



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

A Finding Aid to the Eldzier Cortor papers,  
circa 1930s-2015, bulk 1972-2015  
in the Archives of American Art

Justin Brancato and Rayna Andrews

Funding for the 2017 processing of this collection  
was provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

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Archives of American Art  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Eldzier Cortor Papers
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.corteldz
<b>Date:</b>	circa 1930s-2015 (bulk 1972-2015)
<b>Extent:</b>	3.1 Linear feet
<b>Creator:</b>	Cortor, Eldzier, 1916-
<b>Language:</b>	The collection is in English.
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of painter and printmaker Eldzier Cortor measure 3.1 linear feet and date from circa 1930s to 2015, with the bulk of the papers dating from 1972 to 2015. The papers contain biographical material, correspondence, professional files, exhibition and gallery files, writings, printed material, artwork, and photographs.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Eldzier Cortor loaned materials to the Archives of American Art for microfilming in 1970 and donated papers in 2009. His son, Michael Cortor, gave additional materials in 2016.

### Related Material

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of materials lent for microfilming on reel N70-47, including biographical material, correspondence, printed material, papers related to exhibitions, photographs, and sketchbooks. Except for three photographs that appear in this collection (Box 3, Folder 19), loaned materials were returned to the lender and are not described in the collection container inventory.

### Available Formats

Portions of the collection lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reel N70-47 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

### Processing Information

The papers were originally processed by Justin Brancato in March, 2010. The additional materials were merged and processed in 2017 by Rayna Andrews, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation.

## Preferred Citation

Eldzier Cortor papers, circa 1930s-2015, bulk 1972-2015. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C., Research Center.

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## Biographical Note

Eldzier Cortor (1916-2015) spent his professional career as a painter and printmaker in Chicago and New York. He was born in Richmond Virginia to John and Ophelia Cortor. In 1917, the family moved to Chicago along with countless other African Americans as part of the Great Migration.

In 1936, Cortor began taking evening classes at the Art Institute of Chicago prior to enrolling full time. Kathleen Blackshear, an instructor at the Institute, recommended Cortor for employment at the Works Projects Administration in 1940. It was under Blackshear's guidance that Cortor was introduced to African Art. The depiction of African Americans became the defining subject of Cortor's career, specifically the portrayal of the African American woman, which he commonly represented nude in paintings and prints.

In 1941, with funding by the Works Projects Administration, Cortor helped found the South Side Community Arts Center in Chicago. Over the next few years he would receive two Rosenwald Fellowships, which allowed him to travel to the Sea Islands of Georgia. Afterward, Cortor moved to New York, and in 1946 *Life* magazine published his work *Southern Gate*. In 1949 he received a Guggenheim fellowship, which provided the opportunity to travel to Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti. He settled in Port-au-Prince, where he taught for two years.

Cortor married Sophia Schmidt on August 20, 1951, and they subsequently had four children: Michael, Mercedes, Stephen, and Miriam. His work has been exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Studio Museum of Harlem, and the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston. Notable exhibitions include *Three Masters: Eldzier Cortor, Hughie Lee-Smith, and Archibald John Motley, Jr.* at Kenkeleba House in 1988; *Southern Gate: African American Paintings from the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution* at Duke University Museum of Art, 1999; *Eldzier Cortor: Master Printmaker* at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, 2002; and *Black Spirit: Works on Paper* by Eldzier Cortor at the Indiana Art Museum, 2006.

Eldzier Cortor died in November of 2015, at the age of 99.

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of painter and printmaker Eldzier Cortor measure 3.1 linear feet and date from circa 1930s to 2015, with the bulk of the papers dating from 1972 to 2015. The papers contain biographical material, correspondence, professional files, exhibition and gallery files, writings, printed material, artwork, and photographs.

Biographical material consists of awards certificates; Cortor's artist biography; an obituary and prayer cards for his father in law; an address book; and a Christmas list.

Correspondence includes letters from Cortor's family; correspondence with or about individuals or organizations; and general correspondence. Individuals included in the general correspondence are Acklyn Lynch, Leontine Collier, Violetta Harrigan, Halima Taha, David C. Driskell, Carol Anderson, and Betye Saar. Art institutions represented in this series include Sylvan Cole Gallery, Anderson Gallery, and Kenkeleba House.

Professional files include materials related to the Cosby Collection of Fine Arts; publishing; materials related to fake Cortor works; the Public School Mural Project; teaching files; lists of possible titles for paintings; financial documents; materials related to painting and etching plates for storage; and notes of museum and gallery contacts.

Exhibition and gallery files include correspondence; contracts and agreements; exhibition announcements; inventories; other exhibition materials; clippings; press releases; photographs and photocopied images of artwork; and photographs of exhibitions.

Writings consist primarily of essays and articles about Eldzier Cortor. Also included are his answers to a questionnaire about art, a diary, and notes, as well as hand-copied excerpts of reviews.

