

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willis Bing Davis

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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>	Davis, Willis Bing
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 20, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:21:41).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Mixed media artist and art professor Willis Bing Davis (1937 - ) became the director of the Paul Robeson Cultural and Performing Arts Center in 1979. Davis is president of the board of directors of the National Conference of Artists, and also established the EbonNia Gallery in the developing Wright/Dunbar neighborhood of Dayton's west side. Davis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 20, 2006, in Dayton, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_044
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cultural leader Willis “Bing” Davis was born on June 30, 1937, in Greer, South Carolina to Verona Hargro Davis Buffington and Levonia “Lee” Davis, a coal truck driver and gospel singer. Growing up on Dayton, Ohio’s, East Side, Davis attended Washington Elementary School. An All-City basketball player at six feet four inches tall, Davis graduated from Wilbur Wright High School in 1955. Assisted by coach Dean Dooley, Davis entered DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where his classmate was Vernon Jordan. Graduating in 1959, Davis taught art at Dayton’s Colonel White High School. He attended the Dayton Art Institute and earned his Master of Education degree from Oxford, Ohio’s, Miami University in 1967. Later, from 1975 to 1976, he pursued graduate studies at Indiana University.

Returning to DePauw University in 1970, Davis served as assistant dean of art and coordinator of Black Studies – as the only black faculty member. In 1973, Davis attended his first meeting of the National Conference of Artists (NCA) and made his first trip to Africa (Ghana). Davis was appointed assistant dean of the graduate school and associate professor of art at Miami University in 1976. That same year, Davis held his first one man show at the Studio Museum of Harlem. In 1978, Davis was invited to chair the Art Department and to become director of the new Paul Robeson Cultural and Performing Arts Center by Dr. Arthur E. Thomas of Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Davis, who served on Central State University’s faculty for twenty years, also was a visiting scholar at the University of Dayton and an artist in residence at Wright State University.

Davis has an illustrious record as an artist and curator including exhibitions at the American Craft Museum, the Renwick Gallery, Maryland Institute College of Art and Design, Savannah College of Art and Design, Anacotia Museum, National Museum of Art of Senegal, West Africa, United States Embassy Accra, Ghana, and Museum fur Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany. Davis was visiting artist-lecturer for Panafest 94 in Accra, Ghana. In 1997, Davis received the Ohio Art Educator of the Year Award. He received the 1999 Global Youth Peace and

Tolerance Award and the 2001 Ohioan Pegasus Award. Davis is president of the board of directors of the National Conference of Artists. Davis also established EbonNia Gallery in the developing Wright/Dunbar neighborhood of Dayton's West Side.

A hometown cultural hero, Davis has a grown daughter and lives in Dayton with his wife, Audrey.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willis Bing Davis was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 20, 2006, in Dayton, Ohio, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Mixed media artist and art professor Willis Bing Davis (1937 - ) became the director of the Paul Robeson Cultural and Performing Arts Center in 1979. Davis is president of the board of directors of the National Conference of Artists, and also established the EbonNia Gallery in the developing Wright/Dunbar neighborhood of Dayton's west side.

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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:

Davis, Willis Bing

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Davis, Willis Bing--Interviews

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African American artists--Interviews.

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African American art museum curators--Interviews.

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African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

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College department heads--Ohio--Wilberforce--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:

Mixed Media Artist

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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 Willis Bing Davis, March 20, 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).

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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 Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Willis Bing Davis was born with the name Willis Hoke Davis on June 30, 1937 in Greer, South Carolina. His mother, Verona Hargro Davis Buffington, was born in Commerce, Georgia circa 1910 and worked as a sharecropper. Davis' father, Levonia Davis, was born near Greenville, South Carolina and also worked as a sharecropper. The couple married at Piney Grove Baptist Church in Greer, South Carolina and had four children before moving to Dayton, Ohio in 1937. In Dayton, Davis' father worked as a coal driver for General Jackson Fuel Co., barnstormed as a gospel singer, and was a deacon at Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. Davis' parents separated and he was raised by his mother in East Dayton, Ohio. Davis attended Washington Elementary School and Wilbur Wright High School. He recalls the African American community in East Dayton and how he socialized with the larger African American community in West Dayton.

African American artists as teachers.

African American art museum curators--Interviews.

