

# LIVING DONORS AND ARCHIVES: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES

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## The David C. Driskell Archive Project

- **The Driskell Papers:** Amassed over six decades and consisting of roughly 50,000 items, the Driskell Papers are an essential collection documenting African American art. David C. Driskell is an artist, curator, scholar, professor, and collector whose dedication to African American art and its development as a study has changed the field. His papers track the development of and conversations around African American art and its study.
- **Funding:** Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, through the Council on Library and Information Resources [CLIR], Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives program (2013-2015); Institute of Museum and Library Services [IMLS] (2011-2012).
- **Goals of CLIR project:** To process and make available over 200 linear feet of material from Prof. Driskell's personal papers including lectures, curatorial files, photographs, audio/visual materials, journals, and, most importantly, correspondences with renowned artists which detail the development and importance of African American art.
- **Photographs:** After initial donation, we received 1,500 photographs, many of which were not identified. Our goal is to work with Prof. Driskell to identify as many photographs as possible and provide robust description for them.



David C. Driskell identifying photographs at his home. November 19, 2014



Photographs being identified by David C. Driskell at his home. November 19, 2014

## Benefits and Challenges

### Benefits:

- Access to primary source of knowledge on collection, resulting in stronger, more robust, more accurate description of materials
- Opportunity to build relationship with donor and develop a natural advocate for archives
- Chance to teach donor about archives, making them comfortable and more likely to donate more at a later date

### Challenges:

- Donor and family having difficulty letting go of some material
- Requesting restrictions on some material causing time delays
- Donor's own personal weeding of materials prior to donation
- Heightened sense of urgency due to factors like donor's age
- Learning not to rely solely on donor's memory or perception
- Setting boundaries regarding access to papers

## Our Experience: Working with David C. Driskell

- Since the inception of the Driskell Center, it was a goal to have the art, archive, library, gallery, and offices under one roof. When we moved to our current location in 2007 and had the space, the staff worked with Prof. Driskell to acquire this archive.
- Prior to receiving the papers, our team interviewed Prof. Driskell. Questions focused on the collection and how it started, how he used and organized his materials, and general descriptions of what the collection contained.
- Once the materials were donated, the archive team only contacted Prof. Driskell as needed but throughout the project, maintained open communication.
- Three years after the initial donation, the archives team approached Prof. Driskell regarding photographs he was known to still have at his home. Through extensive planning and discussions, 1,500 photographs were donated as part of the collection and Prof. Driskell agreed to work one-on-one with the Archivist to identify images.
- Through this and previous projects, working directly with Prof. Driskell has proven to be critical. As we have worked with him, we have developed strategies in working with living donors in the future.

## What is a Living Donor?

In many cases, archival collections are donated to repositories after the creator's death and often by their heirs. A living donor, however, is one who donates their papers to an archive while they are still living. This situation calls for unique and thoughtful strategies and approaches in order to make the most of this unique, sometimes challenging, often crucial situation.



Still shot of David C. Driskell giving interview to Driskell Center staff. January 27, 2009

## Strategies

- Conduct initial interview with donor to ensure that staff understands how papers were used, organized, and what they contain
- Start relationship with up-front, clear, and honest communication and set boundaries and guidelines early
- Balance donor's willingness to work with archive while respecting their time and availability
- Be prepared when working directly with donor. Keep donor informed of purpose of contact, plan in advance how to document interaction, and set and execute goals

Walter Williams, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and David Driskell at the opening of Lawrence's *Toussaint L'Ouverture Series* opening at Fisk University. December 8, 1968



David C. Driskell, Lady Bird Johnson, Howard Spragg, Dr. John King at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library at the University of Texas-Austin celebrating the opening of the *Amistad II* exhibition, curated by Driskell. November 1976



David C. Driskell and Romare Bearden at Bearden's Astoria studio. 1984

## Conclusions

Every donor is different. We are lucky to have a donor who can identify images, documents, and give insight into his collection, but there are some living donors incapable or unwilling to work with repositories. Understanding benefits, challenges, and potential strategies can help utilize this unique interaction as much as possible. As our repository grows and we seek new donors, our strategies evolve and change with each individual but this general information helps inform our strategy.