

AFRICA IN AMERICA



Schomburg Center For Research in Black Culture in New York City

INTRODUCTION

Did you know that the Schomburg Center for Research in black Culture of the New York Public Library is the best place to find answers to your questions about black history and the contributions of blacks to the profession and the many fields of entertainment?

The center is at 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard in Harlem and provides public access to a wealth of information and resources about the history and cultural development of people of African descent. In fact, there's no other place like it in the world.

The Schomburg is one of the New York Public Library's 4 research libraries established in 1923 and 1924.

It is named after Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, a Puerto Rican of African descent who was born in 1874 and became interested in discovering and reclaiming his African heritage because, as a child, he was told in school that "black people had no history, no heroes, and no great moment." This absurd notion he set out to dispel.

DeeBrecca S. Pressey, the center's tour coordinator and public affairs developer, says that Schomburg systematically began to collect evidence of blacks' rich exciting history, and that, initially, he concentrated his collection on Puerto Rican and Caribbean

people of African descent; later, she said, he expanded his scope to include the history of blacks throughout the world.

Schomburg collected more than 10,000 historical materials -- including 5,000 books, 3,000 manuscripts, 2,000 etchings and paintings, and several thousand pamphlets -- that helped launch the library's Negro Reference Division.

Thanks to this enormous resource, the division gained international acclaim by the mid-1920s and, in 1972, the Schomburg was designated a research library.

MiMW (MJoTA Institute of Medical Writing) trains health and science professionals in all time zones who need to improve skills in writing presentations, manuscripts, press releases, business plans, book reports, grant proposals, and documents about drugs and devices for industry and government and in seeking jobs and contracts.

Class assignments are published in MJoTA.

MiMW Certificate in Medical Writing can be earned in 6 to 12 months.

MiMW Certificate in Statistics can be earned in 6 months.

<http://www.medicalwritinginstitute.us>

DrDodgson@medicalwritinginstitute.us

Telephone: 609-792-1571

AFRICA IN AMERICA



Harlem from across the Hudson River in New Jersey. Photo SJ Dodgson.

In 1932, Schomburg himself became the curator of the library's History, Literature and Prints Division, remaining in that capacity until his death in 1938.

"Because the center sponsors exhibitions, some people mistake it for a museum when, in fact, it's a research library, where one goes to study, examine, and collect information on a particular topic," Pressey says. "It is not a circulation library, where people can borrow materials for a specified time and then return them so that other people can do the same."

The history of blacks suffers from enormous news reports, says Gloria Vanterpool, an aide at the center. "People, especially students interested in knowing more about our history and contributions to today's civilization need to visit the center and see all this for themselves," she added.

A tour of the center reveals the history of blacks dating back many centuries. One learns, for instance, of Lewis Howard Latimer's (1848-1928) key role in the creation of the electric- power industry, of Granville Wood's (1856-1910) invention of the automatic brake, and, of course, of the work of abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), who said of slavery: "For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunderThe feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

At the Schomburg, too, you learn about the struggle for equality undertaken by William E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), who founded the NAACP. There is also documentation here on the scientific achievements in agriculture of George Washington Carver (1864-1943).

Other historical information pertains to Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), who in 1914 founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which promotes blacks' economic and political power; Alex Haley (1921-1992), whose creative imagination served as a foundation for "Roots," the story of a West African Kunta Kinte and his American descendant; Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993), the first black to be appointed to the Supreme Court; Booker T. Washington (1859-1915), who in 1881 became the founder and head of Tuskegee Institute, the nation's first vocational training center for blacks; abolitionist Sojourner Truth (1797-1883).

Other blacks whose accomplishment can be learned about at the center are, of course, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968); Malcolm X (1925-1965), human rights activist of the 1970s; Bill Cosby, who became the first African-American to star on his own network television show; Oprah Winfrey, arguably the most popular TV talk show host of all time; Bessie Coleman (1892-1926), the first African American aviator, who, despite the restrictions of race and gender in America's aviation Schools, traveled to France to train and earn her

AFRICA IN AMERICA



Mr Lookman Sulaimon in New York, March 2009. Photograph by SJ Dodgson.

pilot's license in 1921; and Rosa Park (1913-2005), whose courageous refusal to give up her seat to a white man in Selma, Alabama, sparked the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Pressey emphasized that the Schomburg is a cultural center as well as a repository that also sponsors a wide range of interpretive programs, including exhibitions, scholarly and public forums and cultural events. She added that it also provides opportunities for community leaders, school children, senior citizens, scholars and artists to meet and engage one another in reflection, discussion and celebration.

