

*Oral history interview with Eugene Vango (1941–) and Doris Woodson (1929–), conducted by Courtney Tkacz at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia on October 6, 2011.*

*Vango is an artist and retired professor. A native of Norfolk, Virginia, he attended Virginia State University on an art scholarship in the 1960s where his mentor was Doris Woodson. He taught in the public schools before going to Pennsylvania State University to earn an MFA in painting with minor in art history. After completing his degree, he was hired at Virginia State University, where he remained for 32 years, heading up the Department of Art and Design for the last 16 years of his tenure. Since retiring, Vango continues to make and teach art.*

*Woodson is an artist and retired professor. A native of Richmond, she spent much of childhood in Philadelphia, but returned to Richmond to attend high school. After graduating from Xavier College with a Bachelor of Arts degree, she went on to become the first African American to receive an MFA in fine arts (specifically painting) from Virginia Commonwealth University. She is a Professor Emerita at Virginia State University where she taught for 30 years. Since retiring, Woodson continues to make and teach art.*

CT: Are you both native Richmonders?

DW: I was born in Richmond, but I left Richmond when I was about two, and I was raised in Philadelphia. Then I came back to Richmond to go to boarding school in Powhatan at Saint Francis de Sales High School.

EV: I was born and bred in Norfolk, Virginia, and I left there to become a freshman at Virginia State College, the now Virginia State University. And it was during that freshman year I fell in love with Richmond, and I determined that I must live and work in this city. However, my first job was not in Richmond, it was in Atlanta. And the first chance I got to come back, I came back. This was around 1967, and I lived in Richmond for twenty-five years, and I moved over to Petersburg in '89. And that's where I presently reside.

CT: You both have a long history of practicing art and teaching art.

DW & EV: Yes, yes.

CT: So when did you first become interested in art?

DW: Well I became interested in...when I went to boarding school one of the nuns I think, must have recognized something that I didn't realize I had. I had an innate interest in it, because I had an uncle who had painted a picture when he was younger. And I always admired that picture. Somehow that picture just became a part of my psyche, you know. And I thought it was so wonderful that someone could do something like that. And I didn't realize that I had an interest in doing that until the nun had me doing little projects, making pictures for cards which we called



spiritual bouquets...that's what we called them, for special occasions. And you had listings of certain prayers, and on the cover there was a design. And she'd always give me flowers or roses, which I thought were so complicated. But I always did them.

But I wasn't ... I didn't go to school to study that. I went to school to study pharmacy, but I wasn't too good at math. And having to keep a B average was going to be a little difficult for me. So I was in pharmacy for one semester, then I changed to biology. And then I really knew that I didn't like that because I wasn't interested in cutting open animals...dissecting and studying animals...and they had an art department, so I went into art. So that was really my first formal experience with art, in college.

EV: I think my interest in art started in first grade...Richard Allen Tucker Elementary School in Norfolk, Virginia. And it all started with a drawing of a dog, and that dog was shown to about every teacher on that hall. And I guess that kind of encouraged me to kind of further explore this thing they called art. So I think my interest started there, but the interest got momentum when I got to junior high school. I had a very encouraging art teacher by the name of Sidney Waters, and it was under him I did my first oil painting. And he thought I was good enough to enter some statewide and citywide competitions. And I managed to win second prize in the Hermitage Art Foundation art show. And from then on it just started snowballing.

And when I got to high school it was the same thing...I entered these contests and won. But ever since I was in elementary school...I think it was in first grade when I was six years old...that I determined I would be a teacher and I had so many interests...geography, arithmetic, history, English...and I thought I was going to be an elementary school teacher. But then I started thinking around junior high, I said, well, being an art teacher might be cool. So what really made up my mind to really go into art as a teacher was when I got a scholarship to study art in Virginia State College in 1960. And I studied art there for four years and after that went on to teach in Atlanta. And returned to Richmond in '67, stayed with the system for about 5 years and then went onto Virginia State College right after graduate school in 1971.

