

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

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Lewis, Samella S. |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, |
| Dates: | August 24, 2003 and May 22, 2004 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2003 and 2004 |
| Physical Description: | 11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:19:41). |
| Abstract: | Printmaker Samella Lewis (1924 - 2022) was a pioneering artist and art historian renowned for her contributions to African American art and art history. In 1951, Lewis became the first African American woman to receive a doctorate in fine arts and art history. In order to publish 'Black Artists on Art,' Lewis founded the first African American-owned art publishing house, Contemporary Crafts. Lewis helped found the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, and established the scholarly journal <i>International Review of African American Art</i> . Lewis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 24, 2003 and May 22, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2003_202 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Artist and art historian Samella Lewis was renowned for her contributions to African American art and art history. Born on February 27, 1924, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Lewis's heritage led her to view art as an essential expression of the community and its struggles.

Lewis began her art career as a student at Dillard University, where she was instructed by the African American sculptor Elizabeth Catlett. At one of her instructor's suggestions, Lewis transferred to Hampton Institute, where she earned her B.A. degree in art history in 1945. Lewis completed her graduate studies at the Ohio State University, earning her M.A. degree in 1948, and in 1951 she became the first African American woman to receive her doctorate in fine arts and art history. In order to publish *Black Artists on Art* (1969), Lewis founded the first African American-owned art publishing house Contemporary Crafts.

From 1969 to 1984, Lewis worked as professor of art history at Scripps College in Claremont, California, becoming the college's first tenured African American professor. Lewis also helped to found the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles in 1976 and established the scholarly journal *International Review of African American Art* that same year. The journal went on to become one of the leading forum for educating scholars and others about the many contributions African Americans have made to the visual arts. Lewis published *African American Art and Artists* in 1978, a history of African American art since the colonial era. Through the museum and journal she founded, Lewis created exhibition opportunities for African American artists which have bolstered their credibility.

Lewis's work was exhibited in many important galleries and museums. Lewis's deeply personal art embodies some experience from her own life in each piece. Lewis received several awards and distinctions; in 1995, she received the UNICEF Award for the Visual Arts, and from 1996 to 1997 worked as a distinguished scholar at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities in Los Angeles. Scripps College also named an academic scholarship in Lewis's honor.

Lewis and her husband, Paul G. Lewis, were married in 1948; the couple raised two children.

Samella Lewis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 24, 2003 and May 22, 2004.

Lewis passed away on May 27, 2022 at the age of 98.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Samella Lewis was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 24, 2003 and May 22, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Printmaker Samella Lewis (1924 - 2022) was a pioneering artist and art historian renowned for her contributions to African American art and art history. In 1951, Lewis became the first African American woman to receive a doctorate in fine arts and art history. In order to publish 'Black Artists on Art,' Lewis founded the first African American-owned art publishing house, Contemporary Crafts. Lewis helped found the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, and established the scholarly journal *International Review of African American Art*.

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, Samella S.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Lewis, Samella S.--Interviews

African American artists--Interviews

African American printmakers--Interviews

African American artists as teachers--Interviews

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

Art historians--Interviews

African American families

African American mothers

African American fathers

African Americans--Genealogy

Ponchatoula (La.)

Art

New Orleans (La.)--Social life and customs

Mardi Gras

Childhood

Racism--United States

Segregation

Race relations in the United States

Southern States--Race relations--History

New Orleans (La.)--Race relations

Voodooism

Creoles

Cajuns

Catlett, Elizabeth, 1915-

Dillard University

Quarles, Benjamin

Robeson, Paul,--1898-1976

White, Charles, 1918-1979

Hampton Institute

Lowenfeld, Viktor

Ohio State University

Discrimination in education

University of Chicago

Morgan State University

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

African American political activists--Interviews

Native American arts

Arts, Asian

Pollock, Jackson, 1912-1956

Art, Modern--20th century--History

Art, Modern--Japanese influences

Art, Modern--Primitive influences

Black Arts movement

Lawrence, Jacob, 1917-2000

Black Nationalism

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Art, African

Cubism

Museum of African American Art (Santa Monica, Calif.)

African American painters--Interviews

Woodruff, Hale, 1900-1980

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Printmaker

Art Curator

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 Samella Lewis, August 24, 2003 and May 22, 2004. 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 Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_001_001, TRT: 0:29:29 ?

Artist and art historian Samella S. Lewis begins by describing her family background, sharing memories about her mother, father, and siblings, and sharing stories about her ancestors. Lewis describes her childhood in New Orleans and Ponchatoula, Louisiana. Lewis explains her early interest in art, saying she began drawing around the age of four.

African American artists--Interviews.

African American printmakers--Interviews.

African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews.

Art historians--Interviews.

African American families.

African American mothers.

African American fathers.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Ponchatoula (La.).

Art.

New Orleans (La.)--Social life and customs.

Mardi Gras.

Children.

Racism--United States.

Segregation.

