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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Kingsley Mark
Calkins, 1979 June 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kingsley Mark Calkins on 1979 June 19. The interview was conducted by Renate Dicks for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

Dicks for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1979

MS. DICKS: [Inaudible.]

MR. CALKINS: Okay. Currently I have an older [inaudible] that my dentist bought at an auction. It's the school yearbook for 1893, and at that time there was a professor named John Goodiss [ph], and one of the dormitories is named after him. He was a professor of geography and drawing, a curious combination, and he came from Sheffield, England, and died around the turn of the century.

That is the earliest record that anyone has of an art department or any real art program at Eastern. Of course it was called Michigan State Normal College then. Its pride was it was the biggest teacher training institution west of the Alleghenies.

My awareness of the art department, well my brother went to school here on Cross Street, so I became aware of the school. My father went to school here, too. I became aware of the school about 1935, the year I graduated from high school. I couldn't afford to go to college so I worked at Stouffers and tried local [inaudible] and line singers for art school.

Then I came here in 1940. At that time there were five people on the staff, and there were maybe 50 art majors. They were all in the art education program, which was very well established by that time. Apparently I came about two or three years after a very famous art department head, Bertha Goodison, died. I'm not too sure of her background, but her successors were a team, Orlo Gill and Hans Sweet [ph]. Hans Sweet was a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago. Orlo Gill was a graduate of U of M Art Department. I was here then as a student, and then I came back and finished after, at the end of World War II. By that time the department had six members.

When I finished my master's degree it would have been, this is my history of this but also the history of the department as I see it, so by that time there were still only about five people teaching in the department. The president then was brand new, President Elliott, President of the University, and he allowed Mr. Gill to hire me. It was their first addition in several years.

About three years after that Orlo Gill died and he had in his time established a statewide art education annual conference that later became the Michigan Art Education Association. So Eastern has really always been the leader in the art education field. I guess our only close competition for prestige in art education was a pair of two women at MSU, Alma Gatch [ph] and Katherine Winkler [ph].

Well, we formed the Michigan Art Education Association and continued to turn out what we felt was the best qualified art teachers in the State of Michigan. We then appealed to—well, let me go back. The year that Mr. Gill died I was sent as a search committee all over to find a new art chairman, and we chose a man named August Freundlich. That's F-r-e-u-n-d-l-i-c-h. August Freundlich was a very young man from New York University. He stayed here as department head for probably five years. In that time we convinced the administration that we should move into a larger art major. We offered 24 credits in art and we got up to 34. Still it was all called Bachelor or Art Education degree.

Mr. Freundlich was offered the head of the departmentship at Peabody, and so he left. After an extensive search, again I was heading the search committee, and meeting people all over the USA. I decided I would rather work for myself than for some of the candidates I was meeting and the staff did too.

So I became the department head, although I had no intention of ever getting into that spot. That makes me at this point the oldest living department head and I think I have the longest record of department headship of anyone except J. Henry Owings had just died. He was the head of the foreign language. So I've been the department head for 22 years, since '59, '58.

At that point the vice president for instruction felt that the university education should be quite diversified, and

he didn't like our pushing for a stronger art department. He felt in order to get good art students we had to compete with first rate art schools. [Inaudible] like a state board of education ruling was that you had to have, a student had to have a major and a minor. Well, we said let's combine our drawing and art history and design courses with the studio courses and make one, call one ostensibly the major and the other the minor.

The state board let us do that on a trial basis for two years. That meant we had a 60 hour major out of 120 hours, rather than the 34 hour major. We were getting closer to the competition, with schools like - professional art schools, the University of Michigan, and that kind of art school.

Well, at the time we did that, that would have been the very early 60's, the enrollment jumped from 85 to 300 in two years, our undergraduate art majors, plus all our service courses, and our staff grew along with that. In ten years we built up to 500 art majors. Our peak year was about 1974 with about 600 undergraduate art majors. During that time we experimented with a Master of Arts degree, an MA, but we realized it wasn't the very best degree for people who wanted to go into college teaching. At this time there was a lot of hiring being done with community colleges and that kind of thing.

We had a first class staff by then, so we changed from that to two degrees, a Master of Art Education and a Master of Fine Arts degree, abandoning the old MA degree. Then for the first time we hired really professional art historians, looking for people with PhDs. We got a pretty good staff there and gradually built up an art history minor. The art history minor increased our hours to 80 out of 120 hours. That's 80 hours in art and art history and 40 basic studies, which is a pretty good comparison with any good art school in the country.

We during that time built this building 15 years ago, and we were required to share it with the industrial education department. We had pleaded for a separate building of our own. By the time we got to the 600 art majors we had outgrown this building by far and we moved into whatever spaces we could find on campus. We took over almost the entire Scherger Building [ph], which was an old science building.

