



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Philip Cecil Malicoat,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Philip Malicoat on October 31, 1975. The interview was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is a continuation of an interview from 1968. In that interview you mentioned in passing a number of people who have been featured, or you studied with, or have been colleagues. You talked about your first training in Indiana. In particular you talked about coming to Provincetown in the late '20s. I wonder if you could characterize some of these teachers or associates. You mentioned Charles Hawthorne.

PHILLIP MALICOAT: I was one of the monitors in his studio class, and also the classes on the beach. Myself and Bruce McCain were monitors the last summer he taught.

ROBERT BROWN: Bruce McCain also was from Indiana?

PHILIP MALICOAT: We both were at the John Heron [Institute] art school there. We got to know Mr. Hawthorne very well. He always had open house and we'd see him. In the studio we filled his screens with paintings before he gave his criticisms. But he was pretty sick and I think he kept pretty much to himself the last summer. He died in October 30, 1930, just a couple of months after the class was over.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Hawthorne the big name that brought people down here, or were there several others?

PHILIP MALICOAT: He had the biggest reputation of anyone. Ambrose Webster had a class. George Elmer Brown. I think they were the principal people who had classes here.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Hawthorne recommended to you when you came?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Hawthorne used to go out on these trips in the spring, going around to art schools, here and there around the country and do demonstrations. He came to the John Heron art school in the spring. He did a demonstration and, of course, talked somewhat about his summer class. They were large classes. Some classes had up to 125-130 people. Most of them were young people.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they mostly pretty serious students?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh yes. There were a few elderly ladies in the class, but most were young people from art schools and places like that. A good gang. The summer I was there, were about 60 or 70 students.

ROBERT BROWN: Hawthorne made you a monitor, so he must have singled you out in some way?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Actually, I was a monitor the year before, when he wasn't here. Harry Campbell took care of all of that business.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Campbell an older student of Hawthorne's?

PHILIP MALICOAT: He never was a painter at all. It was his sister who married Hawthorne, that was Hawthorne's wife. He was in like that, a family affair you might say. He was a very fine gent. He ran the art store where everybody bought their paints. So he knew everything that was going on around in that respect. He took care of all the enrollment, paid the models, and so forth. In general he was the administrator of the school.

ROBERT BROWN: Mainly the class worked from models, or from the outdoors, wasn't it?

PHILIP MALICOAT: We had one or two models on the beach everyday, in the morning and the afternoon. But they were young kids, sitting out in the sun or facing the sea. People could paint up in the class studio if they wanted to do still lifes. There was another studio down the beach, in case it rained.

ROBERT BROWN: A carefully worked out setup.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Very much so. An assistant instructor came out twice a week, I think that was Tuesdays and Thursdays. Hawthorne gave a demonstration on Friday mornings. Saturdays was the general criticism where everybody brought their work in and it was put on a large screen. And he'd give a criticism for the whole class.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find those very useful?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, yes. To me they were tremendously useful. He was a very keen observer and most of the students came out with a lot of energy to get back to painting.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't tear them down?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, no. He always pointed out their best piece. Usually it was a build-up so they wanted to get to work, really get back to work. He was an excellent teacher--he got people moving.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there rivals among some of the people? Or was he simply a happy papa?

PHILIP MALICOAT: He wouldn't have been concerned about that. He had people who had studied with him whom he admired very much and they didn't paint anything like him. Dickinson is one of them. Matter of fact, he had a Dickinson. I think he traded for it. Dickinson wasn't painting anything like him, yet he had been a student of his. And [Ross] Moffett was a student. There was never any jealousy.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were students among yourselves were you a happy go lucky group or were you working very intensely and playing hard?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right. We did both. We used to have 20 pieces to put up on that screen after a week. We'd do two a day during the class and we'd paint over the weekends.

ROBERT BROWN: These were done rapidly, right?

PHILIP MALICOAT: We did them in one sitting. Nine to 12 in the morning and two to five in the afternoon.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work on board or canvas?

PHILIP MALICOAT: On board. We take them down at the end of the week and give them another coat of paint.

ROBERT BROWN: And ready to go for the next week.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes. And we did watercolors and things of that nature.

ROBERT BROWN: This business of scrapping down and starting over--you carried in your head the lessons of the previous week? Did you get a feeling you were growing.

