



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charles W. Corey
regarding James Montgomery Flagg, 1983
June 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Charles W. Corey on June 8, 1983. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: This is Liza Kirwin, interviewing Charles Corey, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, June 8, 1983. Mr. Corey, could you describe how you were selected to pose for the James Montgomery Flagg poster in 1942?

CHARLES COREY: Well, I was informed by Special Services that I had been selected to be the model for a poster, which I knew nothing about, and was told to report to an address in New York City, in the area of Central Park, and to meet with a Mr. James Montgomery Flagg, who was going to do a poster. I was extremely flattered, naturally—I think anybody would be—but a little scared. This was in 1942. I'm not exactly sure of the date. But it was between Father's Day and—something in that area. And I thought possibly I was going to be sitting for a Father's Day poster [laughs] or something. But being aware of Mr. Flagg's World War I poster, which had become famous, I mean, I was so flattered that I didn't know what was going to happen. So I had to be there at nine o'clock in the morning. And being in the military and told that I will be there at nine, I was promptly there at nine and rang the buzzer. And a doorman asked me who I was. And I said I had an appointment with Mr. Flagg. [00:01:56] And he called up to Mr. Flagg's apartment, studio apartment, which was, I think, on the top floor of that building. And—

LIZA KIRWIN: Is that at Central Park?

CHARLES COREY: This is facing Central Park. And went up. And Mr. Flagg greeted me, very, very nicely. I was very impressed when I met the man, the size of the man himself, his face, which had these heavy, bushy eyebrows, and the character of his face, the lines in it, a s—the strength that he represented. And, of course, while he was asking me if I'd like a cup of coffee, to relax me—and he was trying to tell me exactly what was going to happen—I had an opportunity to look around at the apartment, which was a very large apartment. His work area was in one section. But he lived there. His bedrooms, bathrooms, et cetera were on the other side, kitchen. And in one section, as I was sitting there waiting for him to come out of the kitchen and bring me coffee, I could see one whole area covered with magazines. Must have been, oh, hundreds and hundreds of magazines. So apparently, every company sent him a magazine either gratis. I don't think anyone could afford to pay the bill. And I said to him, "Why don't you donate this pile of magazines to the Special Services or the—some enlisted man's club or—et cetera." And he said, "That's a good idea." He said, "Not a bad—get rid of them out of the apartment because the garbage men go crazy, when I collect all these." They—[00:04:00] just a fantastic amount of magazines. And then, of course, looking around the apartment, I saw prizes that had been awarded to Mr. Flagg by various countries, for work that he had performed in those countries, and also the life-size picture of Ethel Barrymore that he had in his apartment, which he turned around and told me that he had done for the Barrymore Theatre. And that picture was the picture of Ethel outside the Barrymore Theatre. And co—now, at that point, he also informed me that he and the Barrymores were—had been very close together, as a family practically, and that he was also working, at that time, on a book that was being written by Gene Fowler, and it was called *Good Night, Sweet Prince*. And actually, it was about Jack Barrymore. And he was doing the illustrations in the book.

LIZA KIRWIN: So that's how you were chosen and how you—

CHARLES COREY: Well, I don't know how I was chosen, actually.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you think that they were looking for a specific image of the American soldier and they chose you because they had a photograph of you, and so they made some decision along that line?

CHARLES COREY: That's a good question. I don't know. I have looked in the mirror and often wondered—

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: —is this the image of the American soldier? [Laughs.]

LIZA KIRWIN: Soldier.

CHARLES COREY: But, no, I really couldn't answer. Whether Mr. Flagg had called or the—see, the poster was going to be sponsored by the United Cigar Corporation of America. [00:06:00] And it's possible that someone in that company had called Selective Services—Special Services, rather—Special Services for a model or someone they thought would be a model or someone that had the patience of sitting on one's butt for eight and a half hours.

LIZA KIRWIN: Can you describe the poster?