African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

College department heads--Ohio--Wilberforce--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:13 ?

Willis Bing Davis recalls wanting to be an artist from childhood and how his family and community nurtured his desires. He remembers his family's artistry including his brother's drawings and his mother's quilting and shape note singing. In fifth or sixth grade, Davis began playing basketball at the Irwin Community Center where he was taught by a man named Jack Reynolds. In seventh grade, Davis joined the basketball team at his school, and continued to play at Wilbur Wright High School under Coach Dean Dooley, who also mentored Davis and encouraged his art. Davis recalls growing as a basketball player and as an artist within his community where he was encouraged to make posters, flyers, and science drawings for school.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:33 ?

Willis Bing Davis visited DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana in 1955 with his high school basketball coach Dean Dooley where he received a scholarship to attend. He enrolled at DePauw University in 1955, and one of the few African American students on campus was his boss in Longdon dining hall, HistoryMaker Vernon Jordan. Davis' mentors at DePauw University included his advisor and ceramics professor Richard Peeler and the head of the art department, A. Reid Winsey. Before attending college, Davis was not familiar with black artists outside of Bob McGuire, Martha Drew Shields, and Maurice Robinson in Dayton, Ohio. Davis graduated from DePauw University in 1959 and became an art teacher for Colonel White High School in Dayton, Ohio.

Although he had damaged both of his Achilles' tendons while playing basketball in college, Davis joined an Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) team in Dayton, where he was coached by Roger Brown. Davis reflects on the talent of his basketball team and his own approach to playing.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:39  
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Willis Bing Davis graduated from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana in 1959. In that same year, Davis' doo-wop band, El Vieros, released a record. With help from his former principal, J. Willy Holmes, Davis became a teacher at Colonel White High School in Dayton, Ohio, where he taught from 1960 until 1967. In 1967, Davis became the director of the art program at the Living Arts Center in Dayton, Ohio, where he hosted artists Edgar Tafur, Charles White, Joe Overstreet, and HistoryMaker Richard Hunt. In 1970, Davis became an assistant dean of art and the coordinator of black studies at DePauw University. In 1973, Davis attended the National Conference of Artists (NCA), where he met artists like Jacob Lawrence as well as HistoryMakers Samella Lewis, David Driskell, and Elizabeth Catlett. In 1973, Davis also visited Africa for the first time, traveling to Senegal and Ghana with a group of public school teachers. In 1976, he had his first solo show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:03  
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Willis Bing Davis visited Africa for the first time in 1973, and recalls his emotional experience visiting the slave castle on Gorée Island in Dakar, Senegal and the generosity he experienced after getting lost in Accra, Ghana. In 1976, Davis left DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana and temporarily accepted a position as chair of the art department at Howard University in Washington, D.C. before leaving to accept a position as assistant dean and associate professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he worked with Dean Spiro Peterson. Davis received his M.Ed degree from Miami University in 1967. At Miami University, Davis started the Developing Academic Potential (DAP) program to award scholarships to minority graduate students in any department. In 1978, Davis became chair of the art department at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. Davis reflects on his career teaching at Central State University, as well as his practices as an artist and his philosophy of art.

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:22  
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Willis Bing Davis continued to create art while working in academia from 1960 until his retirement from Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio in 1998. He reflects upon the importance of music and improvisation in his art and his opinion of a Black Aesthetic. He also reflects upon his colleagues at Central State University, including music professor William Komla Amoaku and President Dr. Arthur E. Thomas. In 1998, Davis retired from teaching and bought a building in the Wright-Dunbar neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio that became the EbonNia Gallery in 2001. In addition to displaying Davis' art and housing his studio, the gallery hosts the non-profit Shango, a Center for the Study of African American Art and Cultures. Davis shares his hopes for the future of the gallery. He also speaks about his two terms as national president of the National Conference of Artists (NCA), his five years as chairman of the board of directors of the NCA, and his involvement with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Video Oral History Interview with Willis Bing Davis, Section A2006\_044\_001\_007, TRT: 0:27:32  
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Willis Bing Davis talks about his distinctive personal style and shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community. He ends the interview by reflecting upon his legacy as a teacher, his family, the Wright-Dunbar neighborhood of Dayton, Ohio where he lives, and how he would like to be remembered.