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think so. The main thing for a student to show progress is the fact that he's working all the time. His mind's in it. His body's in it. He right there day in or day out. Whether he gets any criticism or not, he's going to show some progress. The main thing the teacher can do is inspire you to keep working. Keep you right at it. Go in and point out to you where you are getting off the main track, somewhat.

ROBERT BROWN: By getting off the main track, did he point out technical problems?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, it wasn't technical. His criticism was very seldom ever technical. The one incident that happened to me, I just recalled, I had gone out to Truro to paint. This girlfriend of mine had a car and she'd take me over and I guess we had taken our lunch. He looked at it when it was on a wall or the screen and he said, "You were on a picnic, perhaps?" He looked at me and I said, "Perhaps." He said, "Well, the next time you go on one leave your paint box at home." He recognized this place in Truro that I was painting.

ROBERT BROWN: And this is what you mean about a person not being wholly into the work?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right, he's not concentrating.

ROBERT BROWN: So Hawthorne was demanding, without being overtly demanding.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Very much so. You always came out of his class wanting to get right going again, because there was plenty of room to get better. Besides, on the weekend we usually scrapped down our old canvases that we used all week and repaint them, so we'd be ready for Monday.

ROBERT BROWN: You students of Hawthorne were a prominent part of the population, weren't you? You were a large proportion of the artists.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Very definitely so. You could go down the street in the evenings before the summer was over and know practically everybody. There weren't many tourists in town.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there other older established artists you were aware of in the late '20s and early '30s?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes. You got acquainted with them. The first winter I stayed, in '31, I became a member of the Beachcombers and I met practically all of them. In the summertime that was people like Gerrit Beneker, who lived here at one point yearround. Of course Dickenson was here. And Coulton Waugh and Frederick Waugh, his father. And that Boston painter, William Paxton, he used to be here summers.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you visit their studios or see them at their houses?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Usually I saw them at the Beachcombers or the Art Association. They used to have dances and a lot of people would go. Then I knew John Noble. There was a place called the Ship, a coffeehouse, and they would come into those places and we'd get acquainted with them.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Noble like?

PHILIP MALICOAT: He was quite an elderly gentleman when I knew him. He'd settled down from the wild stories I heard about his early days. Always a pleasant person, but actually quite sarcastic.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he paint a lot when you knew him?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, he had, but I don't think he painted the last few years. I never saw any he did. He came down for the recreation, you might say.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the Beachcombers was recreation.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, that was every Saturday night. Then Bicknell would appear.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

PHILIP MALICOAT: A garrulous old boy, a lot of fun. He liked to drink and tell stories.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that one of the reasons the Beachcombers got going, is a lot of people latched their lives together by getting together regularly?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think so. They actually got started in a small restaurant run by an Italian. It was called Jescoe. They used to meet there on Saturday and Jescoe would cook for them. Then they got together and bought this building we now have.

ROBERT BROWN: The Hulk.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yeah, The Hulk, bought that, and just started growing, naturally. We had more room to spread out in. More things to do. At that time, Miller, Richard Miller, I should say Richard E. Miller, was a member. I don't think Karl Knaths was ever a member of the Beachcombers. Ross Moffett was.

ROBERT BROWN: You liked to go there for good times, to relax. Were there arguments or contentions?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, there was a lot of that. [Laughter] Yes there was a lot of contention because several older members did not have too much respect for one or two of the others-- Hofmann. So a coffee cup would go flying by every so often.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a place for letting off steam.

PHILIP MALICOAT: It really was, and they did.

ROBERT BROWN: More than you could at the Art Association or someone's house?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes that's right. There were no women allowed. This was back in Prohibition, but they still had something to drink. I remember, in the wintertime especially, oh, there would be 12 or 15, maybe 20 people there. People would bring alcohol and put it in bowls and pour some grapefruit juice in it or something, and make a big bowl out of it. Then there was lots of chess at the

Beachcombers. The first winter I was here they had a tournament every Saturday night. Had about 10 chessboards going. All winter. Constant. Every night of the week we were drawing at Henry Hensche's studio. And Dickinson had a class two nights a week, I believe, or at least one night. So even our nights were pretty good. There wasn't anything else going on in town. Maybe there were movies, but we didn't have enough money to go to movies.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you also study with Hensche?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Hensche was the assistant when I was in the class. Then he started the class afterward and I was there the next summer, as I recall, as a monitor on Winthrop Street.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Hensche teach pretty much as Hawthorne?

