

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616<br>info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Grigsby, J. Eugene (Jefferson Eugene), 1918-2013  |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby,  |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | July 11, 2007 and July 13, 2007   |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2007  |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:50:06).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Fine artist, art professor, and high school art teacher Jefferson Eugene Grigsby (1918 - 2013 ) was selected in 1958 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to represent the United States as an art teacher at the Children's Creative Center at the Brussels World Fair. Grigsby published Art and Ethics: Background for Teaching Youth in a Pluralistic Society, the first book ever written for art teachers by an African American artist and author. Grigsby was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 11, 2007 and July 13, 2007, in Phoenix, Arizona. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2007_204   |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.   |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Art professor, fine artist, and high school art teacher Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Jr. was born on October 17, 1918, in Greensboro, North Carolina, to Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Sr. and Perry Lyon Dixon. Grigsby first discovered his love for art after his family moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when he was nine years old. In 1933, Grigsby attended Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. Within a year, Grigsby transferred to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he first met his long time mentor, Hale Woodruff. Grigsby graduated from Morehouse College in 1938, with B.A. degree and because of Woodruff, he was equipped with extensive artistic experience that he would retain throughout his life. Grigsby went on to obtain his M.A. degree in art (1940) from Ohio State University and his Ph.D. degree from New York University (1963).

In 1942, Grigsby volunteered to serve in World War II and became a master sergeant of the 573rd Ordnance Ammunition Company under U.S. Army General George Patton during the Battle of the Bulge. In 1943, Grigsby married Rosalyn Thomasena Marshall, a high school biology teacher and social activist. Three years later, at the invitation of the school's principal, W.A. Robinson, Grigsby began working at Carver High School as an art teacher. After the closing of the school in 1954, Grigsby began working at Phoenix Union High School where he remained until 1966.

In 1958, Grigsby was selected by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to represent the United States as an art teacher at the Children's Creative Center at the Brussels World Fair in Belgium. This experience inspired Grigsby to initiate a number of art programs in community centers, housing projects and day care centers in the Phoenix area.

Grigsby began teaching at the university level in 1966, working at the School of Art at Arizona State University until 1988. During this time, Grigsby published "Art and Ethics: Background for Teaching Youth in a Pluralistic Society," the first book ever written for art teachers by an African American artist and author.

In 2001, "The Art of Eugene Grigsby Jr.: A 65 Year Retrospective" was featured at the Phoenix Art Museum. The exhibition featured insightful commentary of Grigsby's life and influence on the art and education world by his many colleagues, friends and family.

Grigsby served on the boards of numerous organizations, including the National Art Education Association, the Committee on Minority Concerns and Artists of the Black Community/Arizona. Grigsby has also been awarded numerous times for his outstanding work, including the Arizona Governor's "Tostenrud" Art Award and the NAACP's Man of the Year Award.

Grigsby lives with his wife in their Phoenix home. They have two sons, Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, III and Marshall Grigsby, who both have been recognized as educators.

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 11, 2007.

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby passed away on June 9, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby was conducted by Jacques Lesure on July 11, 2007 and July 13, 2007, in Phoenix, Arizona, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fine artist, art professor, and high school art teacher Jefferson Eugene Grigsby (1918 - 2013 ) was selected in 1958 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to represent the United States as an art teacher at the Children's Creative Center at the Brussels World Fair. Grigsby published *Art and Ethics: Background for Teaching Youth in a Pluralistic Society*, the first book ever written for art teachers by an African American artist and author.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## **Persons:**

Grigsby, J. Eugene (Jefferson Eugene), 1918-2013

Lesure, Jacques (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Grigsby, J. Eugene (Jefferson Eugene), 1918-2013 --Interviews

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African American artists--Interviews.

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Fine Artist

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High School Art Teacher

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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## **Administrative Information**

### **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### **Preferred Citation**

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, July 11, 2007 and July 13, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue,

Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:21 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby was born on October 17, 1918 in Greensboro, North Carolina to Purry Dixon Grigsby and Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Sr. Grigsby's maternal grandparents, Alice Wellmon Dixon and William Dixon, raised his mother on a farm in Kings Mountain, North Carolina. She became a teacher, as did several of her sisters. Grigsby's father was born near Newberry, South Carolina, and funded his early education by bartering milk from his family's farm. After serving as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War I, Grigsby's father graduated from Johnson C. Smith University, and then worked as a math teacher in Lynchburg, Virginia. Later, Grigsby relocated with his family to Columbus, Ohio, where his father studied at The Ohio State University; and then to Prairie View, Texas, where his father joined the faculty of Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College. In the late 1920s, they lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina while his father taught at the Winston-Salem State Teachers College.

