

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Merton Simpson

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Simpson, Merton D. (Merton Daniel), 1928-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson,
<b>Dates:</b>	November 29, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	3 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:09:25).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Painter Merton Simpson (1928 - 2013 ) was the first African American to exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum, and was a member of the Spiral group, an African American art collective during the 1960s. Simpson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 29, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_250
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Painter Merton Daniel Simpson was born on September 20, 1928 in Charleston, South Carolina to Jenny and Marion Simpson. He began drawing after being hospitalized at childhood with diphtheria. William Halsey, an artist who gave private instruction to the young artist, soon recognized Simpson's talents. During his formative years, Simpson worked at the Gibbes Museum there he was the only African American in the still segregated institution.

Moving to New York in 1942, Simpson began his studies at Cooper Union Art

School and also at New York University where he studied with professor Hale Woodruff. In 1951, he joined the U.S. Air Force, where he was the official U.S. Air Force artist and painted portraits of officers including one of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. In 1952, his painting, "Nocturnal City" was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Concluding his military service in 1954, Simpson returned to New York to continue painting and was included in two museum exhibitions, Young American Painters at the Guggenheim Museum in 1954 and Eight New York Painters at the University of Michigan in 1956. In 1954, Simpson opened a gallery on Madison Avenue, which featured African and Modern art. During the Civil Rights Movement in 1963, Simpson joined the Spiral Group, an organization of African American artists that included Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Charles Alston. For Simpson, this sense of social consciousness led to his "Confrontation" series, a group of mostly black and white canvases, which expressed the anger, and frustration of the times.

Traveling extensively to West Africa in the 1970s, Simpson built a collection of African art and is known as one of the preeminent dealers of African art. In the 1980s, he created two series of work, "Universal Orchestrations" and "Contemporary Melodies" both showed his great love for jazz music. By the 1990s, Simpson began using fragments from West African hunting cloth, which were used to wrap tribal objects during shipments from Africa. His work gained a sculptural quality reflective of tribal art. In 1995, the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston presented a retrospective exhibition and published a catalogue entitled, "Merton D. Simpson, The Journey of an Artist." The Studio Museum in Harlem honored Simpson in 2002 for his work as an artist and humanitarian.

Merton Daniel Simpson resides in New York City.

Merton Daniel Simpson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 29, 2005.

Merton Simpson passed away on March 9, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Merton Simpson was conducted by Shawn Wilson on November 29, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 3 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter Merton Simpson (1928 - 2013 ) was the first African American to exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum, and was a member of the Spiral group, an African American art collective during the 1960s.

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# 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### **Persons:**

Simpson, Merton D. (Merton Daniel), 1928-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Simpson, Merton D. (Merton Daniel), 1928---Interviews

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African American artists--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

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Art dealers--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Painter

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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## **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 Merton Simpson, November 29, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson, Section  
A2005\_250\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:14 2005/11/29

Merton Simpson was born on September 20, 1928 in Charleston, South Carolina to Jennie Gibson Simpson and Marion Simpson. Simpson's maternal grandmother, Margie Gibson, catered for prominent Charleston families. Simpson's paternal grandmother migrated from New York to Charleston. Simpson's father was a water meter man and Simpson's mother was a homemaker. To earn extra money, Simpson delivered newspapers and helped at a woodworking shop. He often visited the city's waterfront and the circus with his uncle, and tutored children at Jenkins Orphanage in exchange for music lessons. Growing up, Simpson's diphtheria kept him from playing outside, so he turned to painting. Recognizing his talent, local artist Jean Fleming mentored Simpson. He attended The Cooper Union and New York University where he studied with Hale Woodruff. In 1951, he joined the U.S. Air Force and became a portrait artist for army generals, including President Dwight Eisenhower. Simpson resigned from the Air Force to care for his sick mother.

United States. Air Force.

African American families--South Carolina--Charleston.  
African Americans--Education (Elementary).  
African Americans--South Carolina--Charleston--Social  
life and customs.  
Sick children.

Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson, Section  
A2005\_250\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:27 2005/11/29

Merton Simpson founded the artist collective Spiral, along with Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Hale Woodruff. The group's protest against New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art resulted in the museum showcasing black artists. In 1954, Simpson became the first black artist to exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum. Simpson's work was also featured at New York City's Schaeffer Gallery. The Harlem Riots of 1964 inspired Simpson's painting series, 'Confrontation.' While travelling in Paris, France and Africa, Simpson started collecting African art, which he began selling to private collectors like Ralph Ellison. Simpson enjoyed listening to Eddie Lockjaw Davis and Ben Webster at The Blue Note in Paris. In 1995, Simpson showcased his art at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina. Simpson shares his admiration for HistoryMakers Reverend Jesse L. Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton and recalls meeting James Baldwin and Johnny Griffin. Simpson talks about Romare Bearden and the concept of black art.

African American artists--New York (State)--New York.  
African American art.  
Art, African.  
Black arts movement.  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.  
Art dealers--France--Paris.

Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson, Section  
A2005\_250\_001\_003, TRT: 0:10:44 2005/11/29

Merton Simpson sold African art to private collectors like Nelson Rockefeller, Helena Rubinstein, and Eddie Lawrence. Simpson also painted a portrait for HistoryMaker Gordon Parks. A renowned painter,

sculptor, art dealer, and musician, Simpson's work is featured in the permanent collections at Howard University, Clark Atlanta and University of Michigan, as well as the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Simpson reflects upon the importance of history and his career. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.

African American artists--New York (State)--New York.