

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Alvia Wardlaw

PERSON

Wardlaw, Alvia J.

**Alternative Names:** Alvia Wardlaw;

**Life Dates:** November 5, 1947-

**Place of Birth:** Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Residence:** Houston, TX

**Work:** Houston, TX

**Occupations:** Curator; Art History Professor

## Biographical Note

Art historian and curator Alvia J. Wardlaw was born on November 5, 1947 to Virginia Cage and Alvin Wardlaw. She was raised in Houston, Texas and graduated from Jack Yates High School in 1965. Wardlaw earned her B.A. degree in art history from Wellesley College in 1969, and her M.A. degree in art history from New York University in 1986. In 1996, she became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. degree in art history from the University of Texas at Austin.

From 1972 to 1974, Wardlaw worked as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (MFAH). In 1974, she was promoted to associate curator of primitive art and education and was also hired as an adjunct professor at Texas Southern University, where she went on to serve as assistant and associate professor of art history. From 1973 to 1989, Wardlaw curated a number of exhibitions at various institutions, including African Tribal Art (1973); Roy DeCarava: Photographs (1975); Ceremonies and Visions: The Art of John Biggers (1980); Homecoming: African American Family History in Georgia (1982); John Biggers: Bridges (1986); and the 1989 watershed exhibition Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art for the Dallas Museum of Art. She subsequently served as an adjunct curator of African American art at the Dallas Museum, and, in 1995, was named curator of modern and contemporary art for the MFAH. Wardlaw went on to organize The Art of John Biggers: View from the Upper Room (1995); The Quilts of Gee's Bend (2002); Something All Our Own: The Grant Hill Collection of African American Art (2003); and Notes from a Child's Odyssey: The Art of Kermit Oliver (2005). Wardlaw also became director/curator of the University Museum at Texas Southern University, and continued to work as curator of modern and contemporary art at the MFAH until 2009,

when she retired from her position.

Wardlaw has received numerous honors and awards. She was a Fulbright Fellow in West Africa in 1984, won a Fulbright Award for study in Tanzania, East Africa in 1997, was a Senior Fellow for the 2001 American Leadership Forum, and was inducted into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame in 1994. She also received the Award of Merit from the University of Texas at Austin and the Ethos Founders Award from Wellesley College, was recognized as an African American Living Legend by African American News and Issues, and was named Texas Southern University's Research Scholar of the Year in 2009. In addition, Black Art Ancestral Legacy was named Best Exhibition of 1990 by D Magazine, and The Quilts of Gee's Bend received the International Association of Art Critics Award in 2003.

Wardlaw has served on the Advisory Boards of the National Black Arts Festival and Hampton University, as well as the Scholarly Advisory Committee of the Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture. She was also a co-founder of the National Alliance of African and African American Art Support groups in 1998.

Wardlaw lives in Houston, Texas.

Alvia Wardlaw was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on May 7, 2014.

## Related Entries

**Jack Yates High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Wellesley College** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**B.A.**

**New York University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**M.A.**

**University of Texas at Austin** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Ph.D.**

**Dallas Museum of Art** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Adjunct Curator of African American Art**

**University Museum at Texas Southern University** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Director/Curator**

**Museum of Fine Arts in Houston** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1972 to 1974]

**Curatorial Assistant**

**Museum of Fine Arts in Houston** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1974 to 1989]

**Associate Curator of Primitive Art and Education**

**Texas Southern University** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1974 to ?]

**Adjunct Professor; Assistant Professor; Associate Professor**

**Museum of Fine Arts in Houston** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1995 to 2009]

**Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art**

**National Black Arts Festival** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Advisory Board Member**

**Hampton University** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Advisory Board Member**

**Smithsonian National Museum of African-American History and Culture** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Scholarly Advisory Committee Member**

**National Alliance of African and African American Art Support Groups** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 1998 to ?]

**Co-Founder**