I was not only active in teaching but active in participating in the profession as an artist also. So I was in shows here and there, outdoor exhibitions, juried shows. As a matter of fact, my first entrance into a juried show was the annual Atlanta Black Arts Exhibition, and I got honorable mention during my senior year in college. That was one of the national avenues open to African Americans for exhibiting on the national level, because we were still in the post-segregation era. As time went on we were able to get more into the mainstream of American art and what was going on there.

CT: Did either of you take art classes outside of the school setting?

EV: When I was in fifth grade, there were classes being held at one of the local churches in Norfolk, and my teacher thought that I was talented enough to benefit from that experience. So I couldn't afford the class, but the teachers got together and got a collection up to pay the tuition



for that class and all I had to do was get there. And it was very exciting, very exciting, every Saturday at Shiloh Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia.

DW: I took a famous artist course at home because I had three children and I had graduated with a Degree in...a Bachelor's in Art...a Bachelor's of Arts degree from Xavier University in New Orleans. But I got married right away and I started having children right away. And I wanted to keep up my art, so I took this course. I'd get up like five o'clock in the morning, and I'd do my art lessons before the children got up. And then I went to...when my children, my last child, was old enough to go to nursing school, I came back to school at VCU, which was Richmond Professional Institute at the time, and I took some refresher classes, undergraduate classes, and then I applied for the masters program in fine arts.

At the time they weren't really allowing the black applicants to go into fine arts, but I don't know, maybe I came at the right time, because several of my acquaintances, who were artists, were not allowed to go into the fine arts program. They had to go into art education, and, well, I really wasn't interested in art education. But I applied for fine arts, and I did get into that and I was the first African American to graduate with a degree in fine arts and painting specifically. The first degree from VCU, too...that was the first year they gave the degree from VCU. So, that was my outside experience, the famous artist school training, and then I went to photography school...photography workshop in Massachusetts, and that was really nice. For...I think that was about six or eight weeks. Worked a little bit with Garry Winogrand who was a famous photographer, which was really a nice experience.

CT: Do you remember your first visit to the museum?

DW: I don't remember the first one, but I remember just generally coming. I know one big show I came to was the African show, which was...

CT: The Tishman collection?

DW: I understand that was the first show of African art. It was a very, very impressive show. The museum wasn't a place that I frequented, you know, often, because it wasn't really a welcoming place for African Americans. I didn't come to any social events here. I only came to that and maybe one or two other shows, and I enjoyed the shows but, it just wasn't a place where you'd come and really feel comfortable and that you were being received with open arms, you know. So, I don't have a lot of good experiences other than being able to look at the art, and any kind of associations of any kind with the museum in the early years...my early years coming back to Richmond or living here...I was over at Virginia State teaching, and I would come back over here to some of the shows because I wasn't raised in Richmond, I was raised in Philadelphia, so I didn't have a lot of experience with the museum until after '69...1969.

EV: My first trip to the museum, I think, was with one of the art classes at Virginia State College. And I was very impressed with the place. I remember the entrance way with that



sculpture on the other side of the driveway. I think it was one of Henry Moore's pieces, and I just thought it was a real grand place. Of course, it was the original building, they had not done any sort of renovation. And it was during the pre-civil rights movement, and I remember it was somewhat segregated. I remember the bathrooms were marked "colored" and "white," and later on after the passage of the Civil Rights Bill with regard to public accommodation, one of those bathrooms became staff and the other became the men's restroom.

I remember over the years the many renovations and the additions that were done at the museum, and I guess I was too fascinated with what I saw and what I encountered to really notice any unfriendliness. Of course, whatever staff I encountered, I found they were, you know, polite. But as I started to visit the museum on my own in later years, I was always alone as an African American in the museum. And I remember later on blacks did start to visit, as the artifacts related to African Americans and Africans started expanding. I remember the first African gallery, it was very small. It was almost no larger than a walk-in closet. But later on, that exhibition expanded into a major gallery, which was a plus for the museum.

