



# Smithsonian

*Archives of American Art*

## Oral history interview with John Wilson

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Oral history interview with John Wilson
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.wilson93
<b>Date:</b>	1993 March 11-1994 August 16
<b>Creator:</b>	Wilson, John, 1922-2015 (Interviewee) Brown, Robert F. (Interviewer)
<b>Extent:</b>	497 Pages (Transcript)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Audio: Oral history interview with John Wilson, 1993 March 11-1994 August 16, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)</a>

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## 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. Funding for the transcription and microfilming of the interview provided by the Newland Foundation.

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## Biographical / Historical

John Wilson (1922- ) is an African American painter, sculptor, illustrator, printmaker, and educator from Boston, Massachusetts. Full name John Woodrow Wilson.

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## Scope and Contents

An interview of John Woodrow Wilson conducted 1993 March-1994 August, by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art.

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## Scope and Contents

Wilson discusses his childhood as a member of a family of middle class blacks from British Guiana (now Guyana); his father's grave disappointments in the face of racial discrimination; his parents' push for their children to succeed; early urge to read and draw; encouragement by School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston students who taught at the Roxbury Boys Club; his secondary education; and friends.

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## Scope and Contents

He talks about his education at the MFA School, Boston, and comments on such teachers as Ture Bengtz and Karl Zerbe and compares their exacting methods with those of Fernand Leger, his teacher in Paris.

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## Scope and Contents

His work of the 1940s prior to going to Paris; the importance of early awards and sales received while still a student at the MFA School; the excitement of sharing a studio with fellow students, Francesco Carbone and Leo Prince; and encouragement to stay in school during WW II with the promise of a European study fellowship after the war.

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## Scope and Contents

The great impact of his years in Paris (1948-49); the lack of racial prejudice; the liberating effect of Leger's teaching; his awe of the work of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca during a trip to Italy; and the deep impression made on him by seeing tribal art in the Musee de l'Homme, Paris.

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## Scope and Contents

Continued discussion of Leger; his teaching methods; and influences on his work.

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## Scope and Contents

His first teaching position at the MFA School; his involvement in civil rights in Boston; his gregariousness and the use of his studio as a meeting place for artists and political activists; his involvement with socialism in Boston and New York; and working in a socialist children's camp. He remembers meeting Paul Robeson, Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, and Bob Blackburn, who was then setting up his printmaking atelier in New York; marriage to a fellow socialist (June 1950); move to Mexico on a fellowship to study with Jose Orozco on the advice of Leger, only to find that Orozco had died; terrors of travel as an interracial couple through the U.S.; and different racial attitudes in Mexico and the U.S.

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## Scope and Contents

Living in Mexico (1950-56) and anecdotes of David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera; his wife's meeting with Frieda Kahlo and seeing her collection of folk art; their free and cosmopolitan, if impoverished, life in Mexico; his work in a printmaking atelier and on the production of frescoes, and a lengthy aside about his brilliant brother, Freddie, who because he was black was not allowed to pursue his first love, geology, for many years.

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## Scope and Contents

Continued discussion of his experiences in Mexico; the dreary year (1957) he spent doing commercial art for a meatpackers' union in Chicago, a city he disliked; his move to New York in 1958, taking on commercial work to support his family, and teaching anatomy at the Pratt Institute.

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## Scope and Contents

Teaching art at a junior high school in the Bronx, and his gaining respect of students through special projects; teaching drawing at Boston University (1965-86), his approach to teaching including his demanding standards, the seriousness of the students, his opposing rigid attendance and grading rules, and colleagues, such as David Aronson who had created the School, Reed Kay, Jack Kramer, Sidney Hurwitz, and the University president, John Silber.

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## Scope and Contents

Working with the black arts entrepreneur, Elma Lewis, in setting up a visual arts program for the Boston black community (late 1960s-1970s), including the selection of a curator, Edmund Barry Gaither, a young art historian, who eventually established a museum of African-American art; his participation in various black art exhibitions, despite his belief that art should be seen regardless of the ethnic origins of artists; his move toward sculpture, beginning in the early 1960s, as a medium most expressive of black persons, culminating in the 1980s in a series of colossal heads and a statue of Martin Luther King, Jr. for the U.S. Capitol (1985-86); and why he makes art and will so long as he is able.

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## General

Originally recorded on 11 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 22 digital wav files. Duration is 16 hr., 2 min.

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## General

Uneven transcription reflects Wilson's unusual speech pattern.

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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

Types of Materials:

Interviews

Sound recordings

Names:

Aronson, David, 1923-2015  
Bengtzt, Ture, 1907-1973  
Boston University. School of Fine and Applied Arts  
Gaither, Edmund B.  
Hurwitz, Sidney, 1932-  
Kay, Reed  
Kramer, Jack  
Lewis, Elma  
Léger, Fernand, 1881-1955  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. School  
Rivera, Diego, 1886-1957  
Siqueiros, David Alfaro  
Zerbe, Karl, 1903-1972

Occupations:

Educators -- Massachusetts -- Boston  
Painters -- Massachusetts -- Boston  
Printmakers -- Massachusetts -- Boston  
Sculptors -- Massachusetts -- Boston