

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lilian Thomas Burwell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Burwell, Lilian Thomas, 1927-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell,
Dates:	August 3, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:14:47).
Abstract:	Visual artist Lilian Thomas Burwell (1927 -) was an acclaimed visual artist; her paintings were featured in public and private collections internationally, as well as in group and solo shows. Burwell was also the owner and operator of Burwell Studios. Burwell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 3, 2004, in Edgewater, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_118
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Lilian Thomas Burwell was born in Washington, D.C. on June 7, 1927. After completing junior high school, Burwell attended the prestigious High School of Music and Art in New York City, but moved to Washington, D.C., before graduating. Burwell went on to earn her high school diploma from Dunbar High School in 1944.

Burwell had a strong desire to be an artist, however, society, and her family, felt that she would be unable to support herself. One of Burwell's aunts believed in her though, and together they reached a compromise with her family: she would become an art teacher. In 1946, Burwell completed her studies at the Pratt Institute; she would later earn her B.A. from the D.C. Teacher's College. Burwell went on to earn her M.F.A. in 1975 from Catholic University.

Throughout her career, Burwell taught at the Pratt Institute; in the Washington, D.C. public schools; and at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Between 1964 and 1967, Burwell served as the publication and exhibits specialist for the Department of Commerce. In 1983, Burwell founded the Alma Thomas Memorial Gallery where she served as curatorial director for the next year. As an artist, Burwell's works have been included in public and private collections around the world; she was also invited to participate in numerous group and one-woman shows. Burwell went on to become the owner of Burwell Studios, which exhibited her works.

In addition to being an active lecturer in her field, Burwell also published articles on art, and served on the board of directors of the Smithsonian Institution Renwick Alliance and the Arlington Arts Centers. Burwell also served as the curatorial director of the Summer Museum Archives in Washington, D.C., and was the recipient of several awards, including the Excellence in Arts/D.C. Commission on the Arts Individual Artist Award in 1998.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 3, 2004, in Edgewater, Maryland, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Visual artist Lilian Thomas Burwell (1927 -) was an acclaimed visual artist; her paintings were featured in public and private collections internationally, as well as in group and solo shows. Burwell was also the owner and operator of Burwell Studios.

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:

Burwell, Lilian Thomas, 1927-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Burwell, Lilian Thomas, 1927---Interviews

African American artists as teachers--Interviews

African American artists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Visual Artist

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 Lilian Thomas Burwell, August 3, 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 Lilian Thomas Burwell, Section A2004_118_001_001, TRT: 0:30:28 ?

Lilian Thomas Burwell was born on June 7, 1927 in Washington, D.C. Her mother, Margaret Wilkinson Thomas, was born in 1898 in D.C. Her maternal

ancestry can be traced to Lord Fairfax of Virginia who had children by an enslaved woman in the 18th century. Her maternal grandfather was a postal worker. Her grandmother was an attendance officer and friends with HistoryMaker Elizabeth Catlett's mother. Burwell's mother attended Dunbar High School in D.C. and was college educated; she taught for the Workers Progress Administration during the 1930s and '40s. Burwell's father, James Burchett Thomas, was born in 1892 in Alert, North Carolina. The family earned a living harvesting the tobacco and cotton fields they owned. Thomas was the second oldest of twenty-six children and taught photography at North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro where he met Burwell's mother. Burwell's family migrated to New York City in 1929, at the beginning of the Great Depression. Burwell recalls understanding empathy at a young age.

African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

African American artists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell, Section A2004_118_001_002, TRT: 0:30:18 ?

Lilian Thomas Burwell grew up in New York City where her family attended St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Harlem and she attended the Little Red School House in Greenwich Village on scholarship. The Little Red School House was a progressive school with an open classroom concept, emphasizing hands-on experiences rather than rote memorization. Burwell's father, a janitor and later photographer, taught her to question everything she encountered. Burwell had an outspoken personality and remembers riding the subway alone as a child. From an early age, she wanted to be an artist. In fourth grade, she transferred to P.S. 46 where she was a strong student, though she struggled with math, and was able to skip a semester of eighth grade. While she was a student at the High School of Music & Art in New York, her parents moved to Washington, D.C. Burwell eventually joined them in D.C. because she did not get along with the aunt she stayed with in New York. Burwell talks about the evolution of her spirituality.

Video Oral History Interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell, Section A2004_118_001_003, TRT: 0:29:49 ?

Lilian Thomas Burwell attended Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., but took art classes at Armstrong Manual Training School in D.C. Burwell's maternal family was one of the "old Washington" black families, but Burwell chafed at the class consciousness of D.C. She earned a partial scholarship to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Her maternal aunt and uncle paid for the rest of her tuition as well as for books and art supplies. In 1946, Burwell dropped out of school to get married, but her marriage was short-lived. She returned to D.C. with her daughter and although she did not have a college degree, Burwell found a job teaching. She eventually completed her degree at Miner Teachers College in D.C. In the 1960s, while she was an exhibit specialist for the U.S. government doing commercial art, Burwell began to paint seriously in her spare time. Burwell lived frugally to support her daughter and her career; she rented out a room in her house and built most of her furniture, including her daughter's bed.

Video Oral History Interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell, Section A2004_118_001_004, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Lilian Thomas Burwell's early work was photo realistic, but she became interested in abstract expressionism and began to work with Benjamin Abramowitz who encouraged her to think differently about her process. Burwell describes her painting process and a conversation with a friend's daughter which

pushed her to create more authentic work. Some of Burwell's painting takes inspiration from gardening, one of her hobbies. Following her mother's death, Burwell covered her bathroom walls with a mosaic of mirror and wood. As her work has evolved, she has created larger pieces, pieces with cutouts and developed a technique she calls structural painting. She describes the paint she uses, her artistic philosophy, people's responses to her art and how she names her pieces like 'Masai.' Burwell earned her M.F.A. degree from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in 1975, was a member of several art collectives, and has had her work commissioned by Northern Trust Bank in Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Lilian Thomas Burwell, Section A2004_118_001_005, TRT: 0:14:51 ?

Lilian Thomas Burwell's aunt Hilda Wilkinson Brown helped her fulfill her dream of becoming an artist by encouraging her and helping her pay to attend Pratt Institute. Brown was also an accomplished, if not prolific, artist. As executor of her estate, Burwell inherited many of Brown's pieces and has brought attention to her aunt's accomplishments. She sold one of Brown's pieces to the Art Institute of Chicago and has been asked by the Smithsonian American Art Museum to leave one of Brown's pieces to them in her will. Burwell does not often compete for public commissions because she does not like that her selection is dependent on others' sensibilities. She has a good working relationship with HistoryMaker Madeline Murphy Rabb who invited her to create work commissioned by Northern Trust Bank. Burwell describes her hopes for the African American community and how she would like to be remembered. She also reflects upon her life and legacy.