And one of the things that struck me was the loan gallery. They had a gallery where people could actually borrow works of art for public use and for use in the home, and I thought that was a wonderful thing. And you could access some of the local artists from that gallery. I used to visit the museum when I was living in Richmond on an average of once a week, and usually that was a Saturday because I lived in walking distance of the museum. And I enjoyed having lunch here. I enjoyed having lunch outside with the old fountain. I don't know...I never got bored with the art that I saw, and each time I saw it, it kind of spoke differently to me. And it was a kind of world that I could kind of get lost in for a while. I just thought it was marvelous, so you know, I didn't notice too much going on around me. I maintained membership in the museum for years, and when they had the Virginia Museum Theatre I always held season tickets. And I remember I chose to come on a Thursday night. And they had some wonderful productions. And as a member I was able to attend a lot of the receptions where I ran into some interesting people. But here still, there were very few African Americans. But over the years I am delighted that the collection of African American art has increased considerably.

DW: Because there wasn't any at that time.

EV: Right.

DW: I remember when they bought their first piece of African American art. And I did have work in one of the shows. We used to have a show of Virginia artists, and I had a work accepted for that, and I also had a piece in the Artist Refusé...was that the name of it?

CT: The Salon des Refusés.

DW: The Salon des Refusés, right. And then I had a piece accepted for...a family self-portrait accepted for the artists...for the big show, which was quite an honor.



EV: They used to have an annual show, or maybe it was every two years, of prints and drawings. And then they'd have another show where they'd have crafts. And these shows were designed to highlight the works of Virginia artists. And I remember making the cut for one. They were all juried, and I got a drawing into the one for drawings and prints. I guess this was somewhere around the late seventies or early eighties. And I was very excited about that.

DW: Yeah, I don't remember the years, but I know it was sort of early. And I did also come to the...I had a season ticket for the play productions downstairs. Another lady and I used to come over for those, which were very enjoyable, but they were very, very few African Americans there, if any, you know. It just wasn't something that you saw.

CT: The theater had segregated seating for a while beginning in 1956. Do you know anyone that attended during those...during that period?

DW: No, I was... that was after...

EV: During the '50s I was still in grammar school, but I happened to get in on the tail end of that kind of arrangement. But it didn't last very long once I started attending the museum.

DW: And this was probably in the '70s when I came, because I used to come with Sylvia Payne. We had season tickets to the plays, which were very good.

EV: But after my first visit, I was anxious to come back and I did. And when I lived in Richmond and I taught in Richmond, I came quite frequently. And I was always finding something that I could use in my teaching that I found here.

DW: I came often, too, when they started the Friends of African and African American Art, and I was a member of that group, and that was really when I felt really welcomed to come to the museum, you know. It wasn't...there wasn't any...I didn't have any feeling of not being able to come, but it was just that it wasn't a place that you felt that you were welcomed to...particularly welcomed to come to. Although you were welcome to come, but, I mean, you felt like nobody cared if you didn't come.

EV: And I got the impression that a lot of people didn't come because there was very little here that they could relate to...

DW: Right.

EV: ...or say that the museum is celebrating the heritage of the populace at large. Although they had exhibits from other ethnic groups, like Asians, and the Africans, and various European ethnic groups, but the relationship or the things that African Americans could identify with were too few. There were...there was one Virginia artist that frequently participated in a lot of the museum activities. I think it was A.B. Jackson who was...who started out teaching at Norfolk State...it was called Norfolk Division of Virginia State College then. He was probably the most



celebrated African American artist in Virginia, and later on we had other additions like Ben Wigfall and Wilbur Chadwick and people like that. And then the museum began to collect from African Americans across the United States like Jacob Lawrence and Betye Saar and her daughter.

DW: And art in African American families was not something that was readily taught or encouraged, because African Americans were kind of just beginning to go to college. You know, I was like the first person in my family to go to college, and people had a tendency in the community to think that that was a frivolous pursuit to take art, because you needed to be working at something that would bring you an income. But you were...they didn't think you could get a job. So, that was the case with me, because I really wanted to go into interior design. I liked that. But my family didn't have the money to do that...to send me to school to do that...and I knew that if I did, I would have a very difficult time making a career of that because I wouldn't have been accepted as a designer for the people who could afford a designer.

