A TEI Project

Interview of Samella Lewis

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE
MARCH 15, 1992

MASON

Dr. Lewis, when and where were you born?

LEWIS

I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, February 27, 1924.

MASON

Who are your parents?

LEWIS

My mother was Rachel Taylor Sanders, and my father was Samuel Sanders.

MASON

Do you have any siblings?

LEWIS

Only one living, Gertrude Sanders Miller.

MASON

Okay. Do you know much about your sort of family background? Your grandparents? Your great-grandparents? Have they been in New Orleans for a long time?

LEWIS

They've been in the bayou area of Jeanerette and New Iberia in a place called Olivia, which is the Bayou Teche region of Louisiana, which is across the Mississippi River from New Orleans. And they're still there. Then my father's people are from a place forty-five miles outside of New Orleans called Ponchatoula, which is a small bayou area in a strawberry belt. It's near Hammond. Most people would recognize Hammond, Louisiana. But it's a big strawberry area. His father owned a lot of land. His father, I guess, owned at one time about half of the town. His name was Henry Harrison Sanders--2 Sanders not Saunders. I think there are some rumors that he might have been from Jamaica. He was a very fair-skinned man with what they considered an African wife. I don't know how he obtained all of that land, but he did. And my mother's people-- Her father was from either the West or some other place. But her mother was Rosa Bouté, and she was from the bayou area. And her grandfather [Randolph Lewis] was the keeper of the lodge, so they were people who did things in the Bayou Teche region.

MASON

I'm not sure what you mean, "keeping the lodge."

LEWIS

Well, the lodge is a--

MASON

I'm a northerner. I don't know much about southern tradition.

LEWIS

Well, they have lodges. What do you call those people who--?

MASON

Like the Masons?

LEWIS

Masons, yes.

MASON

Oh, I see.

LEWIS

And there are other groups there, the smaller groups, but they are lodges that, when somebody dies or something, they celebrate in Louisiana. They celebrate, and they're the ones who really take charge of ceremonies. And it's like brothers and sisters.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

I don't know the names of those, but they have the sisterhood and the brotherhood, and it's called the lodges. So my great-grandfather was a Methodist minister. And since most of my family left the Catholic Church and went into the A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] Zion Church, I'll have to assume that he was in the A.M.E. Zion Church.

MASON

That's interesting.

LEWIS

There are stories about his keeping the lodge and riding a white horse around the different plantations, kind of nice stories.

MASON

Yeah, it sounds really interesting. Were the lodges based on economic status? Or was it more of a--?

LEWIS

Well, to most people it was a social club, also. But it was the way people looked after each other and supported each other. It didn't matter about whether you owned your own land or didn't own your own land. It was a membership organization, and you could belong regardless of your economic

status. I am not certain about membership requirements. This area is a sugarcane area--we'll say the Bayou Teche region--and people sort of looked out for each other. And it was a very strange situation, because it's where the Acadians--the people known as Cajuns now--live. And they lived with the black Creoles. It's such a mixture there that people crossed over certain lines. However, in the time of need they usually helped each other, whereas they would be against each other in normal times. But the lodge was that one place where-- It was almost like a secret society where people joined, and they could be sure that they would have the proper funerals, the proper burials, and it was a great thing.

MASON

So when your family broke with the-- You said they broke with the Catholic Church to join the A.M.E. Was that kind of considered a big thing back then or--?

LEWIS

Most people of African descent did the same kinds of things. They found-- The Catholic Church, when I was growing up in the South, was a segregated church. You had your African American schools, your special schools, and even in the churches you had segregated sections if you moved outside of the black community. So my family--my Aunt Laura and Uncle Dile and people like that--were basically people of African descent. And New Orleans and that area has a strong tie to Haitian people. So they were as much Haitian in their practices. And New Orleans is also a place--and outlying areas--where you have a religion known as voodoo. We called it hoodoo. We didn't call it voodoo, we called it hoodoo. The practice of the African religions and the Catholicism allowed people to mix the two religions. But once they really became heavily involved in being black people--you know, people of African descent--they found that either the Baptist Church or the Pentecostal Church or the Methodist Church was sort of a higher level. When I say higher level, [I mean a] higher-class A.M.E., because they didn't do the same things. They didn't dance in the churches, you know. They had certain rules. And they didn't even sing the same way. They sang more in harmony. If you go to the Pentecostal or Baptist Churches, people were more spontaneous. I can remember going to a place called Tasker's Chapel and Reverend Hall. I mean, I remember all those

things, but I still went to Catholic schools until the third grade, and then I was transferred to a public school. But my mother and father, both became Methodists, A.M.E. Zion.

MASON

Was your family involved, either immediate family or extended, in any particular political activities like the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] or the [Marcus M.] Garveyites?

LEWIS

Well, you know, in Louisiana you didn't really have much in terms of the Garveyites. You did have a lot of political activities in relationship to the dock workers, the levees, the unions. My grandfather was a dock worker. He used to unload bananas off of the ships, the boats that came into New Orleans. We were certainly involved in those kinds of things and also in local political kinds of things when people were arrested. We were pretty active in things like the NAACP, and also the union seemed to be the most political of the groups.

MASON

Was it really dangerous to be involved in the unions?

LEWIS

Yes, it was dangerous, but there were-- New Orleans is a very interesting place. It's not like Alabama or Mississippi or the larger cities in Alabama and Mississippi. It's a seaport city, so you had mixtures there that almost defied recognition. There were black people there who were whiter than the white people and white people who were darker than African Americans. So the local officials didn't know what to do. City officials and/or police didn't know how to handle the situation most of the time. And the city was large enough so people did not identify-- See, if you were black and you looked white and you lived downtown or uptown, they couldn't place you necessarily. So they had these codes where they didn't beat up on people as much because, you know, they could be beating a white person and thinking it was a black person, the French and Spanish people, and the Acadians and all those people, who are darker than many of the black people. So it caused a great deal of

confusion, and it allowed for a great deal of freedom. Because if you spoke another language-- Most of the black people knew how to speak Creole.

MASON

Your family spoke Creole?

LEWIS

Yes. So if you spoke another language, they really could not tell who you were, because it's that kind of a place. They have what they call the mulattoes, and then they had the Creoles, and the Creoles are basically dark-skinned people. A lot of people don't know that. The Creoles in the bayou area are darker skinned. What people tended to call the Creoles were the mulattoes. So it was a very confusing kind of place--in fact, so much so that some of our friends would go into theaters and some of them would go downstairs where the white people were and some of them would go upstairs. But in some of the funerals where my mother's from, if the deceased was a white person, it was not uncommon to have black individuals seated with the family. So it's a confusing kind of thing to many people, because the families were certainly intermixed. I have photographs of my grandfather, my father's father--very blue eyed and obviously a man of not too much color. And he has his young son [Joseph Sanders] in front of him, and his young son is brown skinned. So people who don't know that kind of culture wondered, "What is this man, this white man, doing with this black child?" You know? And that's his child. His wife was--

MASON

Dark.

LEWIS

Yes. So in my family you had that kind of situation. My mother's from a family of all-- Her brother [Thomas Bouté] has red hair with yellow kind of eyes, and it goes on to dark skin and to-- You know, just a mixture of people, like different races of people. New Orleans was that way. We didn't suffer severely from segregation because there was a real culture there where we had music, we had the poetry, we had artists visiting in New Orleans, jazz--Dixieland--blues and others, staying in New Orleans.

MASON

Yeah, those are the things that I wanted to ask you about, the whole cultural veneer. So each group had its own distinctive culture: the Cajuns and the Creole--

LEWIS

But the most progressive group was the African Americans. The Creoles generally were not a class of educated people, partially because of language barriers. So at the age of eighteen or fifteen, they'd get married and raise families. Many spoke Creole, which was not used in education. The African Americans were the people who continued to educate themselves generally and to support the institutions, the black institutions. There was Xavier University [of Louisiana] and Dillard University. The area was really a kind of cultural mecca where we would have Paul Robeson come, we would have Marian Anderson come, and Claude McKay. So we were in tune with famous individuals. It's one of the places where we were not deprived, because not only our teachers supplied us with books and information of important people. I had Alain Locke's book The Negro in Music and Art in the tenth grade.

MASON

That's incredible. [laughter]

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

That's really incredible.

LEWIS

That's where I first met Elizabeth Catlett, at Dillard University. And the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], where we had programs-- Jacob Lawrence came and established residence in the city. So we had all of these opportunities, and we were encouraged to take advantage of them. It was not something that was

mentioned and maybe you would go and maybe you wouldn't. You would go because these experiences were what we thrived on.

MASON

You should write a book about it, about all those experiences.

LEWIS

Oh, yeah.

MASON

What about your immediate people? Were there people involved in the arts as, say, painters or musicians, that sort of thing?

LEWIS

Well, my mother was a very talented woman. She never became involved professionally. She didn't paint, but she made wonderful quilts and did all kinds of needlework and things of that sort. And I had a sister who was two years older than I am who could paint, could draw, but we did not regard this as something special. Because you have to realize, we also had the French Quarters where we had a lot of artists, a lot of art. It was one of those things where it was almost taken for granted. I didn't have art in the public schools or in kindergarten, but I did have teachers who encouraged art, and that's a big difference, you know. In most places you have a special art teacher. I didn't have that. But the kindergarten teacher was so in tune with creative things that when we-- I can remember doing my first piece of art that I sold.

