



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Vaclav Vytlacil,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Vaclav Vytacil on March 2, 1966. The interview was conducted by Bruce Hooton for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

BRUCE HOOTON: Mr. Vytacil, you were one of the first students of Hofmann from the United States I understand.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, I think it would go all the way back to 1921, the fall of 1921. I had been teaching in Minneapolis and I had decided shortly after the first world war that I'd like a European experience. So, my friend Cameron Booth, a painter, and I decided to go but finally he failed to have the funds so I went alone. I went to Paris, stayed a while and then being of Czech descent I went to visit some relatives I had in Czechoslovakia. Stayed there several months in Prague but decided that my job was back to Paris. It was on the way back through Germany that I stopped to see some of the famous museums and wound up in Munich. And then, taking advantage of the German inflation which was in full swing, I decided that I would like to stay. I met my friend Worth Ryder, who later became the professor of art at the University of Berkeley, and another Chicago painter and the three of us decided, as a little community, that we would be friends and help one another to remain and study in Munich.

BRUCE HOOTON: Do you remember the Chicago painter's name?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Ernest Thurn. In order to stay though, because the Police had that prerequisite for all foreign students turning up in Munich, we had to be enrolled in a recognized school by the Ministry of Culture...not any school but the schools the Ministry of Culture designated. So I enrolled, after some examination, at the Academy - the Bavarian Academy of Art and so did Ernest Thurn. We stayed the major part of one year until the Academy, having too many students, decided that all those over 35 had to leave, and so my friend Ernest Thurn was forced to leave. I was not. And he, in order to remain in Munich, found, two blocks back of the Bavarian Academy, a little school run by Hans Hofmann where he enrolled. Since we all three ate together usually every night, we discussed our daily problems and experiences and then Ernest Thurn began to talk a language that interested me very much. Without finishing the first year, I decided I would stop and enroll in Hans Hofmann's school too because it was the thing that I had in the back of my mind that I wanted to have as an experience in my first trip to Europe. In other words, he explained in a very clear and rational manner the problems of post-Cezanne development in painting in France and that was then the key revolutionary thing for all young American painters. And Mr. Hofmann, or Herr Hofmann, as we used to call him, did it so beautifully and so clearly, at least we thought so, that we felt our work automatically developing in the direction that we wanted it to go. I stayed with him and so did Ernest Thurn, I would say the better part of three or four years, maybe as many as five. Our major work was done during the winter and in the summer we would go with him to Capri, Italy. Having reached Capri and everyone liking it very much we, Ernest Thurn and I, managed to bring and interest a number of students. Matter of fact, at this time we managed to make a very small and modest, in number, German School for German students into an American Academy for American students in Munich itself. Mr. Hofmann found that very advantageous. We paid considerably more than the Germans, although what we did pay in tuition was almost laughable. And he liked us and we all were very happy together and felt that we were very strongly enriched without any doubt about it. However, there came a time after about 4 or 5 years when my friend Worth Ryder, whom I tried very hard to interest in it, but who preferred to stay in the Academy, suddenly one day I remember we were sitting in his rooms in Munich, very modest student quarters, showed me a letter he had just had from his Alma Mater, the University of California at Berkeley, asking him to come there as an instructor in art. I felt right off that he had decided to go and so I said, "Well Worth, you have never come to gain any of these new ideas other than what you have heard around our beer table at night and I think you should come and spend one summer with us in Capri." He agreed. He had the problem of his wife and child but he thought they could remain in Menton, France, and he would go off for the summer weeks with me. I said that I had quarters there with some Italian peasants and that we would eat at home and use the basement room for a studio. And that is how it worked out and Worth Ryder came for that summer. I don't remember exactly the year, but it must have been about 1926, possibly even 1927. That fall he went back to California and Ernest Thurn and I went back to Munich with Hofmann.

