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Oral history interview with Rollin
McNeil Crampton, 1965 January 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rollin McNeil Crampton on January 29, 1965. The interview took place in Woodstock, New York, and was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

JOSEPH TROVATO: This interview with Mr. Rollin Crampton is taking place at his house at Woodstock, New York, January 29, 1965. [Recorder stops, restarts after a pause.] Mr. Crampton, as I understand it you were supervisor of the New York City WPA Art Project—of the mural project. Is this correct, Mr. Crampton?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Yes, that is correct.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And can you tell me when you headed the New York City Project? What was the time?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: As a matter of fact, I didn't head the Project. The Project was headed by Burgoyne Diller.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And what was your title then?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: I was assistant supervisor. There were several others, Kay Scott [ph], and two or three others. [Hugh Tyler and Yurchenco. -Ed.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: What were your responsibilities? What was your job, in other words?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: My responsibilities were concerned with going to different institutions, many public schools, and sometimes other places that had asked for murals.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And what else did it entail, Mr. Crampton?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, it entailed [laughs] many things. I mean, one, I had to look out for the ones who were under my supervision. Each supervisor had a certain number of those on the Project. And also, it entered into the realm of art teaching occasionally.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now when you say art teaching, what did that involve?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: That involved this: that the artist would first of all make rough sketches for the mural wall. And these sketches were passed on by a committee. The committee was usually the supervisors on the Art Project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What were some of the projects that you supervised? And perhaps you might also recall some of the artists who did them?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, two prominent projects were the Textile High School where Dr. William Dooley was a principal. Another was Hunter College. The Hunter College project fell through due to the fact that—wait just a minute, I'll think of his name. [I have it. It was Louis Mimford. -Ed.]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, if you can't recall the name at this moment—

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Augustin [ph] [inaudible].

JOSEPH TROVATO: —it—we can skip it. Maybe it will come back to you.

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, several names I recall. Grace Greenwood worked for the Hunter College project [and for Bellone Hospital -Ed.]. And Philip Guston was doing some work for the World's Fair. And Sande McCoy, Jackson Pollock's brother, was doing some work for the mural division.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, this is fine. Let me ask you, Mr. Crampton, where were the murals executed? Were they done on location? Or did you have a—or was there a place where they were done?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Many of the murals were done right in the Project. But in the case of fresco, that had to be done on location. There was one fresco mural in the Textile High School. There were also what were called portable murals. Those were small murals. You might say they were large easel paintings. And these usually went to—into libraries.

[00:05:05]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Were the subjects for these murals usually prescribed by the—by the heads of the places where they were to be installed, or how?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Usually it was pretty much left to the artist. He could select his subject. Sometimes one of the patrons would offer a suggestion, and occasionally that was followed.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Did you yourself, Mr. Crampton, do any work in the way of—I mean, in the way of mural work or easel painting at that time?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, before I was a supervisor I did—I started to work on one small mural that had to do with Thoreau's life. But at that time, they needed another supervisor and Mr. Kay Scott [ph], who was one of the supervisors at that time, recommended me. And Mr. Diller, who was the head of the Project, said he was very glad to have me in that position.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And how long did you serve as assistant supervisor?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, roughly—I really don't remember just how long. Well, I'd say about three years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. You have already mentioned a number of the projects that you were involved in as—in a supervisory capacity. Were there any other projects?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: There was a project at Red Hook. And at that time, I was supervising Grace Greenwood's sister, Marion Greenwood, who was working on the project at Red Hook. And during that period it was known that Mrs. Roosevelt would visit Red Hook. She was very much interested in the building there—or buildings. So, Diller and myself went to Red Hook on this occasion. And we sat around a saloon there drinking beer. Diller was very fond of beer. I was too, I guess. And it seemed that Mrs. Roosevelt, who was there at that time, was so busy that she said she couldn't look at Marion Greenwood's mural. Well, Diller was very much annoyed at this. And I said, Well, let me have a crack at it.

So, I went to the building where she was talking at that time. And there was a long line of persons there waiting to see her, and several policemen. Well, I was bound to get her to—in to see this mural, so I ducked under the line, and I managed to escape a policeman and got up to the door or doorway just as Mrs. Roosevelt came out. She was very gracious and shook hands with me. And I told her what the problem was and she said, Of course I'll go over there. And she did.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Very good. I guess your persistence paid off. Did this project actually go through?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Oh, yes. This is one of the projects that did go through.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Were there any other projects that you can name at this point?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, there were many others, but in significance they weren't as prominent as the ones that I have mentioned. There were a number of public schools that had asked for murals. And those were usually done within the Project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Can you give us an idea of the number of artists that were employed under your supervision? That is to say with Burgoyne Diller, and yourself?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, as I said before, each supervisor supervised a certain number of artists. I had, I think, around 30 artists.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Can you recall any unusual happenings or incidences that might be of interest for the record?

[00:10:00]

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Yes, I can. At that time there was a lot of talk about Communists and the Communism bugbear, et cetera. So, I recall that an FBI man came in to see me about a Negro who was on the Project and wanted to know whether he was a Communist or not. I couldn't answer this directly. I'd been to his studio where he was working and the FBI man asked me if I noticed what he was reading. And well, I couldn't recall anything particular. He said, Did you see any copies of *the Call* around there? And I said, No, I hadn't seen that. But I said, I read *the Call* myself. I like to read different newspapers. So, later on I was called into the FBI office where there were several FBI men for another interview. And they stated something that sounded rather peculiar to me. They said, Well, would you call some of these people, or some of these persons rather, 100 percent Americans? Well, that was kind of a rough question to answer. And I said, You don't mean the Arrow Collar man, do you?

