

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Peg Alston

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Alston, Peg
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston,
Dates:	March 2, 2006 and March 7, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:11:45).
Abstract:	Art gallery owner Peg Alston (1938 -) is a private art dealer who established the Peg Alston Gallery in 1975. Alston's gallery has received recognition for promoting the artwork of African American artists and sculptors. Alston was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 2, 2006 and March 7, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_032
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Private art dealer Peg Alston was born in Camden, New Jersey on December 31, 1938. As a child, Alston always wanted to make a difference. Prior to starting her private art dealership, Alston worked as a social worker from 1969 to 1975. She obtained her B.A. degree from New York University in 1960 and obtained her M.S.W. degree from Columbia University in 1964. She has also continued to study various art classes at the New School for Social Research. Her career in art began in 1969 as a council member for the Studio Museum of Harlem in New York. Inspired by art and private dealing, she became the publicity director for Cinque Gallery. Becoming frustrated because of the lack of visibility for African American artists, she established the Peg Alston Gallery in 1975, a private art dealership, specializing in African American art and sculpture.

Alston has held numerous art-related positions. In 1978, she served as a panel member on the New York State Council for the Arts where she helped to bring visibility to African American artists. In 1980, Alston became the curator for *Retour Aux Sources*, the first exhibit of African American artists in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and West Africa. In 1989, she was the coordinator for the *Celebration of Tokyo and New York City as Sister Cities Art Festival*, which led to her receiving the Distinction of Honor Award by the New York Coalition of Black Women that same year. From 1990 to 1992, she and Dr. Kaye E. Davis co-sponsored *Established Art Seminars* in New York City, which helped to bring African American art to a broader audience.

Alston continues to work to promote the works of African American artists. In 1995, she was Honorary Chair Person for *Black Pearls: Treasures of African American Women Artists*, an exhibit presented by the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women at New York City's Cinque Gallery. Also in 1995, she was a panel speaker for *Collecting African American Art* at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey and she was also a panel speaker at the *Conference on Female Entrepreneurship* at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which was sponsored by the National Association of Female Executives. Alston has received several awards for her work in African American Art including a Certificate of Recognition from *National Scene Magazine*.

Alston lives in New York with her husband and continues to run the Peg Alston Gallery of African American art and sculpture.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Peg Alston was conducted by Shawn Wilson on March 2, 2006 and March 7, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Art gallery owner Peg Alston (1938 -) is a private art dealer who established the Peg Alston Gallery in 1975. Alston's gallery has received recognition for promoting the artwork of African American artists and sculptors.

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:

Alston, Peg

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Alston, Peg--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Art Gallery Owner

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 Peg Alston, March 2, 2006 and March 7, 2006. 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 Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_001_001, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Peg Alston was born on December 31, 1938 in Camden, New Jersey to Louise Allen Davies and Homer Wilkerson. Her mother was born in Lawnside, New Jersey, which, as a former Underground Railroad stop, had a large African American population. Alston's maternal grandfather was a minister, and her

grandmother was a housekeeper. Their family came from Virginia, where some of the family stayed, passing as white. Alston's mother worked as a seamstress in a coat factory. Alston remembers her father as a friendly man. His mother, Eva Johnson, raised Alston in a lower-middle class Camden neighborhood after her parents divorced when she was nine. Johnson was active in Camden's community, where she attended church and raised money for local black orphans. She emphasized education and required Alston to sing at church and teas. Although she wanted Alston to see the world, she refused to take her to the segregated South when she visited family. Alston describes trips to Philadelphia.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_001_002, TRT: 0:30:51 ?

Peg Alston struggled after her parents separated. She moved to Camden but celebrated Christmas at her mother's house. She gave up violin lessons when she overheard her mother mention leaving her father, although she resumed her lesson at Camden High School in New Jersey. She attended Charles Sumner Elementary School, where her teacher Mrs. Manigault had also taught her mother. She looked up to Mrs. Hazelwood, a poised woman whose husband was active in the NAACP. She was also influenced by her grandmother, Eva Johnson, and her voice teacher, Gretchen Waples. As a child, Alston recited speeches at NAACP meetings and meetings of a local teachers' organization. In high school, Alston was a cheerleader and a member of the YWCA. She was surprised by the discriminatory actions of a YWCA leader, despite being accustomed to integrated communities. Alston also recalls being denied service at a restaurant during her prom night. Upon graduation in 1956, Alston matriculated at New York University to study social work.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_001_003, TRT: 0:29:09 ?

Peg Alston followed her uncle's example, attending New York University. She became part of the beatnik scene and dated poet Lebert Bethune. She often attended dances with other black students in Harlem. Alston worked part time as a babysitter for a wealthy woman, whose original art Alston enjoyed viewing. Although Alston only knew of one African American artist, Hale Woodruff, she became curious about black art. She bought her first painting from Earl Miller after meeting him at a concert. He introduced Alston to the Spiral group, whose members included Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff and other African American artists. Upon graduation in 1960, Alston worked as a social worker at a private foster care organization. The agency funded her master's degree in social work from the New York School of Social Work in 1964, but she left that career behind after failing to gain tenure at City University of New York. Alston built a personal collection of African art and held a show in her apartment in the early 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_001_004, TRT: 0:29:52 ?

Peg Alston met Romare Bearden as she began her art collecting career. He mentored Alston, urging her to open a gallery. In 1978, when Edward Clark asked her to help him understand the African American community's response to his art, she held a successful show of his work at her apartment. Alston often struggled to find artists as she began collecting, because there was little information and resources available on black art. She searched for books and catalogs, volunteering at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to educate herself and share her knowledge with others. She often hosted talks with artists and scholars, like George Preston, in her home. In 1980, Alston held the first show of African American art in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. The show included artists such as Edward Clark, Bill Hudson, Howardena Pindell, Vincent Smith, Barkeley L. Hendricks and Pheoris West. Alston also talks about Jean-Michel Basquiat's popularity, the

false category of black art and public ignorance of the field.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_002_005, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Peg Alston met Merton Simpson before she became an art dealer and was impressed with his collection. In 1964, she attended an exhibit at City College of New York where she met Charles Alston. She also saw works by Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. Alston volunteered at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 1968 shortly after it opened. After becoming a dealer, Alston recognized Lawrence on the street and introduced herself. He arranged for her to sell some of his art, which exposed his work to new audiences. Alston sold pieces by Elizabeth Catlett and Edward Clark, for whom she also hosted an exhibit. In 1978, Alston took part in an art exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution. In 1979, she served as an art consultant for the Black Theatre Festival-U.S.A. at the Lincoln Center. Alston also talks about her maternal family background, her uncle, William Wilkerson, and the interaction of art and history. She describes the mission of the Peg Alston Fine Arts Gallery.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_002_006, TRT: 0:28:04 ?

Peg Alston describes how she chooses art to sell in Peg Alston Fine Arts Gallery. In particular, she describes the work of William T. Williams, Al Loving and Howardena Pindell, whose art is now handled by George R. N’Namdi. In the 1980s, Alston wrote letters to major galleries to encourage them to sell the paintings of Norman Lewis, finding success with art dealer Michael Rosenfeld, although this meant Alston could no longer sell Lewis’ work. Alston talks about the black art galleries of New York City. She explains that the widening audience for African American art was partly enabled by the National Black Fine Art Show, held annually in New York City. She reflects upon her career and the importance of history. She talks about being selected as a HistoryMaker and describes her vocation in art.

Video Oral History Interview with Peg Alston, Section A2006_032_002_007, TRT: 0:14:54 ?

Peg Alston narrates her photographs.