

**The Work is Never Finished:
Prints, Drawings, and Paintings by Samella Lewis
January 24 – March 7, 2026**

Artist, educator, activist, art historian, and curator Dr. Samella Lewis (1923-2022) conducted the lion's share of her life and career in the service of others: championing the work of other Black artists, battling institutional hurdles to create educational and professional opportunities for people of color, and pioneering the field of African American art history. Her own artwork, however, she made for herself. Artmaking constituted a lifelong personal imperative, an essential instrument of communication with her own mind and with the experiences of her community.

The production of her prints, drawings, paintings, and sculpture were deeply personal for Dr. Lewis. Growing up in segregated New Orleans, she channeled her fury at the racial injustice and brutality she witnessed through her practice. As she recalled in a 1999 interview, "I was an artist out of necessity, because of experiences, and you might say a certain amount of pain. Because I needed a voice to respond to situations... so I found from an early stage the idea of symbolic visual expression."

Dr. Lewis seldom worked from live models and rarely used preliminary sketches, relying on memory, accumulated experience, and emotional response to guide her work. A late-1940s pencil drawing and subsequent related linocuts depict a group of migrant workers huddled in the back of a truck. In another drawing from 1942, a young woman curls in on herself with her back to the viewer, guarded but composed. The abstracted female farm laborer in *Field*, 1968 surges defiantly, fist raised, toward the sun. Later works focus on quiet, intimate moments of human connection. These images do not portray specific people, but represent collective portraits of outrage, sorrow, and hope.

"Generally speaking," Dr. Lewis once observed, "the work is never finished." This comment on the subject of her artmaking could just as easily apply to the ongoing legacy of her uncompromising, unrelenting fight for the recognition of Black artists and their rightful place in the art historical canon.

Dr. Samella Lewis earned her bachelor's degree in art history from the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia in 1945, and master's and doctoral degrees in fine art and art history from Ohio State University in 1948 and 1951. She held multiple teaching positions, including at Florida A&M University; State University of New York (SUNY), Plattsburgh; and Scripps College, Claremont, California. She produced numerous books and documentary films on Black art and artists, founded the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles, and launched the periodical *Black Art: An International Quarterly* (later published as the *International Review of African American Art*). Among the public collections in which her works are included are the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.