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Laughs.] Mr. Crampton, for just a moment I should like to have us change our pace and ask you to tell us something about yourself. First of all, where were you born and how did you happen to enter the field of art? What was your beginning in this connection?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, I started at an early age. I don't know just how young, but I always liked to draw. And I studied first with two teachers in New Haven, two female teachers, very pleasant persons. Later on, I studied at the Yale University School of Fine Art. And from there I went down to the League where I won a scholarship.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And with whom did you study at the Art Students League?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: I studied with several—I recall Reuter Dahl and Thomas Fogarty. At that time, I was interested in painting illustration. And first of all, I was an illustrator before I got into the other field. I went to the League [laughs] quite some time ago, about 1905. You want anything about my—

Well, if this of interest, and I don't mean in a snobbish sense, but it has interested me to some extent, I'm a direct descendent of Elder Brewster of Mayflower fame on my mother's side. On my father's side, I'm probably English and Irish.

JOSEPH TROVATO: We're glad to have this down for the record.

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Did I say that? I'd like to make a correction. On my father's side I have Spanish, Irish, and English, no doubt related to the fact that the Spanish were wrecked off the coast of Ireland and got in there.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Crampton, have you devoted yourself a good deal to the field of painting? And have you done any teaching?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Yes, I've done teaching. I taught at Parnassus Square last year. But that's sort of a—well, a minor interest, I suppose, some extent.

JOSEPH TROVATO: How about your own work, your own painting? Can you tell us a little bit about it in the way of, say, stylistically speaking? I do not happen to be too familiar with your work and I'm anxious, after we get through with this interview, to see some of your things.

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: I object to categories, by and large. But I've been called, at different times, an abstract painter, a non-objective painter. And I presume that may answer your question.

[00:15:02]

JOSEPH TROVATO: To go back to the subject of the—of the projects, do you yourself feel that

the experience was beneficial to you as an artist?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Yes, it was very beneficial. I enjoyed the contacts with the various painters on the Project. And also, it was important in so far as the country at large is concerned. It really started tremendous interest in painting.

JOSEPH TROVATO: A moment ago you spoke in relation to your own work as being somewhat in the—what we might call the abstract lines. Since World War II, of course, abstraction has been a very strong idiom in American art, in American painting. But what do you think—what thoughts do you have on some of the very recent developments such as pop art and op art and so on? What are your thoughts on these things that are happening now?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, pop art has been called a new renaissance, but personally I feel that it's in a peculiar field indigenous to its title. And it appears to me that much of it is really in the field of craft.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, some people seem to feel that Abstract Expressionism had sort of reached the end of its—of its road and that something had to give, and that—and so, it took on a—so that—there developed I guess what they call a new objectivity.

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, a well-known philosopher said, "Nothing is constant but change." And I suppose we're going to have change from now until time immemorial. Change can be good or bad, I presume. But in so far as popularity is concerned, I presume—popularity and novelty is concerned, that is one reason that pop art has taken over for the time being. However, I don't think there's enough in it to give it any lasting significance.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, we're happy to have your opinion on this matter.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: What about the artist—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Before we close, Mr. Crampton, perhaps you might recall other things, events, or personalities that might be of interest to have us add here?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, I was one of the organizers of the [nation-wide -Ed.] conference held here in Woodstock where we had artists from various parts of the country, and in so far as I, myself am concerned, I invited Harry Holtzman. I invited Rothko and Newman. Newman stayed with me at the house here. And we had interesting discussions along various lines in connection with the conference.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I recall the conference that you refer to. Was it—do you think it was a successful meeting? What were—what was accomplished?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, one thing that was accomplished was some publicity for Woodstock. And I think one of the other things accomplished was the fact that many artists got together for discussions. And I feel that's very important, that the friendship of artists, I think is extremely important and has a great bearing on a number of other things. You've asked about personalities. Of course, a very striking personality is Thomas Benton, who is an old friend of mine. And as a matter of fact, I brought Benton and Craven to Martha's Vineyard. Benton stayed with me in the studio I had there and Craven stayed in the house that belonged to Mrs. Brug [ph] who owned the studio.

[00:20:07]

In connection with that, I'd like to mention Jack Pollock, who is also a very good friend that I've known from the time he studied with Benton. I guess everybody knows that Pollock liked to drink, and very often got into trouble through his drinking. But all in all, he was one of the colorful personalities in the art field.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I guess that both Benton and Pollock are important figures, of course, in American art. Benton was the sole influential in the '30s. His work influenced the—that of a great many of the artists at that time—his style. And he was a teacher of ever so many artists. Well, a moment ago you also mentioned Ad Reinhardt. Perhaps you have some things to add in this connection?

ROLLIN CRAMPTON: Well, one of my good friends over a period of years has been Ad

Reinhardt. And I feel that he's been a very salutary influence in the art field. He is—well, he has been an influence that I think is important in the fact that he's shown up many things as being concerned with fakery and things of that sort.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, Mr. Crampton, I want to thank you very much for giving us the benefit of your recollections. And as I know that this will be of value to the record of the—of the Archives of American Art's study of the New Deal and the arts. Thank you very much, Mr. Crampton.

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