C. Oliver LaGrone (1906-1995)

Papers, 1942-1995
.4 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 1997-01

Acquisition: Donated by Oliver LaGrone’s daughter, Lotus Johnson.

Access: Access to the collection is unrestricted

Photographs: Removed to Special Photo File

Copyright: Copyright to this collection is held by the Cranbrook Educational Community

Citation: C. Oliver LaGrone Papers, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

History

Clarence Oliver LaGrone, the first African-American student at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, was born December 9, 1906 in McAlester, Oklahoma to Lula Evelyn and William Lee LaGrone. William, a minister and gifted writer who understood the value of a good education, raised Oliver to appreciate education and his African-American heritage.

In 1928, C. Oliver LaGrone attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he studied English and economics. He left school in the summer of 1929 to help his family with their move to Albuquerque. After his father passed away in 1930, he chose not to return to Howard, and enrolled at the University of New Mexico, graduating in 1938 with a B.A. in sociology and fine arts. It was here that he met and married Irmah Cooke. In 1940, the family moved to Michigan, and in the fall of 1941, Oliver began studying with sculptor Carl Milles at Cranbrook Academy of Art. In March 1942, Oliver won a McGregor Fund scholarship for advanced study in sculpture.

Upon completing his studies at Cranbrook, Oliver worked a variety of jobs in order to support his family. In the 1940’s, he worked for Ford at the Detroit Rouge Plant, and in the 1950’s he served as a United Auto Workers international representative. During the McCarthy era, Oliver was asked by the Detroit Loyalty Committee to act as an informant and provide “communist” information on his contacts in the art world, particularly Paul Robeson. LaGrone refused, lost his UAW job as a result and had to sell pots and pans door-to-door.

He returned to school, attending Wayne State University from 1956-1960, receiving the equivalent of an M.A. in Special Education. He worked in the Detroit Public schools teaching arts and crafts and special education. In 1970, Oliver was invited to lecture in art education and Afro-American history at Pennsylvania State University. In 1972, he was appointed Special Assistant to the Vice President of undergraduate education, and in 1975, became artist-in-residence for all 21 branches of the university system. He then served as artist-in-residence at the Hershey Foundation and the Boas Arts Magnet Center for Learning in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Oliver did not limit his creativity to teaching art and creating sculptures. He also wrote and had several poems and reviews published in Negro Digest and the New York Times Sunday Book Review.

Oliver was a longtime Unitarian Universalist and significantly impacted the church and the Harrisburg community by establishing the Oliver LaGrone Scholarship Fund in 1974. Proceeds from the sale of LaGrone’s “The Dancer” was an early contribution to the fund. “Oliver LaGrone Day” was proclaimed by the mayors of Harrisburg on February 3, 1980 and again in 1993, in respect for his community contributions.
In the mid-1990s, he returned to Detroit where he died in October 1995 at the age of 89.

**Scope and Content of Collection**

This collection contains biographical material on LaGrone, as well as newspaper clippings, correspondence, and exhibit programs and lectures, which document his life and career as an artist. Several poems about and by LaGrone are included, as well as a master’s thesis on LaGrone. A photocopy of a scrapbook is included in the collection, and photographs of LaGrone, his friends and family, and sculptures have been removed to the special photo file. Folders are arranged alphabetically.

**Related Collections**

- Cranbrook Academy of Art: Records of the Administration (1981-09)
- Cranbrook Academy of Art Publications (1998-05)
Box Number--Description

Box 1

1. Biographical
2. Certificates, 1990-1993
3. Clippings (1 of 3)
4. Clippings (2 of 3)
5. Clippings (3 of 3)
7. Poetry
9. Scrapbook