We built an enormous sculpture complex on the edge of the campus out of an old warehouse, and gradually it became really beautiful, a first class sculpture building. Then in the last five years we added a wing to that where we do full scale bronze foundry casting. We're probably one of the initiators or one of the few places in the country where people do full scale bronze casting. We expanded our program to offer almost every area. The latest ones to be added were photography. We have a very serious emphasis on textile and fiber. The program that began as three dimensional design expanded into a program called multi-media. This is the—it has a variety of names, what's actually happened there. But probably the most current common name for it is conceptual art.

Our students were the first, our graduate students, MFA students, were the first ones to my knowledge invited by the Art Institute to do one man shows, work in progress shows. Some of these people have become famous or notorious, whichever way you want to look at it. We received an awful lot of publicity in the press.

At the same time a graduate of our department, [inaudible], opened a gallery in Toronto called A Space. There was a great deal of give and take, there has been for the last ten years between this department and Toronto, providing leadership for the real avant-garde art programs in Toronto. We've worked with Tom Sherman. In Detroit, a graduate of Eastern named James Callan, Jim Callan,

A lot of people feel that that was our biggest, one of our biggest drawing points, selling points is the fact that we have done almost all the leadership in Michigan events, avant-garde, conceptual field. But it should be remembered that this is just part of our program and one of our other, several other programs are equally well-known, that is we probably have more exhibit notice, top exhibiting artists that are still around.

But one thing in the last 20 years has been with this rapid growth we've been able to hire top professional people and the good reputation of the department has made it possible to coax them to come here rather than to other schools. So the variety has been one of our strong points I feel in the department, that is we've tried not to duplicate schools. We've tried to make as broad a selection as possible. So we have ceramics from Cranbrook and Alfred, which are quite opposite kinds of first rate ceramic schools. We have painters from Iowa to the Art Institute in Chicago, and Rhode Island School of Design, and Baltimore Institute—Maryland Institute in Baltimore, which are all top schools in the country. Print makers from quite diverse backgrounds, Indiana, Baltimore. The textile fiber teacher is from Indiana University.

We actually worked this up to where we have 35 full-time staff members. At that point we realized that we were the largest art department in the State of Michigan. There are advantages and disadvantages to being the largest art department. One of them, for a while we screened student's portfolios. But as they gave us more space to work and more staff on campus we stopped screening anything except graduate students.

Our graduate program has been very successful. Our MFA students have been placed in top jobs all over the country. I could probably name five department heads in the last 15, 20 years who are, came out of our

graduate programs here. People teaching in first rate schools. One of my things is watercolor. One of my students is teaching at Oxford University, and I didn't even know they taught any art, at Oxford University.

MS. DICKS: Oh, yeah. Can you give me some of those names?

MR. CALKINS: Tom Piper teaches at Oxford University in England. Richard Lang is the head of, chairman of the art department at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania. Ralph Lauren is the head of the department at Bowling Green. Not the head of the art department, but head of an area in the art department at Bowling Green. Lawrence Graham has been a department head at Ball State University. Wayne Gawar, and that's G-a-w-a-r, was the head of the art department at, or was for several years at [inaudible] Community College. Our distinguished ex-department head, Gus Freundlich, has moved on to become the dean of the arts at Syracuse University.

I would like to backtrack, go back to the time when Gus Freundlich was here. We did a rather interesting thing at that time. I'm really going to have to backtrack to get this in here. But Gus and I invented a program of self-evaluation and we got funds to hire people to come here for a week and go over our curriculum with a fine toothed comb. These were about the most distinguished and interesting group of people you could find. One was Carolyn Howlett of the Art Institute of Chicago. The other one was probably one of the three best known art educators in the country, Fred Logan from the University of Wisconsin. Another person was Sarkis Sarkisian, the head of the then Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. The last one was Ama Weddish [ph], who was an internationally famous print maker who had been both a student here and had taught here before going to the University of Michigan.

They spent a week making recommendations about redesigning our program for moving forward. It's been that model that we followed all these years in the department. We feel it's been a marvelously good model because this was designed to be a team, be a balance of art education, where we started, plus art school, plus alumni, where we wanted both. That was a very effective thing to do.

Among the other things that we added to the art department were a more professional gallery program, now headed by the most known black artist in Detroit, Charles McGee. This program—we've always had a lively gallery program and all exhibits we've designed ourselves, but this has become more and more professional. We send trucks to New York to bring exhibits here of exciting new work from New York City. I don't think there are any other schools that are doing that.