BRUCE HOOTON: You were there all of this time?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: I was there all of that time, it must have been a stretch of about 5 or 6 years. 1921 to 1926 or '27. Though it could not have been 6-7 years study with Hofmann. It was interrupted by traveling and other experiences. We would go off for periods and come back again. At the time my friend Ryder went back to

California my period of study in Munich was drawing more or less to a close, also for Ernest Thurn. I was very surprised when, though I stayed about a year more, my friend asked me to come out to the University and deliver a course of lectures entitled "The European Modern Painting" or the "Modern Painting and Sculpture of Europe." I was only too happy, of course, to do it and he said he could get me an appointment for a summer session and it would be a great help to him. I had a wonderful experience in California and Worth and I worked at it with him sitting listening to how clearly I was putting over the ideas. I, doing the talking and showing the pictures, moving from one phase of it to another and being helped by Worth telling me how well I was doing. This was the first time that anyone had delivered this revolutionary art at Berkeley. We did so well the first year, apparently, that I was asked to come back for the next summer session, which went along very smoothly and we had no problems. Matter of fact, we made so much headway and were so appreciated by the students that Worth and I got the idea that this would be a splendid thing for Hofmann. We had now prepared the way for him and now he could come and this would be a culminating experience in introducing modern painting to California. Seems rather presumptuous but, roughly, that's what took place. We managed and Hofmann was invited. There was an additional point to it, however, and that was that having turned the German school in Munich into a kind of modest American Academy for American students, and Hofmann teaching French painting you might say right in Mr. Hitler's backyard, we realized we owed him some responsibility and worried about what would happen in that dreadful thing we saw developing. So that added to it and we brought him over. That gave him the permission since at that time no one could come over other than someone a distinguished Institute of Learning had invited. He did well and was appointed a second time. I, in the meantime, had gone to the Art Students League for the winter and had been teaching there and had prepared the way for him at the League. So when he finished his second appointment, and two appointments was the rule, after which they offered you a permanent appointment if you wished to stay, he left and later joined up with the Art Students League. That again allowed him to stay in this country. I think he taught one year at the League, he may have been there two years, I'm not certain. I think it was only one and started his own school. He had additional troubles about staying then as he was on his own. But I remember one trip to Montreal where he got his re-entry visa and then I heard of another one to Bermuda. But he managed to stay on here until finally he became eligible for citizenship which he finally acquired at the close of the 5 years.

BRUCE HOOTON: The school was in Gloucester - the first one?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: No, at the time he broke away from the League he was running his own school in New York on 57th and Lexington Avenue on the 4th or 5th floor of a building where he had part of a floor. But he had nothing in the summer - no school of his own. Ernest Thurn, in the meantime, had been conducting his own school in Gloucester. So Hofmann being free, and the two being intimate friends, joined him in Gloucester where the two taught. He taught so well, apparently, or became so well known, that it launched the Hofmann's summer school. After two seasons he decided to start his own school in Provincetown. With considerable numbers of students from New York and from other parts of the country who'd come for the summers the school became perhaps the largest in Provincetown. It certainly developed into the largest and most important school there very quickly. Hofmann did so well with it and I believe then began to sell some of his first paintings that he bought himself a house and settled into a permanent summer art school. That lasted a good number of years until he was in or around his middle seventies, when he gave it up and turned entirely to painting.

BRUCE HOOTON: His school here, I believe on 8th Street, went on until about 10 years ago, didn't it?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: That's right. He said the 8th Street School never paid anything but it was the publicity he needed in New York to bring the students not only in New York but from other parts of the country for the summer and he told me one time that he had as many as 110 to 120 students. The summer income could carry him through the year.

BRUCE HOOTON: Do you remember many of the Americans who were abroad with you in Italy or Munich? I'd heard that Zogbaum studied there. Wilfred Zogbaum, sculptor?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: There was a small group. I left...I think the year was 1927 and I think I went back to Europe about '29 or '30. In this time, having left Munich in '27 a small group of Americans had followed us. So you could say it was another generation, the older ones having left. Of this group there was Zogbaum, Alice Fish, Ludwig Sander, ...

BRUCE HOOTON: Was Holty there too?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Holty was there in my time.

