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

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Simpson, Merton
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson,
Dates:	November 29, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	3 Betacam SP videocassettes (1:09:25).
Abstract:	Painter Merton Simpson (1928 -) 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.
Identification:	A2005_250
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

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 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.

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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Painter Merton Simpson (1928 -) 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.

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:

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

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer).

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer).

Subjects:

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

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

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

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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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 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 8/25/2011 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, November 29, 2005

Video Oral History Interview with Merton Simpson, Section A2005_250_001_001, TRT: 0:29:14 2005/11/29

Merton Daniel Simpson slates the interview and lists his favorites. He discusses the background of his mother, Jenny Gibson, and father, Merton Simpson. Due to the fact that he suffered from diphtheria and rheumatic fever, Simpson did not go to school until the third grade. While he was at home, he would paint on the front porch and read the newspaper cartoons. Simpson discusses the fact that he grew up in the projects in Charleston, South Carolina and that he loved attending the saxophone lessons that were given by the Jenkins Orphanage. Other activities that the children did included making wagons and mobile skates. He talks about the various people in Charleston that impacted his painting, including artists Anita Pollitzer, William Hosley and Jean Fleming. In 1951, he volunteered for the U.S. Air Force, where he was a jazz musician and portrait artist.

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 Daniel Simpson discusses Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden; and their protest against the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, New York for not showing African American artists. The protest was successful and six months later African American artists exhibited there. In the early 1960s, African American artists in New York created a collective called Spiral, where they discussed the concept of Black Art. Simpson recalls the circumstances that led him to be the first African American to exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum. He travelled to Paris, France to purchase African art and to visit the city. Simpson reflects on the fact that many European artists, such as Picasso, were influenced by African art, but did not want to admit it. He states that African art is a great art form that is just now getting recognized by museums.

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 comments on some of the private and permanent collectors that he has worked with including Eddie Lawrence and Howard University. Simpson reflects on his accomplishments. In addition, he believes that history is important for everyone to know about, but especially young people so that they know where they came from. He narrates personal photos as well as photos of portraits he did while in the U.S. Air Force.

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