So my only alternative was to do what I didn't really want to do at all. That was probably my last choice, to teach, but there was no other choice because when I came along, African Americans could be doctors, lawyers, dentists for African Americans or post...work in the post office or maybe some other job...professional job...but there weren't...those areas...mostly outside of that...or teachers for black children. But mostly outside of those areas there wasn't much offered for black young people. So, my only alternative was to go into education and to teach art. Which I found out after I started teaching, that I really loved it, you know. So I kept teaching. I went to...my first job was at Richard Bland for a short while, and then I was hired at Virginia State. And then I taught adjunct at VCU, and I am still teaching art as a senior, living in a senior residence. I still teach art to the seniors, and it's something that I really love to do.

CT: You were both professors at Virginia State.

DW: Right.

CT: Did you bring your art classes to the museum?

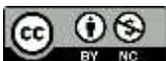
DW: Yes.

EV: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

DW: We took our students on a trip to...well, we didn't come to the Virginia Museum...but we went to the museums in Washington every semester. We'd take them on a day trip to the museums there, to the National Gallery.

EV: That was a very broad experience which started at the National Gallery of Art where they got to see what you might call traditional art...

DW: And contemporary.



EV: ...art of the Renaissance. And then we'd move after lunch to see the more contemporary art at the Hirshhorn. And from there we'd go to the Washington National Cathedral for an experience in medieval architecture. And we'd stay...it was called Introduction to Music and Art, Course 380. And that was a total experience of art and music, because we'd attended the evensong there after the tour of the cathedral itself. And that was a very overwhelming experience for those kids because most of them came from areas that they never got to see art prior to coming to Virginia State or experience seeing the great architecture or the great artifacts of the world. Some of those towns didn't have museums that they could go and have that experience.

DW: Yes, right. We brought them to a show, I think it was here, where we saw that artist from Florida who did the fiber art of figures. The man was sitting in the middle of the room in a chair, and we thought it was a real person.

EV: Uh, Hanson?

DW: No. No, that's not his name.

CT: Not Duane Hanson?

DW: Duane Hanson! Yes, it was. That's who it was!

EV: Yeah, he did the fiberglass sculpture.

DW: Fiberglass, right. That's who it was. That was here, wasn't it?

EV: Yes.

DW: Yeah, we brought our students over here for that one. I remember that one. We probably brought them for more, but that one is real...and we brought them to the African show. And we also brought them to the...didn't we have an Egyptian show here? King Tut? Was that King Tut here or was that in Washington?

EV: That was in Washington. But this museum had an Egyptian gallery.

DW: Yeah, we brought them here.

EV: And I think the most popular aspect of that gallery was looking down into that shaft at that mummy that they had.

DW: But this was a little bit later than in the beginning when we first started coming, you know. It was like more open at that point.

CT: So they never...you never heard from your students that they felt like the museum wasn't accessible like you may have felt?



DW: No, no. I don't know what year Leslie Cheek left the museum...

CT: '68.

DW: '68, okay. But he was...during his time is the time that I most remember, the last time that I most remember the feeling of not being that welcome. Not that we weren't welcome as I said, I didn't feel like I couldn't come over here, but I didn't feel like it was a place that you would be just so happy to be, you know, to be associated with.

EV: And in spite of that, I think the museum did make an effort to reach out to African Americans, because I know two people who benefitted from the annual scholarships...

CT: I was going to ask about that.

EV: That they gave one in the sixties by the name of Dennis Winston and another former classmate of mine by the name of Larnell Custis. I think the museum granted her one of those scholarships and this was somewhere in the sixties.

CT: Benjamin Wigfall received one in the early 1950s.

EV: Okay.

CT: And actually several of the first awards, the award money was to be used to teach art classes for African Americans, like at Craig House or things like that. So since the beginning that was definitely one aspect that they attempted to...

EV: Yeah. I got to meet Ben Wigfall through a colleague Everett Winrow who also taught at Virginia State. And Ben taught at Hampton and moved from there to New Paltz in the New York State University system. Quite a printmaker. And I had an occasion to exhibit in his gallery back in the eighties.