BRUCE HOOTON: Oh, I see, I didn't know.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Holty went back to Paris. I can't think offhand of others, there were several - Janet Chase - well, that was more or less the group. And it was with this group that Zogbaum had worked.

BRUCE HOOTON: They were just in Munich?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: They were in Munich. It may have been that they went to southern France where Hofmann, before he came to Berkeley, had one season in St. Tropez. It is possible that Zogbaum was there, but I doubt it.

BRUCE HOOTON: When you were in Anticoli was that when Hofmann visited you?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: From the Capri summer classes, on our way back to Munich one year, Thurn and I stopped at Anticoli Corrado, a small Abruzzi town about an hour's run from Rome where Maurice Sterne, the American painter, lived and worked together with Edward Bruce who later became the head of the WPA project in Washington.

BRUCE HOOTON: Was that the first time you'd ever met Bruce?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes. So on the way up we told Hofmann about this Abruzzi town where we liked to work and had friends and he wanted to see it too. So we took him and spent a few days and became acquainted with Maurice Sterne and Edward Bruce, as well as a few Italian painters and one or two other Americans. Sort of a grab basket of internationalites. One or two Germans, too, who painted up in Abruzzi hill towns that scattered themselves from the peak down into the valley over the side of the hill. What interested me very much was that all during these years Hofmann never painted. The only thing we ever saw of his were some small little drawings that he had hanging up in his extremely modest quarters in Munich. Little drawings, that couldn't have been more than 4 by 6 inches, very small. He gave this reason: that he had lost all the production he had had in Paris prior to the first world war. He held out till the bitter last and then had run, leaving everything behind as the war broke out. These years of not painting lasted all through the period that we were there and on through the period after Thurn and Ryder and I left. He began again to do some drawings on his first appointment at Berkeley. The span of years could easily be estimated as 15 or more. A long stretch from the time he left Paris prior to first world war to 1929 or 30. He began to draw at Berkeley and a series of those drawings were reproduced in the little book he wrote entitled "In Search of the Real." I think that may have been his beginning to work again. At this time he must have been approaching 60 or in middle 50's, this is a rough estimate, of course. But it was always surprising, this long expanse of no work. Then under the impetus of the spurt that he got - probably financial as well as the change and the excitement of the new world, he had zest again for the work.

BRUCE HOOTON: How was he able to get artists as students if he wasn't an artist himself, though?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: We often discussed that even in the early days in Munich how strange that we never see the work of the man in whom we place so much faith. But we always rationalized it. We didn't need to see the work. We came to be introduced to certain values. He was doing that for us - we saw it developing - we felt ourselves all growing and so this bothered us then in no way.

BRUCE HOOTON: The German students felt the same way, more or less?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: I think they did too.

BRUCE HOOTON: Did you speak German?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes. I didn't speak when I first got to Munich but I learned enough to have a fluent, everyday language. His first drawing in California was followed by some work in New York, however I never saw any of that. I did, however, see the work he began to do in his first years in Provincetown where he really began to paint. He showed me at the end of a summer in New York, in his loft studio, a series of motifs painted in a broad, one might say German Expressionistic manner, however somewhat more abstract. Linear in quality, with sort of lusty patches of color over it, size about 24 by 30. He showed me about 75 of them done on plywood panels as part of his summer's work. He said he had other things but these he showed me at that time with considerable zest and interest and I had a feeling his period of whatever it was that kept him from painting was over. He also showed me several figure things he was doing in New York. I remember one rather large one with a woman in a red dress or something sitting up in a chair rather stiffly and straight and very much in the manner he used to teach us in Munich.

