

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thomas Miller

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Miller, Thomas, 1920-2012
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller,
Dates:	March 31, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:34:18).
Abstract:	Graphic designer and painter Thomas Miller (1920 - 2012) has enjoyed a successful career as an independent artist and is known for portraits and mosaic portraits. Miller was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 31, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_059
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Thomas Miller was born in Bristol, Virginia, on December 24, 1920. Miller graduated from Douglas High School in Bristol in 1937 and went on to earn a B.S. from Virginia State College in 1947. Shortly thereafter, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in World War II.

Miller expressed interest in art when he was very young. He began drawing when he was just nine years old. However, it was not until he returned from the war and moved to Chicago that Miller formally studied art for the first time. He was the only black student enrolled at the Ray Vogue School of Art, where he received his degree in design in 1950. That same year, he was one of two African Americans accepted into the Society of Typographic Art. He worked briefly as a commercial artist for Gerstel/Loeff before joining Morton Goldsholl Associates, the internationally renowned design firm where he worked as a graphic designer for thirty-five years on projects like his 1970s redesign of the 7-Up packaging and identity.

In addition to commercial design work, Miller has enjoyed a successful career as an independent visual artist. While stationed abroad during World War II, he sold oil paintings in England, France and Belgium. He is particularly known for employing a technique known as monotype, a subtractive process in which pigment is removed from paint-coated glass.

More recently, Miller has focused his efforts on creating mosaic portraits. In 1995, as the honoree for the 21st Annual Arts & Crafts Promenade in Chicago, Miller's mosaic portraits of the DuSable Museum's eight founders were permanently installed in the museum's lobby. Miller's portrait of Chicago's late mayor Harold Washington is also in the DuSable Museum's permanent collection.

Though he no longer conducts gallery shows, Miller continues to paint, draw and create in various media. Miller has received numerous industry awards and much recognition for his achievements in the field of graphic design. He and his wife, Anita, have three children and reside in Chicago's Beverly community.

Miller passed away on July 19, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thomas Miller was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 31, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Graphic designer and painter Thomas Miller (1920 - 2012) has enjoyed a successful career as an independent artist and is known for portraits and mosaic portraits.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

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

Restrictions on Use

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

Related Material

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

Controlled Access Terms

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

Persons:

Miller, Thomas, 1920-2012

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Miller, Thomas, 1920-2012--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Graphic Designer

Painter

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

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

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, March 31, 2003. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

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

Other Finding Aid

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

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?
Thomas Miller was born on December 24, 1920 in Bristol, Virginia to Edward Miller and Rosa James Miller. Miller's great-grandfather, James Miller, was enslaved. Miller's grandfather, Thomas Miller, was a tombstone engraver.

Miller's own father was a brakeman on the Norfolk and Western Railway. He also owned a farm and drove a Flint car. In 1924, he was killed in a train accident when Miller was four years old. Miller's mother work hard to raise five children in Bristol, Virginia, three of whom she sent to college. Miller describes his memories of childhood in Bristol, a bustling town with paved streets for whites and blacks alike. He remembers Christmas celebrations and building a plane to emulate Charles Lindbergh. As a young boy, Miller discovered his love of art and drawing, but his family could not afford paper. To satisfy his need for drawing paper, Miller picked up trashed newsprint from the Bristol Herald Courier where the newspaper staff bundled and wrapped the paper for Miller's use.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Thomas Miller learned to draw from Mr. Franklin, a boarder in his aunt's home who taught him to use oil paints. As a child, Miller attended the A.M.E. Zion Methodist Church. Miller attended Douglas High School in Bristol, Virginia from first to twelfth grade. In school, Miller memorized President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address around the age of 10. The Daughters of the American Revolution [DAR] chose Miller to recite the speech in front of the mayors of Tennessee and Virginia and awarded him with a medal. As a teenager, Miller threw the medal into Beaver Creek in response to the DAR's refusal to let contralto Marian Anderson sing at Washington D.C.'s Constitution Hall in 1939. In high school, Miller excelled academically, was lettered in football and basketball, and continued to pursue a career in art. Miller talks about influential teachers and his lifelong role model, Leonardo da Vinci. After graduating from high school in 1937, Miller enrolled at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia where he learned art from John Borigan, an artist and former Olympian. World War II interrupted his studies and Miller was drafted into the U.S. Army.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_003, TRT: 0:28:35 ?

Thomas Miller was a first sergeant in the 3437 Quartermaster Trucking Company during World War II where his principled defiance of a racist officer's orders led to the officer's removal from the company. While in the Army, Miller met his wife, Anita Miller, a member of the Women's Army Corps. They were married for fifty-three years and had three children. After the war, Miller completed his college education at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia in 1947 and opened a service station. He then moved to Chicago, Illinois to study at the Ray Vogue School of Art. After graduating in the late 1940s, Miller struggled to find a job before he was hired at Morton Goldsholl Associates, a respected graphic design firm. In the 1950s, Miller became one of two African Americans in the Society of Typographic Artists, the other was HistoryMaker Leroy Winbush. Miller talks about his design work for Goldsholl clients like 7-Up, Motorola, and IMC. He also talks about racist advertising and his own experiences as a graphic designer of racial discrimination.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Thomas Miller describes racism in the advertising industry and the demeaning portrayals of black people during the 1930s and 1940s. Although Miller was not an active participant in The Civil Rights Movement, he recognized the impact of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As a graphic designer at Morton Goldsholl for thirty-five years, Miller continually pushed himself to learn new skills like airbrushing and calligraphy to stay. After he retired in 1985, Miller experimented with different art forms using foam board and monotype printing. Miller's mosaic works are on display at the DuSable Museum in Chicago,

Illinois. He was commissioned by HistoryMaker Margaret Burroughs to create mosaics depicting the museum's founders as well as Mayor Harold Washington and Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable. Miller describes the mosaics and his artistic process. He also reflects on the dearth of black artists in the early years of his career. Miller expresses his disdain for the term "black art".

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_005, TRT: 0:30:21 ?

Thomas Miller describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Although he was influenced by many artists from Michaelangelo to Van Gogh to Monet and Dalí, Leonardo da Vinci remained Miller's favorite artist from the time he was a young boy. Within his own body of work, Miller cites his portrait of actor Richard B. Harrison as one of his favorite pieces. As a child, Miller placed his art work on the doors of wealthy people in hopes of being discovered as an artist. He reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He also narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Thomas Miller, Section A2003_059_001_006, TRT: 0:07:12 ?

Thomas Miller continues to narrate his photographs.