MASON

My goodness!

LEWIS

To my kindergarten teacher.

MASON

[laughter] Congratulations.

LEWIS

And it was a purple pig.

MASON

Wow.

LEWIS

All of the other children were doing brown pigs, white pigs, so I drew a purple one. And I was determined that, in doing that pig, that I was not going to stay within anybody's lines. I just drew lines, but then I moved outside of them. It was like the pig was vibrating, you know. And so the teacher thought it was an original kind of piece, so she encouraged me. I stopped drawing in the fifth grade because my teacher wanted me to do milk posters, and I vowed then that any of my drawing, any of my art, any of my work, would be for me and that I was not going to become commercial and/or trade off. I sold a piece, but that was one thing that came from my teacher. I liked the teacher. But I wasn't going to do work for anonymous people. I didn't draw at school again until junior high school.

MASON

Okay. What kinds of careers, besides art--? Obviously you must have considered that as a career. Well, what led up to your choosing to go to Dillard University?

LEWIS

I was with this drafting teacher, Mr. E. Belfield Spriggins, who knew something about drafting but not about art. He was my high school teacher. In those days teachers did what they were trained to do and what they were not trained to do. I think his most important role for me was that he not only encouraged me but he challenged me. And he challenged me by using an almost sexist approach, by saying, "Girls can't do things as well as boys." Because he knew that I would respond to that. So he got twice as much work out of me because he knew I was going to try to prove that he was wrong. But it was Mr. Spriggins who kept an eye on me. Each week I would finish my work in his class early, so one day he suggested that I might like to visit the art shops in the French Quarters. There was a fellow in my class; his name was Warren Kenner. And Mr. Spriggins said, "Well, why don't you two just take a walk to the French Quarters?" We were not far from the French Quarters in terms of the high school we attended. So we would go to the French Quarters and look

in windows and look in shops. He sent the two of us together because a female alone in the French Quarters was not a good thing. So he wanted somebody there with-- He wanted the two of us to look out for each other. We used to look in this man's studio. His name was Alfredo Gali. He was an Italian portrait painter. He didn't speak English. And one day we saw a black woman in there. We wanted so badly to go in there, but we would not go in without an invitation, you know. So we saw this black woman, and she saw us peering in the window. Then we went back and we did the same thing the following Thursday. She beckoned to us and said, "Do you do artwork? I noticed you were here last week." And we said, "Yes." So she said, "Well, come on in and I'll see if Mr. Gali can talk to you." So we went in, and he spoke, and she loosely translated. She had been working for him for a long time. He told us to bring some work back the following week, which we did. To make a long story short, he taught us for the next two years free of charge. He didn't know our names. He called me "the girl," he called Warren "the boy." He really worked with us and warned us against the evils of modern art. [laughter] But he taught us technique, and that was priceless, you know. And then, after that, of course, I went to Dillard. I wasn't going to major in art.

MASON

So you didn't have a portfolio together or anything like that?

LEWIS

No, no. I was going to major in history. But Mr. Spriggins insisted that I should take some art classes. Elizabeth Catlett was there teaching freshman art. So I started taking courses with Elizabeth Catlett and subsequently became an art major.

MASON

I can't imagine not getting inspired in one of her classes.

LEWIS

But I had such wonderful teachers at Dillard. Dr. Benjamin Quarles, who's renowned as a Frederick Douglass expert. And I had some others, too, who were just wonderful. I went to Dillard at the right time, with people like Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett.

MASON

Oh, they were still together then?

LEWIS

They married at Dillard.

MASON

Oh, okay. So eventually you switched from history to--

LEWIS

I did, I did. At Dillard you were required to take two years of liberal arts and liberal studies before declaring a major. I really didn't declare a major at Dillard because I was only there for two years, and then I went on to Hampton [University].

MASON

That's right.

LEWIS

And when I went on to Hampton, I declared a major there.

MASON

Yeah, okay. Well, could you talk about some of the things that you learned, say, in Elizabeth Catlett's class? Some of the things that she would talk about in terms of the black aesthetic and all that sort of thing.

LEWIS

One of the important things I learned in Elizabeth's class is that you don't paint people without knowing something about them and who they are and where they are. I was painting these portraits, and she would say, "Who is this?" And I would say, "I don't know." "Well, what are you painting it for?" So that thing of identity became an issue. You know, "Who, where, and why is this person important for you to be painting?" So the idea of-- It's not just the person, it's the person under certain situations, conditions, and so forth and so on. So my art began to be broadened, and my perspective became much broader. And then I used to get on the bus with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth would do certain

things. We had a "For Colored Patrons Only" sign on the bus, and she would take it up and throw it up to the bus driver or out of the window. So there I am sitting there, having grown up under these circumstances, and here this woman comes and disrupts the whole situation. In terms of political activities, I used to go to meetings with Elizabeth where they would-- They would have union meetings. And she was strongly involved in political meetings that had to do with African Americans and segregation and discrimination. The whole issue of human rights, she was involved in it. So I would follow her to these meetings. She never told me or taught me anything about what I should do or shouldn't do. She just exposed me to situations. She took her class to the Picasso show at the [Isaac] Delgado Museum. The Delgado Museum was open to the public because it was sort of like the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art], but it was located and situated in a private kind of city park. The city park was closed to blacks. So how are you going to get to a public museum if you're black without going on the property of the place where you were restricted? Elizabeth solved that by hiring a bus and having us step out of the bus and onto the steps of the museum.

MASON

Driven up to the door.

LEWIS

That's right. So it was being around that kind of situation that was exciting. She invited people like Paul Robeson to come and to sing. And, of course, Paul Robeson would sing and give lectures in her class during the time he was there. She really lost her job at Dillard based on this kind of activity. It all had to do with human rights and values. But she never sat me down and said, "I think you should look at it this way or that way."

MASON

Yeah. In your book you talk about that, and I'm not really clear what the story is exactly, but she lost her U.S. citizenship, is that right? But she's allowed back to the country periodically, so--

LEWIS

Right, right. What happened was she was reported as being an undesirable alien in Mexico, and the Mexican government was instructed or encouraged by the United States State Department to deport her. That would have meant that they would have sent her back here and jailed her. So they jailed her in Mexico. She was released [with the provision that] she could not participate in any political affairs in Mexico. So in order to become a person who had a country where she could participate, she had to become a Mexican citizen. Now, they coerced her into doing this by saying, "You know, we're going to put you in jail." So really, legally she could get her citizenship back if she tried hard enough, but why? You know? She doesn't need it.

MASON

Yeah. She's quite well respected anyway.

LEWIS

Right. So it was the pressure from the-- They even pressured her out of the country by saying-- Well, she used to stand on the street corners in Harlem and raise money for the NAACP and for the labor unions. She was a union person all the way. And there was a whole thing about New York University and the school of education and subversive this and that and the other. So they were going to arrest her during the McCarthy era and put her on the stage, so to speak.

MASON

Right.

LEWIS

And put her on the stage, so to speak. And so, rather than go through all that nonsense, she went on to Mexico.

MASON

What sort of things were you thinking about at that time in terms of how to formulate a black aesthetic or how to articulate what may be an African American aesthetic in art? You said you'd been reading Locke, and I guess you'd probably read James Porter by then.

LEWIS

No James Porter. I didn't read James Porter until later.

MASON

Oh? That was in the forties that it came out.

LEWIS

Yeah, but I still didn't read him until later. Really, I didn't have to think too much about how you formulate a black aesthetic because my whole life was-- I was with people who were like almost next-door neighbors in a way. They were people I knew about and knew. I had read Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar, not only read them but seen plays given at both Dillard and Xavier, dramas, great dramas, based on the great writings of the poets and things. So that was really-- Where people go to movies now, we went to recitations and plays and performances. We didn't go to too many movies.

MASON

Yeah, that was probably a good idea back then. [laughter]

LEWIS

So I came out of a whole history and a whole period and a place. You see, if I had been in New York, I might not have-- Well, if I'd been someplace else, say, even in the South probably, I wouldn't have experienced the kinds of things I experienced. Mine was a whole black culture in my growing up, and that happened for-- It wasn't a class thing; it happened for all of us in public schools. We had really great teachers. You just would be surprised. And they went beyond, we'll say drafting, to say, "You're going to go to this play tonight." And the YWCA and YMCA sponsored a lot of things. It was the way we lived. So when you talk about formulating a black aesthetic, it's like going back and recapturing or recalling some of the things in my life or that I experienced. I mean, Etta Moten [Barnett] coming-- A lot of people don't know about Etta Moten--

MASON

I do.

LEWIS

--but she was the first one who was-- She was Bess in Porgy and Bess. She is still a great lady in Chicago now, you know. And a lot of people came in and out. I didn't have to read about Duke Ellington, he was there! And I didn't have to read about Louis Armstrong. I remember going to a friend's house, and Duke Ellington couldn't stay at a hotel, so he stayed at my friend's house, my friend's mother's house, and was coming out of the bathroom in his bathrobe, you know. [laughter]

MASON

That must have been exciting!

LEWIS

It was just Duke Ellington to me. I didn't-- He didn't make-- He was another person. And, see, it was exciting probably. But a lot of that happened in New Orleans. A lot of that happened. So he was just Duke Ellington to me. And I didn't get excited. He was just having breakfast, getting ready to go in his robe to have breakfast. Because these people couldn't stay in hotels, they stayed in our communities. They were forced to associate with us. [laughter]

MASON

That was a common, common problem.