Printed material includes exhibition announcements, exhibition catalogs, newsletters, clippings, research and source material, and books.

Artwork includes ink and watercolor sketches from Cortor's time as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago. This series also includes additional sketches, sketchbooks, and a collage by K. Carracio.

Photographs depict Cortor, other individuals, his artwork, and exhibitions. There are also photographs from his time in Cuba and Haiti (circa 1950s).

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## Arrangement

The Eldzier Cortor papers are organized into 8 series.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1947-2012 (Box 1; 5 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1970-2015 (Box 1; 8 folders)
- Series 3: Professional Files, 1960, 1972-2015 (Box 1; 0.2 linear feet, OV 4)
- Series 4: Exhibition and Gallery Files, 1972-2015 (Boxes 1-2; 0.7 linear feet)
- Series 5: Writings, circa 1970s-2006 (Box 2; 8 folders)
- Series 6: Printed Material, 1940-1976, 1996-2015 (Boxes 2-3; 0.8 linear feet, OV 4)
- Series 7: Artwork, circa 1930s, circa 1970s-circa 1990s (Box 3; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 8: Photographs, 1939-2002, 2014 (Box 3; 0.5 linear feet)

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

African American artists  
Art -- Economic aspects  
Art -- Forgeries  
Art -- Study and teaching  
Cuba -- Description and Travel

Types of Materials:

Collages  
Diaries  
Photographs  
Sketches  
Watercolors

Names:

Anderson Gallery  
Anderson, Carol  
Art Institute of Chicago -- Students  
Carracio, K.  
Collier, Leontine L.  
Driskell, David C.  
Harrigan, Violetta C., 1941-  
Kenkeleba House  
Lynch, Acklyn  
Saar, Betye  
Sylvan Cole Gallery  
Taha, Halima

Occupations:

Painters -- Illinois -- Chicago  
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York  
Printmakers -- Illinois -- Chicago  
Printmakers -- New York (State) -- New York

Geographic Names:

Haiti -- description and travel

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, 1947-2012

#### *5 Folders (Box 1)*

Biographical material consists of awards from Carnegie Institute in 1947, Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977, and *3rd International Biennial Print Exhibit: 197 ROC*. Also included in this series are Cortor's artist biography; an obituary and prayer card for his father in law; an address book; and a Christmas list.

Box 1, Folder 1	Awards, 1947, 1977, 1987
Box 1, Folder 2	Resume and Biographies, 1996-1997, 2012, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Michael Schmidt (Father-In-Law) Obituary and Prayer Cards, 1988
Box 1, Folder 4	Address Book, undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Christmas List, 2006-2010, undated

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## Series 2: Correspondence, 1970-2015

### *8 Folders (Box 1)*

Correspondence includes letters from Cortor's family; correspondence with or about individuals or organizations; and general correspondence. Material related to Cortor's mother, Ophelia, including a newspaper clipping and a certificate from Saint Peter's Church in New York are included with the family correspondence. Individuals included in the general correspondence are Acklyn Lynch, Leontine Collier, Violetta Harrigan, Halima Taha, David C. Driskell, Carol Anderson, and Betye Saar. Art institutions represented in this series include Sylvan Cole Gallery, Anderson Gallery, and Kenkeleba House. General correspondence is both personal and professional in nature.

Researchers should note that additional correspondence can be found within the Exhibition and Gallery Files series.

This series is arranged with family correspondence at the beginning in chronological order, followed by folders for other individuals arranged alphabetically. General correspondence, arranged chronologically, concludes the series.

Box 1, Folder 6	Family, 1976-2001, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Bhalla, Hans, 1970-1971 This file contains correspondence with Hans Bhalla, as well as with others regarding Cortor's interactions with him.
Box 1, Folder 8	Bridaham, Lester B. , 1979, 1986-1993
Box 1, Folder 9	Kelley, Harmon and Harriet , circa 1993-2013
Box 1, Folder 10	Wein, George, 1997-2008
Box 1, Folder 11-13	General Correspondence, circa 1977-2015

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## Series 3: Professional Files, 1960, 1972-2015

### *0.2 Linear feet (Box 1, OV 4)*

Professional files consist of materials related to Cortor's career as an artist. They include materials related to the Cosby Collection of Fine Arts; agreements to publish articles or reproduce his art in books; materials related to fake Cortor works; materials related to the Public School Mural Project; teaching files; lists of possible titles for paintings; financial documents; documents related to storage of plates; and notes of museum and gallery contacts.