"In addition to its books, manuscripts and photographs, the Schomburg has a vast collection of periodicals, posters, art objects, films, videotapes, audio recordings and memorabilia. It sponsors over 80 public programs annually," Pressey said.

She noted that in 1991, the center created additional spaces for exhibitions and galleries, including the renovated American Negro Theatre, the Latimar and Edison galleries, and the Langston Hughes Auditorium, where lectures, performances and concerts are held.

The Schomburg Center sits on a 75,000 square-foot area; it has a 340-seat Langston Hughes Auditorium, a 75-seat American Negro Theater, as well as exhibition halls and galleries. The center is divided into five collection divisions, which provide state-of-the-art storage and preservation facilities: general research and reference; manuscript, archives and rare books; photographs and prints; moving images and; recorded; sound and artifacts.

To reach the center, take the C or B train to 135th Street and St. Nicholas Ave. and walk three blocks

east, or take the 2 or 3 train to 135th Street and Malcolm X Blvd. and you're right there, at the center's entrance.

A tour guide will greet you and lead you to the Langston Hughes art deco auditorium, where a Shona sculpture by a Zimbabwean artist is on display.

During my tour, Vanterpool, the tour guide who led us into the Langston Hughes Auditorium, described this renowned Harlem Renaissance writer's career. He traveled all over the world, beginning at the age of 17, she said. During his journeys, he documented blacks' cultural heritage in different countries.

Vanterpool explained that one of his poems, "The Negro's Speaks of Rivers," inspired the cosmogram art deco design in the center of the auditorium. It was created in 1991 by the artist Houstin Conwill. Cosmogram art - an embodiment of colorful terrazzo - is artistically laid on the auditorium floor, Vanterpool told us, it symbolizes the lives, the work and the achievements of Schomburg and Hughes.

"The floor is marked by writings and literary signs to pay ancestral tribute to the tradition of African ritual ground markings that showed a connection between blacks from diverse cultures and backgrounds," she said.

The outer circle of the cosmogram indicates the sea path through which Hughes traveled all over the world -- from Africa, to the Western hemisphere, to Russia, to Australia, and to China.



AFRICA IN AMERICA



Vanterpool also pointed out that the final words of Hughes poem, "My soul has grown deep like rivers," are embedded in the fish-shaped art at the center of the circle, noting, too, that Hughes's remains are interred beneath the emblem in a book-like stainless-steel vessel.

Turning to other aspects of the center, Vanterpool explained that the Jean Blackwell Houston General Research and Reference Division maintains a large collection of African-American, Caribbean, and African newspapers and other periodicals as well as documents on the history of blacks in the Americas, particularly in the New York metropolitan area, and literary works from African and the Caribbean. The division also houses videos of artists of African descent.

The Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division collects, preserves, and makes available for research purposes rare, unique, and primary materials on the history and culture of people of African descent throughout the world.

What truly impressed me was the Photographs and Prints Division, which contains 750,000 images from all parts of the world, dating from the mid-18th century to contemporary documentary and artistic photography, including portraits of black artists, political figures, actors, musicians, athletes, and social activists.

The Moving Images and Recorded Sound Division preserves motion picture films, video recordings, music, and spoken-arts recordings. Among the famous films housed here



are Alex Haley's "Roots - The Saga of an American Family," "Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas", "Africa, the Uncovered Continent," "Hispanics, the Changing Role of Women," and "To be Old, Black, and Poor".

By Lookman Mojeed Bashiru Sulaimon Arounfale 'Fale MS

Mr Lookman is the Borokinni of Ojora-Lagos and a Nigerian-American graphic artist from Lagos. He worked for some years in Guinness before moving to the United States and becoming a Master of Science in Technical Writing and Journalism, (Polytechnic University, New York) in June 2008. He lives in East New York.



AFRICA IN AMERICA