CHARLES COREY: Yes. The poster is about, oh, I'd say a little over three feet tall and about—maybe two feet in width—give you some idea—a typical type of poster you'd see in a store window advertising cigars or cigarettes.

LIZA KIRWIN: How were you posed?

CHARLES COREY: I am sitting on a footlocker, looking very dejected. That's how he wanted me to look. And I'm holding a box—an empty box of cigars. And it says—it says over the poster, "When you buy, remember him." So it's a push, actually, for more than for the soldier. It's for the—cigar people are thinking—this is like—almost like a commercial, if you almost think about it.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you smoke cigars, at the—?

CHARLES COREY: No. No. I—

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you get any complementary cigars?

CHARLES COREY: None.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: This is very interesting, too. I got a—believe it or not was sitting for eight and a half hours—a \$50 war bond and my carfare back to Fort Hamilton—was where I was stationed at that particular time. And I got totally smashed with Mr. Flagg. Because every 15 or 20 minutes, when we had a break from modeling and he was doing his scratching out—[00:08:02]—because he had a scratchy type of method, like using a pen and scratching as he painted. And it comes out quite well on the poster. Because you can see his method. And we—he'd give me a break. But then he would pour himself an ounce or ounce—a half of scotch. And he'd pour me one. Well, when I first met him and started the poster—posing for the poster, I was extremely courteous. It was "Mr. James Montgomery Flagg." And after he got talking to me for about two hours, I got—start calling him "Mr. Flagg." And then two hours later, it was "James." And the two of us [laughs] beginning to feel no pain. And I was trying very, very hard [laughs] not to fall off this footlocker. Interesting enough, when he would give me a break, I had an opportunity actually to go and wash up, clean up for a few seconds. So I went into his bathroom, and over the toilet bowl was a painting of a hand, which naturally caught my eye. And when I came back out, I said, "Whose hand is that, Mr. Flagg?" And he said, "Oh, that's Jack Barrymore's hand." He said, "He came to see me once and got very, very drunk, and got very nauseous. And when he went to the toilet and he put his hand—as you kneel on the floor and put your hand on the toilet," he said, "I painted it."

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: That's one of the interesting parts of his apartment. Some of the others were interesting. In his bathroom, he had a life-size painting of Jinx Falkenburg. And Jinx Falkenburg at that time, I believe, was Miss Rheingold number one. [00:10:01] This was the year that they started the Rheingold contest. And she had been selected as the model. And extremely beautiful woman and apparently friendly with Mr. Flagg. But she posed for him, in the nude, and he painted her body, in the nude, in—on the side wall of his bathtub. And you can imagine where the water came out and the hot and cold.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: I don't know whether you'd like this for your recording, but it's going to be there. So he was an interesting man. And, of course, as I said, it took about eight and a half to nine hours. I never had an idea of ever becoming a model. I mean, he asked me. He said, "Would you like to do any?" And I said, "No, once was enough." We finished, oh, sometime late in the afternoon. And I went back to the fort, never saw Mr. Flagg again, and only saw my poster after it was published and put out, in some store windows. And I was informed now—the newspapers got ahold of the idea that—they gave me some publicity. And Ed Zeltner, at that time, was the—one of the feature writers for the *Daily Mirror*, which is no longer in press. I mean, it's been gone for a few years. But I was in his column, Ed Zeltner. A young corporal from New Bedford, Massachusetts, had been posing for James Montgomery Flagg for the World War II poster. Naturally, now the New Bedford *Standard-Times*, which

was my hometown paper, picked it up. So there was a picture of me in that paper—with the story and with a picture of the poster. [00:11:55] And I have that particular copy, which I think I'd be happy to have copied and give to the archives, so you have—

LIZA KIRWIN: That would be nice to have.

CHARLES COREY: —so you have a backup of what happened as—and actually, you could almost tell by the date of the paper, you know, when this occurred. There any other questions you'd like to ask?

LIZA KIRWIN: Well, could you tell me if he worked from full-size or if he did smaller sketches, when he was—when you were posing?