Southern States--Race relations--History.

New Orleans (La.)--Race relations.

Voodooism.

Creoles.
Cajuns.
Catlett, Elizabeth, 1915-
Dillard University.
Quarles, Benjamin.
Robeson, Paul, 1898-1976.
White, Charles, 1918-1979.
Hampton Institute.
Lowenfeld, Viktor.
Ohio State University.
Discrimination in education.
University of Chicago.
Morgan State University.
Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University.
African American political activists--Interviews.
Native American arts.
Arts, Asian.
Pollock, Jackson, 1912-1956.
Art, Modern--20th century--History.
Art, Modern--Japanese influences.
Art, Modern--Primitive influences.
Black Arts movement.
Lawrence, Jacob, 1917-2000.
Black nationalism.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Art, African.
Cubism.
Museum of African American Art (Santa Monica, Calif.).
African American painters--Interviews.
Woodruff, Hale, 1900-1980.

- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_001_002, TRT: 0:31:04 ?
Samella S. Lewis remembers New Orleans and Louisiana during her youth. She recalls being frightened by the mayhem of Mardi Gras and perplexed why the black Mardi Gras clubs called themselves Zulus. Lewis further describes her youthful rebellion against the segregation and racism of New Orleans. She also describes sources of friction between blacks, creoles, and cajuns, as well as discussing the practice of voodoo in New Orleans.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_001_003, TRT: 0:29:43 ?
Samella S. Lewis discusses her artistic apprenticeship under Elizabeth Catlett while she was a student at Dillard University. Lewis describes her early works and inspirations and how a one piece, painted with house paint, ended up in Hampton Institute's art museum. She recalls a controversial painting of a black Christ and the uproar it caused on Dillard's campus. Lewis also recounts her interactions with Benjamin Quarles, Charles White, and Paul Robeson.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_001_004, TRT: 0:31:03 ?
Samella S. Lewis continues to detail her artistic and political development under

Elizabeth Catlett while at Dillard University, and later Hampton Institute. Lewis also recalls a professor and mentor, Viktor Lowenfeld, from Hampton and tells of her other influences there. Lewis explains how she incorporated history into her art and describes some of her works from her years at Hampton.

- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_001_005, TRT: 0:31:02 ?
Samella S. Lewis details her graduate studies in art and art history at Ohio State University, from where she became the first black woman to receive a doctorate in fine arts and history. She recounts the racist atmosphere at Ohio State that led her to other institutions after earning her degree. Lewis then describes her studio work at the University of Chicago and Morgan State University, explaining that her activism was not well received at Morgan State. Lewis then describes her political activism while at Florida A&M University, including facing accusations of being a Communist.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_006, TRT: 0:31:10 ?
Samella S. Lewis details her political activism and its effect on her artistic endeavors. Lewis recalls the McCarthy era of anti-Communism and how it affected the art department at Florida A&M University. She explains how she was accused of being a Communist and faced intense scrutiny from Florida's governor and the all-white board of university trustees. She also details the difficulties Elizabeth Catlett faced due to her union and political activism while at Dillard University and Hampton Institute. Lewis also discusses the negative effects of integration.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_007, TRT: 0:34:46 ?
Samella S. Lewis discusses her studies of Native American art and Asian Art; assesses their places in the arts pantheon; and explains their influences on her work. She also traces the influence of Native American, Chinese, Japanese, and African art to 20th century artists like Elizabeth Catlett and Jackson Pollock. Lewis also discusses Catlett's period of exile in Mexico.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_008, TRT: 0:31:06 ?
Samella S. Lewis opines on the low status of black art during the 1960s. She details the rise of the Black Arts Movement and her association with notable artists like Jacob Lawrence, David Driskell, and Elizabeth Catlett. She explains how Black Nationalism influenced the Black Arts Movement. Lewis recalls a protest at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the late 1960s for its refusal to incorporate any mention of African art in a Cubist exhibition. She also explains how her mentor, Viktor Lowenfeld, influenced her own artistic style.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_009, TRT: 0:31:23 ?
Samella S. Lewis discusses her art history scholarship, focusing on 'Black Artists on Art,' and explaining how she worked to legitimize black art in the scholarly world. Lewis recounts her role in the founding of the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles and explains fundraising strategies. Lewis considers her future plans, saying she wants to shift her attention from writing to painting and sculpting, and reflects on the importance of history.
- Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_010, TRT: 0:30:15 ?
Samella S. Lewis explains the writing process behind her book 'African American Art, Arts and Artists.' Lewis shares an anecdote about Elizabeth Catlett's activism and restates Catlett's influence on her own work. She discusses black artists who have not received the credit they deserve, such as Hale Woodruff and Charles White. Lewis also discusses the lack of African American art in major museum exhibitions. Finally, she reflects on her life and career and considers her legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Samella Lewis, Section A2003_202_002_011, TRT: 0:08:40 ?
Samella Lewis narrates photographs.