

# The race to save Black history: as art collections deteriorate, preservationists struggle to save our culture

**Ebony, Feb, 2008 by Eric V. Copage**

For more than 40 years, Mayme Agnew Clayton, a university librarian in Los Angeles for most of her adult life, collected books, films, letters and other precious items documenting African-American history. The reason, she often would say, was so "children would know that Black people have done great things," remembers her son, Avery.

When she died in October 2006 at age 83, Dr. Clayton appeared to have accomplished her life's goal. She had amassed what many experts believe is one of the nation's top private collections of artifacts and documents dedicated to the African-American past.

But for many years, much of her trove was housed in the garage behind her California bungalow in the middle-class West Adams Historic District of Los Angeles. Water seepage on the garage floor mined a stack of the California Eagle, one of America's first Black newspapers. Silverfish, the wingless inch-long insects with an appetite for glue and paper, had grazed on some of Dr. Clayton's 30,000 first-edition and out-of-print books written by or about Black people.

A reporter from The Washington Post simply described the scene in the overstuffed garage as "photographs, journals, cartoons, correspondence, dusted with ... mold."

African-American preservationists around the country--some academically trained, others ordinary folk trying to do the right thing--are racing to collect and preserve documents and artifacts about Black history and culture.

"White America has been aware that in order to tell your story, you have to preserve your history," says Jacqueline K. Dace, the curator of the African American Collection of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, adding that since the late 1970s, Black America is realizing the same thing at a quickening pace.

Yet Black preservationists often meet with frustration. Budget cuts in 2004 at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, caused the center's administration to lay off its sole archivist. That same year similar budgetary constraints forced Clark Atlanta University to shutter its 64-year-old School of Library And Information Studies.

This was a "big blow" for the preservation of Black culture because "the majority of archivists now come from library and information programs," says Petrina Jackson, a co-chairwoman of the Archivists and Archives of Color Roundtable, the part of the Society of American Archivists that advocates the preservation of materials related to minorities.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita took a toll on the archives and libraries of historically Black colleges and universities, including the art collection at Southern University of New Orleans.

Water in the first-floor building, where the collection was housed, rose to 5 feet, according to The Times-Picayune newspaper in New Orleans. The paper said water "knocked pottery and masks off their shelves and managed to invade Plexiglas display cases." The result: "Intricate patterns carved on a drum were barely visible

beneath a film of mold ... Mold had blackened raffia ... from tribal masks ... had eaten away at shackles and chains in a plastic storage chest that was flail to the brim with a thick, viscous, yellow-brown broth."

Linda M. Hill, the curator and the archivist for the Center for African and African American Studies at Southern, says nearly one-third of the 1,000 pieces of textiles, African wood sculptures and other African and African-American cultural artifacts were unsalvageable.

Sometimes Black history goes up in smoke. In 2006, a fire destroyed Chicago's Pilgrim Baptist Church, a focal point for Black religious and cultural life during the great migration and beyond. Thomas A. Dorsey, known as the father of gospel music, had been Pilgrim's longtime music director. The blaze, which investigators say began accidentally while workmen were renovating the church, destroyed hundreds of historic photographs and a dozen or so cartons filled with Dorsey's original sheet music, according to Jacqueline E. Washington, the church archivist.

"African-American history is in boxes in basements and attics throughout the country," says Clayton, who oversees his mother's collection with Lloyd Clayton, one of his two brothers. He emphasized that the materials are perishable because of age, as well as accidents and natural disasters.

"If there isn't an organized effort to identify and provide safe haven for them, within 50 years they will be gone," he says.

Four years before his mother's death, Avery Clayton launched his campaign to catalogue, assess and preserve the contents of the 680 boxes of books and artifacts in the garage, as well as those housed in two storage units, a safety deposit box and a film archive. He hired a trained preservationist who had the books and papers from the garage frozen for six weeks in a special facility--a standard conservation procedure that kills insects and mold.

Such care and expertise doesn't come cheap. In this instance, it cost \$65,000. Clayton, a former elementary and high school teacher, says he received those funds from an anonymous donor.

Not everyone who takes responsibility for guarding African-American cultural treasures has a well-heeled angel watching over them. Many Black preservationists are left to care for a collection with no training and very limited resources the best way they can.

"We have well-meaning folk in the Black community who make major steps forward by collecting material," says Vernon S. Courtney, the director of the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Va. "But they don't know anything about storage conditions and whether you should handle stuff or not handle it. In general, it is a group of folk who have no prior experience."

Neither Ray Coleman, the former interim executive director of the Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities in East St. Louis, Ill., nor Darryl Braddix, the Centers' former artistic director, collected the material they adopted. Both freely admit they have no training in archival or preservation work.

Yet, when Katherine Dunham, the legendary dancer, choreographer, anthropologist and social activist, died in May of 2006 at age 96, Coleman and Braddix strove to continue her legacy.

