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Oral history interview with Robert Powell
Coggins, 1985 September 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert P. Coggins on September 26, 1985. The interview took place in Marietta, Georgia, 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: First, let me make sure the tape is running. This is Liza Kirwin interviewing Robert Coggins at his home in Marietta, Georgia, for the Archives of American Art, September 26, 1985. Dr. Coggins, could you begin by telling us a little bit about your family background and education?

ROBERT COGGINS: I was born in Marietta in 1924. May 7th. My mother and father were both native southerners. My [coughs]—excuse me—my mother was born in Forsyth, Georgia, and was a member of the Banks family, which is a very prominent family in Georgia and Alabama.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was the name of the town?

ROBERT COGGINS: Forsyth.

LIZA KIRWIN: Forsyth?

ROBERT COGGINS: Forsyth. And through the Banks-Weaver side of the family, my maternal great-grandmother, we go back to Robert E. Lee, and the Washington family. My father was from Spartanburg, South Carolina, and there are many Cogginses in Spartanburg County and Spartanburg, South Carolina. They were mostly farmers and later became merchants. They met when my father was in Atlanta, working at Rich's, which is the Macy's of Atlanta. I mean, the—

LIZA KIRWIN: A department store?

ROBERT COGGINS: —a department store, yeah. Similar to Macy's or one of the other big department stores in New York. They were married, they came to Marietta in 1923, and my father opened up his own shoe business. [00:02:00] I grew up in Marietta, which was a very small country town 20 miles from Atlanta, with one two-lane road, and the streetcar. That was about the transportation modes to Atlanta. I was educated in Marietta public schools until my last two years of high school, and I went to preparatory school at the Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, which is one of the South's better preparatory schools. Fortunately I did go. It made me much better prepared for my college education and for life thereafter. They had very strict academic standards. And of course, being in the '39, '40, '41, the discipline of that era and the discipline of today are two entirely different things. From my background at Baylor, it made it very easy for me to be accepted at Emory. I attended Emory University in 1941. I was a freshman at Emory when World War II began. And after this, everyone sort of took a lackadaisical attitude—my peers, that well, we would all be in the service very shortly and would probably be drafted in a very short period of time. On my 18th birthday, I enlisted and was assigned to the V-12 program, which had been opened by that time. This was a college program, and actually you were in the United States navy, but you went to college under the navy. A very fine program, and I spent about another year and a quarter going 12 months a year at Emory. [00:04:00] At the end of my junior year of college, I was given a choice to either go on to medical school or to go to midshipmen's school to become an officer. I chose to go to midshipmen's school. Number one, I didn't want to be a coward, I wanted to do my fair share, and number two, I think I would have been much too young to have been a graduated physician by the age of 21 or 22 years of age. So I've never regretted it. I went overseas in the—during the war, in the South Pacific, from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima, spending most of the time around Guam, Tinian, and Saipan. I was the commanding officer of an LCT, landing craft tank.

LIZA KIRWIN: LCT?

ROBERT COGGINS: LCT, landing craft tank. And I was the senior officer and frequently the only officer on board. So at the ripe old age of 19 I had my own command. For a Georgia boy, I didn't know much about the ocean. I learned very rapidly, I assure you. The rest of my men were from the North, but we worked out a very equitable and reasonable solution, and I tried to run the ship with common sense. And, as I alluded earlier this evening, I have been in three hurricanes, two at sea on the LCT, and they were long, long, very hairy experience, to put it

bluntly. Hundred-mile-an-hour wind is an awful amount of wind. But we survived and made it back after the war was over. I was at Saipan and Tinian when the first bomb was dropped. [00:06:00] We knew something extremely heavy was going on, but we didn't know what. And we found out very shortly. [Coughs.] And then President Truman by that time gave a more than adequate warning that he'd do it again, and he did it, and so the war ended rather suddenly. But we were being prepared for the invasion of Japan. The average—well, I won't say the average, but the highest temperature of the day was usually up around 105, 110 degrees, and when they started issuing antifreeze and fur coats, it must be you're not planning on being that way for so long period of time. But we went on. I did have the opportunity to go to Japan. I spent about 10 days, which was really a wonderful experience. It was right after the war, but the attitude of the Japanese people was incredible. They all saluted, whether they were military or non-military. They just wore you out, really, with their politeness. But that's the only time I really got real bad homesick. I had Thanksgiving dinner with the American troops in Japan during the war, and Mount Fujiyama looked very much like Kennesaw Mountain with snow on top of it. I'm sure it was a symbolism that I established in my own mind more than fact, but I enjoyed it tremendously. Then I waited, came back to the States, was at home for a little while, and then there was a point system—not being married, not having any children—the ones with the most points got out, and there were many things that had a certain amount of points. So then I was stationed on the East Coast. I went from Norfolk to Charleston to Jacksonville. And the ship I had been assigned to by this time was a destroyer's escort. [00:08:00] And I took this destroyer's escort—we took it down to the Greenville Springs, Florida, and decommissioned the ship. I then came back and went straight to college, which was a bad mistake. I should have taken the summer off, but I didn't. Found out I didn't need four quarters to graduate, I just needed three quarters, so end result, I took the fall quarter off, went to football games, had a great time, and then was finally accepted into medical school. And my future lay either in medicine or law. I'd been accepted to five law schools before I was accepted to medical school. I thought I was going to be a lawyer by default. One of my professors at Emory wanted me to be a patent attorney. At that time, there were no patent attorneys in the southeastern United States. It would have been a very interesting experience, the road not taken, and I'm not sorry that I took the road of medicine. I've always enjoyed medicine.

LIZA KIRWIN: Why did you choose medicine over law at that point?

ROBERT COGGINS: Uh, I think it was just service to mankind, and as long as I could remember, I'd always wanted to be a doctor, whether it was a very good job of brainwashing by my mother in particular when I was a child that I don't remember, or whether it was just a sincere and genuine desire to be a physician. I've always enjoyed it. I enjoy my doctor-patient relationship. It becomes more than just a relationship, it becomes more of a friendship. It's sort of a part of a big family, and I enjoy this as I—as I mentioned earlier too, I feel like I've had the pleasure of practicing medicine in the golden age of medicine. Unfortunately, the younger people come along, they miss this unique opportunity that about [inaudible] span of about 30 or 40 years, where we had many great drugs to work with without the governmental interference that we're having to contend with today. [00:10:06]

LIZA KIRWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So then you went to medical school at Emory?

ROBERT COGGINS: No, I went to college at Emory. I had a bachelor of arts at Emory, and then I went to the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta. Came to Grady to do my internship. I'd been accepted to Parkland in Dallas and Charity in New Orleans and Bellevue and Emory—I mean Grady—the larger charity hospitals. And since I was a native Georgian and probably would always basically stay in the South and certainly probably in Georgia, I went ahead and chose Grady, because you make so many good contacts. And I think that dividing my education between Emory and the Medical College of Georgia proved to be very advantageous, because now I know some physician in practically every city or hamlet in Georgia and many, many in Florida. Because at the time I was in medical school, the state of Florida did not have a medical school, so all their graduates came from—about half of them came from Georgia. And as a result, I knew somebody in just about—I know now [inaudible] just about every city in Georgia and a large majority in Florida. This has been very helpful, too.

LIZA KIRWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When did you get involved in collecting art?

ROBERT COGGINS: That unfortunately came much later. I started my practice in 1955. I graduated in '51, then four years postgraduate training, and then I came. My wife at the time—I've only had one wife; we just have a unique relationship, and we get along better not married than we did married—we were building a large house out in the county. [00:12:07] It turned out to be much larger than I had anticipated. Eleven thousand square feet didn't sound all that big until you begin to live in 11,000 square feet and start decorating 11,000 square feet. [They laugh.] And this turned into—furniture, tried to do everything in antiques—draperies, carpets—and then the paintings. And the paintings seemed to fit something that I really could get attached to. I tried the coins, I tried stamps, and those just did not fit the niche. I felt that I needed something to do besides just medicine. My father was a product of the Depression; work was his hobby. That's the only thing you need. And when he was ill, for a period of about four years, I saw how miserable he was. This was pre-TV; we had radio and playing cards was really about the only two things he had to entertain him. And I said, I'm going to find something that

satisfies me. And I recommend to my patients—I figured I'd follow my own advice too—and that is to get a hobby that—either a hobby or hobbies—where one you can do outside, and one you can do inside. The art fits both. You can read, you can look at the paintings, you can get out and go to museums, or you go to antique shops and the galleries and find paintings, so it fits all the categories I was looking for. And I thoroughly enjoyed it. The first thing that I did was English portraiture. [00:14:02] The very first painting that Alice [Coggins] and I bought was really a tapestry of an English landscape that was sewn on silk. Mrs. Coggins still has this piece. And then we began to get into English portraiture. English portraiture, the Dutch still lifes. The show at the High now is all 17th-century Dutch paintings, which I like to see, because that was a period I enjoyed thoroughly. Some of the great, great still lifes came out of that period, and still life artists that influenced many Americans. So about 1971 I began to get a strong urge to collect American art. Why not? We were preparing for the bicentennial of America. So we put together a nice catalogue. This is when Jim Salas [ph] came with me, when we were preparing that catalogue. And Jim, who's been working with me almost 10 years, we—neither of us knew quite when the [inaudible] was. We had known each other for a while, but we hadn't really worked together. And we had a show that opened in Atlanta, *Selections from the Robert P. Coggins collection*. So this was American art with a southern accent. Unfortunately, many of those paintings, which were really quite good, had to be sold so I could buy southern paintings. We've had—we've been working on the southern art, both with an emphasis on just southern art, whether it was male, female, black, or white, but now our emphasis is we have one, the show on the road now, *Art and Artists of the South: The Robert P. Coggins Collection*, which is just southern art. [00:16:03] We're now going to concentrate on southern women artists. Of artists that have been ignored, the southern women are probably the most ignored of all of them, and we feel like that it's—you ask any person on the street to name you three women artists, and they have a hard time. A lot of art historians would have a hard time. But if you ask to name three southern women artists, they would just paralyze and say, "Well, there aren't three southern women artists." So as a result we feel like it's time to open up new horizons and recognize people that have just not been recognized.

LIZA KIRWIN: Was there one particular southern artist that got you started in collecting southern art?

ROBERT COGGINS: I would say it was Elliott Daingerfield. Elliott Daingerfield was fairly readily available. Everybody knew the name, everybody knew Daingerfield, but nobody knew anything about Daingerfield. There was a show at the Mint Museum and at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1971 and '72. The catalogues are now out of date but we do have some—out of date and out of print. The Daingerfield—two daughters were living when I first went to meet them. They lived at Blowing Rock six months of the year, and the rest of the time they visited with their children or maybe went back even to New York. They maintained an apartment at the Hotel des Artistes in New York for a number of years, where Daingerfield lived himself for maybe 25 or 30 years. And they were delightful elderly ladies that were just a real pleasure to work with, and we do have many, many hours of tape of our conversations with the Daingerfield daughters. [00:18:07] They were Gwendoline and Marjorie. They were both delightful ladies, true southern women but had an international flair about them. Their father had traveled extensively—he painted in Venice on two different occasions and traveled across Europe, and I think Daingerfield was much better recognized in his own lifetime than he is even today, but we do feel that he should become and is, really, one of America's great artists. When he went to New York in the mid-1880s, Walter Satterlee took him in and more or less made him his studio boy. But he subsequently came under the influence of George Inness, and they became great friends. Kenyon Cox was a great friend of his, then George and his junior [ph]. One of his biggest career hits was when he was among the group commissioned to paint the Grand Canyon by the Santa Fe River. And they did representational works, and then he used the Grand Canyon as a backdrop for several of his allegorical works. Daingerfield was basically a self-educated man. His father was a captain in the Confederate Army, having been commissioned by Robert E. Lee and took his garrison of troops, as far as part of the Confederate Treasury at Fayetteville, North Carolina, and that's where they were until the War Between the States was over. By this time, he had reached the rank of major, and Major Daingerfield did the best he could to seek out a living. And this was during the period of Reconstruction. [00:20:00] We do have two chapters of Daingerfield's autobiography that the family didn't even know existed. We found these while working with some of the papers. We went up there one weekend, and we worked—it was a rainy, miserable weekend, and we were literally in the clouds. The humidity was 101 percent [laughs], so we had to stay in the house. [Inaudible] to go out because we was in the clouds, because they lived up on top of the mountain. And we got a tremendous amount of work done, and we got into all the papers. We got the two chapters of his autobiography. Whether there are others or not, we don't know. It starts out quite early in life and goes through the Reconstruction period, and then his early days into New York. He describes a painting that we own, that's in the current show, of a still life of chrysanthemums that he sowed, and we think it's the same painting we have. It's dated 1885.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you buy most of your Daingerfields from the women? Marjorie and—

ROBERT COGGINS: No. We bought several, yes, quite a few, and we have many of our drawings and preparatory sketches and so forth, for frescoes that he did at Our Lady's Chapel of Saint Mary's the Virgin on Broadway, right off Broadway, 46th Street in New York. It's a wonderful church, and they have this wonderful Daingerfield painting there. If you happen to be in New York, you need to go and see it. You should call ahead,

because it's—the congregation left the church, and there's still a small congregation that are loyal to the church, but it's also a hangout for the winos. [00:22:03] They have to lock the doors to the church to keep the winos all coming into the church, sleeping [laughs]. It's a beautiful, beautiful church, and in the chapel are these frescoes that Daingerfield did. We do have photographs of these in case they should ever be destroyed. We commissioned a photographer to record these, and we have both in color and black and white. But Berry-Hill Galleries, the church, and ourselves, we tried to have a benefit, and did have a benefit, but it wasn't as successful as we would have hoped it had been, to raise funds for restoration, because they are beginning to get in pretty bad shape. Of course, they were done in 1905—was when they were completed—and about 1903, '[0]2 to '[0]3 when they were begun. That's when he also did the Fiske Madonna. Mr. Fiske, who was the president of Metropolitan Life Insurance Company—I believe [inaudible]—commissioned one for the chapel at Metropolitan Life Insurance, and some—we have the study for it out in the hallway. It's a beautiful, beautiful Madonna. So, Daingerfield was a man of many moods. By the family's own admission, he almost went off the deep end. He got into spiritualism, and in some of his paintings you can feel this, this ghostly, supernatural feeling. And as time's gone, you see sort of ghostlike figures in his paintings. A very strange man. I feel like—I think Jim and I both feel like we know the man very well, although he died in 1972.

LIZA KIRWIN: So it was Daingerfield that really got you interested in collecting, or concentrating on southern?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, concentrating on the southern. [00:23:59] I'd already made the basic decision to go ahead and collect in southern art, but Daingerfield helped make it easier to focus in on the South. And of course, when you find one artist, you find other art, and one leads to the other.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was the next artist to follow after Daingerfield that you were most interested in?

ROBERT COGGINS: Oh, I guess Thomas Edison Richards would probably be the one we got most interested in, and then there was uh, Willie M. Chambers. Willie M. Chambers was in the first show. And Willie M. Chambers was a black man, *Uncle* [inaudible], Montezuma, Georgia. No date. But Chambers—who wrote both the catalogues, with Jim's help, furnishing data, he wrote several of the articles—uh, there was no information. So we assume that Willie M. Chambers was a black man, probably a slave. He was not under the census of Montezuma, the county seat of Macon County, Georgia. And Dr. Chambers searched the records for about 100 years. So we was opening at the University of Rochester, at the Rochester Memorial Art Museum, and this gentleman came up to me and introduced himself, and he said, "I'm Dr. so-and-so, I'm professor of economics at the University of Rochester," and he says, "I understand you're having trouble identifying Miss Willie." And I said, "Beg your pardon?" And he said, "Miss Willie Chambers." And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Miss Willie lived in Montezuma, but she was actually a seamstress in Atlanta around the turn of the century, in the 1880s—in the late [18]80s and early [18]90s and even up into the first part of the 20th century." [00:26:04] And she was a wonderful seamstress. She went back to Montezuma to visit during the summers, but she would have been carried on the Atlanta census. So that mystery was solved. We made several trips to Montezuma, which is a pretty good ride.

LIZA KIRWIN: Where is that?

ROBERT COGGINS: It's near Plains [laughs]. Everybody knows where Plains is since Jimmy Carter became president—

LIZA KIRWIN: Oh yeah, of course.

ROBERT COGGINS: —but it used to be that Plains was near Montezuma and Americus. But since Jimmy became president of the United States, everybody knows where Plains is now. It's about 25 miles—it's in—sort of southwest central Georgia, near the Alabama-Georgia line.

LIZA KIRWIN: When you were collecting these first works, did you go out and uh, or Jimmy, go out and search for these things? How did you come by them? Did you work with dealers?

ROBERT COGGINS: We went out and searched for them. We tried to find somebody to be a contact for us. Of course, we were buying at auction. Berry-Hill Galleries in New York had been very good to us, and we bought through them, and we went to some of the other galleries, and of course the auction house. And then we ran across another artist that we have become very, very fond of, Nell Choate Jones. We didn't know more information on Nell Choate. She was born in Hawkinsville, Georgia, which is sort of south-central Georgia.

LIZA KIRWIN: Hoggins?

ROBERT COGGINS: Hawkinsville.

LIZA KIRWIN: Hawkinsville?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yeah, Hawkinsville. It's a small hamlet in middle Georgia, south middle Georgia. Georgia's a big state.

LIZA KIRWIN: I know, I just drove across it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COGGINS: Most people don't realize it's the—New York calls themselves the Empire State, but actually there's more square miles in the state of Georgia than any other state east of the Mississippi. [00:28:00] And there are thousands of little towns in Georgia [laughs]. But Nell Jones has been one of my favorite artists too. But —

LIZA KIRWIN: And you pretty much discovered her.

ROBERT COGGINS: No, we've kind of increased her exposure. Marbella Galleries in New York had a show of her works, and we walked in off of the street, practically, into Marbella Galleries, and there were paintings from Marietta, Georgia—four of them—so we bought them. And one piece that unfortunately got away from us, because gee, you'd think I'd like it, but it showed a lack of knowledge of the southern heritage, was a black funeral, was the ladies laying the flowers on the casket. Well, this is a very strong southern custom, particularly among the blacks. They have what they—the counterpart of a pallbearer is the flower ladies, and they bring in each floral wreath separately and either lie them on the casket or they set up the stands and every telegram, every letter of condolence, and every message is read and every card is read. A black funeral is a long, long experience. Average time would be two to three hours for a black funeral—at the church, besides the graveside service. You have to be in pretty good emotional shape to go to a funeral [inaudible]. Of course, it's a definite part of their culture. And our maid has many friends, and they're passing away, so we usually lose her about once a week so she can take a part of a day off and go to a black funeral. [00:30:03] Some of her colleagues or friends have died. But we never deny this because it's very important to their culture. And we have always respected the blacks in the South, contrary to popular belief, and to quote the late Adam Clayton Powell, congressman from Harlem, who got into all kinds of little—Congressman Powell said, "In the South, the blacks are accepted as individuals but rejected as a race; in the North they're accepted as a race but rejected as individuals." And I think this says it better than anything I've ever heard, uh, and this is really quite true. Of course so many racial barriers have fallen at last, and everything now—there's still a few. They're more subtle than they used to be. But it had to go sometime, so it's as good as time as any for it to go. And although at the time I wasn't happy—I wasn't the happiest southerner about the civil rights bill, I think it's probably one of the greatest bills that ever took place, because it just ended all of it in one fell swoop, got it out of the way. Otherwise it would have taken 100 years more. Georgia being one of the more progressive states in the South, probably would have done it much sooner. Some of the other states in the South would have been much, much slower, if ever. If it hadn't become a federal law, I don't know it would have ever really been as smooth a transition as it has been. Now, the artist that I think we can take credit for about discovering is Willie M. Chambers. The *Basket of Cherries* was one of the three paintings the Virginia Museum chose for their *Painting in the South* show, and they love Miss Willie. [00:32:05] They didn't seem to pay much attention to Nell Choate Jones. But then again, you know, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and we're all looking for certain types of art to fill a need.

LIZA KIRWIN: Where did you first find her paintings?

ROBERT COGGINS: I bought it at Berry-Hill Galleries. And the source other than [inaudible] is listed, a New England art market. That doesn't say a darn thing. [They laugh.] It could have come out of Long Island or it could have come out of Marietta, Georgia, for all I know, but it's a wonderful painting. It was in the show as—I don't know whether you probably remember it now or not, when we were in Savannah, that you saw the *Art and Artists of the South* show. It's in the catalogue. It's a wonderful painting. And [inaudible] Uncle Ham [ph] is indeed a real character, it's not—

LIZA KIRWIN: You mean the painting of the—

ROBERT COGGINS: The black man sit—

LIZA KIRWIN: Yeah, with the cart.

ROBERT COGGINS: Right, sitting in the cart with cotton in the back. It's a little bit naïve. So she was—Miss Willie was really a Sunday artist. She was not an academy-trained artist at all. Nell Choate Jones had more training, but she's more into the regionalist style, very much in the Thomas Hart Benton with the elongated figures of that era, and she did most of the work in the '30s and '40s. But she used to stop here in Marietta on her way South. She taught in the public school system of Brooklyn. She went from—and it probably was a two- or three-day ride—probably a three-day drive—back to Georgia, in Hawkinsville, when she used to come through in the '30s and '40s. And she stayed with a very good friend of my late mother. And I called Mrs. Mosely [ph], is the friend's name—and I still need to go get her on tape, because she's getting quite elderly—and she said, "Yes, your mother played bridge with Nell Choate. [00:34:11] Don't you remember?" Well, I was a teenager at most at

that time, and I could have cared less what they were doing. [Laughs.] But I'm sorry—that you know, there are many things you never ask the right questions and don't remember the right things. But she did set up an easel and paint here in Marietta. We have three or four paintings by her—of her done here in Marietta. So she's done—But as you notice, we found as many or more good women artists of the South, so that's what prompted us to get into the idea of doing a show of just southern women artists. Now, we're not rigid in the criteria in that they had to be southern born, southern bred, and so forth, but if it was an artist that came South, painted in the South, and worked in the South, and captured the southern spirit and feel, then we feel that they had—that they also qualified. But somebody just passing through Georgia or Florida and make one painting and go about their way, I don't really think they'd qualify. Like Martin Johnson Heade, for example, he used to spend his winters in St. Augustine. He and [inaudible] Lawrence [ph] really came down from the Boston area. And we have some wonderful Frank Shapleighs that were done in St. Augustine area. As a matter of fact, I think we have four of them. And Shapleigh is a good New England artist. For a long time, he was sort of pooh-poohed as being a [inaudible] artist, but I think he's a wonderful artist. And one of the things he did—it sure makes it easier for us—he documented very meticulously on the back of the painting where it was done, when it was done, and where it was and so forth, and it's really a big help to us. It cuts out a lot of the guesswork that gets so inherently aggravating to art historians and art collectors as well. [00:36:02]

LIZA KIRWIN: What is the scope of your collection right now? What are the dates? And you collect mostly paintings, but do you also purchase sculpture for your collection?

ROBERT COGGINS: We have some sculpture, but the reason we don't have any more sculpture, good sculpture by southerners, we just don't know of any. We think Anna Hyatt Huntington is superb, and we have several sculptures by her. We're still looking. Sculpture's also very difficult to display unless you have a museum environment. And I've always believed art and furniture should be usable and should be enjoyed; they should not be put ropes around and don't sit here and don't do this. If you're going to have good furniture, enjoy it. If you have good paintings, admire it. And I don't get upset if somebody goes over and actually touches the canvas, where in a museum, the guard would be having a fit. As a matter of fact, we were talking about Lamar Dodd earlier this evening. I did that one day at Lamar's. Just instinctively I reached over to feel the surface. He said, "I sure am glad you did this." I said, "I hope you're not getting me." [They laugh.] I was really quite embarrassed, but it was multilayers of gold leaf and silver leaf laid down on the canvas—actually on board. It's a beautiful, beautiful piece, when he was doing his *Open Heart* series. That in itself would be an interview that you would really enjoy doing, I'm sure, if you have a chance to see Mr. Dodd, because it's a whole story itself behind that. And he said, "No, no, I prefer people feel it." I said, "Well, I'm glad, because," I said, "I really—I did it instinctively, having done it at home all the time." But I think you have to feel the painting sometimes to get the full appreciation of it. [00:38:01]

LIZA KIRWIN: So that's one of the reasons you don't collect sculpture, is that—

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, the main reason is availability.

LIZA KIRWIN: —you can't find that much of it.

ROBERT COGGINS: Is availability, and not that many southern sculptors that we've run across yet. And secondly, it's hard to display.

LIZA KIRWIN: Has there been anyone who particularly influenced your collecting activities? Other collectors or dealers or art historians?

ROBERT COGGINS: I don't think so. I think it's been a matter of availability. Oh, we hear—I mean, everybody—there's sort of an interrelationship between collectors, dealers, and all, and if they show us something good, then we get interested in it. But we have our own internal organization of Jim Salls and Scott Jayce [ph] and Mark Bow [ph] was with us for a long time, and myself, and we discuss the things. And we try to get the painting for at least 24 hours before we make up our minds, where we look at it different times of day, under different circumstances. A lot of times before I get ready to go to bed, I'll have my pajamas on and I'll come in here in the living room and turn on the light and sit there and just look at it for a little while. And if it gets better by morning, it's a keeper. If it gets worse, we get rid of it. Paintings usually get better or worse; they don't stay the same. They either grow—like the one [inaudible] is definitely a no-no [laughs], but somebody had to look at it, so we looked at it, but we won't be interested in keeping it.

LIZA KIRWIN: So you just keep it for 24 hours and everybody talks about it—and you see whether it grows on you?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yeah, we talk about it, among ourselves. What?

LIZA KIRWIN: See whether you like it or not?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yeah, right. And we'll discuss it, and then it's something we may have a little controversy, but we'll even vote on it. I do maintain the power of veto. [00:40:00] Occasionally—I can't think of any time I really overridden them once or twice, and most of the time I've been wrong about that, so [laughs]. But by having different age groups and younger men, it really gives me an entirely different insight into things a lot of times. They see things that I don't see.

LIZA KIRWIN: How have you refined your collection over the years? Have there been some people, some artists that you just—the deaccessioned and others that you tried to acquire over the years to refine the collection?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, we tried to maintain a good American collection with an emphasis on southern art. For example, we have a Jayce [ph], a Sargent, and a Henry [ph]. I hope we'll always be able to keep these three, but I consider some of the great portraitists—we have a John White Alexander that's a sketch. We did have another John White Alexander, but we did sell it to one of the New York galleries. But the problem is that I'm playing a game that only the big—the ultrarich, and I'm not ultrarich, I have to work for my living, so it makes it a little hard to do it with limited funds. But we have a lot of fun doing it. So I have to dispose of things, a lot of times, to buy other things. But we're sort of trying to narrow in now on women artists, particularly with an emphasis on southern women, and a good American collection.

LIZA KIRWIN: So you would be purchasing toward the idea of an exhibition of women artists now?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yes. Yeah. We have about 48 in the collection now of different southern women artists. There's some obvious areas that we don't have. We will try to fill as many—sometimes availability is a real problem. [00:42:00] We ran into the same problem with the *Art and Artists of the South*. We couldn't find a Marshall Smith, we couldn't find a William Buck, we couldn't find a Ralph Clegue, or Richard Clegue, sorry, uh and others—we had—particularly when you get into the Louisiana delta area, because that's a different world from this part of the South. We don't know that area well. And our strength lies in Georgia and Alabama, Mississippi, I mean, Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, North Carolina. And fairly well in Florida. Some in Tennessee. But I think—and of course Virginia was abundant with painters because of Richmond. And Richmond's only been one of the major cultural centers, as has been Charleston, and as has been Savannah. The coastal cities, they've always dominated the thinking of the art of the South.

LIZA KIRWIN: How have the regional museums reacted to your collecting? Have they encouraged you over the years?

ROBERT COGGINS: Not particularly, no. Most of them, they've either been—most of them have been indifferent. Some—had never had southern art in it. Some have been indifferent, some have been just totally negative, one or two have just been downright rude. "Southern what? Is there southern art? We never heard of it." So, all this did was make us that much more convinced that the show needed to be done. See, this is the first time that a private collector has ever shown an exhibition on art of the South. It was the two previous shows done, one by 1960 by the Caulker [ph] Museum, really was a portraiture along the Eastern seaboard, beginning in Richmond and down to Savannah, mainly Charleston. [00:44:05] And then *Painting in the South* show done by the Virginia Museum. They did a wonderful job. They covered a period that would have been impossible for a private individual to handle because they had the right to [inaudible] all over the world, 1564 to 1980. That's a long period of time. And then from there, we went to—we cover from 1825 to 1950, after the first quarter of the 19th century—and those dates are arbitrary—to the first half of the 20th century. There wasn't any vast change on 1950 to 1951; it's all been a slow transitional evolution. There's a migration to the Sun Belt [inaudible]. But I tried to capture the feeling of the true South that I knew as a child and as a young man.

LIZA KIRWIN: Could you describe some of that, your feeling for the South?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, it was a much more tranquil, slow, relaxed, courteous politeness. The South is beginning to lose some of this. Fortunately it's still more prevalent in the South than anywhere else in the country. But it was just a proper thing that you'd treat a lady as a lady until they proved otherwise. And a man didn't need a contract; a man's word was his bond. And then if he didn't live up to his word, then he was a renegade. And he'd be known to be just kicked out of society completely. Nobody would have anything to do with him because he didn't live up to his word. [00:46:01] Um, it's—there was a certain tranquility. And even though there was segregation—and indeed there was—and there was many injustices done, there was still that very warm individual relationship that existed between the black and the white, on a one-on-one basis—as I mentioned earlier about the race being rejected but the individual's accepted. The reverse was also true of the North. But most of the blacks that moved North have all come back South, to my knowledge. They come back because they like to live in the South. They say they feel more comfortable here than they did in the North.

LIZA KIRWIN: So that's the kind of quality that you're trying to capture?

ROBERT COGGINS: We've tried to capture as best we can with 106 works—the various phases of southern history and southern art. Of course, you know, that's an impossible task, but it has been fun trying to put it

together. And the show had been very well-received, as you noticed in Savannah. And I might add that Savannah's been one of the better receptions by the audience there. But I think part of this is the—we're building into sort of a crescendo, and as we go to the next stop, which is Columbia—see, Columbia was the sponsoring museum. As you well know, by protocol they should have opened the show, but the bicentennial of Columbia, South Carolina, which is also the capital of South Carolina, is '86, so they wanted this show for their—

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LIZA KIRWIN: Okay.

ROBERT COGGINS: The state of South Carolina, through their humanities committee and the National Endowment for the Humanities—I don't even know the amount of money. I've never asked, I mean, it wasn't any of my business to say, they've been very generous. We had nowhere like the budget that the Virginia Museum had—they had an almost \$2 million budget—R. J. Reynolds and the state of Virginia both came with approximately a million dollars apiece. We had nothing like that at all. The *South Carolina Press*, which printed the catalogue, did a good job. There are a few things I wish they had given us the opportunity to review before it went to press, but they didn't. So—some of the illustrations could have been vastly improved. There are some obvious errors in the text—obvious to us because we know the text so well—misspelled words and things of this nature, but nothing major. The biggest mistake I think they made in the catalogue is it has no index. So, we made our own.

LIZA KIRWIN: When did you first meet Bruce Chambers, and how did he come to write the catalogue for you?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, that's very interesting, because Bruce was teaching at Emory University in the art history department, and this was in the mid—probably early '70s. Bruce was the only Americanist at Emory. All the others were French or Renaissance, Italian Renaissance or French Renaissance or Medieval, just wherever you wanted, but nobody really give a damn about American art. So Bruce—how we contacted each other, I don't know. [00:02:01] I think he called me. There was an artist that taught at Georgia State University, Jim Sitton. Jim is now deceased. He was murdered by an attacker—he was attacked in an attempted robbery, and he made the mistake of resisting and the guy shot him and he died. There's a retrospective show of his works now in Atlanta. And Jim told Bruce, "You need to see this collection in Marietta." So Bruce came out, and we got along real well. And through the catalogue, the first catalogue that he wrote, he got a position with the Rochester Memorial Art Museum as curator and assistant director. And then he went from there to Iowa, and he had some trouble there. The administrative changed the place, and Bruce was hunting for a job, and I was friendly with Berry-Hill and they needed somebody, so I kind of helped get them together. And then Bruce wrote the catalogue for *Art and Artists of the South*. Bruce was a real scholar. He has the academic background that we don't have, and the formalities of the art world, and the, you know—art historical—that we have our own art historical knowledge, but it's been totally self-acquired. Our tuition has been paid for by mistakes, not by—[they laugh]. We haven't—again, we don't have vast sums of money to work with, so if it weren't for certain financial institutions, mainly the Trust Company of Georgia and the Trust Company of Cobb County, we would never have been able to have put this thing together. To educate bankers is difficult; to educate southern bankers, who are notoriously conservative, that art is indeed an investment has not been an easy task, I assure you. [00:04:03] I mean, it's been fun. We had a lot of fun doing it. But I think Bruce and I have a very good reciprocal relationship: I help Bruce and he helps us, so it's sort of a pleasant relationship, and I think you probably sensed this when we were in Savannah. Oh, Bruce and I have had some terrible arguments, but it kind of flushes out the arteries and gets everybody happy that way.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did Nina come and talk to you about doing the show at the Columbia Museum first?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, the way it came about, Bruce and Nina had graduated together at the—

LIZA KIRWIN: —University of Pennsylvania.

ROBERT COGGINS: —University of Pennsylvania. And we went to one museum in Georgia and were turned down, flat.

LIZA KIRWIN: Which museum was that?

ROBERT COGGINS: The University of Georgia, the Georgia Museum of Art. I remember the board of advisors there.

LIZA KIRWIN: And they turned you down?

ROBERT COGGINS: Flat. It was a "me too" show, and I quote. And I'm aware that we're on tape, but it was all well in good faith, we had been working on it for several years, I had been asked to represent the museum by the previous director at the formation meeting, and that's when Jim Salls and I went up to the formation meeting

of the Pitts [ph] in Richmond. Then we did not talk to the High because we knew we would be turned down there, because they go for the much more international and national scope, even in the old building. Although the first show was, you know, they were not the sponsoring museum. Rochester Memorial Art Museum in Rochester, New York, was the sponsoring museum. Bruce talked to Savannah, and Alexander Gaudieri was the director then.
[00:06:00]

LIZA KIRWIN: At the Telfair?

ROBERT COGGINS: At the Telfair. And I think they would have taken it if I had canceled the opening at Nashville that I had already committed myself to. I refused to do so.

LIZA KIRWIN: Why would they have taken it if you'd done that?

ROBERT COGGINS: They wanted to open it in Savannah.

LIZA KIRWIN: They wanted to open it first?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yes, and I'd already given my word to Nashville, to Cheekwood [Estate and Gardens]. They had been very helpful, but they didn't have the funds, apparently, to help sponsor it. So Bruce went to Columbia, South Carolina, and he and Nina got to talking, and Nina Ferris [ph] became very enthralled with the idea and has been very, very helpful, as has the registrar there, Miss Harriet Green [ph], has been. Both of them have been a real pleasure to work with. The staff, basically they have been very helpful. It's a small staff and sort of a big family type of thing. But they have been very good to us, as have Governor and Mrs. Riley of the state of South Carolina. Governor and Mrs. Harris of Georgia have also been very helpful to us. But uh—it was a bit of a shock when I got turned down, I assure you. But I think that may have been a blessing, because it just made me that much more determined to have the best possible show, and by doing it that way, I could then be satisfied in my own mind we did the best we could do.

LIZA KIRWIN: Have you tried to interest northern museums in showing your *Artists of the South*?

ROBERT COGGINS: The protocol of the art museum world has been something I've had a hard time adapting to. [00:07:58] We've asked Nina Ferris to contact northern museums. For some reason that's not clear to me, we haven't crossed the Mason-Dixon line. That was years the War Between the States, that era is gone. Historically it's still important. But we have sort of rekindled that fire while we were in Savannah, and hopefully we will be able to get in one or two northern museums. There's no real time limit on this show. Columbia's not in any big hurry, and neither are we. But I hope the show as it is will be able to be kept together after the exhibitions are over. Because we can't house it all at one time; we can't hang it all at one time. But I don't know what's going to happen—we'll worry about that fate later on. But I would definitely like to see it exposed both to the North and in the Midwest. Hopefully we can work this out. I don't think this would be—a lot of people think people of the North would not be interested in art of the South. I disagree. I think it would be very interesting, because it's very new territory, and the art market and the art world is looking for something new. Western art of 25 years ago were all illustrators; now they've become great artists. Russell and Remington are still basically illustrators that have become great artists and bring big bucks. I think some of the artists of the South are just as good or better quality artists, and that potential also exists. And, you know, after all, this is not only an academic game, it's also a financial game that's played.

LIZA KIRWIN: Do you collect work that's been executed after 1950?

ROBERT COGGINS: Oh, yes.

LIZA KIRWIN: You do?

ROBERT COGGINS: But we use that more or less as an arbitrary date.

LIZA KIRWIN: —arbitrary date just for this exhibition?

ROBERT COGGINS: Yeah, yeah. [00:10:01] Well, at least we want the artist to have been active before 1950 to be in the exhibition. There's an artist, a local artist, named William Enchican [ph], who is a very competent artist. He's a young man; he's only in his late 30s, possibly early 40s. He's an extremely competent self-taught artist, paints very much in the style of the realistic Andrew Wyeth style, but with a southern accent again. And he's beginning to evolve into his own style. He's really a wonderful artist, and we have quite a few of his works. We don't have anything hanging right now, but we have some on loan to the governor's mansion of Georgia, we have 36 on loan to the governor's mansion of South Carolina that they asked to borrow for at least a year, and then we have seven or eight in the office of the governor of Georgia that we have out on loan right now. We enjoy lending things. And we have a Will Henry Stevens. Two of our works are on loan to the show *Tennessee Landscapes* at the Tennessee State Museum. It's going to travel across Tennessee.

LIZA KIRWIN: At the opening at the Savannah Museum, at the Telfair Academy, you were given a proclamation by the governor of Georgia. Could you talk a little bit about how that felt to get that award?

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, I think it was truly one of the great honors that have been bestowed upon me, when the governor of your native state does issue a proclamation in honor of what you've done and what you are doing and to be recognized by the chief executive officer of the state. [00:12:00] I mean, the governor is still the head man of the state. And Georgia, in contrast to South Carolina, the governor has considerably more power. South Carolina is more of a legislative state. Well, the governor and Mrs. Riley of South Carolina have also been extremely kind. It was a very high honor. But being given the key to the city of Savannah was equally a high award, because Savannah—in Georgia and in the South, Savannah and Charleston are friendly competitors. They are both true southern cities, and it was a great honor to receive both of these awards at the same night. A very emotional experience, as you can tell.

LIZA KIRWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think at some point in the future that there will be a Robert P. Coggins Museum of Southern American Art?

ROBERT COGGINS: Only time will tell. Unfortunately [laughs], unless some gift, vast sums of money come along, I doubt it, but hopefully the collection will be able to be kept intact. I'd love to see this and nothing would please me more. But only time will tell, Liza. I wish I did have the crystal ball and could tell it. I would be able to die a lot happier if I did know that.

LIZA KIRWIN: Would you want that museum to be in Georgia?

ROBERT COGGINS: Georgia or South Carolina, yes. Because they both have been good to me. Georgia being my native home. And of course my father was a South Carolinian, so I feel a very close tie to South Carolina as well. [00:14:00] Plus the state of South Carolina and the museum world of South Carolina have been extremely kind to me. The Columbia Museum, the State Museum in Columbia both have gone above and beyond to help us any way they can. The State Museum is just really in its early formative stage, but we've met some wonderful people in Columbia that have been helpful in every way that they could.

LIZA KIRWIN: I'm sure you've seen some of the untrained folk artists that Georgia has produced. Most recently they've gotten a lot of attention in New York galleries. Will you be collecting that kind of art?

ROBERT COGGINS: Folk art?

LIZA KIRWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COGGINS: We have some folk art now. One thing just is the availability of it. Secondly is the cost of it. Unfortunately I do have to work with a rather tight budget. And when we sell things, we pay a little bit back to the bank and we buy some more paintings and then we start the vicious cycle all over again.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Inaudible.] [Laughs.] I guess that's all that I have to ask at this point, unless you want to add something more.

ROBERT COGGINS: No, except to say that I'm very honored that the Archives of American Art would like to have an interview with me on tape and become part of the permanent files. I'm very flattered that you would be interested in doing this.

LIZA KIRWIN: Well, we're delighted to have this interview because of your contribution to southern art history.

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. It's always nice to deal with nice people, and y'all being at the opening was quite an addition that we felt was—made you understand more what we were trying to do, and I think it was a big help for us. [00:15:57] I do have some copies of the proclamation if you don't have one of them, we'd be glad to give you one of them.

LIZA KIRWIN: I'd like to have one. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, thank you very much.

ROBERT COGGINS: Well, thank you. Appreciate it. Enjoyed it.

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[END OF INTERVIEW