

Umbra Search: African American History

Umbra Search African American History is a freely available widget (an element of a graphical user interface that displays) information or provides a specific way for a user to interact with an operation system or an application and search tool via umbrasearch.org that facilitates access to African American history through digitization content, community events and workshops developed by the Givens Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, with Penumbra Theatre Company.

The service is a response to a project dedicated to understanding the role of theater archives in documenting history. However, the scope of immediately went beyond theater and the performing arts to unite the historical artifacts and documents that represent the full depth and breadth of the African American experience—its people, places, ideas, events, movements, and inspirations in hope that this rich history will find new life and form in theater, literature, works of art, journalism, scholarship, teaching curricula, and much more.

Hence the project began in 2012 with 'Preserving the Ephemeral: An Archival Program for Theater and the Performing Arts' (<https://www.lib.umn.edu/about/ephemeral/>), originally conceived as *The African American Theater History Project* with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Preserving the Ephemeral* was a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and Penumbra Theatre Company to assess the needs of the theater community, and ethnic theaters in particular, around questions of archives and historical legacy wherein over 300 theater representatives responded to a national survey in partnership with American Theatre Archive Project, and artistic directors and founders from over 60 theaters around the U.S. participated in forums convened to discuss the challenges and heightened importance of archives for culturally specific companies.

The Givens Collection consists of over 10,000 books, magazines, and pamphlets by or about African Americans. Included are novels, poetry, plays, short stories, essays, literary criticism, periodicals, and biographies that span nearly 250 years of American culture, with particular strength in the areas of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The Collection also holds a significant number of books that relate to African American art, education, social sciences, sports, and entertainment, as well as works by or about continental Africans and Africans in diaspora.

With tens of thousands of archival and manuscript materials that document the history of African descendant literature and culture—correspondence, pamphlets, screenplays, newspaper clippings, photographs, sheet music, ephemera, including the Penumbra Theatre Company Archives—the Givens Collection is an invaluable community and scholarly resource, and is a key foundation of *Umbra Search* with the Digital Public Library of America corpus providing over half of the content found in *Umbra Search*.

In short, umbrasearch.org brings together more than 400,000 digitized materials from over 1,000 libraries and archives across the country; and it celebrates the vital efforts of the individuals and institutions that have helped to preserve and make accessible online hundreds of thousands of pieces of African American history and culture, via the Umbra Society of the early 1960s, a group of Black writers and poets who helped create the Black Arts Movement.

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