



News

Eldzier Cortor, artist who studied black cultures, dies at 99 +



Renowned artist Eldzier Cortor poses for a portrait at the Palmer House on Feb. 21, 2015 in Chicago. (Armando L. Sanchez / Chicago Tribune)

By **Kate Marshall Dole**
Chicago Tribune

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Eldzier Cortor was known for his study of the black female form over his many decades as a working artist.

Though his work was in the public eye since 1946, when his painting of a semi-nude African-American woman, titled "Southern Gate," was featured in Life magazine, Cortor was a private person who painted for himself, not the approval of others.

"He wasn't motivated by his audience; he was motivated by his soul," said Michael Rosenfeld, owner of the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, a dealer of Cortor's works. "For many years, I encouraged him to meet with art historians and curators and be the subject of exhibitions. He denied one request after another."

Cortor, 99, died Nov. 26, in his son Michael Cortor's Seaford, N.Y., home, the son said.

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Cortor was born in Richmond, Va., on Jan. 10, 1916, the only son of John, an electrician, and Ophelia Cortor. Participating in the Great Migration of black families from the rural South, the Cortors moved to Chicago in 1917, according to an essay written by Matt Backer that accompanied an exhibition of Cortor's work at the Indiana University Art Museum in 2006.

Growing up, Cortor read the Chicago Defender and was drawn to the comic "Bungleton Green." When he enrolled at the School of the [Art Institute](#) in 1936, he intended to create his own comics.

"I wanted to be a cartoonist," Cortor said in a video released by the Art Institute of Chicago earlier this year. "In order to be a cartoonist, I had to take the whole course, you see. Painting and all of that other stuff. But then I found out that I excelled in the other things."

At the Art Institute, Cortor studied under Kathleen Blackshear, who was influential in the artistic development of several prominent black artists, and who often depicted African-Americans in her own work. Blackshear brought Cortor to the Field Museum for inspiration, and the collection of African sculpture had a strong influence on his emerging artistic style.

Later in the 1930s, Cortor found employment through the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.

"As a worker in the Federal Art Project, a branch of the Works Progress Administration designed to both employ the nation's artists and to fill public buildings with art, Cortor drew genre scenes of Depression-era Bronzeville," Backer wrote.

With WPA funding, Cortor, alongside Charles White and Margaret Burroughs, co-founded the South Side Community Art Center. The center, which remains open today, is the only surviving arts center of 110 opened under the Federal Art Project, according to the center's website.

In the early 1940s, with a grant from the Rosenwald Fund, Cortor traveled to the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and the Carolinas to study the Gullah community.

During this time, "he found particularly elegant and beautiful," said Rosenfeld. These figures were prominent in Cortor's paintings throughout his career.

"Part of what made Eldzier Cortor so influential was the kind of integrity he had in his focus" on these figures, which "he pursued and explored for 75 years," Rosenfeld said.

Cortor continued his study of African-American cultures and figures in Jamaica, Cuba and Haiti, supported by a Guggenheim fellowship.

In the early 1950s, Cortor settled in New York City, where he lived for the rest of his life. During that time, he met Sophia Schmidt, whom he married and remained with until her death in 2006.

Cortor's work has been featured at the Art Institute, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Boston's Museum of Fine Art and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, among others. Earlier this year, Cortor gave the Art Institute a painting, 30 prints and several printing matrices. In conjunction with the gift, he visited Chicago for the first time since 1952.

His son Michael recalls that Cortor was a private person, particularly when it came to his work.

"He always said that art is solitude," Michael Cortor said. "I do have one picture of him contemplating a drawing, but I never saw him sitting down and actually drawing or painting. He seemed to want to do that in isolation."

Survivors also include a daughter, Miriam Cortor, and a granddaughter.

Services will be Dec. 21 in New York.

Dole is a freelance reporter.

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