PHILIP MALICOAT: In a sense, but he didn't have the simplicity that Hawthorne had, of teaching. We got him to actually stop talking so much. If anyone had heard it once, they got a little bored. But we never could shut him up. [Laughter] He'd just talk and say the same thing over and over again. This is a criticism, about how I felt about him.

ROBERT BROWN: On the other hand, could he go directly to your canvas and demonstrate a point?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Not near as well as Hawthorne could. With Hensche, by the time you got to the pertinent point, you'd forgotten it. Hawthorne said it and dropped it. He was through with you in five minutes.

ROBERT BROWN: He got right to the heart of your case?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right. Otherwise, if you go on for half an hour, it's a lost cause. I don't know how he teaches these days, but in those days, we took Henry aside one day, and told him we thought he was carrying on too long. It could be two o'clock in the afternoon, it was ridiculous, with 25 people. It should have been over in half an hour, an hour at the most.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think he did that? You weren't much younger than he. Do you think he had to prove himself?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I haven't the slightest idea.

ROBERT BROWN: Dickinson, you took, from him for a couple of winters drawing lessons? He was 10 or 15 years older than you. What was his teaching like?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, his teaching was excellent. Absolutely excellent teacher, stayed right to the fundamentals and kept to how to go about it.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in drawing?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes. All the basic things of drawing, you got it within a couple of winters. Once or twice a week. He'd give you one criticism and it would last three or four minutes. He was very succinct; it was very easy to understand him. I think one of the best examples of what he said to me, I think one of the last times I was in his class, he said he said he didn't think he could help me anymore, words to that effect, and now I was on the bottom rung of the ladder. Now it was completely up to you. Which when you thought about it was a good criticism. Now you are just starting. You know the mechanics of drawing. That's all you can teach. You can't teach anyone to

be an artist. You know the mechanics of drawing? Go ahead--you are on your own.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of work is he doing now? I admire his work.

PHILIP MALICOAT: He is doing these large figure compositions, as I remember. I don't know what else he was doing. Probably landscapes and seascapes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have classes other than drawing?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, I painted. An asset to painting, you might say, learning to draw. I did a lot of drawing too but it was a tremendous help doing it. Settling myself on how to go about drawing something you've never seen.

ROBERT BROWN: From memory or from imagination?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, just from looking at it. Learn how to see something, you might say. Learn how to tackle it.

ROBERT BROWN: You had not really gotten that from anyone before?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, hit or miss.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you think Dickinson made a difference?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think the difference between Dickinson and most of the drawing teachers is the fact that he really narrowed it down to the mechanics, to a mechanical thing. He wasn't trying to teach you to be an artist. He was trying to teach you how to go about drawing, which no other teacher had ever done. So you could look at something you'd never seen before in your life and you know how to tackle it. Doesn't make any difference whether you'd ever seen it. Matter of fact, one of his chief remarks was that it was much better if you'd never had seen it before. Because you don't take it for granted. Or you don't look at it with a prejudiced eye. Something like that is a tremendous help to find yourself able to tackle anything, anyplace, to know how to go about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he teach you how to handle you medium, your charcoal, your pencil?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, he was actually teaching us how to draw something accurately. We had a plumb line. Chiefly we did it with a plumb line. It was charcoal, but charcoal is a quite simple medium to be able to use. It doesn't take very much to be adept at it. But he was teaching us how to draw a box, a simple thing like a box. How to do it accurately in its position. Not to take it for granted that it is in some other position, but in the position it is. So if you were looking down on it, it looked like you were looking down on it. Completely a matter of eye training.

ROBERT BROWN: And you did work with some mechanical aid like a plumb line?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Plumb line, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Presumably you'd done perspective drawing back at John Heron?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, yes, but it is of no use to you when you are drawing from nature. You don't need to know anything about perspective to become an excellent draftsman.

ROBERT BROWN: It's the power to record accurately?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure. And the plumb line is the most, having a straight line like that, even when you are drawing an ellipse or a curve of any kind, the straight line is about the only thing there is that you can be sure of. [Picks up plumb line] You use it right in your hands. You use it for the perpendicular, and you use it for the horizontal. If you want to take off an angle, you can use it like that. But it was the using checkpoints to check angles out which, a box for example, you could find out approximately how it sets in view of this one position. Of course you can move over two feet and it's something completely different again. It doesn't matter what you're drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: You get the angle of the piece in front of you. Receding or projecting or tilted . . .

