

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 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:52:55).
Abstract:	Theater 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 Boston, 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®

Museum chief executive 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 NCAA 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 Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Theater 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.

Occupations:

Theater Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 5/30/2023 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

Video Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis, Section A2003_071_001_001, TRT: 0:27:00 ?
Elma Lewis was born on September 15, 1921 in Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother, Edwardine Jordan Corbin Lewis, was born in St. Lucy's Parish in

Barbados to Caroline Licorice and James Jordan. She married Athelston Corbin in Trinidad and had two sons, Darnley Leon Corbin and George Clarence Corbin. After five years, Corbin died and Lewis' mother moved to Boston, Massachusetts in 1915. Lewis' father, Clairmont Richard McDonald Lewis, was born around 1898 in Christ Church, Barbados to Josephine Blackman Lewis and Richard McDonald Lewis. He moved to Boston, Massachusetts in 1916, where he worked as a laborer. Lewis' parents met in Boston and were active in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Lewis attended St. Cyprian Episcopal Church. She recalls her family's traditions and the culture she experienced as a child. Lewis attended Girls' Latin School, and later graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School in Boston, Massachusetts. She received her B.A. degree from Emerson College in 1943.

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 ?

Elma Lewis attended elementary school at the Asa Gray School and The Hammond School in Boston, Massachusetts. Lewis describes her personality in school, and how she wanted to teach rather than be taught. She took private lessons in elocution after seeing a young girl recite poetry at a Universal Negro Improvement Association meeting, and by eleven years old she was earning enough from presentations to support herself. Lewis received her Bachelor of Literary Interpretation degree from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts in 1943, and her M.Ed. degree from Boston University in Boston, Massachusetts in 1944. In 1950, Lewis founded the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, where she taught classical ballet for thirty years and trained African American students in the arts. She talks about her artistic friends, including Babatunde Olatunji, Max Roach, Arthur Mitchell, Randy Weston, and HistoryMakers Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Billy Taylor, and Doris Jones.

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 ?

Elma Lewis founded the Elma Lewis Playhouse in the Park in Franklin Park in 1966. The park had previously been abandoned by Boston's white community, and Lewis personally cleaned up the park and developed the space. Lewis recalls Duke Ellington playing at the Playhouse twice a year to open up the annual Garvey Festival. In 1968, Lewis founded the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston, Massachusetts in 1968, an organization which included The Museum of the National Center for Afro-American Artists which was responsible for exhibiting and performing works by African American artists such as Abdias do Nascimento, Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Talley Beatty, Jerry Pinkney, and HistoryMaker Katherine Dunham. The Center was also celebrated for its yearly performances of Langston Hughes' "Black Nativity." Lewis recalls traveling to Senegal, her relationship with HistoryMaker and Minister Louis Farrakhan, and the childhood personality of Malcolm X and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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 ?

Elma Lewis talks about the notable African Americans she met or who have influenced her. As a student at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts, Lewis met Paul Robeson and received feedback from him about her acting. She talks about the importance of passing African American history to future generations. Lewis describes meeting Danny Glover and hearing him credit his acting career to Lewis' National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston, Massachusetts. She also talks about Glover's humanitarian outreach and Robert Parris Moses' Algebra Project. Lewis goes on to describe the cultural legacies of HistoryMaker Maya Angelou and Paul Laurence Dunbar as well as the personalities of Gwendolyn Brooks and HistoryMakers Reverend Jesse Jackson, Minister Louis Farrakhan, and Reverend Al Sharpton. She also reflects on making the most of her experiences, her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and her legacy.

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 ?

Elma Lewis shares her plans for the future. She also describes how she would like to be remembered and reflects on how she has made the most in her life with the gifts she was given. The interview ends with Larry Crowe narrating Elma Lewis' photographs.