

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Morrow, Curtis
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow,
Dates:	November 3, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:49:55).
Abstract:	Jewelry artist Curtis "Kojo" Morrow (1933 - 2023) spent eleven years living in Ghana with other African American artists and intellectuals. In addition to his art and jewelry, Morrow published <i>The Return of the African-American</i> , a book detailing his journey to Africa, and <i>What's a Commie Ever Done to Black People?</i> , a book based on his experiences in Korea. Morrow received a purple heart for his assignment in Korea. Morrow was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 3, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_259
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author and jewelry maker Curtis “Kojo” Morrow was born March 27, 1933 in Chicago, Illinois. He attended elementary school at Doolittle, Douglas and Phillips. When his family moved to Michigan, Morrow, on his seventeenth birthday asked for his mother’s consent to drop out of Buchanan High School and to join the U.S. Army. While training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, Morrow learned of the escalating conflict in Korea and volunteered for service.

Morrow was sent to Korea and was assigned to the Army’s last all-black unit, the 24th Regiment Combat Team, known as the Buffalo Soldiers. Wounded twice, Morrow received the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star for heroism, the Combat Infantry Badge and four Battle Stars. After Korea, he spent two years as a paratrooper in Japan, before being honorably discharged in 1954. At Chicago's American Academy of Art, from 1957 to 1959, Guy Nalls mentored Morrow in painting. Moving to New York in the early 1960s, Morrow was part a group of black artists and intellectuals who became disillusioned with America and drawn to Africa. In 1965 he left for Ghana with less than \$300 in his pocket.

An admirer of Ghana President Kwame Nkrumah, Morrow was welcomed at the airport by Nkrumah's advisor, Dr. Shirley Graham DuBois. Morrow spent the next eleven years living in Ghana, Togo and the Ivory Coast, learning traditional woodcarving and jewelry craftsmanship and fully immersing himself in the culture. Morrow was adopted by an Ashanti-Paramount chief in Ghana and given the name “Kojo Acheampong.” In Ghana during the 1960s and 1970s, the African American expatriates included artists Tom Feelings, Julian Mayfield, Maya Angelou, historian Nell I. Painter, and Alice Windom. In 1983, this group, "Sankofa", held a reunion in Washington, D.C. When he returned to the United States in 1976, Morrow was able to contribute to the growing interests in African art and culture.

In addition to his art and jewelry, Morrow has published *The Return of the African-American*, detailing his journey of self-discovery to Africa. His second book, *What's a Commie Ever Done to Black People?*, details his experiences in Korea and explores what it is like to fight as a United States soldier for other people's "freedom" while suffering from racial discrimination in that same army. Morrow also created an illustrated children's book based on African mythology.

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow passed away on May 20, 2023 at the age of 90.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 3, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Jewelry artist Curtis "Kojo" Morrow (1933 - 2023) spent eleven years living in Ghana with other African American artists and intellectuals. In addition to his art and jewelry, Morrow published *The Return of the African-American*, a book detailing his journey to Africa, and *What's a Commie Ever Done to Black People?*, a book based on his experiences in Korea. Morrow received a purple heart for his assignment in Korea.

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:

Morrow, Curtis

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Morrow, Curtis--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Jewelry Artist

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 Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, November 3, 2003. 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 Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_001, TRT: 0:28:45 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow was born on March the 27th, 1933 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Clere Smith, was born in 1917 in Clarksdale, Mississippi and moved to Chicago in 1927. There, she met Morrow's father, Curtis Morrow, who was born in Mississippi near the Tennessee border. Morrow's paternal grandfather was born in 1849 and did not know either of his parents well, but knew that his father escaped slavery to live with Choctaws in Mississippi. During the Civil War, Morrow's paternal grandfather escaped slavery and joined the Union Army, working as a laborer while attending school at night. At the end of the Civil War, he adopted the name George Wash Morrow as a replacement for George Washington, which had already been selected too often. He eventually became a Baptist preacher and a teacher. Morrow recalls his grandfather sharing lessons, family stories and memories of life during slavery. His grandfather's pride in his African heritage inspired Morrow's childhood desire to travel to Africa.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow's paternal grandfather escaped slavery during the Civil War, and became a deacon and teacher. Morrow describes his grandfather's memories of the brutality of slavery. Morrow explains how his parents met in Chicago, Illinois. His father worked odd jobs during the Great Depression and his mother worked in a laundry and as a domestic. Morrow grew up in Chicago where he sold the Chicago Defender as a child and was raised in his aunt's and uncle's Pentecostal church. Morrow attended James R. Doolittle Elementary School and Wendell Phillips Elementary. His interest in art was nurtured by a local artist and a teacher who was a military veteran; a Pullman Porter in his neighborhood reinforced his desire to travel. Morrow's parents divorced and his mother remarried and moved to Buchanan, Michigan. After his father's death, Morrow moved there and attended Buchanan High School. In 1950, he convinced his mother to allow him to enlist in the U.S. Army at the age of seventeen.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_003, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow joined the U.S. Army in 1950, two years after the U.S. Military was desegregated. After being sworn in in Indianapolis, Indiana, he completed basic training at Fort Riley, Kansas where he fought white soldiers who bullied him. Morrow had his first experience with Jim Crow segregation when he rode the train to demolition training in Fort Belvoir, Virginia and was forced to sit in a segregated car once the train crossed the Mason-Dixon Line. Morrow volunteered to fight in the Korean War and was sent to Camp Drake in Japan. Upon arriving in Korea just after the Inchon Landing, he was assigned to the segregated 24th Infantry Regiment, the last unit of Buffalo Soldiers. He witnessed the aftermath of the Inchon Landing and survived nine months of combat on the front lines. Morrow recalls learning important lessons about survival and his first combat experience when his unit surprised enemy soldiers. Morrow also explains how Korea was the last conventional war.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_004, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow was wounded twice during the Korean War, once when a mine fuse accidentally detonated. While he was having the shrapnel from the