Box 1, Folder 14	The Cosby Collection of Fine Arts, 1987-2001, 2015
Box 1, Folder 15	Public School Mural Project, 1972-1976 Oversized material housed in OV 4.
Box OV 4	Oversized Sketches for the Public School Mural Project, 1972-1976 Oversized items from Box 1, Folder 15.
Box 1, Folder 16	Harry Henderson, <i>A History of African-American Artists</i> , 1981-1994
Box 1, Folder 17	Publishing, 1960, 1980-2010, undated
Box 1, Folder 18-20	Materials Related to Fake Works, 1987-2015
Box 1, Folder 21	Pratt Institute, 1972-1974, 1995
Box 1, Folder 22	Titles for Paintings, undated
Box 1, Folder 23	Taxes and Financial Documents, 2012-2013
Box 1, Folder 24	Painting and Etching Plates for Storage, circa 1999
Box 1, Folder 25	Museum and Gallery Contacts, undated

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## Series 4: Exhibition and Gallery Files, 1972-2015

### 0.7 Linear feet (Box 1-2)

Exhibition and gallery files include correspondence; contracts and agreements; exhibition announcements and catalogs; inventories; clippings; press releases; photographs and photocopied images of artwork; photographs of exhibitions; etc.

This series is organized alphabetically by venue, with other general exhibition materials at the end.

Box 1, Folder 26	The Art Institute of Chicago, 1992-2003, 2012-2015, undated
Box 1, Folder 27	Brooklyn Museum, 2006-2008, 2012
Box 1, Folder 28	David Anderson Gallery, 1972-1991
Box 1, Folder 29	Indiana University Art Museum, <i>Black Spirit: Works on Paper</i> (2006), 2004-2006
Box 1, Folder 30	Kenkeleba House, <i>The Unbroken Circle</i> (1986), 1986
Box 1, Folder 31	Kenkeleba House, <i>Three Masters</i> (1988), 1987-1988
Box 1, Folder 32	Kenkeleba House, <i>The Intaglio Prints</i> (2000), 2000, undated
Box 1, Folder 33	Kenkeleba House, 2001, 2014
Box 1, Folder 34-35	Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1987, 1995-2015, undated
Box 1, Folder 36	Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996
Box 1, Folder 37	Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1995-1996, 2012-2013, undated
Box 1, Folder 38	National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, 1972-1973, 1987, 1998-1999
Box 1, Folder 39	National Arts Club, 1994, 1999
Box 1, Folder 40	Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2013-2014
Box 1, Folder 41	Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013-2015
Box 1, Folder 42	Saint Louis Art Museum, 2003-2004, 2013
Box 2, Folder 1	San Antonio Museum of Art, 2012-2014, undated

Box 2, Folder 2	Schomburg Center, 1998, 2012
Box 2, Folder 3	Smithsonian Institution, 1985-2003, 2009-2012, undated This file contains materials related to the Archives of American Art, as well as the Smithsonian American Art Museum (previously the National Museum of American Art).
Box 2, Folder 4	The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1973, 1982-2009, undated
Box 2, Folder 5	Whitney Museum of Art, 2013-2015
Box 2, Folder 6	Other Exhibitions and Venues, 1992-2003, 2012-2014, undated
Box 2, Folder 7-8	Exhibition Planning Materials, undated

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## Series 5: Writings, circa 1970s-2006, undated

### 8 Folders (Box 2)

Writings include a short biography of Cortor's life and career, two unpublished essays about Cortor by Erica Moiah James, and an article by Cecile Whiting. Also included is a questionnaire completed by Cortor concerning his artistic process, techniques, influences and biography; a diary; notes; and transcribed hand-written excerpts by miscellaneous authors.

Box 2, Folder 9	Biography by Joye Vailes Shepperd, undated
Box 2, Folder 10	Essays on Cortor by Erica Moiah James, 1998-1999, 2006
Box 2, Folder 11	<i>More Than Meets the Eye: Archibald Motley and Debates on Race in Art</i> by Cecile Whiting, 1999
Box 2, Folder 12	Photocopy Excerpt of "Visible Roots and Visual Routes" Chapter from <i>The Art of History</i> , Edited by Lisa Gail Collins, 2002
Box 2, Folder 13	Questionnaire Answers by Cortor, undated
Box 2, Folder 14	Diary, 1986 Spiral bound notebook with diary entries for January-February 1986. There are 4 leaves of entries and the rest of the notebook is blank.
Box 2, Folder 15	Notes, undated
Box 2, Folder 16	Transcribed Excerpts by Miscellaneous Authors, circa 1970s-circa 1990s

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## Series 6: Printed Material, 1940-1976, 1996-2015

0.8 Linear feet (Box 2-3, OV 4)

Printed material includes exhibition announcements, exhibition catalogs, newsletters, clippings, research and source material, and books. Of particular note is an article from the publication *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life* from 1940, about African-American artists living in Chicago. Exhibition catalogs include catalogs from the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery's ongoing series of exhibitions of African-American art, all of which include works of art by Cortor.

