

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Elma Lewis

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lewis, Elma
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis,
Dates:	April 10, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	5 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:52:55).
Abstract:	Museum chief executive Elma Lewis (1921 - 2004) founded the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts to meet the cultural and artistic needs of the African American community in Boston. Lewis also founded Playhouse in the Park, a summer theater program that featured performers such as Duke Ellington and the National Center of Afro-American Artists, an umbrella organization that included the school, jazz and classical orchestras, a chorus, a dance troupe and a museum. Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 10, 2003, in Baltimore, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_071
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Elma Lewis was born September 15, 1921, in Boston to immigrant parents from the West Indies. Lewis devoted a lifetime to bringing culture into the lives of Boston's African American community. Lewis attended public schools in Boston and went to Emerson College to earn a B.A. in 1943. She received an M.Ed. from Boston University in 1944.

After completing her education, Lewis taught dance, drama and speech therapy, and in 1950 she founded the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts. The school was established to meet the cultural and artistic needs of the African American community in Boston. Lewis developed a comprehensive program teaching dance, drama, art, music and costume design. Twenty-five students enrolled on the first day of school. In 1966, Lewis founded Playhouse in the Park, a summer theater program that featured performers such as Duke Ellington. Two years later, Lewis founded the National Center of Afro-American Artists, an umbrella organization that included the school, jazz and classical orchestras, a chorus, a dance troupe and a museum.

In 1981, Lewis was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for her dedicated work in the arts, and in 1983 President Ronald Reagan presented her the Presidential Medal for the Arts. Although the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts closed in 1990, many of Lewis' pupils have gone on to well-established careers in entertainment while others have opened up schools of their own. Lewis continues to be active with the NCAAA and is active with a number of other organizations as well. She is a trustee and life member of PBS station, WGBH, having been involved with it for forty years. She was also an active member of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for forty years as well as a trustee of the Massachusetts College of Art. Lewis has received more than 400 awards in her lifetime and twenty-eight honorary degrees.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Elma Lewis was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 10, 2003, in Baltimore, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacam SP videocassettes. Museum chief executive Elma Lewis (1921 - 2004) founded the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts to meet the cultural and artistic needs of the African American community in Boston. Lewis also founded Playhouse in the Park, a summer theater program that featured performers such as Duke Ellington and the National Center of Afro-American Artists, an umbrella organization that included the school, jazz and classical orchestras, a chorus, a dance troupe and a museum.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Lewis, Elma

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lewis, Elma--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

National Center of Afro-American Artists.

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, April 10, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 1/21/2013 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage, April 10, 2003

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_001, TRT: 0:27:00
2003/04/10

Elma Ina Lewis describes the 1968 founding of the National Center of African American Artists and its establishment at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts. Lewis then discusses her Barbadian family history and how her parents, Claremont Richard McDonald Lewis and Edwardine Jordan Corbin, met after they moved to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Lewis' parents became Garveyites in America and were

involved in the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Lewis recounts her Methodist neighborhood center education in music and creative arts throughout her youth which led to her desire to study theater at Emerson College after attending Boston schools Girls' Latin School, where she was first confronted with racism, and Roxbury Memorial High School. Lewis belongs to St. Cyprian's Protestant Episcopal Church where attending Sunday school and church weekly has proven to be character building.

African Americans--Massachusetts--History--20th century.

African Americans--Massachusetts--Social life and customs.

Barbados--Social life and customs.

Garvey, Marcus, 1887-1940.

Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_002, TRT: 0:28:00
2003/04/10

Elma Lewis discusses her education, inspiration, and the founding of her theater school. Lewis attended Asa Gray Elementary School and the Hammond School as a child. She obtained a Bachelor of Literary Interpretation from Emerson College and a Master of Education from Boston University. Lewis mentions an inspirational elocution teacher but admits her parents were her most profound influence. She discusses how a UNIA meeting influenced her desire to be on stage and how her family gave her the idea for a school and helped her to achieve the dream in 1950. Lewis discusses struggling to succeed as the first Black woman to open a theater school in Boston and the long standing relationships with her students and numerous actors and musicians. She discusses the cycle of teaching that she sees with her previous students whose objectives are to equalize Black people's opportunities to live in the world.

Universal Negro Improvement Association.

African Americans--Education (Elementary)--Massachusetts--Boston.

African American art--History--20th century.

African American art--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30
2003/04/10

Elma Lewis describes the National Center for Afro American Artists as an outgrowth of many of the emotional, cultural, and professional needs of America's Black community. The goal of the Center is to elevate and educate Black people, but the White community was also welcomed. She discusses events, exhibits, and co-ops sponsored by the Center throughout the late twentieth century and explains how the museum was founded. Lewis recalls personalities who have participated in events and exhibits including Duke Ellington and Jerry Pinkney. Lewis then discusses some of the personalities she has known throughout the years including Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X. Lewis is proud to admit the influence Boston has had on shaping the lives of Black people in this world.

X, Malcolm, 1925-1965

Ellington, Duke, 1899-1974.

Pinkney, Jerry--Exhibitions.

Art--Massachusetts--Boston.

Farrakhan, Louis

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_004, TRT: 0:20:35
2003/04/10

Elma Lewis discusses many influential Black artists including Paul Robeson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. She discusses the need for Black children to know their history. Lewis' philosophy of art is that all things works together for good and she hopes that everyone will be brought together in a common purpose for the good of humanity. Her legacy is the people she taught and the physical centers she helped to build.

Brooks, Gwendolyn, 1917-2000

Robeson, Paul, 1898-1976

Angelou, Maya

Dunbar, Paul Lawrence, 1872-1906

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_005, TRT: 0:08:50
2003/04/10

Elma Lewis discusses how her projects have become her life, her husband, and her children. She would like to be remembered as one who offered no harm, did good wherever possible, and constantly tried to right the wrongs that had been done to her people. Lewis participated in other organizations as a trustee so she could influence them for that purpose. She describes some of her travels, focusing on African countries. Lewis ends by proclaiming that one's name is what one makes of it. Everyone is born with everything they need to succeed. The tape ends with a review of photographs.