Prairie View (Tex.)--Race relations.

African American families--North Carolina.

African American parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby lived in Winston-Salem, North Carolina with his parents, Purry Dixon Grigsby and Jefferson Eugene Grigsby Sr., and brothers, Donald Grigsby and Marvin Grigsby. He attended Columbia Heights High School, and had a newspaper route and violin lessons. When Grigsby was in the eighth grade, his father was hired as the principal of the Second Ward High School in Charlotte, North Carolina. After moving there, Grigsby founded the school's theatrical club, and began painting under the tutelage of his neighbor, Walker Foster. Upon graduating in 1934, Grigsby studied for one year at Charlotte's Johnson C. Smith University. Then, he met muralist Hale Woodruff at an art gallery show in Atlanta, Georgia. Woodruff became Grigsby's mentor, and convinced him to transfer to Atlanta's Morehouse College, where Grigsby

majored in art, and was taught by Samuel Howard Archer, the college president; theater professor John M. Ross; and sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--North Carolina--Charlotte.

Woodruff, Hale, 1900-1980.

Morehouse College (Atlanta, Ga.).

African Americans--Childhood and youth.

African Americans--Education (Higher).

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he studied art under muralist Hale Woodruff, and alongside printmaker Wilmer Jennings. Upon graduating in 1938, Grigsby moved to New York City, where he enrolled in the American Artists School. After meeting painter Jacob Lawrence at a gallery, Grigsby was introduced to collagist Romare Bearden, artist Charles Alston and the rest of New York City's black arts community, with whom he visited Harlem's nightclubs, and played poker at Alston's home. Many of Grigsby's fellows, including Alston, were employed by the Works Progress Administration, but Grigsby was too young to qualify. Instead, he worked at the Gotham Book Mart; and then for the Rose McClendon Players, where he assisted Perry Watkins, Broadway's first black set designer. In 1940, Grigsby joined the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, where he met author Langston Hughes. Later, Grigsby founded the Ohio State Playmakers while earning a master's degree at The Ohio State University.

Woodruff, Hale, 1900-1980.

United States. Work Projects Administration (N.Y.).

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--Social life and customs.

African American artists--New York (State)--New York.

Ohio State University.

Art--Study and teaching.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby earned a master's degree in 1940 at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. That year, he met his wife, Thomasena Marshall Grigsby, at a community center in Columbus. In 1941, Grigsby made silk screen paintings while an artist in residence at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. He was subsequently hired by Mary McLeod Bethune to teach at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida. After deferring U.S. military service three times, Grigsby enlisted in a U.S. Army company based in Monroe, North Carolina. Although not originally slated to leave Monroe, they were sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and then deployed overseas under the command of General George S. Patton, Jr. While sailing to Europe on the RMS Queen Elizabeth, Grigsby organized a theatrical production featuring skits and his own military band. He also met boxer Joe Louis on the voyage. Upon landing in France, Grigsby served as the master sergeant of an ammunition depot during World War II.

Ohio State University.

Bethune-Cookman College (Daytona Beach, Fla.)--Faculty.

Arts--Study and teaching (Higher).

World War, 1939-1945--Participation, African American.

United States. Army.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby served from 1942 in the U.S. Army, where he was commended for his theater productions, including his musical, 'Two Points Shy.' In 1943, while stationed at Fort Rucker, Alabama, he married Thomasena Marshall Grigsby. Grigsby returned from the service in 1945, and taught briefly at Barber-Scotia Junior College in Concord, North Carolina. He was then hired by Principal W.A. Robinson to teach at George Washington Carver High School in Phoenix, Arizona, where the faculty included Joseph Simeon Flipper II and Arlena Seneca. Grigsby founded the school's art department, and taught artist Roosevelt "Rip" Woods, whom he assigned to paint a mural of George Washington Carver for the school. When George Washington Carver High School closed in 1954, Grigsby became a teacher at Phoenix Union High School. In Phoenix, Grigsby's family was the first black household to live north of Van Buren Street. He also recalls meeting Grace Kelly while teaching at Expo 58 in Belgium.

African American soldiers-Social life and customs.

