

New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

PODCAST TITLE: *The Hand Of Freedom*

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NMS Placement Site: *Art UK*

Section 1

Hello, My name is Hermenia Powers, and I am a trainee at the New Museum school, based at Art UK, Art UK is one of the most impressive organisations you may have never heard of. They are on a mission to digitise all of the UK's public sculpture and showcase it online. The project will take an estimated three years to complete.

But what's the point of it?

Well, the sole purpose is to make art accessible for all to view and enjoy, the website artuk.org, will forever stand as a means to access the nations art, and means there's a documented account of the artists and artworks that have left a legacy big or small; their contribution is not at risk of being forgotten.

So with sculpture being a hot topic. I took it upon myself to take a trip across the Atlantic, to one of Africa's smallest yet most fascinating countries, Liberia; to rediscover an African giant of contemporary art.

Section 2

Our artist in focus is *Richuline Vahnjah Richards*. *Richards*' ancestry can be traced back to an '*Othello Richards*'. *Othello* was a slave in Rockbridge County, Virginia and died a free man, a citizen of the Republic of Liberia after migrating there in the mid-nineteenth century. *The Richards* family would be fundamental in helping build the town of 'Clay-Ashland' located on the St Paul River, a 'settler' town, meaning it would become the home of freed slaves from the U.S. And so this is the town our *Richards* grew up in, sitting high on the banks of the St Paul River.

Section 3

Richuline V. Richards born 1935, was a man of many talents, a singer, radio personality and not to mention Mayor of his hometown, Clay-Ashland. Most of all, he is known for sculpting many of Liberia's most treasured sculptures. *Richards* worked mainly from wood, creating intricate works- one particular work though, this one made of bronze- catches my attention, it screams life and movement, it translates the significance of music to Liberia's cultural heritage.

Section 4

Titled 'Traditional Dancers', the dancers who are wearing native dress, and sculpted back to back, relish in the sound of a talking drum. Richards himself was a lover of music, and I was shocked to find out he played the drums, at the height of his career he conducted and produced a morning radio show called 'Focus on Folk Music' from 1964 to 1980. Another radio show, titled, 'Adventures with Classical Music' produced by the artist in 1987, would grace the radios of everyday Liberians on Sunday nights from 11.15 to 11.45.

This love for music was apparent throughout his life, *Richards* was the choir director of St Peter's Methodist Church where his father was a reverend. When still a student, at the Booker Washington Institute (BWI) in Kakata, Liberia, he directed the BWI Male Glee Club, who would become well-known in Liberia for their awesome music composition. He Graduated from BWI from the prestigious Liberian school majoring in carpentry and traditional carving in 1953.

His passion and dedication to the arts paid off, when he received a scholarship from the Government of Liberia to study at Ohio State University. Completing a degree in 1962 in Sculpture and Ceramics from the Institute of Chicago. He then returned to Liberia to create his own art studio 'creative art studio' on Buchanan Street in Monrovia, where he offered private lessons in Arts and Crafts.

INTERVIEW CLIP 1

Armena Richards, on what she remembers of her father, of his art and personality

Section 5

Because of his work-ethic, passion and knowledge, he was promoted to Assistant Professor of the University of Liberia in 1966 and in 1979, he became a chairman of the department of Arts and Crafts at the university, and also taught Arts and Craft at the American Cooperative School and The College of West Africa in Monrovia.

His career at the Ministry of Public Works in Liberia and the various International organizations that he was a member of opened doors for him to travel throughout Europe, Latin America and closer to home - Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone.

In 1977 - the 'Second World Festival of Black and African Art' took place in Lagos, Nigeria, that year the continent saw a celebration of art from two Liberian artists, *Richards* had been invited as a special guest to the event and singer *Morris Dolly* performed his hit 'Who are you Baby'. He was commissioned to create many works for notable African figures. Including the famous 'pata-pata singer' *Miriam Makeba* and *Ahmed Sekou Toure* the first president of Guinea. A statue named 'Thoughts of Africa' In the infamous Ducor Hotel or 'Hotel Africa' once known to be the continents finest Hotel in Liberia's hay-day of the 60's is also sculpted by *Richards*.

Section 6

But *Richards* was more than just an artist, he was an advocate for the arts, he believed in the preservation of Liberia's cultural heritage, his radio show focused on the beauty of Liberian folk-music, he dedicated his time to leadership roles in various organisations, to name a few:

- He acted as Chairman of the School Committee of Clay-Ashland; 1971-1977
- Was Chief of the Division of Art and Crafts, Ministry Cultural Affairs and Tourism, 1966-1968.
- Served as the National Representative for Liberia for the World Crafts Council, 1964-1968 and not to mention Vice President for Africa of the World Crafts Council (WCC), 1968-1974.
- He accepted to serve again on June 19, 1987 as Vice President for Africa WCC until his death.

His work certainly motivated by his love for creating and its role in informing the public on the rich history of Liberia's people, both native people and settlers- in this quote he highlights the importance of a legacy that instills the belief of art's intrinsic value to any society, as it maintains the preservation of a nation's past heritage and fuels the creativity of the present.

INTERVIEW CLIP 2 - Richuline V. Richards

I believe that an artist may create masterpieces such as monuments, statues, relief murals, etc. which may bring him fame, wealth and popularity.... but I feel that if one artist tries to train at least one other person as an artist, his contribution is more valuable to the society because though the training of each additional artist, the beauty, history and culture/heritage and way of life of man will continue to be portrayed through the arts for generations unborn. To this belief, I dedicated my life as an artist.