1971.005.001 Drawing



Description
Pastel portrait of Nellie Harriet Watts (1889-1969), done from a photograph by Carl Owens. A full-face view of subject wearing olive green hat and dress, having short hair touched with grey, against slate blue background. Narrow white cloth mat, gilded grey frame, under non-glare glass. Subject was a school teacher and was known as "Mother to Black Artists."

Born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1889, Miss Watts graduated from Atlanta University and studied at Columbia University before coming to Detroit in 1920. A 39-year public teaching career began in 1920 at the Capron school and ended in 1960 at the Duffield School. She taught third and fourth grades. She also helped to organize the Detroit Federation of teachers. She once told reporters that "Both of my parents were born in slavery, and when they became free, my father's one big idea was to educate his seven children. For most of his working life, father was a $6.00-a-week-railroad-worker. In later life he was able to go into his own grocery store business. Both my mother and father encouraged me to study for a teaching career."

When she first came to Detroit, Nellie Watts joined the Plymouth Congressional Church. For many years she was superintendent of the Sunday school, occasionally sang in the choir and was active in working with young people's groups. In 1937, Nellie Watts and a little-known artist made their Detroit debut in Old Orchestra Hall. The artist was

a vocalist Marion Anderson. The critics "raved over Miss Anderson's quality, tone, and range, and I lost $800 because of the sparse attendance at this--concert" For six years, after her public school teaching day was over, Miss Watts carried her concert series alone. Friends and acquaintances became used to having Miss. Watts approach with a plea for a short-term loan to cover concert losses. Although she seldom broke even, she did get some backing in 1943, when a patron of the arts group was organized with 300 members. Each member was asked to pay $10 annually. Six dollars of each membership went to Nellie Watts. In return she guaranteed tickets to star performances. Even so, Miss. Watts had to use a large share of her teaching salary each year to meet expenses. In later years, Miss.Watts received some financial support from the Michigan State Council for the Arts. Friends and fellow-teachers say that Miss. Watts often dipped into her own slim funds to buy a violin for a struggling young African American artist or to finance music lessons for a African American youngster who had operatic ambitions. A testimonial banquet was held for Nellie Watts on March 18, 1967, in the Masonic Temple. George Romney, at that time Governor of Michigan. Two years later Nellie Watts passed away. She was buried in her native city of Atlanta. She died on December 26, 1969, at the age of 80. Back in Detroit, a special memorial service was held for Miss. Watts in the Plymouth United Church of Christ.