DW: I also did a visiting artist class at...I don't remember whether it was one or two classes or workshops or whatever at the Robinson House, early on.

CT: They had a lot of...they called them "One Man Shows" for Virginia artists.

EV: I remember the Robinson House.

DW: I did...I taught a class there. That was while I was teaching at Virginia State.

EV: Each time I would come to the museum and especially at the Robinson House I would always go away inspired, geared up, and ready to work.

DW: I am so proud of this museum, because it has come a long way. And it's a beautiful museum, and they did such a wonderful job of integrating the old with the new, so that, you know, you barely know when you're inside the building...outside you can tell, but inside you



barely tell the difference between the two unless you're looking at the architectural style, you know. It's such a beautiful experience to come here now. It's really a joy, you know. Something you really get excited about, coming to the museum.

EV: I've been to quite a few museums around the country, and I am proud that this museum has been able to keep pace with some of the most well-known museums around the country.

DW: That's right. It's in the top ten I know. I've heard that. I don't know what number it is, but it's as nice or nicer than a lot of the other museums I've seen. And especially with the grounds, because a lot of museums are in the cities and they don't have the benefit of the beautiful grounds that you have here. So I think they've done such a marvelous job, and it's been interesting to see the frequency of the renovations and enlargements of the museum since I've been, you know, attentive to being around the museum.

CT: And you've definitely seen a demographic shift in who comes to the museum?

DW: Right. Absolutely, yes. And it's really rewarding to see so many African Americans coming to the museum now for various functions and really enjoying it and talking about it.

EV: I remember I was in the museum one day and there were two more African Americans in the museum, two ladies, and they were walking around and were looking at the tapestries. And one lady said, "Oh, what a beautiful rug!" And I said, "Uh oh." I said, "Now that we've got them here, I've got to make sure that they know what they're looking at." I didn't want to embarrass that lady by walking up to her and saying "That's not a rug, lady. That's a tapestry." But I said, "I must do more in my class to teach people how to distinguish between media." I thought that was so funny that she called that thing a rug. But I was so proud to see more other African Americans besides myself coming to the museum.

DW: That probably would be true with most anyone. I mean, they didn't have to be African American. [Laughter]

CT: That's not the first time they've been called rugs. [Laughter]

EV: Right. And a lot of people...and this isn't, you know, not on African Americans, but they can't distinguish between drawings and paintings and other media, and this is, you know, where we have to be a little more effective in art appreciation classes and humanities electives to make sure that people know what they're looking at.

CT: Is that partly why you both still continue to teach art even though you're both retired?

EV: I continue to teach because I enjoy teaching. It was my life, you know. I enjoyed my students, I enjoyed my coworkers. And now that I'm free from all the, I would say, restrictions that I was under when I was teaching, I'm free to kind of explore and to innovate and, you know,

provide an exciting experience for folk who are approaching art for the first time. And I won't have to worry about grading folk, and you know, all that kind of stuff, taking roll... [Laughter]

DW: I enjoy teaching, too. You know, to me it's so rewarding. I get more of a reward—I volunteer to teach where I live—and it's more of a reward to me, I think, from my point of view, than what the students get out of it, because it's so...it's such a joy to see people, these are all very elderly people, and it's such a joy to see them...some of them have wanted to try something in art for so many years but with their other pursuits they haven't been able to, and that they think they can't do it. And you know, I know they can if they just decide that they would work at it, you know. And to see the look or the expressions or the comments they make when they do a piece of work and I mat it and frame it and they are so overcome.