African American art teachers--Arizona--Phoenix.

Exposition universelle et internationale (1958 : Brussels, Belgium).

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby attended L'École Supérieure des Beaux Arts while stationed in Marseille, France at the end of World War II. In 1945, he returned to the United States on a ship called the Walter E. Ranger, and taught at Barber-Scotia Junior College in Concord, North Carolina. In 1946, Grigsby moved to Phoenix, Arizona, where he became an art teacher at George Washington Carver High School. There, his students included future artist Roosevelt "Rip" Woods, who learned about George Washington Carver's ambitions to study art while completing a class project. Early in his teaching career, Grigsby tended bar and harvested watermelons during the summer to earn additional funds. In 1954, George Washington Carver High School closed, and he joined the integrated Phoenix Union High School, where he had to adjust to larger class sizes. He also began a Ph.D. program in art history at Columbia University in New York City, and then transferred to New York University, where he received his degree in 1963.

École supérieure des beaux-arts (Marseille).

Arts--Study and teaching (Higher).

Commercial artist.

Artist.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_002\_007, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby was invited to teach at Expo 58 in Belgium by Victor D'Amico, the education director of the Museum of Modern Art. At the expo, Grigsby, who was fluent in French, taught art to children of varying cultures. He also met African American expatriates, like restaurateur and Morehouse College alumnus Leroy Haynes and drummer Kenny Clarke of the Modern Jazz Quartet. With his family, Grigsby traveled to the Netherlands, Belgium, France and England, until contracting hepatitis and returning to recover in Phoenix, Arizona. In the early 1960s, Grigsby continued teaching at Phoenix Union High School, while completing a Ph.D. degree in art history at New York University.

He also made prints with artist John T. Biggers at Texas Southern University. In 1966, Grigsby was recruited by his former student, Roosevelt "Rip" Woods, to join the art faculty of Arizona State University. He went on to publish articles on African American art with sculptor Elizabeth Catlett and printmaker Samella Lewis.

Exposition universelle et internationale (1958 : Brussels, Belgium).

Art--Study and teaching (Higher).

Art--Study and teaching (Secondary).

Arizona State University--Faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_002\_008, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby became the vice president of the National Art Education Association in 1972, and coordinated the organization's national convention in Hawaii. The next year, he took a sabbatical leave from teaching at Arizona State University (ASU) to conduct interviews of African American artists like Samella Lewis, Jacob Lawrence and Robert Blackburn for his book, 'Art and Ethics: Background for Teaching Youth in a Pluralistic Society.' Later in the 1970s, Grigsby took a second sabbatical leave, during which he gave lectures in Africa on behalf of the United States Information Agency. He met artists like Nigerian painter and printmaker Bruce Onobrakpeya, and learned about Shamba Bolongongo, a Kuba king and art patron. In the early 1980s, Grigsby mounted an African art exhibition at Phoenix's Heard Museum, with financial support from Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. Grigsby retired from teaching at ASU in 1988.

African American artists--Interviews.

National Art Education Association.

African American art--African influences.

Art, Kuba.

Artists and community--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_002\_009, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby was a founding member of the Consortium of Black Organizations and Others for the Arts (COBA) during the 1980s. Through COBA, he hosted lectures by dancer Katherine Dunham, painter Robert Colescott, poet Maya Angelou and sculptor Elizabeth Catlett. COBA also organized the Madeline Hardy Inner-City Multicultural Youth Art Exhibit, an invitational art competition. When Grigsby turned seventy years old in 1988, he was required to retire from Arizona State University. He became active in many community organizations, including the Garfield Organization and activist Leon Sullivan's Opportunities Industrialization Centers. Grigsby also published articles in the International Review of African American Art, and continued to make art, including acrylic paintings and prints. Grigsby describes COBA's outreach programs for young artists, and reflects upon the role of commercialism in art. He also describes his hopes for the African American community, and how he would like to be remembered.

Artists and community--United States.

Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America.

African American youth.

Video Oral History Interview with Jefferson Eugene Grigsby, Section A2007\_204\_002\_010, TRT: 0:25:25 ?

Jefferson Eugene Grigsby attended the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, which was held in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria. There, he met artist Grace Hampton, whom he recruited to the art doctoral program at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. He continued to serve as Hampton's advisor while she launched her first community art program in Tempe's Carl Hayden Projects. Grigsby also shares a message to future generations, and narrates his photographs.

African American families.