CHARLES COREY: No, the poster shows me, you know, full-size, sitting—

LIZA KIRWIN: But I mean, the poster itself was—was he working on small sketches or was he working on a larger piece of paper?

CHARLES COREY: No, he was working on something that would be, as I said, oh, like this—

LIZA KIRWIN: About three feet?

CHARLES COREY: About.

LIZA KIRWIN: All right. Uh-huh [affirmative]. Okay. And he never took any photographs of you—

CHARLES COREY: No.

LIZA KIRWIN: —he didn't do it—

CHARLES COREY: No, he did not.

LIZA KIRWIN: —from photographs.

CHARLES COREY: No. No. He just sketched me, as I sat there.

LIZA KIRWIN: You mentioned an anecdote earlier about first meeting him, what he—what was the first thing that he said to you, when he met you?

CHARLES COREY: Oh!

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: Very interesting. He said to me—he said, "Most people think that most painters or people associated with the world of art are homosexuals." He said, "I just want to assure you that I'm not a homosexual," which struck me very funny.

LIZA KIRWIN: That was the first thing.

CHARLES COREY: But that was the first thing he said to me.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: Because he said, "Many of my friends are." And he said, "But I'm not." I don't know whether he said that to put me at ease, you know, sitting in his studio. It didn't bother me anyway. But this was the first thing he said to me. Yes.

LIZA KIRWIN: Could you tell me about the scrapbooks that he showed you while you were there in the studio?

CHARLES COREY: Oh, yes. That—he had albums of the Barrymore family, with pictures of himself and Lionel, Ethel. And, of course, his favorite was Jack, John Barrymore. [00:14:00] And there was a lot more of John Barrymore and himself and Gene Fowler in the albums than there was of Ethel and Lionel. But he's extremely fond of the Barrymore family, very close to the Barrymores. And he said Jack Barrymore was probably, in his estimation, the greatest actor that ever appeared on a stage or in Hollywood. Absolutely fantastic, good-looking man, as he pointed out. He said—unfortunately—he said—quite a drunk. But—which was the downfall, I think, of Jack Barrymore.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did Flagg talk to you or mention anything about any other models that he—had used—

CHARLES COREY: No.

LIZA KIRWIN: —for his posters?

CHARLES COREY: No. He never mentioned—it's unfortunate, I should have asked him who posed for the World War I poster, which became so famous. I've had people ask me, when they found out that I posed for Mr. Flagg—that I look pretty good for the model who posed for that poster. [They laugh.] Well, actually, I tell them I didn't pose for the World War I poster. Because I'd have to be—what—110—

LIZA KIRWIN: Yeah.

CHARLES COREY: —[laughs] at the present moment. So. But they always think of that poster, if they—when they think of asking me about James Montgomery Flagg. They don't tie me in with the poster he did in World War II.

LIZA KIRWIN: How did you decide to donate your poster to the Library of Congress?

CHARLES COREY: Well, my wife, Mary, myself talked about this. And I had called on Mr. Paul Richard, of the *Washington Post*, and he had put me in touch with the Library of Congress, about the idea of my donating the poster, rather than—[00:16:07]—I was actually, I think, interested at the time finding out whether it was worth a lot of money, as a collector's item. And he assured me, "Yes, you—possibly you could get a couple of hundred dollars." But I think my children were more interested in a lot more money than a couple hundred dollars. So I said—and I thought this over to myself. In my will, which one of my children would I leave this to? And, you know, one would feel flattered, the other two would feel angry. So rather than do that, I—someone said to me, "Why don't you leave it to the Library of Congress?" Anybody who wants to see it, they can always go in and see it. And that's how that came about.

LIZA KIRWIN: Well, if you don't have anything more to add, I think we can end here.

CHARLES COREY: Except that I have a very good-looking interviewer—

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

CHARLES COREY: —if you'd like to put that on tape.

LIZA KIRWIN: Thank you. Thank you.

CHARLES COREY: You're welcome—

LIZA KIRWIN: Thank you, very much. [00:17:18]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]