Box 2, Folder 17	Exhibition Announcements, 1999-2002, 2006, 2014 Oversized materials housed in OV 4.
Box OV 4	Oversized Exhibition Announcement, <i>African American Art: 200 Years</i> (2008), 2008
Box 2, Folder 18	Exhibition Catalog, <i>University of Illinois Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting</i> , 1951
Box 2, Folder 19	Exhibition Catalog, <i>Migraciones: Una Exhibicion de Artistas Graficos Afro-Americanos</i> (Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia), 1976 This exhibition catalog is in Spanish.
Box 2, Folder 20-22	Exhibition Catalogs, <i>African-American Art 20th Century Masterworks</i> (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery), 1996-2003
Box 2, Folder 23	Exhibition Catalog, <i>Challenge of the Modern: African-American Artists 1925-1945</i> (The Studio Museum in Harlem), 2003
Box 2, Folder 24	Exhibition Catalog, <i>Syncopated Rhythms: 20th-Century African American Art from the George and Joyce Wein Collection</i> (Boston University Gallery), 2005
Box 2, Folder 25	Clippings, 1940, 2006, 2011-2015, undated
Box 2, Folder 26	Society of American Graphic Artists Magazine and Newsletter, 2013-2014
Box 2, Folder 27	Research Material - Gems, 2012
Box 2, Folder 28	Source Material - Black Music, Showbiz, undated
Box 2, Folder 29	Source Material - Jazz, Performance, Etc., undated
Box 2, Folder 30-32	Source Material, undated Oversized material housed in OV 4.
Box OV 4	Oversized Source Material, undated

- Box 2, Folder 33      *Art and Anatomy* by Heidi Lenssen, 1947
- Box 2, Folder 34      *American Negro Art* by Cedric Dover, Inscribed to Eldzier Cortor, 1960  
Includes printed material laid in at back.
- Box 2, Folder 35      *Collecting African American Art* by Halima Taha, Inscribed to Eldzier and Sophia Cortor by the Author, 1998
- Box 3, Folder 1      *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* by Andrea D. Barnwell, Inscribed to Eldzier Cortor by Walter O. Evans, 2000
- Box 3, Folder 2      *Black Art: A Cultural History* by Richard J. Powell, Inscribed to Eldzier Cortor by the Author, 2002, 2010

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## Series 7: Artwork, circa 1930s, circa 1970s-circa 1990s

### *0.2 Linear feet (Box 3)*

Artwork includes ink and watercolor sketches from Cortor's time as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago. This series also includes additional sketches, sketchbooks, and a collage by K. Carracio.

Box 3, Folder 3	Early Sketches, circa 1930s
Box 3, Folder 4	Sketches and Drawing, undated
Box 3, Folder 5-7	Sketchbooks, 1979, 1985-1986, 1997, undated Some sketchbooks only have sketches/notes on the first few pages.
Box 3, Folder 8	Color Tests and Samples, undated
Box 3, Folder 9	Collage by K. Caraccio, undated

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## Series 8: Photographs, 1939-2002, 2014

### *0.5 Linear feet (Box 3)*

This series consists of photographs of Cortor and other individuals, including one of Cortor with the "fifteenth street gang" at the Henry Booth House in Chicago, and two photographs of Cortor with Harry Rand, curator of Painting and Sculpture at the National Museum of American Art, Washington D.C., 1986. Also included are black and white photographs, color transparencies, and slides of Cortor's artwork; photographs of exhibitions; and photographs from Cortor's time in Cuba and Haiti (circa 1950s).

Box 3, Folder 10	Photographs of Artwork, circa 1940s-circa 1990s
Box 3, Folder 11	Transparencies of Artwork, circa 1980s-circa 2000s
Box 3, Folder 12	Slides of Artwork, circa 1959-circa 1995
Box 3, Folder 13	Photographs of Exhibitions, 2000-2002
Box 3, Folder 14	Photographs, circa 1980s
Box 3, Folder 15	Photographs, 1939-1948, 1982, 1987, 1994
Box 3, Folder 16	"Black & White Photos (Oils & Prints)", Photographs, Negatives, and Slides, circa 1940s-circa 1990s
Box 3, Folder 17	Photographs of Artwork, undated
Box 3, Folder 18	Photocopies of Photographs of Paintings, "Rosenfeld 2002", undated
Box 3, Folder 19	Photographs of Cortor, circa 1940, undated These photographs can also be found on microfilm reel N70-47.
Box 3, Folder 20	Photographs of Cortor, 1986, 1995, undated
Box 3, Folder 21	Photographs of Eldzier Cortor and Other Individuals, 1970, 1980s, 2014
Box 3, Folder 22	Photographs of Other Individuals and Places, 1960-1990s, 2004
Box 3, Folder 23	Photographs of Sophia Cortor, undated
Box 3, Folder 24	Photographs of Havana, Santiago, and Haiti, 1950s

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