Descriptive Summary

Creator: Willis, John Ralph.
Title: John Ralph Willis papers, 1971-1992
Call Number: Manuscript Collection No. 1208
Extent: .25 linear ft. (1 box)
Abstract: This collection contains the papers of John Ralph Willis from 1971-1992, including correspondence, printed material and a few photographs.
Language: Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

Restrictions on Access
Unrestricted access.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction
All requests subject to limitations noted in departmental policies on reproduction.

Source
Purchase, 2011.

Citation
[after identification of item(s)], John Ralph Willis papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Processing
Processed by Sarah Quigley, November 2011.

Collection Description

Biographical Note
John Ralph Willis (1938-2007), African American educator and art collector, was born in Lorain, Ohio to John R. Willis, Sr. and Lena Mae Tinch Willis. He was a cousin of noted African American artist and scholar John A. Willis (1911-1997). Willis attended Booker T. Washington High School in Detroit, Michigan, and earned a B.A. in English from Oberlin College in 1960. He pursued graduate studies in sociology at Columbia University and received his Ph.D. in 1975. In 1975, he became a sociology professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and in 1983, he joined the faculty of Tougaloo College in Mississippi as a sociology professor and chairman of the Department of Social Sciences. Willis was also a founder of the William T. Dillard Library of African American Art, which was later renamed the John R. Willis Library of African American Art. In 1992, he began an art collection of African American art, which he later donated to Emory University. Willis was a member of several professional associations, including the American Sociological Association, the Midwest Conference of Teachers of African American History, and the American Association of Teachers of African American Studies. He was also active in the community, serving on the boards of several organizations and contributing to the development of African American art. John Ralph Willis passed away on July 29, 2007.
American author Toni Morrison. Willis received a bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona, a master's degree from Boston University and a Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London where he was a Marshall Scholar. He was a faculty member at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Birmingham (UK) before joining the faculty in Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies in 1972. He was an expert in West African History and Islamic Law; Director of Princeton's program in African American Studies; founder of Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Comparative Studies; advisor to the Cass Library of African Studies; and a fellow of the Morgan Library. Willis was also an art collector, and wrote the catalog for "Fragment of American Life," an exhibition at Princeton University focusing on seven African-American artists, including Romare Bearden, Joseph Delaney, Rex Goreleigh, Lois Mailou Jones, Jacob Lawrence, Hughie Lee-Smith, and Hale Woodruff.

Willis married Anne Jones in 1972 and the couple had three children together; a daughter, Avery and two sons, Kingsley and Gorleigh. He also had two daughters, Ashley and Courtney, from a previous marriage. Willis died of a heart attack in November 2007 at age 69.

Scope and Content Note
This collection contains the papers of John Ralph Willis from 1971-1992. The collection documents Willis's interest in African American art through correspondence, printed material and a few photographs. The correspondence includes letters to Willis from artists Joseph Delaney and Rex Goreleigh, as well as a number of fellow educators. Printed material includes symposia programs, newsletters and articles about African American art, and also exhibition invitations and programs, particularly from the Rainbow Sun Gallery. The photographs in this collection are of Willis with artists Hughie Lee-Smith and Jacob Lawrence.

Arrangement Note
Arranged alphabetically by record type.
## Container List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box</th>
<th>Folder</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Correspondence, 1973-1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Photographs, including John Willis with Hughie Lee-Smith and Jacob Lawrence, undated</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Printed material: Exhibit invitations and programs, 1971-1984</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Printed material: Newsletters, 1975-1976</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Printed material: Rainbow Sign Gallery exhibit programs, 1972-1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Printed material: Symposia programs, 1975-1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Printed material: <em>Voices from the Harlem Renaissance</em>, edited by Nathan Irvin Huggins, brochure, 1976</td>
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</tbody>
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