

**THE PROMISE AND POTENTIAL OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN GIVING TO THE ARTS**

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An essay prepared for Creative America, a report by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities describing the system of support for cultural life in the United States today

INTRODUCTION

There are few human endeavors as diverse and important to the sense of community as the arts. The arts cover such varied institutions as museums, orchestras, theater groups and symphonies; educational activities such as training and appreciation; and for-profit activities such as music performing and recording, film-making, writing and publishing.¹ With the exception of for-profit arts activities that are largely self-financing, to remain successful non-profit arts activities require significant ongoing financial contributions from a variety of sources, including individuals, corporations, foundations and government.

The current climate of corporate downsizing, changing foundation priorities and reduced government funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and other agencies, make individual donor contributions to the arts increasingly important. Moreover, as African Americans and other ethnic and racial minority groups become a larger percentage of the total U.S. population, understanding the different philanthropic traditions and patterns of giving of these groups will be critical in expanding the base of individual contributions to the arts.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section explores the evolution of African American philanthropy and its unique development in American society. The second section reviews why arts organizations have become interested in African American philanthropy and the limited statistical data available on individual African American and white charitable giving to the arts. The third section examines the difficulties that some arts organizations have had in soliciting contributions from arts organizations and other methods that might be considered. The paper concludes

with some broader observations about the promise and potential of African American giving to the arts.

Before continuing, it is important to discuss several methodological shortcomings inherent in this essay as well as to underscore the importance of certain hypotheses that are presented. This paper draws on a limited range of existing statistical and anecdotal research on giving to the arts. As a result, data that were originally compiled to answer entirely different questions are utilized here regardless of issues such as comparable definitions of the arts or adequate sample size (particularly of African Americans). This first issue cannot be understated. Many of the studies refer to “arts, culture and humanities” as a single catch-all category or lump the arts into an “other” category due to its small percentage. While unlikely, the possibility exists that using a specific and consistent definition of the arts and examining individual giving to that specific definition might yield different conclusions.

There also are two conceptual issues that are imbedded in the discussion of African American philanthropy that are worth noting. First, African American philanthropy is dynamic. Its defining characteristic over time has been the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and conditions. As a result, examining past and current trends does not necessarily provide an accurate prediction of future directions. Second, African American philanthropy has largely been communal in nature -- a large number of people giving relatively modest gifts. While the elimination of overt discrimination has enabled a significant number of African Americans to increase their

annual income and accumulate wealth, it is unclear to what extent the tradition of “group” giving has been affected by these trends.

THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

Organized African American philanthropy is over 200 years old.² It began in the early African American church and mutual aid associations, which were for decades the only institutions over which African Americans exercised control. Legally denied services and basic rights, African Americans developed a collective philanthropy, channeling the limited individual resources of many through the church. The early African American church answered an amazing array of secular needs: emergency food and shelter, education, burial insurance and leadership on social justice issues confronting the African American community. While there were individual wealthy African American philanthropists, the majority of charitable giving by African Americans was communal in nature with a large number of individuals giving small sums of money to support specific activities.

It is important to understand that unlike its white counterpart, the African American church has always functioned as a multipurpose social service agency. Historically, it has served as the collection point for the charitable gifts of African Americans. The philanthropic activities of the African American church are directly responsible for the creation of the first African American schools, banks and insurance companies.

As slavery gave way to the separate and “unequal” Jim Crow society, the African American church continued to be the primary vehicle through which African

Americans focused their philanthropic giving. Legal segregation created a dual economy, especially in the southern states. This dual structure, precipitated by the fact that African Americans were not allowed to participate in the larger society, led African Americans to create and support their own businesses and non-profit institutions.

The successes of the civil rights movement that began in the late 1950s resulted in dramatic improvement in the opportunities and socio-economic status of African Americans. For the purposes of this essay, two consequences are particularly relevant. First, the elimination of exclusionary practices resulted in mainstream organizations and businesses slowly beginning to solicit contributions and sales from the African American community. The converse also was true, African American non-profits and businesses no longer had a monopoly on the support of the African American community.

Second, the reduction in discrimination and segregation created a significant increase in the income and wealth of African Americans. As African Americans became more geographically mobile and economically stable, they became somewhat less reliant on giving only through the church. The creation of the well known United Negro College Fund in 1949 and the National Black United Fund in 1972 helped begin a trend of national charitable organizations that would rely on philanthropy among strangers, instead of the historical trend of philanthropy among friends.³ The creation of these and similar African American organizations were, in part, a recognition of the need to harness and direct the charitable giving of geographically

dispersed African Americans through institutions other than the church.