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

I guess I didn't put that question very well. I guess more what I was thinking of-- You know, some people would try to argue that-- Well, for example, Alain Locke was trying to say that black Americans should look to African art first and that-- And some other people might say that there are some European forms that are foreign to sort of an African American sensibility. So I was just wondering if there was any sort of pressure to work in a certain form that seemed to be more "authentic" than another.

LEWIS

I see. Okay. One of the great assists, we'll say, that I had in terms of formulating a kind of black aesthetics--let's put it this way--and what I was going to do came from, strangely enough, Viktor Lowenfeld. Viktor Lowenfeld.

MASON

Yeah, he's very interesting.

LEWIS

In that Viktor would-- He was more of a psychologist.

MASON

Right. He came from Vienna, right?

LEWIS

Yeah, Vienna, Austria. Yeah.

MASON

He was one of the refugees from the war [World War II].

LEWIS

He never showed us how to do anything, but he talked with us and got us to thinking about who we were and what we knew about who we were. And that forced me in a way to go back through my own situation, my own life, my mother's, and my father's. You painted, or you did your artwork, based on your feelings about who you were or who you are. And you could like or dislike yourself. If you disliked yourself-- It was very interesting some of the things that he could pull out of people. [He'd] say, "Well, now, what is this? What about this?" But when you come through it yourself and you are black, then it seems to me that you have no choice but to at least be challenged by a black aesthetic. He would pass on information to read--not necessarily art books, but information kinds of things. They could be related to the dance; they could be related to the music. When I was at Hampton, they brought in Dinah Washington, you know. And they brought in people who were in dance. And Zora Neale Hurston. But this contributed to my feeling and understanding of a black aesthetic and my appreciation for it. Because these things were sifted through-- They were not just names, but they were sifted through me and through my ideas. I have never painted a portrait of Dinah Washington,

but I painted what Dinah Washington did or meant to me, that empathy for the black culture. You couldn't escape it because-- And that's why I really liked the black schools a lot. We would go to chapel, and they would sing the spirituals. We would sing the spirituals. And there was something almost like you were engulfed in it. It was like magic, you know. It was fabulous. You could get it no place else except in the black schools at that time, and in the black church, we'll say. I don't think it was a theoretical thing when someone said, "I think you'd better really try to work on this and see if you can get the essence of the black feeling." Elizabeth taught it by saying, "Okay, the tree is not just a tree. There is a special something about that tree and the ground it comes out of and its relationship, too. Okay?" When I moved to Lowenfeld, he says, "What other things didn't you really like to do? Or what other things did you like to do?" And he would deal with it in terms of shape and line and have you talk about it while you were making those shapes and lines. And that's how I really-- It wasn't a superficial or surface kind of thing. I do think that a lot of what happened-- Alain Locke said to people, "Okay, come from an African perspective," and I think a lot of that that was done during that time was from a more superficial perspective, because people had not experienced Africa at all.

MASON

Yeah, it was a whole exotic experience.

LEWIS

That's right. And they did the best that they could. Probably Aaron Douglas was the smartest of all of them, mostly, because he withdrew from the idea. He knew what they said Africa was like, and he did that with those murals in the library in New York, but he then moved to the African American experience and the culture that he knew. So when it happened, how it happened, who motivated it or stimulated it, I would say that it happened very early in my life, and that I wouldn't accept a negative situation about black people without investigating. I never, never in life-- Well, when I was at Ohio State [University], one of my professors said, "Didn't you ever want to be white?" And my response was, "No." I knew why. Because I'd seen so many negative things that whites had done to people who didn't harm anything at all, and I didn't want to be that kind of person. It wasn't white or black. It was I

did not want to be in the group where I saw too many people from that group doing those things. And then he said, "Then you don't like white people?" I said, "No, that's not the point. I don't like people who say that they're white and who see themselves as white rather than human beings. I don't hate them." Because that's one thing Lowenfeld passed on to us, that hatred can do more damage to your own psyche than it can do to anything else, anybody else. But I let him, this major professor of mine from Ohio State, know that I don't choose to live among people like that. He was at my house visiting. I was letting him know if he felt that way, he should go to a hotel.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO
MARCH 15, 1992

LEWIS

I saw her on the stage.

MASON

You're talking about Zora Hurston?

LEWIS

Yes. She was so funny. And we were not supposed to leave the auditorium, you know. When you go, you are supposed to stay until everything is over. I was laughing so much I had to crawl out of the auditorium. I'll never forget that. Zora Neale was something.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But, you know, when you had those kinds of experiences, and this-- I'm not talking about every day, but at least once a month something happened, where somebody important came through and you talked to them or they'd come to your class. That's rich, you know. That's rich.

MASON

Let's see. You were talking about the way Lowenfeld and Elizabeth Catlett were trying to get the students to see sort of the essences of things. And in

some of them you can really see it, in her work and Charles White's work, in John [Thomas] Biggers's work, in your work, especially ones on the cover of Art: African American, these almost archetypal figures.

LEWIS

Right. John Biggers and I were classmates at Hampton.

MASON

I see.

LEWIS

He'd left to go to Penn [Pennsylvania] State [University] and I stayed and graduated. But we are still good friends.

MASON

So that didn't come like out of any Jungian theory in psychology or anything like that? [laughter]

LEWIS

I feel so fortunate that when I needed good teachers and good advisers I met them at the right time. I could have gone any way. Because I was determined. I don't know what I was determined to do, but I wasn't-- I was really determined that I was going to do certain things my way, and the outlet and the avenues were provided by people like Elizabeth. Even when I left Hampton and Viktor Lowenfeld, I met Dr. James Grimes, who spent the rest of his life trying to understand me. [laughter] He followed me around even to California. He was a good influence. He was from Asheville, North Carolina--real southern, real southern. We sort of challenged each other. But he was more interested in finding out, "Who is this person? What has gone wrong here? I'm very nice to her, but she's not very nice to me." You know, these kinds of things. And he didn't understand why. He later found out why.

MASON

Okay, well, I wanted to talk more about Ohio State, but I just wanted to ask about Hampton. I'm from Maryland, and I've never seen the Hampton collection so-- Because I didn't learn that there was black art until after I graduated from college. [laughter]

LEWIS

Well, that's great that you've gone to school.

MASON

So they have a collection of what? Asian? Do they have Native American art?

LEWIS

Native American, African American, African. They are celebrating the 125th anniversary of the museum and the college on the first week of April. Their collection of Native American art is better than the Smithsonian [Institution]'s. Not larger than, but better than. Their collection of African art is better than the Smithsonian, not larger but better.

MASON

Is better than UCLA's Fowler [Museum of Cultural History]?

LEWIS

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely. And the art exhibit that's coming to the County Museum, Jacob Lawrence? Well, it's Hampton's.

MASON

Oh, I see. Yeah, that's right.

LEWIS

Yes, the Hampton collection.

MASON

They have the whole Migration [of the Negro] series?

LEWIS

No, no, no. It's the Frederick Douglass, the Harriet Tubman, and other works. The Migration series is owned by the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection.

MASON

Oh, I see.

LEWIS

So Hampton has been buying Jacob Lawrences and inheriting Jacob Lawrences for a long time. And they have the Sheppard Collection of Kuba art from Zaire. They have the best Kuba collection in the world. And it was Dr. [William H.] Sheppard who graduated from Hampton and in 1890 sailed out of New York to Africa. Now, he might have graduated before that time. Because I think he went to Stillman College after that to study to become a Presbyterian minister. But he sent and brought back works for Hampton, Howard [University], and Schomburg [Collection of Negro Literature and History]. But Hampton's collection is superior to all of them. But they are really entrenched in the arts.

MASON

So you got to work with the collection. Did you do any sort of museum-type training? Or was it more just the study of the actual works of art themselves?

LEWIS

Yes, studies of the works of art. When we were with Lowenfeld, we exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the only student group up in the exhibit there.

MASON

When was that?

LEWIS

Oh, God. It must have been in the forties, '43, '44, or something like that. It's '43 or '44, '43. And we went out to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. And he saw to it that our works traveled and were published.

MASON

Wow.

LEWIS

So we didn't have a museum studies program, but we had a museum. And when the museum was not adequate, he had the works transferred to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. They were kept until such time as the museum could--

MASON

Do you remember which one of your pieces went to the show in New York? The Museum of Modern Art?

LEWIS

Yes. It was called Waterboy. And Hampton purchased that piece from me recently. I kept it for a long time. Two years ago they purchased it from me.

MASON

Okay.

LEWIS

And there was another one called The Sharecropper Family that they bought. That was published in one of the art magazines [Design].

MASON

Okay. It was hard for me to find a production of your works. There were some in Black Artists on Art.

LEWIS

Yeah, when they have—

MASON

And, of course, they're horrible xeroxes.

LEWIS

I know. That's the Waterboy, this one right here. That is the Garbageman.

MASON

This is the Garbageman.

LEWIS

And that was purchased by a man named Bill Olsen. At the time, he was the publicist for Richard Burton and Liz [Elizabeth] Taylor. This one, a serigraph, The Cane Field, was in about three or four museums, including the Baltimore Museum of Art. Most of my things now are out because I have a

show at Morehouse College in Atlanta that opens on the fourth of May. Even the older things. Sort of a retrospective. Hampton is sending some works. They have bought a lot of work, and I have given them a lot of pieces. It was a strange thing that now I've sort of inherited the Sheppard papers, the man who graduated and went to Africa in 1890. He was the first black missionary to go to Africa. And his daughter lived here for forty years.