BRUCE HOOTON: He's not known for his figurative work, you know?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: No. As I see it now it was primarily an approach to painting through form. It was the stress on the form realized to which the color was attached as well as it might. It could not be described as the search for the form through color - which was apparently what interested him when he dropped the figure work and began to work completely in the abstract idiom. I remember seeing several of his first canvases. Not at the time he painted them but somewhat later in New York, and I could see that the approach now was from color standpoint. The figure exactness and demand, which was sort of always compared to the strength of the old masters,

especially the Nuerenberg school, and we used to use Durer as a justifying agent for the efforts that we were constantly not being able to do though we put out our best effort in the realization of the figure drawing that we were all doing in Munich. There was very little painting in the class, on the part of the Americans anyway, and very little on the part of the Germans, in terms of real painting. It was almost all drawing disciplines. It was so severe, really, that when Thurn and I went to Italy the first year, about 1925, we never did any color. We drew. We stayed about 6 months and we did nothing but drawings in pencil and ink all over Capri and up in the Abruzzis. We were somewhat laughed at by our friends when we got back to Munich. "What! You go to colorful Italy and you spend your time with a pencil?"

BRUCE HOOTON: They were landscape drawings?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, landscape. Some figure, but mostly landscape. Always stressing a kind of architectural structure - with the building scattered about with the spaces in between (carefully measured to scale). We had a jargon built on the idea that form, the figure, being the substance of the positive space in it with the substance of the negative space around it, organized as we thought the old master did it in terms of the plane. A kind of a unified three dimensionality. And as I say, I'm not making very clear procedure of this, but that was what I saw in his first paintings when he began to work both in New York and Provincetown. Provincetown began to loosen him up as we say and the thing began to take on an Impressionistic splash of color and vitality and energy. It was not French painting, primarily. It was definitely a German Expressionism - colorful, yes. The figure painting, to go back for a moment, was primarily on the basis of this discipline of form. Then after he left the figure painting and did his first paintings in the abstract idiom you could still feel the power of the line, the drive towards the rhythm in line through the composition. And if you compare that to his last work, where the linear quality is gone and you have these enormous solutions of vast areas of heavily applied color, you could feel that a period of 15 or 20 years, possibly more, was necessary from the time he began to paint in New York till the time that he found the statement that he had, for instance, in his last show at Kootz's. It took these 20 years to evolve, from a heavy linear form, this drawing form, this zestful form...with the color developing secondly to the time when painting meant to him the development of form through color only. I always had a feeling - and this I very definitely could support with further evidence - that having come in contact with young student life in New York City, and having very definitely come in contact with the work of such painters as Pollock, DeKooning, Tomlin, Kline, and maybe several others that you could name like Vicente - that this was of tremendous significance to him. Though he always felt at the end, and he told me, that he really built this - I always had the feeling that he owed as much to the American explosion of talent that took place in New York as the students owed him. DeKooning never was a student of his, neither was Pollock, neither was Tomlin, and neither was Kline. Now it's true that by word of mouth and by friends we were all involved together when we started the first American Abstract painters which DeKooning wanted to join but said he wasn't ready. Gorky came up and said "When you get yourself organized I'll decide whether I want to join or not." We were much too helter-skelter, but a good many like Balcomb Greene were there and his wife, and a number of others - Carl Holty and I and a number of others joined - some 12 to 15 who started American Abstract Artists. Now to repeat: some of this number were former Hofmann students, but others were not. It started with the American Abstract Artists having for the first time, a show of Abstract painting in New York at the National Academy rooms which we actually rented because they needed the rent money. One of their best rooms. And as Walkowitz said, "to have lived as long as I have and to see Abstract painting at The National Academy, now I can die in peace."

BRUCE HOOTON: When was that show? It was in the Squibb Building, the first one, wasn't it?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, you're right. I made a mistake. I forgot. It must have been the second or third. Yes, you're right - the Squibb Building show was in a lovely set of rooms because the owner of the building, or the management, was interested in painting and said we could use those rooms with the agreement that if they could rent it we take your pictures out. But meantime we could hang pictures there and be welcome. Which we did.

BRUCE HOOTON: What was the story about Gorky and the lightbulb and the ball of string? In the Abstract meetings in the beginning? Do you remember anything about that?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: The lightbulb and the ball of string?