The continuing growth in the number of African American middle and upper income households has also had an impact on the direction of African American philanthropy. There is considerable statistical evidence, as will be reviewed in the next section, that these individuals are charitable, and significant anecdotal evidence that they are creating private independent foundations and individual charitable funds at community foundations.⁴ In addition, several African American college fraternities and sororities, such as Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha, have created operating foundations to carry out their charitable activities. With the advent of these institutions, African Americans have an impressive array of charitable institutions through which to carry-out their unique patterns of charitable giving.

GIVING TO THE ARTS

There are at least two reasons why arts organizations should be concerned with African American patterns of giving - morality and market. The moral reason is that, ideally, every non-profit organization should be able to solicit contributions from donors of all races and ethnicity. Historically, however, little attention was given to the cultivation of donors of color by traditional non-profit organizations because they were perceived as nongivers and unimportant to the long-run financial success of the non-profit organization. New demographic trends, however, have led corporations as well as non-profit organizations to reassess the veracity of these old assumptions.

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, nonwhites will outnumber the current white majority early in the 21st century. Current estimates indicate that

African Americans have a combined annual income approaching \$400 billion and contribute \$5.9 billion to charitable organizations.⁵ It does not require much analysis to recognize that if tomorrow's givers have significantly different giving priorities from today's givers, then the financial health of many non-profit organizations may be in jeopardy.⁶ Under these conditions, there are three possible scenarios: 1) the non-profit organization will successfully appeal to donors of color and maintain or expand its financial support; 2) the non-profit organization will be able to successfully solicit an increasing amount of funds from a shrinking white donor base; or 3) the non-profit organization will have to downsize the operations consistent with the lower revenue from a smaller donor base.

According to the American Association of Fundraising Counsel, Americans contributed a total of \$143.85 billion to charitable organizations in 1995. Individuals contributed the largest share of those contributions \$116.23 billion. Foundations contributed \$10.44 billion, bequests accounted for \$9.77 billion and corporations contributed \$7.40 billion.⁷ Table 1 indicates the percentage of total gifts received by type of non-profit organization.⁸ The arts sector received the fifth largest share of contributions of any sector, \$9.96 billion. Such a low comparative percentage would suggest that arts organizations may find it difficult to easily expand their share of contributions compared to other charities.

Table 1. Uses of Charitable Contributions (\$ in billions)

	Amount	Percentage of Total
Religion	\$63.45	44.1%
Education	\$17.94	12.5%
Health	\$12.59	8.8%
Human Services	\$11.70	8.1%
Arts, Culture and Humanities	\$ 9.96	6.9%
Gifts to Foundations	\$ 7.43	5.2%
Public/Society Benefit	\$ 7.10	4.9%
Environment/Wildlife	\$ 3.98	2.8%
International Affairs	\$ 2.06	1.4%
Unclassified	\$ 7.64	5.3%

Before the 1980s there was little reliable data on the charitable giving of individuals. Moreover, few believed that it was worthwhile to examine the charitable giving patterns of racial minorities and ethnic groups other than to document that they did not have a tradition of giving. As detailed in the previous section, nothing could be further from the truth. The first national survey of the charitable giving and volunteering tradition of African Americans was conducted in 1985 by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. The multi-year study concluded for the first time that, although their patterns of giving are different, African Americans and whites with the same total income contribute equivalent total amounts to charitable organizations consistent with their charitable priorities and unique traditions. Subsequent studies of the charitable giving patterns of other ethnic and racial groups have reported similar findings.

As one would suspect, the limited data on the individual charitable giving

patterns of African Americans and whites mirror the aggregate findings on contributions to the areas described above. The various studies indicate that the arts sector receives a relatively small share of total individual contributions, which suggests that it will be difficult to shift significantly the current patterns of giving by African American and white donors. Data from a 1986 study by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Table 2, found that less than 2.8 percent of total African American giving and 5.5 percent of total white giving went to “other charities not mentioned,” including the arts.⁹ The largest shares were received by churches, educational organizations, social welfare organizations and hospitals and medical centers.