MASON

Did he go to Liberia?

LEWIS

No, he went to Zaire and stayed with the Kuba tribe for twenty-five years. And she was right here in Los Angeles, had all his papers. And her brother came from Washington when she passed, and he was throwing them away.

MASON

But that happens every day in the black community, doesn't it?

LEWIS

Yes, it does.

MASON

I just read something about Alex Haley's stuff being auctioned off, just like it was--

LEWIS

Yeah, I know. I went over and bought a small piece from the son, and fortunately I had my phone number on my check and he called me. And rather than throwing away everything, he told me to come and get all of this stuff.

MASON

Good, good.

LEWIS

I kept it for a while, and then I gave it to Hampton. But I found a number of handwritten things in my studio in the back. I'm going to take those when I go to Hampton on the first of next month. [tape recorder off] Now, Dr. William H.

Sheppard, a black missionary, challenged King Leopold [II] of Belgium for cutting off the right hands of the Bakuba men who would not cut the rubber trees before they were ripe. Neighboring tribes were given what amounts to fifty dollars for every right hand and eighty-five dollars for every skull. So Sheppard reported this, and he was arrested. But he challenged King Leopold. And all of this was in his papers, and Hampton has those papers now. But the life of this man is incredible. He said he found a higher civilization in Africa than the one he left in the United States.

MASON

Wow. That's not hard to do! [laughter]

LEWIS

No. But it's hard to find a missionary who would say that.

MASON

Yeah, that's true.

LEWIS

But I think all of these things, accidents and things on purpose, have contributed. It's almost like a charmed kind of life, you know, in terms of moving and circulating in black situations. When I go to the islands of the Caribbean, I find and discover so many things that seem to be related. So it's just been a continuous thing. Even if I wanted to avoid some of them, it's almost as though I couldn't. But I think, growing up in the way I did with the complex kind of racial structures in terms of people intermixing and mingling and-- I grew up in an area where you had Mahalia Jackson and people like that, just people that you could look at, bigger than life, but who were-- I mean, Fats Domino has a house near where we would go and eat every day. It's a big house, but it's in a neighborhood with what we call shotgun houses. And people just sort of hung together. We didn't have a class system. There was, in a way, a kind of color problem. But the people who were causing the color problem were the poorest people. The more educated people were the darker people. So it's sort of a reversal of things that you would find in Atlanta and in other places.

MASON

Okay. When you went to Ohio State, that was to major in art history?

LEWIS

No.

MASON

Oh, okay.

LEWIS

When I went to Ohio State-- Viktor Lowenfeld said he wanted me to help him, and he wanted me to go to Ohio State. "But if you're going to help me with my teaching, then you'll have to get a master's degree." He wanted me to help him. He wanted me to teach printmaking because I was doing prints and all kinds of things--printmaking and sculpture. So I went to Ohio State to study printmaking, and the man I went to study with went to France to study with somebody else. So that knocked out the printmaking. I didn't take it because I wasn't going to be able to study with the person I wanted to study with. So I moved into sculpture and started studying sculpture. And I ran into problems of--not only racism but also sexism, where my professors felt that women shouldn't do welding, they shouldn't do sculpture because, you know, it was using welding and chain saws and other difficult tools.

MASON

It was using tools, yeah.

LEWIS

So I had to blast a few of them, and then I went into painting, and that's when I met Dr. Grimes. I decided that I wanted to know more about the world that wasn't Western. So I went into anthropology first, in conjunction with my painting, and I studied with some really good anthropologists and started doing Native American art. And then, after that, I started doing Asian art, particularly Chinese. But I did Native American because at that time Ohio State had one of the finest Native American collections. So that's how I branched out into history. I did what they called pre-Columbian art. We called it west Mexico and things like that, because we don't want to give Columbus the privilege of even being mentioned in the light of such great art. So I did my art history as a final thing. I did ninety hours beyond the Ph.D. to do the art

history. But it was a kind of conglomerate-art art history, because the Western art history didn't satisfy me. It was more along the area of anthropology. And then I went straight into Chinese.

MASON

Oh, I'm sorry. I was going to ask you about that.

LEWIS

I went into Chinese art history based on a National Defense Education [Act] grant. I went to Taiwan to study the [Chinese National] Palace Museum collection and to study at [the First Institute of Chinese Civilization] T'ung Hai University. And then, after that, I did a Ford [Foundation] grant and then came to USC [University of Southern California] and did Chinese studies and Chinese art and Chinese language. But I spent three years there.

MASON

Did you go back there to--?

LEWIS

Did I go back there--?

MASON

No, do you ever go back to Taiwan?

LEWIS

I've been back, yes. And I have friends who are there. I also went to mainland [China]. Through Elizabeth Catlett I received an invitation to go and help them with the library in Beijing to set up a collection of African American books and artifacts.

MASON

Oh, what's the name of the library?

LEWIS

It's sort of a community library in Beijing, China. I don't know the name of it.

MASON

Of course, I've never heard of anything like that. It would be very interesting.

LEWIS

Yeah, there were black people in China. A lot of people don't realize that.

MASON

Yeah, there are so many black people in Russia.

LEWIS

Yeah, they built the railroads in northern China and things of that sort. When I first went to mainland, I had to go by way of Canada, because we didn't have relations with China.

MASON

Right.

LEWIS

It was in the sixties.

MASON

Right.

LEWIS

I had to go get permission from Senator [J. William] Fulbright. I had studied the Chinese language under the Fulbright [fellowship]. So I had to get permission from Senator Fulbright to go by way of Canada to mainland. So I did some studies. I went with a group of women from Australia. And that happened so strangely because by that time I knew Mandarin Chinese, and during a presentation I saw, they were showing their slides backwards. And when I told them after the presentation that they were showing the slides backward, then they found out that I could translate. So they took me to translate for them and to work with them. That's the way I first got to mainland. But I was in Kimoi and Matsu. When I was in Taiwan, I was the only one to go to Kimoi and Matsu, which were close to mainland. And troops were constantly exchanging fire. But going to these places was nice. I found out a lot about African in China; I really did. And the Jesuits have done a lot of work

on that in their papers. They know about the close connection between Africa and China.

MASON

Do you know an Arnold Rubin?

LEWIS

I know of him. I met him and spoke with him on occasions before he died.

MASON

Yeah, he died a while ago, but he was very interested in blacks in Japan during the fifteenth century.

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

He was inspired by--and of course his name just slipped my mind--a professor [Joseph Harris] at Howard University who specializes in the diaspora. He came to UCLA, and he put up this map, and he talked about different trade routes and things. He said, "You know, this map took me fifteen minutes to draw, but it represents twenty years of work of tracing all these connections of blacks--"

LEWIS

Of course, of course. You know, many of the scrolls-- I have a lot of really nice scrolls of Japanese and Chinese art. But if you look at the scrolls during the T'ung dynasty--a lot of them are in the Boston Museum [of Fine Arts]--they have African grooms and Chinese brides. And as early as some of the earliest dynasties in China, you will find works that are like the Asante and work sort of like the works in Nigeria. You know, the bronzes and things, very, very similar. And people say, "So how did the Africans get there?" Well, they sailed, you know! [laughter]

MASON

Aliens from outer space.

LEWIS

And I said, "Well, Africans are Egyptians, also, you know." They moved down from the area, and just like the Chinese and people like that got to Africa. The Africans were a great seafaring people. And the Pescadores Isles are filled with Africans. It's interesing. We did a project in Fiji. And a man who was the great historian in Fiji, he was challenged by somebody from a Canadian university who said that he didn't know what he was talking about. The man was a Queen's scholar who was talking about the relationship of the Fijians to the Tanzanians and similar gods. So he said, "Well, now, they can't be related because their heads aren't shaped the right way" and all of this kind of nonsense, you know. But all along in those Pescadores Isles, where the Africans had dropped off, you have a great mixture of African and Asian and Chinese and wonderful cultures.

MASON

Yeah, it's a really exciting field, but not much--

LEWIS

Not much study has been done. I remember I had a little flare-up with Arnold Rubin over the East Indians and black culture. And he once said, "No, that's not the same thing. These are not black people." I said, "Well, what are you trying to tell me? That these people have no relationship to Africa?" And he said, "No, they don't have any relationship." I said, "Well, I've got news for you." Those were our last confrontations about East Indians and Africans.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But that's a different kind of blackness. Anyway, I told him we'd better do a little more research.

MASON

Yeah, I think his thing was mostly that-- I don't know. He just felt that some of the things he had read were kind of outrageous, and he just-- You know, he knew he'd heard about these connections, and he just wanted people to be careful.

LEWIS

I feel fortunate in that I did studio art as well as art history, and that there are some things that you can examine in terms of works of art and in terms of materials that are undeniably related. I mean, if you have those things and you really are-- Some of the things that I talked about-- Like in the T'ung [dynasty], Sherman Lee had first said, "Well, those men were darker because the pigment that they used for them had darkened." Why didn't the pigment for the women darken, then? And in the Han dynasty you had the blacks in those caves and also in the little figurines. They were obviously Africans. And if you know anything about the garb, the rituals of this and that-- And if you go to Brazil you find the connection, because there's a Chinese and African mixture. They're using the same symbols that you find in the earlier periods of Chinese art and also the Asante and the Yoruba. If you know anything about symbols, then you can put it together. I mean, you can't say, "Well, it's absolutely a fact," but it certainly is something to work on.

