The Northern Illinois University/Lyric Opera of Chicago historical scenic collection represents a comprehensive depository of primary scenic materials from the American Operatic theatre at the end of 19th and 20th centuries. The contents include almost the entire repertoire of operas innovatively produced by Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company and traces the inception, rise and development of resident opera in Chicago, culminating with the demise of the Civic Opera Company in 1932. Portions of the collection display the special talents of renowned European and American Scenic designers and craftsmen.

Having in excess of 5 million square feet of painted surfaces, the largest continuous and best preserved collection of an approach to scenic art, at once embodies the 200 year old tradition of lavish painterly perspective and yet signals the erosion of that tradition in favor of the architectonic approach fostered by the development of electricity in stage lighting and practiced by the new stagecraft movement.

Housed in the Arts Annex of the College of Visual and Performing Arts the collection contains scenery (including 900 backdrops averaging 68'x40' in size, and approximately 2200 framed flats) 3-dim units, properties, 120 intricately detailed, finely crafted scenic maquettes, and archival documents including drawings and meticulous production notebooks which record and illustrate scenic and performance details of each opera.

The collection utilizes over 500,000 cubic feet of storage area for much of the scenery stretches three-fourths of the way to the top of the building. Racks for the flattage and bins for the drops reach 40 feet to the roof while full settings or scenic pieces may be erected for viewing, and especially for lighting and painting study.