Table 2. Where Black and White Charitable Contributions Go

	Black	White
Own Church	68.0%	59.4%
Religious Organizations	7.4	8.3
Educational Organizations	3.8	6.0
Social Welfare Organizations	6.2	7.7
Hospitals and Medical Centers	6.6	7.3
Political Organizations	1.1	2.7
Social and Fraternal Organizations	1.3	1.6
International Aid Organizations	2.8	1.5
Other Charities Not Mentioned	2.8	5.5

A more recent 1994 national study by the Washington, D.C. based Independent Sector found that overall, 8 percent of all Americans contributed 1.7 percent of their total contributions to arts and culture organizations. This amounted to an average

household contribution of \$139 by those families that supported the arts. Of those 8 percent of households that reported contributions to the arts, 94 percent were white, 4.4 percent were African American and 7.3 percent were Hispanic. Among the 4.4 percent of households that reported volunteering to arts organizations, 94 percent were white, 2.8 percent were African American and 5.4 percent were Hispanic.¹⁰ Given the demographic composition of the United States, these percentages are less than revealing. It should be noted that the Independent Sector's findings did not adequately sample African Americans and, as a result, may not accurately reflect African American giving.¹¹

Overall, these findings are not surprising. The church continues to be a major factor in the giving of African Americans for reasons described in the previous section. Issues such as education and social welfare probably remain high on the priority lists of African Americans who remain one generation away from poverty and who may still feel the sting of lingering discrimination. Taken together, the statistics indicate that arts organizations have considerable work to do in significantly increasing the share of charitable contributions to arts organizations.

SOLICITING AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTORS

While the historical review and statistical findings indicate that African Americans have a long charitable tradition and are active givers, many non-profit organizations including arts groups have found it difficult to secure contributions from significant numbers of African Americans. There are at least two reasons for this difficulty: the relative low priority of arts in the lives of African Americans and the

type of solicitation efforts that are most likely to be used by arts organizations.

Notwithstanding the growing affluence of an increasing number of African Americans, the African American community is still motivated by issues of poverty, education and social justice. Many middle and upper income African American are one generation removed from poverty and are likely to have family relatives who are in or near poverty. For these individuals, art as viewed in its current context is likely to be seen as a secondary charitable activity compared to other activities that may have an immediate impact on the social and economic conditions of African Americans. This implication can be drawn by examining the relatively small percentage of total contributions African Americans made to “other charities not mentioned.” In this regard, it is important to note that the percentage share of white contributions to “other charities not mentioned” is not significantly different than the contributions of African Americans (see Table 2).

It should not be overlooked that the difficulty of raising charitable contributions from African Americans to arts organizations is not limited to mainstream arts organizations but has been the subject of considerable discussion by African American arts organizations. In an extensive article on the reasons behind the difficulty of maintaining a stable African American repertory company in Washington, D.C., the author notes, in pertinent part:

Washington would seem to be the perfect location for an ongoing, viable black theater company. But the reasons for the fitful histories of such companies are many, including lack of charismatic leadership and financing; the talent drain by television, Broadway, movies and now, ironically, the “nontraditional casting” efforts of mainstream theaters; the philanthropic patterns of the black middle class; and the apathy of Washington audiences (black and white) who

want big names, a big building and a big return on their evening's investment.¹²

While African Americans clearly give, as the preceding quote indicates, it would be incorrect to assume that African American non-profit organizations have an automatic claim on the charitable giving of African Americans. A wide array of African American non-profit organizations have indicated that they have found difficulty in raising funds from the African American community.¹³ In many instances, these non-profit organizations have insufficient fund development mechanisms and have not performed at an adequate level to warrant the support they are seeking.

The first step in attracting African American patrons is to ask for their support and provide them with cultural experiences or entertainment that is of interest to them. Surprisingly, there has been significant research to indicate that racial and ethnic minority groups are simply not asked to give. The Independent Sector has found that African Americans and Hispanics are among those most likely not to be asked. They stated:

People are more than twice as likely to give when asked than when they are not. Among the respondents who reported that they were asked to give, 84 percent actually contributed. Among the 22 percent who were not asked to give, 38 percent contributed. Those respondents least likely to be asked were: (1) Blacks (66 percent) or Hispanics (70 percent); . . .¹⁴

A growing number of arts organizations have recognized that they need to solicit African Americans and others actively and have begun a number of efforts to reach out to different racial and ethnic groups. One method has been to use "nontraditional casting" -- casting people of color in leading roles of major

productions. Another technique has been to offer programming that is believed to be of interest to African Americans. For example, jazz was recently added as a full-fledged constituent of Lincoln Center programming, at an annual budget of over \$4 million and Carnegie Hall now has its own jazz orchestra.¹⁵

Lastly, a growing number of performing music groups have hired artistic and music directors who happen to be people of color. For example, Wynton Marsalis is artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center; Eiji Oue is music director of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra; Bobby McFerrin is creative chair of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra; and Bill Eddins is the associate conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra.¹⁶ While each of these individuals were certainly hired because of their artistic interpretation, technical skills and talent, it is not unreasonable to surmise that it also was hoped that these individuals could more easily attract new audiences, particularly people of color.