MASON

Yeah, definitely something to work on.

LEWIS

And it's as valid as some of the things that the Western art historians consider as valid. Much more so.

MASON

Yeah. I mean, given the whole history of the development of Western art history, coming out of and during certain time periods, you can't say it's unbiased and objective scholarship.

LEWIS

Yeah. Do you know Mikelle [Smith Omari]?

MASON

I met Mikelle Smith Omari once, just once. But I don't remember-- She gave me your card.

LEWIS

Yeah. She and Rubin had many, many fights. She's at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She's doing well. She's doing very well.

MASON

So somehow you were able to marry the cultural anthropology with the aesthetic aspects of art history. And it's interesting--

LEWIS

In the studio, also. See, that was a fortunate thing, because I was able to understand the material, the medium and the use of it. I had a background. And coming from Hampton to Ohio State, Hampton provided more-- Actually, Dillard provided a great humanities background. Hampton provided not only the continuation of the humanities background, but a studio situation. We worked in the studios until twelve or one o'clock at night--you know, midnight and one o'clock in the morning. We got special permission, the art students did. We had the attention of great professors. And by the time I got to Ohio State, I discovered that art-wise they were not as well equipped as Hampton. I don't think the professors were as well prepared as those at Hampton. That also helped to strengthen my belief in the black aesthetics. And they simply didn't provide. They had forty thousand students and they just didn't provide the attention that we received at Hampton. Dillard had four or five hundred students. Hampton didn't have many more than that--maybe seven hundred. So we got a lot of attention, and we learned a lot.

MASON

So that was a big change. Even though I'm sure the graduate departments were much more concentrated. But still it was a lot bigger.

LEWIS

It's very interesting going to-- Hampton had a mixed faculty of probably 50 percent people of African descent and 50 percent of European descent.

MASON

Were there any Asians or Native Americans on the faculty?

LEWIS

Not Native Americans but Asians. No Native Americans to my knowledge. I mean, I just don't know. There were some Africans, also, people who came directly from Ghana and places like that. Like Roudolph Aggrey, who was a student there, but I think some of his relatives were teachers. I never one time felt that I was being exposed to something that was more than I could comprehend when I was at Ohio State, because the background at Hampton prepared me to know how to study, to know how to read, to know how to write, to know how to--

MASON

Did you find you were educating some of your professors about things? Then were you wondering, "Why am I paying my money to go here when I know more than they do?"

LEWIS

Yes. But I did meet a few of the professors who were very interesting, like Mary Holmes, who left here [UCLA] and went to [University of California] Santa Cruz, I think. She went to Santa Cruz when it was started. She was at UCLA also, but then she went to Santa Cruz. But I wasn't by any means intimidated or inhibited in any way by Ohio State. And I wasn't inhibited when I went to New York University to do art history.

MASON

This was postdoc?

LEWIS

Yes. But I found myself being really appreciative about having gone to Dillard and Hampton, and I don't think it would have been the same had I not been exposed to the black schools.

MASON

So when you began teaching-- I guess there are so many questions. I guess what I was asking before about how you were able to sort of combine the aesthetics with the cultural anthropology-- I mean, that's a really tricky road to kind of negotiate, because sometimes you end up with things like William [Stanley] Rubin's "Primitivism [in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern]" show at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art]. [laughter] You

know, the question is how to avoid that. And also it seemed that you were teaching African Asian and African American. Everything we've talked about in school, a lot is how extraordinary it is that there are five European art professors--medieval, Renaissance--but there is one person who teaches Asian. And one person who teaches African!

LEWIS

I know, I know.

MASON

It's really incredible. So I'm just wondering how you were able to negotiate all those things. We should mention that you taught at Hampton from about '45 to '47, and then you went to Morgan [State] University.

LEWIS

Morgan State, yeah.

MASON

'Fifty to '53. And then you were in Florida from '53 to '58. And then you went to New York.

LEWIS

Okay. Now, really, how I was able to do that, I was seriously interested in all of those areas. When I started out in anthropology I did a lot of work in Native American cultures. Then I had a Fulbright to go to India, and I decided I didn't really want to go to India because I was more interested in Chinese art. It's art history, but it grew out of studio work, because when I wanted to know--Lowenfeld would say, "If you really want to know something badly enough, you'll study it, and you'll find out where it's from and what it does and the essence and structure of it and where it relates to what you're doing." I said to my professor, "There must be something more than these Gothic cathedrals, these floor plans of the cathedrals. There must be something. This is the dullest thing I ever encountered. I'm sick of this!" [laughter] He said, "Well, you know, there are other cultures." And this is a man who had married and he had eight children. He was married to one of the Taft women, so he wasn't going to leave her, you know. Senator [Robert A.] Taft.

MASON

Oh.

LEWIS

So anyway, he wanted to travel. So he would send his students to all of these different places. And he'd say, "I know you like Native American art. Native American art is tied into Asian art." He was the one who would spark these things. And it's "How so? How is this?" He said, "Well, we're going to get you a grant to go to India." So instead of India, I went to China. I went to Taiwan. Sure enough, I got exposed to the hill [indigenous] people there. It was like going to the Southwest--you know, the same ceremonial kinds of things. But I became infatuated with calligraphy and with the Sung dynasty brush stroke. So all of this was tied into not my just studying art history but my relating to the art history through my studio impulses. I didn't paint like Chinese people, but I wish you could have seen some of the works that I did.

MASON

Do you have any slides?

LEWIS

Yeah, yeah.

MASON

Could you bring me some?

LEWIS

Yeah. I have to get a set together for you.

MASON

Okay.

LEWIS

Because I just had all those works photographed. And when I came back from Asia, from Taiwan, my paintings changed.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

So what I was doing, I was doing the art history and recording things and working with Dr. Li Chi at Academica Senica in Taiwan at the same time. A part of my ideas were being changed in terms of the visual sense. And the same thing when I did Japanese studies. I'm really diverting it to some extent from Chinese studies, because they're related. When I studied Chinese, I was getting into what is Japanese, what is Korean--Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Because China is mother of this. It's like we talk about African studies. You get into African studies, if you know enough about Africa and the art of Africa, you can move out into Brazil, you can move to the Caribbean.

MASON

Right.

LEWIS

So that's the way I was able to do it. I tied it together. In teaching it, I'm sure I moved out of Africa to other areas. I never taught courses where I closed the door: this is African art and this is Caribbean art. I tried to show interrelationships. And then, in showing the interrelationships, I have to show what the Asian aspect of-- I might bring the two together in Surinam, which is Caribbean in spirit but South American in location. So, you know, it's a challenge. And I might call it African art, but I kind of move beyond. I might call it art of Nigeria or a certain period of Nigeria. And then I also do not deal with the art separate from the people but identify the art almost through the people. But there are common threads in terms of identifying those people who are connected with-- Either the Asian people who are connected with Africa, or the African people who are connected with Asia. And I saw the demarcation line from north China to south China. But it involves a lot of things. Now, I probably confused more of my students than I--

MASON

Well, if they had grown up the way you did, then they could probably sort out all these things.

LEWIS

But they aren't given opportunities generally to work out situations. But I think probably the best education is confusion, you know. You gather the information, and they sort it out and decide what it is they're going to do.

MASON

So did you give them assignments to go out and work with original collections, like go to the UCLA Fowler Museum?

LEWIS

Yes. And the first time, generally, I would take some of them. We went on trips. And then others would go on to-- I even sent some to Ghana and to Ethiopia.

MASON

Oh, good.

LEWIS

I did, because Scripps [College] had a fine junior year abroad program. I was really fortunate to work at the Claremont Colleges. I sent students to the University of Ghana. I sent students to the University of Nigeria. I sent students to Ethiopia. I sent them to numerous European capitals.

MASON

These were undergraduates?

LEWIS

Yes, undergraduate students. I sent them to Greece, Rome, Paris, and Germany. But most of the African American students, I tried to get them to go to African countries. It wasn't easy. A lot of them wanted to go to Paris and Rome.

MASON

Yeah. [laughter] At least it was familiar.

LEWIS

Yeah. But the most thrilling situation that I encountered at Scripps was when we wanted to enroll some of our students at the University of [Science and

Technology in] Ghana at Kumasi, and they wouldn't accept them because they didn't have adequate backgrounds. The University in Ghana was still on the English system.

MASON

Oh, yeah.

LEWIS

[laughter] And I was happy about that, because you know how highfalutin the Claremont Colleges are.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

So I said, "Aha!" [laughter] "Can't send your students over there."

MASON

They turned up their nose at you.

LEWIS

Yeah. It was tough, but-- I started writing. I don't know if you have that on your-- When I started teaching and reading the books that were textbooks, I think I was most offended by-- Who's the guy at Columbia who wrote the book called Primitive Art?

MASON

At Columbia University?

LEWIS

Yeah. He just died about three years ago. But I was offended by anything that says "primitive" art when they were speaking in terms of-- Well, they're beginning to define it differently, now, of course. But I've forgotten his name. But they were talking about a form of primitive art, you know, a primitive situation. It wasn't even art, you know. [Douglas] Fraser. Was it Fraser? That was Fraser, yeah. Anyway, I think it was.