mine removed at an aid station, he witnessed a soldier die in excruciating pain. Morrow describes the courageous leadership of his white commanding officer, Harold P. Mueller; the unsanitary conditions of combat; the fear of being captured by the enemy; and witnessing civilian casualties. He estimates that a third of his unit, the 24th Infantry Regiment, died in combat. Upon his return to the U.S., Morrow began drinking heavily to cope with the trauma of war and did not speak about his experience for 35 years. He had to leave a screening of a movie in 1955, when the sound of gunfire brought back painful memories. Morrow believes it is important for survivors of atrocities to talk about their experience. In 2001, he returned to South Korea. On his trip, he witnessed people's gratitude towards African American soldiers and learned about Korean culture.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_005, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow earned a bronze star during the Korean War after killing a young Chinese soldier in close combat. He reflects upon the experience and talks about the dangers of friendly fire during a war. Morrow recovered from a concussion at the Swedish Red Cross Field Hospital in South Korea before returning home in 1954. When he returned home, he worked at the post office and then in 1957 enrolled in the American Academy of Art in Chicago, Illinois. His interest in art and his mentor, painter Gus Nall, helped Morrow stop the heavy drinking that he had begun after his return from the war. In 1962, he moved to Harlem, New York City where he became interested in the Nation of Islam and encountered Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. He continued working at the post office while pursuing his interest in art. He joined the 20th Century Art Creators, which included Earl Sweeting and Elton Fax. Morrow read 'I Speak of Freedom' by Kwame Nkrumah, which convinced him to travel to Ghana. He arrived in Ghana in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_006, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow traveled to Ghana in 1965 and met many African American expatriates including Tom Feelings, Julian Mayfield, Shirley Graham Du Bois and John Ray. In February 1966, four months after Morrow arrived in Ghana, a coup d'état ousted President Kwame Nkrumah. Many African Americans who had been involved with the government left, but Morrow remained and focused on his artwork. He learned how to make jewelry from cow horns from a local artisan and his first jewelry sale was to Leroy E. Mitchell's wife. He also began short-lived ventures with other American expatriates, delivering packaged lunches to workers at Kaiser Aluminum and constructing a road to facilitate a food delivery business. Morrow adapted to African lifestyles and customs and was adopted by an Ashanti group in 1967. He continued developing his arts and crafts business in Accra, Ghana, traveling to Togo and the Ivory Coast to acquire items to sell and creating original pieces. He spent time off in the village of Agogo, Ghana.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_007, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow developed his entrepreneurial skills and gained self-confidence during his nearly eleven years in Ghana. He recalls political discussions he had in Ghana and speculating about African Americans' tribal heritage with Tom Feelings, Ted Pontiflet and HistoryMaker Maya Angelou. Morrow returned to the United States in the late-1970s when his mother died. In Chicago, Illinois, he studied metallurgy with independent craftsmen; continued

his art work and jewelry making; taught some of his family members his craft; and published 'The Return of the African-American' in 1983, about his experience in Africa. Prior to traveling to Africa, Morrow struggled with some members of the African American community not acknowledging an African heritage; he has found that recently this heritage has become more accepted within the community. He describes his hopes for the African American community and explains the African perspective on the transatlantic slave trade.

Video Oral History Interview with Curtis "Kojo" Morrow, Section A2003_259_001_008, TRT: 0:20:40 ?

Curtis "Kojo" Morrow was inspired by explorer Matthew Henson's biography. After encouragement from family and friends, Morrow wrote 'Return of the African-American' about his travels in Africa, which was published in 1983. Upon realizing that some family members did not know about the Korean War, Morrow wrote about his war experiences in the book 'What's a Commie Ever Done to Black People?: A Korean War Memoir of Fighting in the U.S. Army's Last All Negro Unit,' published in 1997. Morrow reflects upon his life, his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. Morrow concludes by narrating his photographs.