



## What is the issue?

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color often have rich histories and stories that need to be documented. But this legacy is currently at risk of being lost because of precarious storage of documents and artifacts, insufficient staff time and expertise, and lack of support from institutional archives and funders.

## What is the research context?

BIPOC-centered arts organizations play a pivotal role in amplifying the histories, traditions, and perspectives of their communities, often challenging dominant narratives about marginalized groups. Archives enable and reflect an organization's ability to tell its own stories to the public. BIPOC-centered arts organizations often have limited resources to devote to archiving, and do not tend to have trained archivists on staff. The lack of BIPOC archivists in the profession also perpetuates disparities in representation of their perspectives in archives.

## What are the research findings?

The findings from the initial survey and the qualitative research highlighted that most participating

## Research Approach

UCLA Community Archives Lab researchers and South Asian American Digital Archive (SAA-DA) staff partnered on a community-led participatory action research project to understand how to better safeguard the legacy of arts organizations led by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). They conducted a survey of 113 organizations, gathered data from 15 interviews and nine focus groups, and evaluated SAADA's year-long fellowship that placed archivists in three South Asian arts organizations to collect oral histories and digitize historical records.

BIPOC-centered arts organizations placed a high degree of importance on archiving their histories. Study participants at Black arts-organizations in particular placed themselves in relation to a long lineage of Black creative practice, and expressed a desire to make their own histories and stories accessible for Black artists of the future. Researchers found that some organizations had begun to publish written works and performances through books, CDs, and digital files as an important

Research brief based on *Archiving the Arts: Preserving Our Past, Cultivating Our Future: Guidelines and a Three-Part Study on Preserving the History of BIPOC-Centered Arts Organizations* by Michelle Caswell, Thuy Vo Dang, Tonia Sutherland, Anna Robinson-Sweet, and James Epps at the UCLA Community Archives Lab.

archiving strategy. They also posted materials to their website and other third-party sites.

The researchers found that organizational records, both analog and digital, were precariously stored, and organizations often did not have the time, labor, expertise, and resources to steward them. While analog records of older organizations are deteriorating in storage closets or basements, digital records also carry their own risks. Storing files on commercial cloud storage and social media platforms (Google Drive, YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook) is not a sustainable preservation solution because it is viable only as long as the platform exists, or does not malfunction.

The report also describes that partnerships between BIPOC-centered arts organizations and external archives (such as university or museum archives and other types of repositories) have been fraught and challenging to establish or sustain. BIPOC organizations are cautious of potential partnerships with external archives, citing fears of extraction or exploitation, a poor track record of caring for BIPOC collections, or fear of having to give up narrative autonomy along with custody of materials. Many established archives have also shifted the burden

of funding such partnerships onto the arts organizations. Still, some organizations said they would like to pursue reciprocal external partnerships with archives. Others said they needed additional skills and staff to manage their archives internally.

## Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2026). *People need to know this story: A study of BIPOC-Centered Arts Organizations' Archival Practices and Needs*. A research brief describing a study led by Michelle Caswell, Thuy Vo Dang, Tonia Sutherland, Anna Robinson-Sweet, and James Epps. The Wallace Foundation, New York. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AO8206.001>

## Read More

[Archiving the Arts: Preserving Our Past, Cultivating Our Future: Guidelines and a Three-Part Study on Preserving the History of BIPOC-Centered Arts Organizations](#) written by Michelle Caswell, Thuy Vo Dang, Tonia Sutherland, Anna Robinson-Sweet, and James Epps.

## Implications for Stakeholders

The research makes the following recommendations:

**Archives and funding agencies** have opportunities to seek out, value, and provide greater care for the records of BIPOC-centered arts organizations.

**Funding agencies** can actively support the hiring of trained archivists at BIPOC-centered arts organizations. It is important that such archivists come from within the communities being represented and served by the arts organizations. Funders can also support training for basic archival skills, including digital archival skills, to staff at BIPOC-centered arts organizations.

**Archivists** working for community archives, university archives, and other types of repositories should proactively reach out to BIPOC-centered arts organizations to gauge when partnerships with archives are desired. These partnerships may require new, creative modes of archival practice that allow arts organizations to maintain narrative autonomy and custody of materials.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The views summarized in this brief are those of the research team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.