MASON

There was this whole period where he was--

LEWIS

Yeah. But I started writing because I didn't want my students-- I wrote my lectures, and I wrote articles. I just didn't want my students to-- I wanted to challenge some of those textbooks. I had to use some of them. I think it was Douglas Fraser. I had to use some of the books because that's all we had. And I began challenging some of those things, not saying to the students, "Well, this is not correct, this is incorrect," but saying, "How would you define--?" Or "How would you look at this, the work of the Kuba?" It is very abstract and beautifully done. Or "What would you call this?" And then some times I would put out some Western art up there, European art, and some African, and say, "Now, who's primitive?"

MASON

Yeah. [laughter]

LEWIS

That's how I started writing and doing films and things, because I just was unhappy. And this goes back to early teaching. Elizabeth Catlett would say, "If you're not happy with something, don't knock it, just get in there and try to do something about it. If you can't do anything about it, then just go on and do something positive." And so it goes back to, shall we say, early training.

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MASON

Okay. We were just talking about your creating some of your own materials for your own courses out of necessity. Let's see. Well, you did spend some time in New York. We didn't talk about that. I don't know if there's anything that--

LEWIS

Well, it was a good situation. I was part of a Ford [Foundation] New York State grant. I was at New York University studying the bronzes with a major Chinese [art] professor [Alexander Sopher] at the Doris Duke House across from the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]. So I spent some time there, and there were good connections. I spent some time at the Freer Gallery doing a research fellowship thing, and at Harvard [University] a research fellowship. All of these were in conjunction with my USC [University of Southern California] work. You see, I was awarded a National Defense Education [Act] grant to come to USC to study Chinese art history and language and philosophy. There was no Chinese art history at USC.

MASON

I see.

LEWIS

So I had to go other places to do the art history. I was able to do the language and philosophy there. Can you imagine that? You know, a place like this, and I had to go to the East Coast to study Chinese art history?

MASON

Yeah, it's ironic.

LEWIS

Yeah, rather than the West Coast. I don't think they even had it at UCLA.

MASON

Even now, we have-- Well, with the budgets and everything it's so bad now. But we haven't been able to get a permanent person for a while. So it's like every two years we have somebody come in and do Chinese.

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

Well, did you meet any artists in New York, like Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden?

LEWIS

Oh, no, I knew Jake before that. I have known Jake for a long time. He used to live in New Orleans when he was doing his Migration series. He finished it there. And I knew Romare from-- I used to go to conferences and things. That's another thing I would do; I would go to different cities and see many of the artists.

MASON

Oh, that's right. What was it? The National Conference of Artists had started.

LEWIS

Yes.

MASON

Did you found that?

LEWIS

I was one of the founders. It's not written that way. It's written that it started in Atlanta, and that's not true. It started at Florida A&M University. Two or three years prior to its Atlanta meeting, we had one at Florida A&M, and then we had a meeting at Lincoln University in-- Not Pennsylvania, but Lincoln near Saint Louis.

MASON

Right, yeah.

LEWIS

And then it was in Atlanta.

MASON

I see. Because I've seen conflicting things about it.

LEWIS

No, it started at Florida A&M. And the main speaker was Hale Woodruff. The second one when we were at Lincoln was James Porter. I have photographs of all that. But I let them have it if they want it. Who cares?

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But I would go to conferences to meet [Viktor] Lowenfeld. I started out early going to conferences, so we would get together and talk. And that's how I got to meet people like David Smith and a lot of folks, a lot of artists. We used to go to artists' studios, because Lowenfeld was such a prominent figure in the art world. He would take me with him to these-- Walt Koon and different studios of artists, you know, Alexander Calder, Ben Shahn.

MASON

Yeah. I don't know how to phrase this question in an elegant way. But when I've looked through books of African American art, the 1950s seems to be kind of an odd period, because on the one hand you have the triumph of American art with Jackson Pollock and [Robert] Rauschenberg, and on the other hand-- Of course, in the black community, this is the whole-- You know, the Civil Rights movement had started, and there is the whole McCarthy thing. And then there is another sort of migration out. People started to go back to Europe again-- you know, Richard Wright and people like Sam [Samuel M.] Middleton, things like that. I mean, how would you sort of characterize that period before 1965?

LEWIS

That's a period I sometimes refer to as the integration period, where blacks really wanted to be a part of the so-called mainstream. And you have a style that comes out-- Floyd Coleman and what's his name up at the California College for Arts and Crafts? Well, there was a whole school of blacks who began--

MASON

Sargent Johnson?

LEWIS

No, no, no. This one is alive. He's good. [Raymond Saunders] I mean, it is no reflection on these people, but they were a part of the New York school. And

the blacks at that time, even those who left the country, were caught up in this-- You have to realize this is a period of a lot of the beginning of the integration, the cases for integration. And they really didn't want to completely identify with, let's say, the Harlem Renaissance period or the WPA [Works Progress Administration] political situations. They wanted to cross over to a large extent. The galleries were beginning to pick up a few of them, and they did not want to be identifiable. It was a very stange period for black people, period. They just simply didn't know what to do with themselves in terms of whether they really wanted to be immersed into this other culture. Because integration didn't mean you were going to be integrated; it meant you were going to be assimilated as much as possible. Ray Saunders is who I'm thinking about. Ray Saunders is a part of this school of the fifties where people began to work on shapes and symbols, but our symbols were emptier than the symbols of, we'll say, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline and people of that sort. Their symbols didn't represent what the historians say they represent. Because if you look at Jackson Pollock and you know his history, you know about the Native American culture that heavily influenced him. They mention it, but most critics stop at mentioning it. And then Franz Kline, you know about his association, his relationship, to Zen Buddhism and things of that sort, and the calligraphic strokes. That's what he did mostly, you know. But blacks, the African Americans, really-- They were talking about this school-- Was it Providence [College]? Where they all would go and study with a guy in Germany--?

MASON

Not at Black Mountain College?

LEWIS

No, no, a guy from Germany who would study impasto and expressionistic styles.

MASON

Hofmann.

LEWIS

Hans Hofmann, yes. And it was a mixture of so many things. And I think it was a little confusing, because the blacks were coming from almost no place. If you can name three of them-- Say Jacob Lawrence held to his style, Charles White held to his, Elizabeth Catlett stuck to hers, and Hale Woodruff moved into that scheme of things. But when Hale Woodruff moved into it, except for some of those beautiful vertical kinds of things that he did later on, it was sort of empty. It was almost an empty period for-- I don't know. You have Sargent Johnson still doing his thing. Those blacks who stuck to and strengthened what they were already doing were the ones who sort of developed. Romare [Bearden] never moved to that kind of painting. I'm trying to think of who did.

MASON

Oh, I guess Norman Lewis had always--

LEWIS

Norman Lewis. No, no, no. Norman moved into it. Norman was figurative before that.

MASON

I see.

LEWIS

Figurative, quite political and figurative, and he did move into it. Norman Lewis. And he probably moved into it in a much more substantial and significant way than some of the others. I think he understood it better than most. But most of them-- It was kind of a lost period for them, and shallow, you know, and decorative. Not much substance. The one thing about the so-called moving into the mainstream, we know that the mainstream is western European and so forth. That's what people are talking about. And when they get to the United States, they're talking about the style that-- You know, the op, pop, or whatever. But the one thing that we have to remember is, unless we are coming from that aspect of ourselves, we'll become imitators. And that's what a lot of the people in the fifties became.

MASON

Do you see a kind of particular African American spirituality as somehow a necessary part of African American creation or expression?

LEWIS

What some people would call spirituality I would say symbolism and form that might have grown out of not necessarily the essence of anything spiritual but the essence of something that has to do with a substantive involvement in some basic background life and maybe a-- It could be something as simple as your grandmother's cooking; it could be as simple as that. But it can loom as one of the most important things in your life. When you think back in terms of your upbringing and think about just the foods, we'll say-- When I think about the foods that I experienced in Louisiana, I certainly could make paintings, symbolic paintings, based on just the foods for the rest of my life, the combination. So it's those meaningful symbols rather than-- And that evokes a kind of spirituality in a way, but it's not in terms of religion, you know.

MASON

Yeah, yeah.

LEWIS

You know, I grew up where they had the carnival and everything. I believe the carnival meant joy and celebration to a lot of people, but for me it meant-- I was fearful of it. Not that somebody would hurt me, but because of the masquerading and the people becoming probably the most vicious aspect of themselves, you know? I saw it in a different way. That's when they'd take me to Ponchatoula because I didn't want to be there. As a child; this is not now. It doesn't bother me now.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But I think that my sensitivities about what's important can-- I guess a lot of it is-- It goes back to things that people wouldn't even notice. And I think sometimes they're the most important things that we can uncover as art people. I see the artist as a visual kind of pathfinder, or forerunner or somebody who discovers something before the historians even discover it, before a lot of people do. They're ten years ahead of most people if they're good artists.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But they're the least understood, because people don't recognize them as being intelligent people. They see them as these people who are these dreamers and they take all these chances. And historians have to know about these kinds of minds. Otherwise, they're interpreting things in a very surface and superficial manner. You can't interpret art without knowing something about philosophy, without knowing something about "who are these people"--you know, history. You simply can't do it.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

People do it based on what their professors tell them, and then they keep repeating the nonsense, you know.