While these efforts are certainly important, they must be sustained over a long period of time in order to gain the trust and support of communities that have heretofore been largely ignored by these institutions. Moreover, people of color also are likely to assess how the overall mission of the institution serves their personal and community interests as well as how many people of color are on the governing board. The interconnectedness between issues of diversity in programming, staffing, board governance, operations and fund-raising development must all be taken into account when soliciting donors of color.

These are not insignificant issues. In reaching out to new donors, charitable organizations are often resistant to making changes that might make the institution more accessible and appealing to people of color. For example, local arts organizations might achieve some measure of success by developing partnerships with local African American churches. In addition, fundraisers for arts organizations may need to communicate differently with different racial and ethnic groups because of their varying cultural traditions.¹⁷ To make matters more difficult, arts organizations may discover that reaching out to communities of color may adversely impact the continued willingness of some of their existing white donors to remain involved and financially supportive. As a result of these and other issues, it is essential that decisions to attract people of color as donors must have the strong support of the governing board and senior staff leadership of the institution and be viewed as long-run strategies.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

African Americans have had a long and impressive history of charitable giving. As a result of the historic inequities of American society, much of African American philanthropy continues to be channeled through the church to address issues of social welfare and education. At present, the arts receive only a limited share African American charitable contributions. The changing demographics of American society coupled with a reduction in corporate and government funding are likely to increase

pressure on arts institutions to identify and cultivate charitable contributions from African Americans and other ethnic and racial groups. For these development outreach efforts to be successful, arts institutions will need to examine diversity not only in their programming but also in their governing structure, operations and staffing.

The arts are an important part of the fabric of any community. Although outreach efforts require significant time, energy and resources to be successful, those art institutions that are inclusive and embrace diversity will find it easier to solicit charitable contributions from a wide base of donors. Moreover, given the importance of the arts to a strong and vibrant community, a more inclusive arts community may well be a key part of the solution to the continuing problem of racial discord in American society.

NOTES

1. The McKnight Foundation, *Here + Now: A Report on the Arts in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: The McKnight Foundation, 1996), p. 14.
2. For a complete review of the history of African American philanthropy see: Emmett D. Carson, *A Hand Up: Black Philanthropy and Self-help in America* (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1993).
3. Emmett D. Carson, "The National Black United Fund: From Movement for Social Change to Social Change Organization," *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising*, No. 1., Fall 1993.
4. See "Give Something Back," *Ebony*, March 1990, pp. 64-69. and Karen Grigsby Bates, "The Will To Give," *Emerge*, pp. 56-60.
5. Marjorie Whigham-Desir, "The Real Black Power," *Black Enterprise*, July 1996, p. 62.
6. Emmett D. Carson, "Black Philanthropy: Shaping Tomorrow's Non-profit Sector," *The Journal: Contemporary Issues in Fund Raising* (Alexandria, VA: National Society of Fund Raising Executives, Summer 1989), pp. 23-31.
7. The American Association of Fund-Raising Counsel (AAFRC), *Giving USA 1996* (New York: AAFRC, 1996), p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13
9. Emmett D. Carson, "The Evolution of Black Philanthropy: Patterns of Giving and Voluntarism," *Philanthropic Giving: Studies in Varieties and Goals*, ed. Richard Magat (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 97.
10. Independent Sector, *Giving & Volunteering in the United States, 1994 Volume II*, (Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1995), pp. 20-21.

11. National surveys that randomly sample the general public seldom survey specific ethnic and racial groups in sufficient numbers to make statistically valid statements about the population group as a whole. As a result, national surveys must “over” sample ethnic and racial minorities if they are to make valid statements about the national profile of a specific group.

12. Jacqueline Trescott, “Fade-Out: It Has Talent, Money, a Stable Middle Class. So Why Hasn't D.C. Had a Black Repertory Company for the Past Decade?” *Washington Post*, Washington, DC , Sunday, November 7, 1993, Section G, pp. 1-6.

13. Courtney Leatherman, “After Years of Failing to Win Alumni Gifts, Black Colleges Step Up Their Efforts; ‘We're Sitting on Great Potential,’ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 25, 1989, pp. A31-A33; and Jonathan Kaugman, “Passing the Plate: Black Charities Say Growing Middle Class Isn't Enough,” *Wall Street Journal*, Monday, January 29, 1996, p. A1.

14. Independent Sector, *Giving & Volunteering in the United States*, (Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector, 1994), p. 9.

15. Jazz Joins Lincoln Center, *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis, MN, Wednesday July 3, 1996, p. E5.

16. Eric Friesen, “4 of a Kind,” *Minnesota Monthly*, April 1996.

17. Emmett D. Carson, “Understanding Cultural Difference in Fundraising,” *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising*, no. 10, Winter 1995, pp. 99-112.