BRUCE HOOTON: He wanted to do a group of sculptures or exhibitions of this?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: During the Abstract Artists Organization there were various theories advanced. One of them, possibly the most revolutionary, was that every member of the Abstract Group was to paint one subject, contemporary in nature, out of the life of New York City, an object so commonplace there would be no question about any selectivity about it. So we all got to hashing this over and the lightbulb was mentioned. The Lord only knows that's common enough. So we decided that everyone ... the ten or twelve sitting there, would, for the next meeting, prepare a lightbulb painting. Well, when we met I was the only one who had a lightbulb painting!

BRUCE HOOTON: Do you still have it?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: I think I have it.

BRUCE HOOTON: I'd like to see it.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: I didn't think much of it but the others seemed to think it was alright. Mainly, I think, because they were all ashamed they had fallen down on their theories, which I took literally. I met Stuart Davis one time and I talked with him about us. We invited him to join up but he felt himself somewhat advanced or somewhat out of tune with us or maybe a little older or whatever it was. He was interested in us and all that, but he did not join. I think was devoting himself a great deal to political things at that time, and the Artists Congress and he wasn't painting. Painting was a kind of side issue. We wanted him. But anyway, I knew him and I spoke to him about us and his wife said "Oh yes, my Stuart has always had an idea like that." She said he thought that painting should take on an international, cosmopolitan attitude and it ought not to be nationalistic, it ought to be about subjects everybody will appreciate. That was a big theory but it was a fiasco. It lasted one or two weeks, in which there was one picture delivered. Everybody gave up - including Gorky. You raised the question of a ball of string. I never heard of that, but it may have been the same kind of an idea.

BRUCE HOOTON: The same kind of a joint idea Mr. Bolotowsky remembered the ball of string.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Oh, he did?

BRUCE HOOTON: The lightbulb was first. Maybe the ball of string was just adding another commonplace object.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, it may well have been. I had forgotten about that. I thought that my painting of the lightbulb was a miserable affair - I look back upon it now - seeing what the human mind can do, you know - to oneself - but we all have faith in it. So we dropped any such thing as that and it was never brought up again, and everyone turned to geometric painting. I think for the first time there were constructions made. I know I did eight or ten. I believe these were some of the very first constructions done in New York City on the basis of modern abstract sculptural form. Mine were sort of hard to describe - things hung onto a door - I mean various objects. I also did a three dimensional structure and had a great desire to go on with the three dimensional, but we were living in two rooms with a newly acquired family. So my wife instructed me "No more three dimensions" - and that was the end of that phase.

BRUCE HOOTON: Hofmann encountered an already growing desire to explore the canvas...

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, and how much he owed to it. I myself feel in the many talks I had with him subsequently, especially when he had reached his peak, that some of his attitudes were somewhat defensive. I never heard him say how much he owed, though at the Modern Museum show, he did have in, large letters directly over the first painting, a sort of homage, you could call it, in which he mentions Pollock, Tomlin, I'm not quite sure the number of names, Kline was in too. Perhaps having been accepted at the Modern Museum after a great many years of being passed over possibly ...

BRUCE HOOTON: Yes, he said that in a letter to you that I saw. He was very anti-museum.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, and his wife told me it took 5 years to get the Modern Museum interested enough to consider him. But at another time he says that if -----hadn't been working on it I don't think I ever would have had the stamina to survive. But then with this first show at the modern which was a very handsome show -it seems he must have had some thought behind, when he mentions the names of these four or five in very large, broad letters, carefully stated over the first picture immediately in the first entrance room.

BRUCE HOOTON: Well, Lee Krasner told me a story once that she had introduced Hofmann to Pollock. I think she was a pupil of Hofmanns for a while. She met Pollock who was living around 8th Street with a man by the name of Louis Bunce who now lives out on the west coast. She took Hofmann by and Hofmann picks up the brushes that are stuck to the bottom of the coffee can in their varnish and says "Ach..you paint with this? You could kill a man with this." And Pollock says "Yes, that's right." Pollock and Hofmann apparently had never met until Lee introduced them. DeKooning had already had a show with Pollock back in '43 or '44 at a place I think called the MacMillen Gallery. It was set up by Graham - John B. Graham. Do you remember him?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Oh, John Graham? Oh yes, I knew him very well - oh for many years - also in Paris.