MASON

Even other artists sometimes are the worst critics of other artists.

LEWIS

Yeah, yeah, that's true. That's true. Well, that's a put-down sometimes, too. I get excited about-- I mean, I paint, and I do sculpture, but I get excited about works by other artists. It's almost as though I'm drawn into what they are doing based on my sensitivity for it, but also I get excited as though I'm doing it. I guess that's why I still buy art. Some people will say, "Why are you buying that? You can paint that. Why are you doing that?"

MASON

[laughter] That's crazy. Why buy that book? You could write it. I don't know.

LEWIS

Right, right. It's a rich world out there, you know. I just don't think artists ought to be what people think they are, like unintelligent people, you know,

dodos and things. They're not. They have some of the richest and most philosophical information to give to others.

MASON

Yeah. That's an American attitude, too.

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

I mean, like in other countries--you went to Haiti and Cuba and Taiwan, I guess--wouldn't you say that generally they're treated better?

LEWIS

Right. I have a friend, an artist friend, Howard Smith. I don't know if you've ever--?

MASON

Right. He lives in France.

LEWIS

Finland.

MASON

Okay. That's right.

LEWIS

Howard sent us some things over here. He wanted to be a part of the whole thing when he heard Martin Luther King [Jr.] was killed. He wanted to be a part of getting really interesting works to the black community and people. So he was selling these things for like eight dollars. And there were some people in New York buying these things and putting them on view with the [Roy] Lichtensteins and so forth and selling them for thousands of dollars. The Howard Smiths. He was really upset, because the whole purpose of his art was being distorted and so forth. So I say that to say that we have been doing wonderful things for a long, long time. I mean, you go to South Africa and you see what the people have been doing with their homes, and you go to Zaire,

and you go to this place--they've been doing it for centuries, you know. And all of a sudden when somebody-- It's like with the music. Have a little departure on it in a European descent, and then there's something great. You know, like Romare was painting for fifty years, and he was still considered as a new artist.

MASON

Oh, yeah. Like David Hammons now is an emerging artist. [laughter] It's like, "No, no."

LEWIS

What is happening there, though, is that we are not in control of the promotion of art. We don't own the galleries, we don't own the publishing companies, we don't own any of that. We can do it--

MASON

You do.

LEWIS

I do. That's why I do it. Listen, my book out there-- There are two publishers or three publishers who want it, and I say, "You can have it under this circumstance or that circumstance. I will have to know every move you make with that book. Otherwise, forget it." We have to have that kind of control if we're going to have responsible reporting on us.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

Now, I don't say that everybody in my book is-- I mean, they're creditable people, but they're not all great artists. I've even picked up [Horst W.] Janson's book [History of Art], and I don't think a lot of them are creditable people or great artists either, you know. They might be creditable, but they're not great artists. So I think we have to measure ourselves by just a lot of reading and knowing that there are very few great people of any profession in this world. They're good. I will take an artist out of my book if that artist has not progressed unless that artist made some astounding contribution to something. And they'll say, "Well, I'm not in this edition of your book. What

have you done?" "I haven't seen any growth. You're doing the same things over and over." I mean, okay, Jacob Lawrence can do the same things over and over, similar things we'll say, because he has set a whole situation for us that we can not only be proud of, but we can build on. And then somebody could say, "Well, why don't you say more about this person or that person?" My response is, "Why don't you write your own book? You can do it. Yeah, don't ask me that." And "Who determines who's in the magazine?" That's what the people ask me. I said, "Well, I guess the people who paid for it."

MASON

[laughter] The Hancraft Studios that published your Elizabeth Catlett book [The Art of Elizabeth Catlettt], is that part of your organizations?

LEWIS

Yeah.

MASON

What else do they publish besides--?

LEWIS

Contemporary Crafts did this. It's all sort of the same people. What I did, I gathered a group of friends and said, "Okay, you put this amount and this amount, and we'll do this and this." The Elizabeth Catlett book was going to be published by Harry [N.] Abrams [Inc.]. Do you know the story about that?

MASON

No, but I don't have good feelings about Abrams.

LEWIS

Okay, Abrams. When I met with the president-- You know, the Los Angeles Times owned Abrams. I don't know if they still do, but they did. Okay. And I got an introduction to the president through the L.A. Times through a black person who worked for the-- He was the assistant vice president at one of those things. The president of Abrams, Harry Abrams, told me he loved Elizabeth Catlett's work, but he just couldn't take those political statements that she made. So he didn't want any prints in the book. He didn't want anything about her politics. He didn't want anything about anything but the

sculpture. I said, "Well, she's a political being. You can't erase all of that and come up with a product that represents her." And he said, "But I want to publish the book." And I said, "Well, I would say no, but I will let Ms. Catlett make that decision." And, of course, she almost blew up. It was at the New Orleans Museum [of Art] when we started this, the show that she was-- This was supposed to be ready in time along with the Abrams publication, but it wasn't. So we decided the only way we are going to publish this book is to do it ourselves, because no publishers would accept her political statements at that time, even as late as whenever we did this. He said we had to clean it up. And any artist who has anything to say that-- And then Abrams remainders a lot of books; they will remainder in a minute. Like the Bearden book [Romare Bearden: His Life and Art], they remaindered that in a few months.

MASON

Oh, I didn't know that.

LEWIS

Oh, yeah.

MASON

Yeah, that's the reason-- I said I don't have good feelings about them because I was reading something where Mary Schmidt Campbell was supposed to do a monograph on Bearden. And the next thing I know, you know, this guy Myron Schwartzman--who was he?--he gets the--

LEWIS

Right.

MASON

And I thought that was really incredible. I didn't know what the whole background was, but I said, you know, that's really bad.

LEWIS

Mary Schmidt Campbell did a dissertation on Bearden at Syracuse [University]. But it's strange out there.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

I'm talking with three publishers, because I want to move the Art: African American into another volume--increase this one in terms of performance, installation, and then move to Art: African American Bahia, the whole thing of the Bahian art, and then find a way to do a third volume on the Caribbean, to show the connection. Because they have some tie-in with Africa, of course.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

But that's my goal. And I think I found a publisher who can stand it.

MASON

Okay.

LEWIS

But as an art historian, if you're going into art history, it's very-- I'm going on the publications committee of the College Art [Association of America], and I stay on it because we have to fight to get certain things done. But it's important that we're there, that we be there to open those doors, because they don't think about how to open them up, how to give-- And I always enter by saying, "Look, you are the deprived people because this is a global culture now we're dealing with. We're not dealing with a myopic view of your little world."

MASON

Yeah, the British who came over.

LEWIS

That's right. So "You can't continue to miseducate people like this, because, you know, the Japanese and the Chinese and all these people think you're insane already." [laughter] They are nice to have at these meetings and talk. You know, "What kind of knowledge is this?" So I am able to make some moves.

MASON

On your résumé you have that you're on the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] boards and things like that, and I'm just wondering what that experience is like. If you're just, you know, kind of a lone black woman and trying to speak for--

LEWIS

Well, the Studio Museum [in Harlem], for instance-- This is an example. The Studio Museum show of-- I forget what it was called, but it has to do with the sixties.

MASON

Yeah, the 1960s and a turbulent decade, something like that [Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963-1973].

LEWIS

Yeah. That was at NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] twice, and it was turned down twice. And then I was on the committee to evaluate it the third time it came up. I had read the history that it had been turned down twice. And I saw the good old white boys talking about it, joking about it. I knew one of them really well. He used to be at the Oakland [Museum]. I forget-- He's somewhere in Dakota now, someplace. So I had to leave the room because my name was there as a consultant; even though they hadn't consulted with me, my name was there. So before I left the room, I whispered to him, "Now, if you don't see to it that this is approved, then I'm going to find out what it is that you want approved and it's not going to work." In other words, I knew that through explanations I couldn't get very far, so I began to politick. You have to do that. It was a trade-off. And they got approved. The only stipulation that they put in there was that I had to be an active participant. And I agreed to do that in terms of seeing to it and approving certain things. In other words, I couldn't be just a board member or a member who is an honorary or in an honorary position; I had to be an active participant.

MASON

Like you had to approve their budget and things like that?

LEWIS

Well, you know, they'd call me in and do certain things. We never really clarified that, but they had to have some way out. But they approved the whole thing. But on those boards, that's a lot of what you do, because you can't explain to people who have no knowledge of what you're talking about. You're just wasting your time. The "experts" are so closed-minded, and they've been educated to believe that everything that they believe is right. I had one man who is a Ph.D. in art history from Princeton [University] who told me he had a letter from Africa. And I said, "Well, what language is it in?" He couldn't read it; it obviously wasn't in English. He said, "It's in African."

MASON

[laughter] Without blushing.

