

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William T. Williams

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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>	Williams, William T. (William Thomas), 1942-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 29, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:04).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Painter and art professor William T. Williams (1942 - ) became the first African American artist included in H.W. Janson's History of Art text in 1986. An abstract expressionist painter, he taught art at Brooklyn College, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Williams was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 29, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_118
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Artist William Thomas Williams, Jr. was born on July 17, 1942, in Cross Creek, North Carolina, to William Thomas Williams, Sr. and Hazel Williams. Williams's family moved to Queens, New York, when he was four years old, but Williams would continue to visit North Carolina in the summertime.

In 1956, Williams met famed artist Jacob Lawrence, an encounter that helped him believe that he could be a professional artist. That same year, Williams was admitted to the High School for Industrial Arts in Manhattan, where he often frequented the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After graduating from high school as a member of the National Honor Society, Williams entered New York City Community College in 1960, and graduated two years later with his A.A.S. degree.

In 1962, Williams was admitted into Pratt Institute. In the summer of 1965, Williams attended a summer art program at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. Williams graduated with honors from Pratt Institute with his B.F.A. degree in 1966, then attended Yale University School of Art and Architecture, where he earned his M.F.A. degree in 1968. Williams returned to New York City, and with the help of his parents, rented a Soho loft that remained his home and studio throughout his career. Soon after, Williams married Patricia De Weese, with whom he had two children: Aaron and Nila.

Williams's first exhibit was a part of a group exhibition called *X to the Fourth Power*; it was held at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York in 1969, a place he would return to for exhibitions numerous times. In 1971, Williams had his first show at the Reese Paley Art Gallery, where he sold out his entire exhibit. Throughout the 1970s, Williams's work would be exhibited at a number of venues, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Whitney Museum in New York, the American Embassy in Moscow, and the Fondation Maeght in France.

In 1970, Williams became a professor of art at Brooklyn College, and in 1971, he began a summer residency as a member of the faculty at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a position he would hold again in 1974 and 1978. Williams became the director pro tem at Skowhegan School in 1979.

In the late 1970s, Williams took his first trip to Africa, which influenced the style of his work throughout the 1980s. In 1984, Williams became a visiting professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and the following year held a solo exhibition at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Williams became the first black artist included in H.W. Janson's *History of Art* textbook in 1986, and in 1987, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Williams continued to work throughout the 1990s, and his work was included in the *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities* touring exhibit in 1999. In 2006, Williams was awarded the prestigious North Carolina Award, the highest civilian honor the state can bequeath.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William T. Williams was conducted by Shawn Wilson on March 29, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter and art professor William T. Williams (1942 - ) became the first African American artist included in H.W. Janson's *History of Art* text in 1986. An abstract expressionist painter, he taught art at Brooklyn College, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

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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:

Williams, William T. (William Thomas), 1942-

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Williams, William T. (William Thomas), 1942---Interviews

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African American artists as teachers--Interviews

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African American artists--Interviews

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African American educators--Interviews

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African American painters--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:

Painter

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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 William T. Williams, March 29, 2007. 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 William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

William T. Williams was born on July 17, 1942 in Cross Creek, North Carolina to Hazel Davis Williams and William T. Williams, Sr. In Cross Creek, Williams' maternal and paternal families farmed tobacco, as other jobs were scarce. They also raised produce, hunted game and canned food for winter. His father's family worked nearby at Fort Bragg and on the Rockefeller family's Overhills estate. Williams' parents belonged to the local African Methodist Episcopal church, and attended high school together. His father was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1942, and served in North Africa and the Middle East. At the close of World War II, his parents moved to New York City, and left Williams in the care of his maternal grandmother, Sophia Davis Jackson. He attended kindergarten in New York City, and the first grade in North Carolina, where his aunts taught school. By the time Williams entered the second grade, much of his family had moved to New York City, and he returned permanently to his parents' home there.

African American artists as teachers--Interviews.

African American artists--Interviews.

African American educators--Interviews.

African American painters--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

William T. Williams grew up in North Carolina, where his family made chairs and quilts, and taught him to sort dried tobacco. After moving to Queens, New York, he attended P.S. 39, and lived in the Redfern Houses. Social worker Tom Heemans gave Williams a studio at the community center, and introduced him to painter Jacob Lawrence. Williams' interest in art grew with the encouragement of his teacher at J.H.S. 198, Benjamin N. Cardozo Junior High School, and he often drew on scraps of paper from a nearby printing plant. Williams attended the School of Industrial Art, where Calvin Klein was his classmate. He aspired to become a commercial artist, and attended New York City Community College with a scholarship from the Courtsmen Athletic Association. After graduation, Williams worked briefly as a designer for music magazines, and then enrolled at the Pratt Institute, where he began to paint with teacher Richard Bove, and earned a grant to attend summer courses at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_003, TRT:

0:29:40 ?

William T. Williams was mentored by artist Alfred Leslie at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, and by painter Jacob Lawrence, who taught at the Pratt Institute during Williams' last year there. Williams also studied at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, and won a grant from paint manufacturer Leonard Bocour, who supplied him with paint for fifteen years. At the time, artists of color were excluded from New York City galleries and institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art; and, even when Williams was recommended to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum by painter Ethel Schwabacher, he was offered only a job as a guard. In 1968, Williams began teaching at New York City's School of Visual Arts, and held his first professional exhibition at the opening of the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he established the artist in residency program. After Williams' work attracted the interest of museum trustee Charles Cowles, the Museum of Modern Art bought one of his paintings.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:03 ?

William T. Williams formed the Smokehouse Associates, a public arts group in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, with sculptor Mel Edwards. While the black arts community in New York was growing, African Americans were underrepresented in galleries and museums like the Whitney Museum of American Art, which only considered black artists after they enlisted the help of diplomat Ralph Bunche and former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. In 1970, Williams was invited by gallery owner Reese Palley to hold his first solo show of fourteen paintings, all of which sold. He received an award from the Ashland Endowment to visit Europe, and showed his artwork in France beside the works of Willem de Kooning. One of his paintings was shown at the 'Whitney Annual,' and was purchased by Nelson Rockefeller. From 1974, Williams focused on his teaching career. He reflects upon his artistic philosophy; the impact of aging on his art; and his artistic influences, including his Southern upbringing and travels in Nigeria.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

William T. Williams was an artist in residence at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he met artist David Driskell, who introduced him to the work of Aaron Douglass and other black artists. In his classes, Williams taught about African American artists in the context of their technique, rather than their race. After the birth of his children, Williams focused on his teaching career. In the late 1970s, he became the first black director of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. Williams also taught at City University, where he worked with young artists of color, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Williams reflects upon the shifts in his artistic style. He describes his painting "Cape Split," which was featured in the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. Williams became the first African American artist featured in H.W. Janson's 'History of Art' with the inclusion of his painting, "Batman." He also talks about the success of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Video Oral History Interview with William T. Williams, Section A2007\_118\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:37 ?

William T. Williams exhibited his artwork at the opening of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington D.C. in 1987, and held an exhibition at the Museo Alejandro Otero in Caracas, Venezuela in 1991. One year later, the

Studio Museum in Harlem honored him with a lifetime achievement award. At the time of the interview, Williams hoped to collaborate with playwright Walter Jones on a book. He also talks about his children, one of whom was his manager, and his hope that they will donate his paintings to historically black colleges and universities after his death. He shares his advice to aspiring artists, and describes the impact of affirmative action policies on the art world. Williams also talks about the positive effects of increased numbers of African American museum curators and directors for artists of color, and his parents' continued support of his career. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.