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right. You get the posture of the piece. And if you tilt the box up, it's got posture too. The same as a figure has. You just have to come to recognize these things and don't take them for granted. A lot of people sit down to draw a dish. Regardless if the dish is an ellipse if it is over on its side enough, they will draw it completely round because they've got a prejudiced of what a dish looks like. This is to teach you not to take anything for granted. To start using your own head.

ROBERT BROWN: As you said, when you finished with him, now you were ready to begin. How did you feel when you had begun to master the idea of accuracy?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well the technique of drawing, the mechanics of drawing . . .

ROBERT BROWN: Did you sense a change in your work? Did you try to do different things?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Slowly, but then things get a little easier because you know how to tackle something and you can spend more time not worrying about all the things you have to worry about when you're learning to draw, you know, the accuracy. It becomes very automatic and you don't have to think about it.

ROBERT BROWN: And did you begin tackling more complex compositions?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall what you were trying to express?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I don't know exactly. We were always trying to express something.

ROBERT BROWN: It just comes about?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right. You get into a canvas and after, it sort of carries its own weight, and soon it starts carrying you along too.

ROBERT BROWN: By weight, you mean things that are pulling you along?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure. If you get things that you leave on a canvas over a period of time, things that you feel are close to what you want to do, and as well as you can do it, then they will automatically add, lead to something else, to put in the canvas, or to take out. It's the guiding principle, you might say, the guiding hand. It's the boss, somewhat.

ROBERT BROWN: When you found you working mode, do you keep it with you a good deal of the time?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, let's see, after the first winter I got married. A couple years later I spent three months on a canvas. Compositions are made up out of using the nature.

ROBERT BROWN: A composition is made up . . . you mean you'd settle on

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, you'd start something on a canvas then you'd add things to it. The composition isn't all set up on the floor at one time, but there're parts of it, and if you get a part of it going pretty well, it just makes the canvas come out much easier. It's all a trial and error method as far as I've been ever able to tell. You try something. If it doesn't work, you take it out and try something else.

ROBERT BROWN: Most of the time when you are with your canvas, are you working on it or studying it?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, you study them, I still do, use the afternoons, planning what I'm going to do the next day.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you take notes or plan it in your head?

PHILIP MALICOAT: You plan it in your head.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were with the Hawthorne school, you run right out and hit the wall. It was more impulsive?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, it's what I wanted to do, and it was probably the best method of teaching there in the summertime, keep them outdoors because people had been indoors all winter. Actually, you could probably say everything you knew in one three-hour period, and then some. Even now, when painting landscapes, I do them in one sitting. Very simple. Much simpler to do it that way than to find other things besides the one you have, and to find other things you felt other than what you feel today.

ROBERT BROWN: In that sense, you said everything. You spend less time on the subject matter.

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's it. I stayed in France for a year and completely did landscapes, and drawings, one sitting. It would take me as long to do a drawing as it would to do an oil.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas, more typically, you worked on canvases slowly for a long time? These are works you can come back to. Were a lot of them coming out of your head?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, they are now, have been for quite a number of years. There are canvases that get going on subject matter and take time, you don't have any idea how it's going to end up so you are just feeling your way around, trying to learn something. Usually they are problems to solve. Most canvases are problems that you set yourself to learn something from.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you give a hypothetical case?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, a few years ago I realized suddenly that I didn't have any idea how to draw an ellipse, and do it accurately, and perfect it. So I took the summer, I took two months and worked out a method of drawing an ellipse so I wouldn't have to fumble with it. And then I painted it, made a canvas out of it later. What I usually do is take something I don't know about, rather than making up a canvas completely. But this was a more a case of a mechanical way of drawing an ellipse and being sure of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Once you've done that you can start looking at

PHILIP MALICOAT: Then I painted it. You can't get a book on it. So far as I know nobody's ever tackled it. That it could be done geometrically. I've never seen an article telling how to draw and a lesson to do an accurate job of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Why not just do a geometrical drawing?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Then I'd have to learn geometry. [Laughter]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you absolutely fascinated by the ellipse or was this part of a general other interest as well.

PHILIP MALICOAT: I've always been fascinated with an ellipse and things of that nature. It's a beautiful piece and it changes, you know, from a circle up to a straight line, depending on the position it's in. That's just an example. Try a different composition, start out by putting a thing in an odd place, and see what you could do to it.

ROBERT BROWN: This figure composition has no title.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, that was started with a figure not knowing at all how it was going to turn out.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work from a model?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, that's from a model. The rest of it evolved slowly. I don't remember how many sittings I had. I think it was well over a hundred.

ROBERT BROWN: With a model?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, I repainted it twice, so the model probably had about 15 or 20 sittings. Those are canvases where you're really attempting to work out a problem. Other canvases you do, you are not working out a problem, you are just doing something to get an effect.

ROBERT BROWN: What is the title of this one?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That one--"The Road to Inventing"--that was done last fall. I don't know what brought that out either.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a problem in mind in doing this?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Not particularly, other than doing a good piece of work, and the placement of the figure over on its side like that, to see what I could do.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have in mind a relation to the background? Apart from purely formal?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, just a figure started out, and the rest of it just evolved. Finally you get something else that seems to be working and try to get something else to go with, so the whole canvas will be a unit and not the main object.

ROBERT BROWN: You have curving forms with the wheel, even the twigs, and in the upper portion. Do you think this evolved because of the voluptuous human form?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, I don't know, you've got to get some variety. One thing helps set off another thing. If you get too much of the same thing, too many curves, it's likely to get a little boring. Too many squares and it's likely to be a little boring.

ROBERT BROWN: So this is not deliberate or self-conscious?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right, working up areas to make it more interesting, better color.

ROBERT BROWN: You work in monotoes. Has this been going on for many years?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Started when I was in art school. It was I liked the best and you are allowed to do what you like the best. To me, they give more room for, they are not quite so deliberate in the sense of a person using color out of a tube. You've got more ground to cover and play with and express yourself with. It's adding, like adding notes to a piano, you might say. Instead of using an eight-tone scale you're using a 24-tone scale. You have to learn many things when you paint with a gray palette. One of things you learn is that you have to keep you tools clean. Use clean brushes, otherwise everything looks all the same.

ROBERT BROWN: The more limited the color range, the more subtle the relationships.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure. You have to keep the originality and character from getting lost and messed up with all the other things.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas if you use strong color

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, you don't have to worry.

ROBERT BROWN: You don't have to worry. The colors themselves are of sufficient contrast and sufficiently distinct?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure. Usually it's much simpler in conception, than breaking up colors.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't very interested in orchestrating colors?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, no, eight tones are too many anyhow, too many to use. It's a great problem to use eight colors on a canvas. If you can use four you're doing pretty good, with different values in them, because that gets very complicated. It's a good deal like someone setting 20 colors on their palette. I don't think anybody can use 20 colors. Your lucky if you can learn to use 10 or 12. When you get up to 20, you are going to lose yourself. In painting you want to keep it as simple as possible to keep the strength of it going.

ROBERT BROWN: There are few colors but your paintings are broken up with many patterns.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes, it's broken up into many patterns and there not to many different colors in it, there probably isn't over four or five, but the values of them are considerably different.

ROBERT BROWN: There is a rather limited color range as I said before and you become rather extensive in your subtle painting of values.

PHILIP MALICOAT: There you've got to be careful too, otherwise you'll lose the strength of the piece. One time I had 14 values for one color. After I got through, I realized there were just too many values in it. So I simplified it down to maybe six.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you find was happening?

PHILIP MALICOAT: It just lost all its strength, too fine gradations going from here to there. Much better to have a little abrupt change in the canvas, or it can be false looking.

ROBERT BROWN: You certainly have that in this painting over there from 1970 or so. A great black form, then the grays, and the greenish gray. It does suggest something very violent.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Of course a painter always has two or three things in mind, and one of them is a sense of good color relationships and good quality in the paint. The problem was to handle the big area with that dark, right in the middle of the canvas, and make it come off.

ROBERT BROWN: So representation doesn't figure in at all?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No. It's something lying up in your head that you're just throwing out. This is a series. I did four storm pieces one winter. The first one I did was pretty complicated. The second I was able to simplify some. The third was even simpler. And this one was the simplest of them all. Finally got it broken down, but I had to paint three others to I could paint one simply and hold it that way.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you keep those others?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I have them. They were pieces I learned a good deal out of and they evolved into this piece. Why not keep them? They are fairly well painted and representative of my work. I didn't work too long on them, about 20 sittings, 25 on each one.

ROBERT BROWN: You gave them a title.

PHILIP MALICOAT: I gave them all titles.

ROBERT BROWN: Yet they don't represent a storm?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, my idea of a storm. I have one called "Storm over Land," which had some shapes of trees that were abstracted in a certain sense.

ROBERT BROWN: The important thing is the result, how it works as a painted thing.

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right. Did it do what I wanted to do, or could I do what I wanted to do, or even come close to it. That's the main thing. You very seldom achieve exactly what you want to do. Your mind is nebulous, and you don't know what something looks like till its down on the canvas. You paint a lot of nice things upstairs, but it's a matter of painting.

ROBERT BROWN: When you finished studying with Dickinson, you'd learned to render something accurately. Did you continue representing things through the '40s?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Pretty much so. During World War II I had practically a two-year period where I didn't paint. After the war things got a little easier and I started branching out then. Had more time to work. Had more time to think.

ROBERT BROWN: You were doing more and more of this sort of thing, rather than representational?

PHILIP MALICOAT: That's right, although I'd break down and do quite a representation piece once

in a while.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were in Europe you did landscapes.

PHILIP MALICOAT: All landscapes and buildings and things like that. We were living in Paris on the Isle St. Louis, which is right next to the Seine. I used to go down on the quays and paint. When we were out in Brittany, I painted outdoors all the time, and in Southern France, five months in the wintertime, nice winter. I painted outdoors practically every day. When I came back I had about 60 oils and about 40 drawings.

ROBERT BROWN: While you were over there, why do you suppose you were doing these recordings, you might call them, of what you saw? Why do that when, as you say, your major work is in your head?

PHILIP MALICOAT: There's the pleasure of doing it. Not only pleasure, but they're fresh, you don't have to work over them. The setting has inspired you to do something. It's a big drive. It's very difficult to paint outdoors for any length of time. I don't think I could do it now. Starting a new canvas everyday and having a subject matter and not repeating yourself is a heck of a big job. Otherwise you'd fall into the trap of doing the same thing over and over, and that isn't any fun. When I look back on it, that year in France was the only year in my life I only did landscapes. We went over in March '60 and came back March '61.

ROBERT BROWN: When you came back, did you start doing landscapes here?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, I started painting in the studio. I had a studio in Southern France and I had one in Paris too, but I wasn't too much interested in painting in the studio.

ROBERT BROWN: Your years in Provincetown, you've mainly painted in your studio?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Mainly I have. Oh, I've done a lot of landscapes and seascapes down here, but spasmodic, one or two, and won't do another one for a year.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this studio one you've had for long?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Since 1945. I built it in 1945.

ROBERT BROWN: When you're in here, is this a place where your imagination can run?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Nobody ever bothers me here, very seldom. I do as I please. I've spent so much of my life in a studio, I hardly know how to describe it.

ROBERT BROWN: It's not a need to escape, is it?

PHILIP MALICOAT: No, when I need to get out, I'll go out to the back shore or somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: I was going to say you are awfully convivial, and your longtime involvement with the Art Association, Beachcombers. When you are the other artists in Provincetown go out, are you mainly talking shop? Why do you go out? I know you talked about chess, drinking.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Very seldom, shop. I don't think I've actually talked shop with another painter. Oh, every once in a while you are at their house, shop comes in, but very seldom. It's conviviality. I play chess and I play music at least one night a week. It's pleasant and breaks up the routine.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you felt competitive with other artists?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Never felt competitive. One of the things I've always enjoyed about being a painter is that you don't have to be competitive. As a matter of fact, it's a great pleasure to see a good canvas regardless of who does it. No competition. If you can do what I can do, good for you, if you want to take that much trouble.

ROBERT BROWN: You've got yourself involved with the Art Association. Is that because you wanted to or felt a sense of responsibility?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think all painters are responsible for painting, for what's being shown, and if you are in it you've got to take up a certain amount of the slack and put forth your ideas to the whole community. If you don't, someone else will take over and maybe not to your liking. The years I was in the Art Association, I can't say it was a pleasure, but it was a big lesson on how to get along with your fellow painters, plus keeping a good level of quality in the shows. Some painters tend to take over, and you've got to stop it because they want them and their gang in and nobody else. So it's a matter of self-preservation, I guess, you get in and stick your chin out.

ROBERT BROWN: If you are not competitive, you are at least concerned.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Sure. Art policy, I'm very much concerned to keep quality in it, to keep it open, so it won't get tied up in knots.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you say you achieved that at the Art Association?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think we achieved it damn well for 25 years there. It had been achieved before to a certain extent, but there were cliques breaking out, a modern bunch and this bunch and that bunch.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean in the '30s?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Finally, when we got that pulled together, which we did. I was vice-president then.

ROBERT BROWN: When was this?

PHILIP MALICOAT: The late '30s and all of the '40s and '50s, and '60s, I guess. We got that ironed out and actually started working again as a community of artists instead of broken up into two or three communities. Abstract art and so forth--it was all brought together again.

ROBERT BROWN: You had some rather childish protests.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Fantastic.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think it was that bothered the older painters so much?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I don't know. They didn't think it was any good because it didn't represent anything they'd been brought up to believe in, you might say. They were a little too old and it was a little too new an idea to them. It started out with Cézanne and it's been going ever since and they were just against it. At a place like the Art Association, where they are likely to get into each other's hair anyhow, so they broke off and it took quite a number of years to get us pulling back together again. But they did.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think you were good, diplomatically, at doing this?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I don't think I was too bad at it. It seemed the reasonable thing to do. After all, a painter can recognize a good painting, whether it is abstract or not. I used to sit on the jury--being a vice-president I could sit on any jury I wanted, but when there were split, I'd sit on the modern jury. And I did for quite a few summers. Hofmann was on it, and others of the modern group, and there was no contention about what was good or bad or indifferent. Everybody practically had the same ideas.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Hofmann a very broad-minded person?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, yes. He was very broad-minded.

ROBERT BROWN: Meanwhile the other jury was more traditional. Was that a separate jury. They separate the shows for a time.

PHILIP MALICOAT: They finally brought them back together, but they had separate juries. So if you were avant-garde you could send to the modern. But they all were hung together.

ROBERT BROWN: Who instigated this, the traditional people, because they said only we can judge the quality of something well represented?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Well, the moderns didn't feel they were getting a square deal with only a traditional jury, which is sort of ridiculous, but nevertheless that was their true feeling. Then they all hung in the same room, but they were all mixed up, they weren't separated. For a while they were. One jury had one wall and the other jury would have the other wall. But that wasn't working. There were more representational painters than there were modern, so each artist would have to put in four or five canvases to make the show. That caused feelings, and everything was helter-skelter.

ROBERT BROWN: Did some of the older, representational artists come to live with the abstract.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Very definitely. As far as I know, they all did. They did not want to admit it, I think, even in the early '40s and late '30s they still had some abstract or modern people they admired. As colorists and as people who handle a canvas well. Most of the abstract painters all had been trained academically.

ROBERT BROWN: What effect did abstract expressionism from New York have? Was it felt in the '40s?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Not too much.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean the younger ones did come here summers.

PHILIP MALICOAT: Of course Hofmann was here and he had his school in the late '40s. I don't remember when he just started out. Of the group, I guess Motherwell was the best known. Several others were around here in the early '50s.

ROBERT BROWN: So Provincetown was prepared, through Hofmann?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I guess so, through Hofmann, and through the general interest in painting you knew what was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was a time when there were a lot of sophisticated collectors coming down here too, weren't there, good galleries?

PHILIP MALICOAT: There was a gallery every other house, practically. There were a lot of galleries. Whether they were good or not is another question. There were two or three really good ones and there were lots of collectors coming out. Lots of paintings being sold out of here. It was fantastic. That's why a lot of painters left Rockport and Boston. Some just pulled right out of Gloucester and Rockport and came down here.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this hold into the '50s?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I think so. It was still going pretty strong into the '60s. The galleries guard the gold. The HCE was probably the best and that was going into the '60s. People like Hirshhorn came down.

ROBERT BROWN: You said you weren't too competitive. Did you not try and have your paintings exhibited frequently?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Oh, once in a while I'd put out a little effort. But not very often. I haven't had a show in 10 years.

ROBERT BROWN: You are content to make an occasional sale to someone who will come to the Art Association or your studio and see your work?

PHILIP MALICOAT: I guess I was more interested in painting than anything else. To get too mixed up in selling is going to take up a lot of time. I figured there'd be time enough for that when I got cornered in a wheelchair, couldn't paint anymore.

ROBERT BROWN: Then you would begin to plot and scheme?

PHILIP MALICOAT: Yes. [Laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW

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