LEWIS

Yeah. And he's the same man who wanted to put African art in the ethnic studies department because he didn't want all the other students having access to it. I said, "Okay, but you are going to have to put your German art in there, your Italian art. Look in your dictionary and see what ethnic means." But this man is still pumping that kind of nonsense into students. I said, "Do you realize Africa is one of the largest continents on the face of the earth?" He said, "Well, they don't do anything there, you know." Europeans are the only ones who have done any art, as far as he is concerned. He was just bold enough to tell me that. But that's the general consensus. These people are going to be wiped out. Give them less than ten years. Give them five years. They're going to have to rewrite everything, you know, that nonsense Janson puts down.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

They'll have to rewrite everything. That's why I think that as African American people, people of African descent, we have an obligation to prepare ourselves to research. I mean, okay, we can use research techniques developed by Europeans. I don't care who developed them. Research and get some of this

basic information that goes back into history so that we can clean up this stuff. And if we don't do it, and we wait for them to do it, it's going to be fifteen or twenty years before they do it. And if we do it, we've got to insist that it be published and put out there, even if we're going to have to do it ourselves. They try to look down on self-publishing, but how else are you going to get anything done? They're not going to do it. We could insist. We could withhold from certain organizations who are involved in publishing because they are usually-- I mean, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, when they published my book, they told me they were going to limit the publication to textbooks because black people didn't read.

MASON

Aha.

LEWIS

They didn't want to put it out there in bookstores. I said, "Well, maybe white people read." They said, "Well, hey, they don't read black books." So, you know, really, that hostility. But we know they own Sea World, they own this. So we're going to have to say, look into what they own, how they have diversified, get to those places, go to the meetings and find out. I have a friend who goes to all of the meetings of the energy corporations. He says, "In your office do you have any black art on the wall?" Some people say he's crazy. He's not crazy. No. He knows that they have invested heavily in corporate art. And, you know, unless we investigate, it's not going to happen, because they know we're no threat.

MASON

Yeah, yeah. Wow.

LEWIS

But it's a whole thing we--

MASON

They are supposedly changing now. I mean, they put up the [Henry O.] Tanner at the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art] now. And, let's see, Jacob Lawrence is covered, and it's not black history month.

LEWIS

[laughter] No, let me tell you what. Do you know that Tanner that they put up?

MASON

Aha.

LEWIS

When I was working at the L.A. County Museum, they had that Tanner up for sale for $800, and I was sad because none of us bought it. But I'm glad we didn't, because now they are acknowledging it. They had a work by a white artist-- What's his name, now? [Robert Gwathmey] He worked at the ACA Gallery, but because he painted black subject matter they wanted to assure me that I didn't know what I was talking about when I said he was white.

MASON

Has there ever been a black art exhibit at the County Museum that wasn't an installation? Like the Panorama show, that was an installation. And the Maren Hassinger, that was an installation.

LEWIS

There was one-- Two Hundred Years or something--

MASON

Oh, right, Two Centuries of Black American Art by David Driskell.

LEWIS

But that was after the La Jolla [Museum of Art] did one bigger than that.

MASON

Oh, yeah.

LEWIS

La Jolla Museum did one in 1969 or '70 where they borrowed works from-- They had African art from the collection of the Museum of Primitive Art. It was then the Museum of Primitive Art; it's now at the Met [Metropolitan Museum

of Art]. They borrowed works from the Museum of Modern Art, the Picassos and the [Georges] Braques and the [Jacques] Lipchitzes. They showed the influence of African art on their works, and then out of that they had-- For the first time since Jake painted his Migration series, they had the whole Migration series. They brought it together, and it was a wonderful show. They published a catalog on the show. It was called Dimensions of Black.

MASON

Right.

LEWIS

It grew out of a study program for UC [University of California] San Diego. It was really wonderful. That preceded the Two Centuries. But no, they haven't had anything.

MASON

Okay.

LEWIS

I don't pay too much attention to these museums anymore. I just try to do what I can do. We [Landau Traveling Exhibitions] have the Richard Hunt and Richmond Barthé show [Two Sculptors, Two Eras] circulating, and it's getting rave reviews from really major critics. It's being reviewed in Art in America and Art News. I purposely put the two of them together because-- They seem opposites, but I knew that Richard would draw to Barthé, and once you got people in there they would see the substance of Barthé. So it really worked well. But I just can't, as we say, pause in my stride. I just go ahead and do what I have to do. I don't even care whether Abrams publishes or Harcourt Brace publishes. I don't care. I say I'm going to get it out one way or the other.

MASON

Yeah. Of course, I have a ton of questions left, but we are sort of winding down here. Since you brought up your museum, what's your relationship to the museum now, the Museum of African American Art?

LEWIS

Nothing. Nothing. Ten years ago, I think it was-- Oh, let's see. Ten years we worked merging-- [Mary Jane] Hewitt and I worked with that museum. We severed our relationship more than five years ago, at least five years ago. Because we tried to get them to get Floyd Coleman as the director. We tried to get them to hire a director. There was a young woman from UCLA who was working with them. We tried to get them to hire her, but they just think they can run a museum with volunteers. I have no relationship, I'm happy to say, no relationship with them. I couldn't work that way.

MASON

And they've got the Palmer Hayden collection.

LEWIS

I got them the Palmer Hayden collection. That was through my efforts. They were given a Barthé collection through my efforts. They've got some [Hale] Woodruff paintings, also. They've got some good things. Fortunately, we put it in the-- I don't know what you would call it, but if they can't function well or they can't keep it going, then they have to give that collection to another nonprofit museum. They can't keep it or sell it off or steal it. No. They probably have the best collection of any African American museum, permanent collection, in this country.

MASON

What do you think about the Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] collection?

LEWIS

That's an interesting collection.

MASON

Because they have a lot of historical, local artists like P'lla Mills, Beulah Woodard that you just don't find anyplace else.

LEWIS

Right. Right. No. I have the list of it, and [William] Pajaud did a great job. I liked the murals, too.

MASON

Yeah.

LEWIS

The Johnson [Publishing Company] collection in Chicago is pretty good, too. But I think for a black museum, this museum has the best collection. I know the museum over at Exposition Park [California Afro-American Museum]—

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MASON

I didn't know if you were going to finish your sentence about the California Afro-American Museum, because it's sort of always been-- I don't know. It started out pretty strong.

LEWIS

It did. It did. The director then--I've forgotten her name--she did a good job.

MASON

Aurelia Brooks was the--

LEWIS

No, she wasn't the first director.

MASON

Oh, Charlene Claye.

LEWIS

Charlene Claye, yeah.

MASON

She was from Brooklyn, I think.

LEWIS

She really worked hard and tried to-- It was supposed to have been mostly a history museum, you see. I think that's where it got turned around. It was

history and culture, and I think somehow it became an art museum, which it really wasn't founded to be. Charlene was good, but she got pushed out somehow.

MASON

Yeah. Okay. Let's see. Well, I'm not going to torture you with more questions.

LEWIS

It's all right.

MASON

I actually did have a question about-- This is out of left field, but-- You were on the board of the Women's Building for a while. And I know they're doing an oral history project now, but I don't think they've talked to any women of color at all.

LEWIS

They haven't talked to me.

MASON

So I don't know if you have anything to say about the Women's Building, because everybody seems to kind of accept the fact that it was sort of a white-- Well, the way people characterize the feminist movement today, it's kind of a white, middle-class thing.

LEWIS

Well, I got involved with them before there was a Women's Building, with the people who preceded these people who had left.

MASON

Like Judy Chicago.

LEWIS

Yeah, Judy Chicago and people like that, yeah. We had a gallery on Redondo [Boulevard], near Olympic [Boulevard].

MASON

Oh, this is with Bernie Casey.

LEWIS

Yeah. I forgot what we called it. But it was Redondo near Olympic.

MASON

Multicultural Gallery?

LEWIS

Yes, that's right. The women who were working on the building--they didn't have the building then, but those who were sort of orchestrating the movement of the women's situation--we used to meet at our gallery sometimes. We had a big show there called Cookies for Dough. We were baking art. It was real nice. It was a mixed group--more white women than black. But, you know, we were all there, and that's when I knew Judy and people like that.

MASON

Sheila [Levrant] deBretteville?

LEWIS

Yeah. And I've forgotten the one out in Santa Monica. Her husband is some big judge or something now. A lot of artists, of course, and, as I said, mostly white. But we did a lot of things together. And that's why I guess I was put on that board. But that was sort of from the early days. I did an Elizabeth Catlett show for them, and I did some other things. But I was responsible for bringing in a lot of black females to do things.

MASON

Did you know Suzanne Shelton, who I think ended up being the last director before they dismantled the whole thing?

LEWIS

No, I don't remember her. I don't recall her.

MASON

Maybe that was a lot later.

LEWIS

I used to work with them and have meetings. But, you know, that wasn't sufficient for me, but it was a part of strengthening the whole situation in terms of our involvement. I guess I helped them to get one of their first grants, because I was on the panel for the NEA. People were laughing when their proposal came up. Like, "Who are these women? They're crazy." You know, "This is insanity." Making light of their proposal. And then I made my speech, and they got the grant. Because, you know, they always ask, "Is there anybody here who knows what this is about?"

MASON

[laughter] And you raised your hand.

LEWIS

Yeah. First, I had to reprimand some members of the panel for making light of it if they didn't know what was up. And they began to call me "sapphire." They would say, "She's a sapphire," you know. But anyway, I accepted it. So my involvement with them was always from a distance, you know. I guess I got one of their awards for something.

MASON

Yeah, the Vesta Awards.

LEWIS

Yeah. That was about it. I also found that at one time the white women could get in there and block things and do things and do what they wanted to do, you know. So I said, "Well, you know, if this is the kind of power that they're gaining, then we'd better be in there with some of this power, too, and get some of it." But it didn't quite work out that way.

MASON

Yeah, okay. Well, I guess that's kind of the last thing.

Date: