

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Napoleon Jones-Henderson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Jones-Henderson, Napoleon, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson,
Dates:	April 22, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:07:41).
Abstract:	Mixed media artist Napoleon Jones-Henderson (1943 -) is director of the Research Institute of African and African Diaspora Arts Inc. and associate professor of art at Benedict College, is the longest standing member of AfriCOBRA. Jones-Henderson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 22, 2013, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_009
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Napoleon Jones-Henderson was born in 1943 in Chicago, Illinois. Jones-Henderson attended the Sorbonne Student Continuum Student and Artists Center in Paris, France in 1963 where spent one year immersed in an independent study program. Upon returning to the United States, he enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago and received his B.F.A. degree from there in 1971. Jones-Henderson went on to earn with his M.A. degree from Northern Illinois University in 1971 and his M.F.A. degree from the Maryland Institute College Art in 2005.

In 1968, during the apex of the Chicago Black Arts Movement, Jones-Henderson became involved with a Chicago-based artists' collective called COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists). The collective changed their name in 1969 to AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). During the formative years of AfriCOBRA, Jones-Henderson created large pictorial weavings that were included in the group's important series of exhibitions mounted at the Studio Museum in Harlem in the early 1970s. He has been an active member of AfriCOBRA since 1969 and is the longest standing member of the group. In 2011, Jones-Henderson produced *Afrocobra: Art for the People* (2011), a documentary about the groups' involvement with the 1960s Black Arts Movement.

Jones-Henderson became the Executive Director of the Research Institute of African and African Diaspora Arts, Inc., in Roxbury, Massachusetts in 1979. He then went on to serve in various academic positions at Malcolm X College in Chicago, the Massachusetts College of Arts, Emerson College in Boston. Jones Henderson was appointed adjunct artist critic and lecturer at the Vermont College of Norwich University in Montpelier, Vermont in 1989. In addition, Jones-Henderson served as an artist-in-residence at Towson University, Syracuse University, and the McDonough School. In 2005, Jones-Henderson was appointed associate professor of art at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. His artwork is housed at the DuSable Museum of African American History, Schomburg Cdnr of Research in Black Culture, Southside Community Art Center, Hampton University Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

In recognition of his art, Jones-Henderson received the Merit of Honor Award from the Walters Art Museum and the Award for Outstanding Recognition from the Museum of Science and Industry. He was also honored by the National Conference of Artists with the Award of Excellence.

Napoleon Jones-Henderson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 22, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 22, 2013, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Mixed media artist Napoleon Jones-Henderson (1943 -) is director of the Research Institute of African and African Diaspora Arts Inc. and associate professor of art at Benedict College, is the longest standing member of AfriCOBRA.

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:

Jones-Henderson, Napoleon, 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jones-Henderson, Napoleon, 1943- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Mixed Media 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 Napoleon Jones-Henderson, April 22, 2013. 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 Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_001, TRT: 1:29:13 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson describes his family background. His mother, Maxine Unger, was born on June 14, 1924 in Bessemer, Alabama. Her mother died when she was two years old. Her father, Bodie Washington, who was of Irish ancestry, migrated to Chicago, Illinois during the 1930s. Maxine was raised by an aunt, but later moved to Chicago in 1942 to be with her father. Jones-Henderson talks about his uncle, who moved from Alabama to the coal-mining town of Lynch, Kentucky, where the former Lynch Colored High School still stands. He also describes the history of Juneteenth and Emancipation Day celebrations throughout the United States. Jones-Henderson's father, Woodrow Henderson was born on May 16, 1917 in Yazoo City, Mississippi to landowning farmers Eva and Lewis Henderson whose ancestors were enslaved. Lewis migrated to Chicago during the 1930s, and Woodrow enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War II. Discharged for post-traumatic stress in 1942, he worked then worked at his father grocery store in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_002, TRT: 2:28:12 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson remembers growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. He describes Chicago's Washington Park as a safe and family friendly area where people could spend the night outside without disturbance. During World War II, his father was stationed overseas as a U.S. Army laborer, but was discharged due to post-traumatic stress. Jones-Henderson talks about how his parents met, their personalities, and his seven siblings. After his birth, his mother selected his first name at random from submissions by the nurses at Cook County Hospital. Jones-Henderson recalls his earliest childhood memory and the sights, sounds, and smells of growing up. He recalls the Bud Billiken Parade and Picnic, and the Hall Branch of Chicago Public Library, where Gwendolyn Brooks read books and poems to children. He also remembers the Regal Theater and the Museum of Science and Industry. At age twelve, his family moved to Chicago's Altgeld Gardens community, where he attended George Washington Carver High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_003, TRT: 3:30:27 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson recalls his childhood on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. He shares memories of Pan-Africanist scholar Frederic H. Hammurabi Robb and Anderson Punch, Chicago's famous Chicken Man. He describes Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood and community life on 47th Street. He attended a few different elementary schools before moving Chicago's Altgeld Gardens Homes. He attended George Washington Carver High School where his mentors included art teacher Helen Joyner, who fostered his love for the visual arts; and poet Conrad Kent Rivers, who substituted for his English teacher. Because his English teacher, Thomas Green, was acquainted with Lorraine Hansberry, his class was able to perform 'A Raisin in the Sun' while it was on Broadway. His principal, Conrad C. Melnick, later served as Chicago's Superintendent of Schools. Jones-Henderson describes Altgeld Gardens, a public housing complex of duplex townhouses. The community had a suburban feel and many residents had their own gardens.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_004, TRT: 4:30:25 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson talks about his high school years and receiving the opportunity to study art in Paris, France. At George Washington Carver High School in Chicago, Illinois, he was a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society and the track and field team. Track members were mandated to take

ballet classes. He also worked at the Jewel Tea Company, a local grocery store. He recalls when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Carver High School and Sammy Davis, Jr.'s performance there. After graduating in 1962, he declined a scholarship from Jewel Tea Company to attend Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. Instead, he studied art at Chicago's Woodrow Wilson and South Shore Junior Colleges, and moved into a management position at Jewel. With encouragement from an art teacher at Wilson College, Jones-Henderson successfully applied for a scholarship to study art at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne) in the summer of 1963. He recounts his preparations for study abroad and his journey to Paris.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_005, TRT: 5:28:19 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson recounts his art studies at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne) in France in 1963, and the following decade in Chicago, Illinois. He describes his experiences in Paris, where he met Oakland, California lawyer Carole Ward Allen and several African students. He participated in a protest at the U.S. Embassy during the 1963 March on Washington and also visited Germany, Italy, and the south of France. Upon returning to Chicago in fall, he resumed working at the Jewel Tea Company and enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago in 1968. Jones-Henderson describes the black activist community in Chicago during the 1960s and the Black People's Topographical Research Centers. He shares his observations about the intellectual environment in Paris during his study abroad and why he stopped cutting his hair. He talks about the Nation of Islam, the South Side Community Art Center, and HistoryMaker Margaret Burroughs, founder of Chicago's DuSable Museum of African American History.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_006, TRT: 6:29:49 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson describes studying at the Art Institute of Chicago and participating in the Black Arts Movement in Chicago, Illinois. He talks about Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, and activism in Chicago's black community. He also recalls artists like HistoryMakers Phil Cohran and Haki Madhubuti and artistic institutions including the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). He talks about African textiles and their use in African Diaspora art. In tandem with a lecture by Whitney Halstead, the textiles piqued his interest in African arts. In 1971, he received his B.F.A. degree and a fellowship from the Art Institute for his works, which incorporated African motifs. He talks about attending Grant Memorial A.M.E. Church and Mount Olive Church in Chicago and about family's religious views. He recalls the formation of AfriCOBRA in 1968, riots after the death of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Wall of Respect mural.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_007, TRT: 7:28:13 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson talks about AfriCOBRA, an art collective founded by Barbara Jones-Hogu, Gerald Williams, and Jae Jarrell along with HistoryMakers Wadsworth A. Jarrell, Sr. and Jeff Donaldson. Jones-Henderson recalls an experience at the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois which displayed a disconnect between formal art training and the black experience. He describes AfriCOBRA's philosophy and the role of the image-maker in the community. The collective's first exhibition was at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York in 1970. Jones-Henderson also talks about the National Conference of Artists, a

