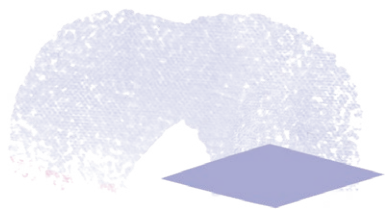
introduces the concept of “events of practice exhibitions”, as developed within the *Dancing Museums* project in Norway and further pursued within the *Dance-ICH* project. She outlines four curatorial strategies that employ community-based participation to activate dance heritage within museum contexts, thereby reshaping audience engagement with intangible heritage and enhancing its relevance as a living, experiential practice. **Silvestru Petac** addresses the ethnographic museum’s role in safeguarding Romanian traditional dance, proposing a theoretical distinction applicable to the Romanian situation between “traditional dance” and “dance of the ethnographical type”. He critiques theatrically performative approaches to heritage and advocates for a more reflexive, participatory museological paradigm that reconciles safeguarding with community engagement. The role of the ethnographic museum in safeguarding traditional performance as intangible cultural heritage is also discussed by **Anja Jerin and Adela Pukl**. They reflect upon the manner in which the Slovene Ethnographic Museum engages with music and dance heritage through the dual lenses of the UNESCO safeguarding paradigm and museological practice. They discuss the institutional challenges and opportunities involved in translating systemic frameworks into curatorial work, with a focus on customs, community, and performative practices. This thematic section is concluded with a further discussion from the perspective of practical museum experience. **Raluca Ioana Andrei and Simona Maria Malearov** present a case study of Romania’s ASTRA Museum, demonstrating how digital tools, educational programmes, and community collaboration are employed to safeguard traditional dance. Their analysis emphasises the importance of maintaining the ritual and social significance of dance, rather than reducing it to static stage representations.

Together, these contributions enhance our understanding of the diverse ways in which dance continues to exist as intangible cultural heritage within communities, cultural institutions, and in the context of UNESCO’s global policy frameworks and beyond. We hope that this volume will encourage readers to reflect on the challenges faced by various stakeholders in sustaining dance heritage – both today and for future generations. In offering what we and the authors believe are valuable insights into how dance heritage is approached, safeguarded, and interpreted across Europe, we hope that the volume may serve as a case study of broader processes and tensions within the field of intangible cultural heritage.

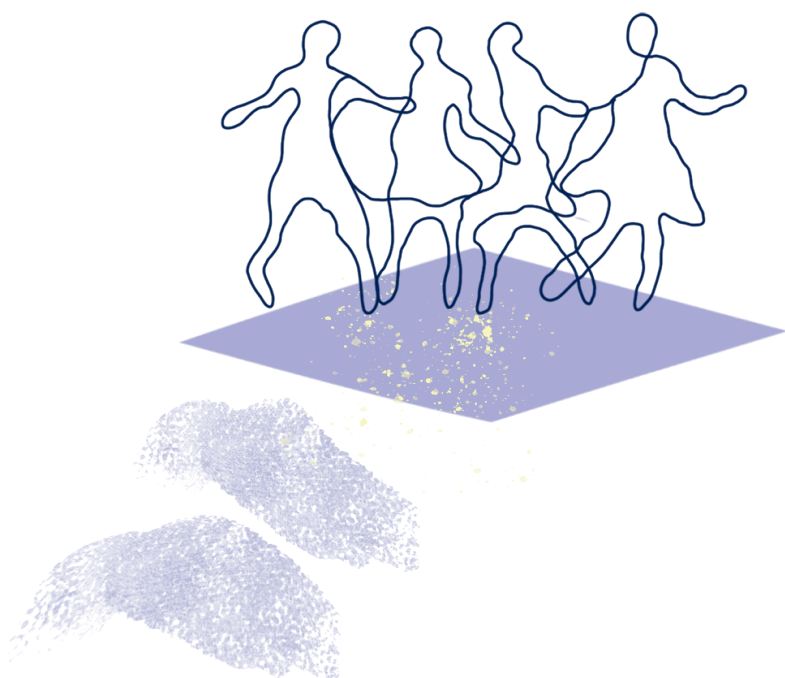
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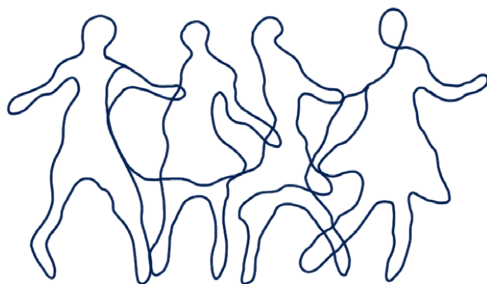


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