"I grew up in that neighborhood and had older sisters who were Dunham technique dancers," says Coleman, a political consultant who lives in Fairview Heights, Ill.

Despite his sisters' involvement with the center, it was years before he entered the Centers' landmark two-story English Regency townhouse. But after he did, he says, "I realized what a precious jewel we had in East St. Louis, and I realized I had not done what I could to preserve it and get word out."

Listening to Coleman speak over the phone about the museum is to hear a voice that seems choked by equal parts earnestness and desperation.

The financial situation of the museum had never been robust, he says. And around the year 2000, when Dunham moved from East St. Louis to New York City to live in an assisted-care facility, the Centers' finances deteriorated, Coleman says.

To add to the financial woes, last winter, burglars broke into the museum and wrecked the heating and air conditioning unit. "They stole \$15 to \$20 worth of copper," Coleman says, adding that in the process the burglars caused thousands of dollars in damage. There were no funds at the time to fix it, so for more than six months, Dunham's papers and artifacts were exposed to winter cold, summer heat and yo-yoing humidity--hardly the stable environment ideal for unique, aging objects, some of which are already in delicate condition.

Rumors that Dunham's collection in the museum was in danger circulated last summer when the National Association of African American Museums, a nonprofit organization comprised of Black museums and cultural institutions, met in St. Louis. Several of the association members visited the museum and came away thinking a curatorial disaster was about to happen.

"Some items were stored on radiators, and dry heat can crack artifacts," says Dace, of the Missouri Historical Society, who took the national group members to look at the museum.

The window glass was untinted, she says, which allowed sunlight to bleach photographs and costumes. The hem of a kimono on exhibit touched the museum floor, exposing it to the voracious appetite of carpet beetles and other insects.

Coleman does not dispute that these conditions existed. Once he was told that they jeopardized his beloved collection, he and Braddix rectified what they could. "We must do a better job," Coleman admits. "We must get the resources to do it."

Last spring, members of the Dunham Centers' board created a partnership with a university neighborhood-preservation program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Scores of students moved files and records from the dank basements of Dunham's three former homes to the drier basement of the museum.

Board members then reached out to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and the Missouri Historical Society for assistance in handling the museum's finances, maintaining the facilities, preserving Dunham's records and artifacts, and applying for grants.

In August 2007, Anne Walker, who studied with Dunham and who has a certificate in not-for-profit management from what is now the University of Illinois at Springfield, was appointed executive director of the Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities. In the fall, about a dozen graduate students from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign began spending weekends archiving Dunham's papers. The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity gave the museum a \$300,000 grant (allocated over three years to help with the expenses of archiving material and capital improvements to the properties).

But \$300,000 is only a "drop in the bucket," Walker says. For instance, it can't be used to retire the \$75,000 in previous debts. However, Walker hopes that these first steps in stabilizing the museum will make it more appealing to other financial contributors.

That's the good news about the preservation of Black cultural artifacts and documents--an unprecedented opportunity for collectors to partner with established institutions that have the money and expertise to help preserve collections.

Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss., for instance, has a collection of more than 2,000 lithographs, paintings, sculptures and drawings from the likes of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, and traditional art from throughout Africa. Luckily most of the collection was safe at a temperature-controlled, off-campus facility, and escaped the ravages of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina.

Until about five years ago, the art had been stored in a basement on campus. But alumni and other private donors set up a preservation fund to move it to a professional facility.

Johnnie Mae Maberry-Gilbert, chairman of the art department and director of the Art Colony at Tougaloo, the college's 11-year-old art program, says the school is looking for sponsorship to build an art education center so that the works can be taken out of storage and displayed properly.

But Tougaloo is the exception. Too many art collections and artifacts are not safe. In Los Angeles, Avery Clayton has worked with about 20 organizations and institutions to help properly preserve African-American history, including the Getty Museum, various universities throughout California and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a part of the New York Public Library system, and one of an increasing number of topflight repositories for Black historical materials. Other premier archival facilities include the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; the California African American Museum in Los Angeles; and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama.

Clayton persuaded city officials in Culver City, Calif., to rent him an unused 24,000-square-foot former courthouse for \$1 a year. He hopes to open it by 2009 as the Mayme A. Clayton Library & Cultural Center, a museum, as well as a research center and a repository for other large collections of African-American history. Renovation of the courthouse building, hiring staff and preparing the collection for public display is expected to cost \$6.8 million.

But like others who take on the task of collecting and preserving the physical aspects of Black history under daunting circumstances, Clayton seems unfazed. There is an evangelical confidence to his commitment. "What we as African-Americans are confronted with is having mass media define our culture for us," Clayton says. "Initially when I began this campaign, I thought my mission was to rescue my mother's collection. But what I've come to realize is that it's really much larger than that."

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