We also put funds away to provide two very prestigious lecture programs, and I don't think anyone else is doing anything, has done anything quite like this. One is the art education lecture program bringing top people from all over the country, people like Natali Cole from California in the past and—oh, gee, I don't remember—but big names in art education, all that combined with a fine arts lecture series that has included people that have really controversial reputations, such as Igo Escanci [ph], you know, Igo Escanci the conceptual artist, very strange. I'm not quite sure of the spelling of his name. Alice Neal. These are top names in the New York art world and some from California of the same stature.

It's been our experience that once they announce these names we get people from all over the state of Michigan and down into Ohio coming to our lecture series. There's just been nothing like it. It's all been a free lecture series. This has run now for something like ten years, this very prestigious lecture series.

We also invented the first big national jewelry conference. It was about four years ago and our two jewelry professors invited the top experimental jewelers from the best graduate schools all over the country. We had special security measures and so on. [Inaudible] an exhibit, but we did about four days of demonstrations in that field.

Jewelry under [inaudible] direction has opened up from things like earrings and bracelets into a big metal sculpture, body sculpture, all kinds of forms and things. It's become a very exciting area. We are working with Meyer Gist [ph] from Artisans in Ann Arbor, that's a store, and occasional donations, we've built up a very good representational permanent collection that includes names like Wilmer Verd [ph], and Doris Lee, and Carol Law [ph].

Then we sent two men to Africa to do an investigation for our black arts program. That was in the 60's—no, about 1972 actually. They were given funds to buy extensively arts in Africa. Brought in speakers and consultants to design our black art history course. Now our African collection is a pretty good African collection.

That's it. Do you have questions?

MS. DICKS: Well, these are just things that I—I don't mean to quiz you obviously. Have you ever used the, I guess the CETA funds, the Michigan funds, or—

MR. CALKINS: Starting this week we're on about our third program with CETA, and we've had a program called Upward Bound before CETA. That was kind of a predecessor of CETA. The Upward Bound program was where students were bused out here from Detroit and—not all black students, but mainly. Going to be the secretaries, typists and so on, and also taking classes here. That's what we're involved with this summer. It's a very large CETA grant.

When we're talking about that kind of grant, we also have had other grants. We had a very large grant from—it was a combined grant, federal and so on, to develop a program in arts for the community. It was actually called Project 74, but it involved experimenting with students painting very large scale outdoor murals. It's about the same time that Detroit started this, and Charlie McGee is the one that's in leadership there.

Some of that has spilled over into CETA in Ann Arbor where one of our students is doing the same thing in Ann Arbor with high school level students doing quality outdoor murals, not just cute things, very sophisticated outdoor murals.

MS. DICKS: Okay.

MR. CALKINS: Another project of that kind that was good was a project, completely novel, called Conversation 74. That was a type of exchange program partially funded by the Michigan Council for the Arts where we brought in all the directors or inventors of novel programs in the State of Michigan, really experimental ideas. We had the man who did the fish ladder construction on the Grand River in Grand Rapids. We had Siro Miles [ph] for instance, the man who renovated the program at the Highland Park Junior College, who built the ethnic group there. That drew people from all over the state. It was a one day conference.

We also had shared in the development of the [inaudible], including hiring special art teachers, art history teachers to teach. There was Barbara Pilile [ph] and Ellen Schwartz.

MS. DICKS: Have you had a visiting artists program here?

MR. CALKINS: The closest thing to a visiting artists program that we've had was the fact that we did hire Charles McGee initially as an artist in residence. He was running the Gallery 7 and the Fisher Building at the same time, and teaching here. We've had a couple other people like that, most notably John Mills, the very famous British sculptor who taught here for a year as a visiting artist. But we don't have a formalized program as some schools do.

MS. DICKS: Is there a philosophy that the department has in general?

MR. CALKINS: The philosophy that the department has is probably a reflection of my point of view, and that is that a student should not be forced to conform to a school pattern. I've seen this in too many schools, and I could name some but I won't, where there's actually such a thing as a school color scheme and a school style, an art school. It's a very dangerous thing.

So as much as possible I tried to find staff members who were almost exact opposites so that the student who wants to paint landscape can find a landscape painter to study with here. If a student wants, you know, the most avant-garde thing in New York City and to be able to cope with that, you can find that kind of painting teacher here. And that's true all the way through. That's been I think one of our strong points, because I don't think any other school has ever quite achieved what we've achieved in that respect.

Our goal is to turn out the artists, and human beings, and people who think, are broad enough to compete for jobs in all the different levels we prepare them for, which is the best first grade art teacher in the world or the best university painting professor in the world.

MS. DICKS: Well, I think we've covered just about everything I have down.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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