



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Elma Lewis

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by the Smithsonian Institution's Women's Committee.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Elma Lewis
Date:	1997 July 25 and Sept. 19, 1997
Identifier:	AAA.lewis97
Creator:	Lewis, Elma (Interviewee) Brown, Robert F. (Interviewer)
Extent:	34 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Elma Lewis, 1997 July 25 and Sept. 19, Transcript

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Restrictions

Transcript available on the Archives of American Art website.

Biographical / Historical

Elma Lewis (1921-2004) was an artist and teacher from Boston, Mass.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Elma Lewis conducted 1997 July 25 and Sept. 19, by Robert Brown, for the Archives of American Art, in Lewis' home, Roxbury, Mass.

Scope and Contents

Lewis discusses her parents, immigrants from Barbados; her father being very politicized, quickly disillusioned regarding economic opportunity and racism; meeting Marcus Garvey and becoming a member of United Negro Improvement Association; her parents giving her a very strong cultural sense of her race and culture steeped in Christian doctrine; family thought in pan-African terms; attending integrated schools; World War II as a watershed

for the Black community; her brother graduating from Harvard medical school after their mother demanded he be admitted, though still he had difficulty being accepted in medical community; another brother who became a concert pianist; her study of dance (ballet) for many years.

Scope and Contents

Father's encouragement to attend Emerson College in Boston (1939-1943); preparation for a career in music and the performing arts; teachers' training at Boston University (1943-1944); teaching at the school of dance and performing arts run by Doris Jones; Lewis founding her own school, the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in the largely Black Roxbury section of Boston in 1950; incorporating the visual arts; teaching by Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Duke Ellington; problems posed by patronizing white liberal community; development of cooperative program with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; hiring the artist John Wilson and art historian Edmund Barry Gaither to further develop visual arts programs; and the primacy of culture and spirituality.

General

Originally recorded on 1 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2007 as 2 digital wav files. Duration is 1 hr., 32 min.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- African American artists
- African American educators
- Women artists
- Women educators

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Sound recordings

Names:

- Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts

Occupations:

- Educators -- Massachusetts -- Boston