BRUCE HOOTON: He was apparently a great speaker for DeKooning and an aid to Lee and Pollock, at least got them into galleries. That I understand from Lee.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: This was during the period of my second seven years in Europe - after I had left and Hofmann, so to speak, took over. Things developed and though I knew about the, I knew about them second-

hand. These things must have happened then. But John Graham used to come to Paris. I remember once when he was there he said "Oh Vyt, you've got to come to the studio, I'm painting everything in stripes." So I went, and so he was.

BRUCE HOOTON: You mean the figures were in stripes?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Mostly they were abstract still-lifes roughly shapes of some kind. But definitely a concreteness of positive and negative space. The thing rested. The objects rested on something - it had that feeling. But everything was in stripes.

BRUCE HOOTON: He was a very interesting man in his time, had a romantic career.

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes. Well, he never told me much about that, only that he had been a cavalryman in the Tzar's Army and got out. One interesting note that made a very important impression on me and that was perhaps in '36 or so. I picked him up again in New York and he was painting away and took me into his room, a modest little place, and showed me what I thought was a batch of very interesting, intellectually composed pictures. One that explains what he was doing was a long, horizontal rectangle. The top of it was a light blue and underneath it the other half, roughly - was dirty white and there was a string of heavy cord that sort of divided the two colors and extended across the whole canvas and went around the edges and was tied in the back. And he explained it. He said "If, since the Renaissance, the tendency of painting has been to simplify itself, then I have now reduced it to its ultimate simplicity. The two areas represent the color and the form and the plastic elements are represented by the 3 dimensional string. There you have the whole equation of painting." Other canvases there were in similar vein. I have never forgotten that. It made an impression on me of how much intellectual work would be done about painting - when those who had Hofmann for instruction thought his was the sum total of all of it. I had never heard such theories as Graham advanced there in his studio and then later in that book that he wrote, "Dialectics and Systems of Art" or something close to that, in which one realized there were vast fields of intellectual endeavor and creative thought besides what we had heard.

BRUCE HOOTON: Did he mention that again in the book...do you remember?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: I don't remember. I don't think so. I think that was just the spirit of the moment.

BRUCE HOOTON: In France, were there many other American painters when you were there?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: Yes, there were quite a few. There may well have been shows by those groups that went to Paris after the Civil War or in the '80s and '90s. But for a long time there had been no show of American Painters residing in Paris. There happened to be then, around the thirties, so large a group of painters that one of the Europeans, who later managed the show and arranged it, thought it would be a good thing to have a show of American painting. And we did have it at a rather good Gallery, The Gallery Renaissance.

BRUCE HOOTON: That was the American Abstract Artists?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: No, these were just American artists residing in Paris around the year '30 and there were so many of them. Maholy was one, I don't know that Walkowitz was one, I was one, Paul Burlin was one, Stella was another, there was a whole string of painters there and several sculptors. And so this European arranged it and did all the foot work, collecting the pictures an all the rest, and had it at the Gallery Renaissance and the show was well attended. It made a fair representation. No one expected it would make Paris take notice, but there were some Europeans there who said it was a pleasant afternoon and a creditable performance, and so on. One of the French painters, Teriard, picked out several of the painters as being good and worthy of notice, said nice things about them. Two of them were selected to be shown by some German authorities on the Rhine, but that fell through. I don't know why. There were two selected, I think Rockner and I were selected to be shown in a personal way...not a one man show but a personality presentation. But that fell through for some reason. But the show was referred to as a worthy venture and it was certainly the first time after many, many years that a group of Americans residing in Paris, organized by Europeans, was presented to the Parisian public. It was spoken of fairly well and we put out a book which is in existence. There was a formidable array of American painters residing in Paris then.

BRUCE HOOTON: Did you know many Frenchmen? Were there any Frenchmen who particularly influenced you?

VACLAV VYTLACIL: No, I didn't speak French. And the efforts I made at the French language hurt my own ears so much that I depended on my wife who did a good job.

END OF INTERVIEW

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