One day I was...I came in the art room and this lady was from New York City, and she had never done any art, and she said...and the first thing she told me when I asked her if she wanted to get into the art class was, “no indeed!” So I said well just come and visit us and she came and visited, and I gave her a pencil and I gave her a pepper and I told her to look at it. I gave her something, some piece, I think it was a pepper. I don't know...don't remember exactly what it was, but I think it was a green pepper, and I told her to do...I told her how to do a contour drawing. And she said “Draw that without looking at it?” [Laughter] And I, you know, explained to her what I wanted her to do and she did it, and I commented on how well she had done it and she looked at it and she didn't believe she had done it. But she got in the class as a result of that, and one of the first things that she did was pretty good so I matted it and framed it for her, and I had it hanging on the wall. And she came in the art room, and I came in behind her, and she was just standing there. I didn't know she was in there. She was just standing there and I was behind her. And I saw her doing this, you know, she was just shaking her shoulders. So I said, “Dolores, what are you laughing about?” And she said “I did that! I did that!” And that was like somebody giving me a big box with a big bow on it as a gift.

And then Margaret Dabney, you know, she did a drawing and I said, “Oh that's wonderful! That is so nice, beautiful lines.” You know, she had...I had given them a plant to draw. And I matted hers and framed it and I took it to her and she looked at it and I said, “I brought your drawing to you.” And she said “That's mine?” So, you know, it's really a reward for me to be able to share and help people to see. But they're not...they look at things, but they don't really see them. And then someone told me one day they were looking, they see so much more. She said, “I see so much more now that I'm taking this class,” she said, “than I could see before.” She said, “I was looking at the clouds when I was driving...” and I said, “Oh no, no, please don't do it while you're driving!” [Laughter] But they look at the trees and it's just, it really...it gives me a lot of pleasure and elation to know that people see things that are there to be seen, that are so wonderful to see, the relationship between the sky and the trees and the colors and the...it's just shapes.

EV: Yeah, now that the work is over they can smell the coffee. [Laughter]



DW: Yeah. And the different kinds of art. And to know that they don't have to worry about a grade. First class I tell them everyone has an A+, so don't worry about the grades. You know, everyone has an A+, just enjoy. It's wonderful for me. I've been teaching art to the seniors now for at least four years. Since I've been over there five years and I've been teaching for four of them.

EV: I've been retired for eight years now, and I've continued to exhibit, paint, and exhibit. And I have the opportunity to teach a class beginning Friday at Westminster Canterbury, I'm going to be teaching drawing and it's going to be nice. It's gonna really be nice.

CT: Great. Well, I thank you. It's been forty minutes, so we've just talked the day away. Is there anything else you want to add?

DW: You can probably scratch a lot of it. [Laughter]

CT: Not at all...not at all.

EV: Well I'm just happy to participate in this archival event, because I think old folk have a lot to say and they've experienced a lot that really shouldn't get lost.

DW: No, that's true.

EV: Because that's first-hand information. And I've enjoyed the museum, and it has certainly inspired me and motivated me in my work and my teaching, too, so I hope the institution continues to thrive.

DW: And the collections have just...oh, they're wonderful...they're just getting better and better and better.

EV: Yes.

DW: Yes, they really are.

CT: We're lucky to have them here.

DW: Yes, yes, we are. This is really a gift for Richmond.

EV: Well, it's a gift for the whole United States, actually.

DW: Yeah, well, it's a gift for the world, but it's a real gift for the city of Richmond, because we don't think of Richmond as a highly metropolitan place, although it's metropolitan, but most people think of Richmond as a small town, really, in relation to the bigger, more gigantic metropolis, you know, like New York City and Washington, D.C. But to have a museum like this in Richmond I just think is awesome.



EV: And it's awesome that they were able to take art to the people with that program they had called the Artmobile, which Virginia State used to make arrangements for on an annual basis. I don't know where that program is today.

DW: Do they still have it?

EV: Do they still have it?

CT: No, it ended in the 1990s.

EV: Okay.

DW: Oh.

CT: Yeah, but it was so popular. And so many people have stories about seeing that.

DW: And that was so nice because you were able to take art to the people that couldn't get to the museums. The proximity of museums was not available for them.

EV: A lot of school children benefitted from that because all schools in Virginia did not have art programs. Not all of them had art programs or art teachers, or the program was so thin probably due to budgetary issues that they couldn't supply art teachers as needed. So that was good compensation for that type of situation.