support network for black artists. He describes AfriCOBRA's aesthetic principles, including strong frontality, symmetry and bright colors. He also talks about the Wall of Respect mural in Chicago, HistoryMaker Phil Cohran's Afro-Arts Theater and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. While at the Art Institute, his mentors included HistoryMakers Margaret Burroughs and Richard Hunt.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_008, TRT: 8:28:12 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson talks about his artistic career in the 1970s. Upon receiving his B.F.A. degree from the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois in 1971, he was awarded a fellowship. The money allowed him to study with textile artist Claire Zeisler, but Jones-Henderson soon realized Zeisler only wanted an apprentice. He then used his funding to found the Ankh Studio in Chicago's South Shore community with Lester Lashley, Murry DePillars, Raah Bird and others. He explains the roles of African art and Egyptian symbols in the Black Arts Movement. He also talks about Raah Bird, the Ankh Studio, and the South Shore community during the 1970s. In 1971, Jones-Henderson began teaching at Chicago's Malcolm X College. He describes the campus and how it changed since the 1970s. He also lists artists affiliated with AfriCOBRA like Omar Lama and talks about muralists including Calvin B. Jones and Mitchell Caton. In 1972, he went to Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to study under textile artist Mahboob Shahzaman.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_009, TRT: 9:29:01 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson describes his life and career in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1974, he left Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to become one of the first black faculty members at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. He recounts how he met Annette Jones, whom he married in Chicago, Illinois in 1974, and with whom he adopted two daughters after moving to Boston. Upon arriving in Boston, he initially rented studio space in an industrial building. After the landlord committed arson to get government money for redevelopment, Jones-Henderson purchased the Roxbury home of Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale. He describes the history of the Hale House and the African American cultural events he hosts there, including an annual Juneteenth celebration, which in 1999 featured a bronze recasting of black artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's 1919 sculpture 'Freedman' and a new sculpture of Harriet Tubman by Fern Cunningham. He contrasts political attitudes in Chicago and Boston.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_010, TRT: 10:30:51 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson remembers the 1980s and 1990s. In 1979, he was arrested while attending a conference of the National Conference of Artists (NCA) in Detroit, Michigan, when he intervened in a police brutality incident. He was bailed out with the help of HistoryMakers Evangeline Montgomery and Shirley Ann Woodson-Reid. Jones-Henderson describes the conference and its attendees, including HistoryMakers Willis Bing Davis, Jon Onye Lockard, and Tyree Guyton. He also talks about his teaching positions at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Emerson College and Roxbury Community College in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1999, he began teaching at the historically black Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. He describes the challenges and rewards of teaching at an HBCU. He also recalls a controversy in 1999 over a Confederate battle flag at the South Carolina State House. Jones-Henderson

recounts his work in Haiti as a textile consultant for USAID and his travels to Barbados and Mauretania.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_011,
TRT: 11:29:13 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson describes his travels in Africa. During his trip to Mauritania with USAID, he encountered nomadic herders suffering from drought. Jones-Henderson helped the herders supplement their economy by teaching them to weave wool carpets for export. He describes the people's culture, food, and henna art. In 1977, he traveled to Nigeria for Festac '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, in Lagos. There, he engaged with scholars and artists from throughout the African Diaspora, including Stevie Wonder, Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, HistoryMaker Della Hardman, and American ceramist Winnie Owens-Hart. Jones-Henderson visited textile artist Agbo Folarin in Ife, Nigeria with Owens-Hart, and together, the three visited nearby Osogbo. He describes his spiritual experience at the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a collection of religious shrines. He also reflects upon the significance of Festac '77 and the presidential election of HistoryMaker Barack Obama.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_012,
TRT: 12:25:43 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson reflects upon his life and legacy. He remembers Festac '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria. He also talks about the contrast between the luxury accommodations the Nigerian government gave him and other guests and the poverty afflicting the local population. Jones-Henderson describes his future plans, and his desire to do create a tapestry of HistoryMaker Elizabeth Catlett's print, 'Sharecropper.' He reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community and his legacy. He also describes his family, including his late wife Annette Jones and his daughters, Mamemaeli and Lylana. Mamemaeli serves in the Boston, Massachusetts Police Department alongside the son of Spelman University president Johnnetta Cole. He talks about his plans to preserve his artworks and his books, and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Section A2013_009_001_013,
TRT: 13:20:03 ?

Napoleon Jones-Henderson narrates his photographs.