



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Douglass
Crockwell, 1965 February 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Douglass Crockwell on February 21, 1965. The interview took place in Glens Falls, 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. Douglass Crockwell is taking place at the Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York. February 21, 1965. [Recorder stops, restarts.] It is a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Crockwell. I well recall your visit to Utica. I can't remember the exact time. It was some years ago, when you gave a talk, or rather a demonstration, I should say, at Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute's School of Art. How long have you been here on your present job as acting director of the Hyde Collection, Mr. Crockwell?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, you may know that the Hyde Foundation has been in existence for about 12 years. It was set up by Mrs. Hyde during her lifetime, with a board of trustees to handle the affairs of the collection. I've been president of the board since the inception. And I've not really taken any active part in the administration of the museum until just about a year ago when our curator left to go down to New York for further study.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, now that was the Jerry Dodge, wasn't it, Mr. Crockwell, or not?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: No, Mr. Dodge left about two—about three years ago, I think, to go down to Florida, the Cummer Gallery. But taking his place immediately after was Mr. John Howat.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And he stayed for two years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Would you tell us a little bit about the Hyde Collection? I'm anxious to see it myself because I must confess that this is my first visit. And I've been wanting to come here for years and years. And then you might also tell us a little bit about the program that you had here.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Now, Mr. Trovato, I believe the most important factor in the collection is that it was selected personally by Mr. and Mrs. Hyde. They did have professional help in a great many of their decisions, but the collection itself has a definite character, which reflects the character of Mr. and Mrs. Hyde, and also indicates the tremendous sensitivity to art and color and all the details of running a fine house. These things give a definite quality to the collection. We have some fine paintings. One general characteristic I would say about the whole collection is that the paintings are on the small side. And for this reason, they fit into the room of this house as they would in almost any other house.

JOSEPH TROVATO: One we might call a home collection or a collection that fits the home. Is that—

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: I would say so, yes. Not too long ago, I was in The Frick Collection. And—

JOSEPH TROVATO: It came to my mind when—yes.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And the essential difference came to me suddenly one day, that—it was only a difference in the size of the paintings. That we had largely the same masters and equally good pictures in my estimation.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: The collection more or less was completed, that is no acquisitions have been made for the last seven years. Mrs. Hyde, of course, passed away just about a year ago—a little over a year ago. And at that time, what was formerly a private collection became a full-fledged public collection. And we went into the process of developing ourselves in such a way that we could take care of the public more easily. We organized a group of volunteers. And this group has been so cooperative and so efficient in the work that they have done that we felt no actual need for hiring people except the director, perhaps, and office help. This has saved us a great deal of money, of course [laughs]—

[00:05:06]

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Laughs.] I should think so.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: —which is essential. Our endowment is not large. It's adequate to keep us on a minimum schedule. But the mere fact that we have this wonderful help has enabled us to do a good job. And in this year and a half that we've been open to the public, four afternoons a week from two to five, we have increased our attendance 10 times, and every month it goes up a little bit. So, we expect that by 1966 it maybe 20 times.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Wow, this is wonderful.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And it's very satisfying. Of course, as we go along, we get—we become more complicated in our operation. We have an art school, actually an evening school, because most of the students work in the daytime, but it's active and enthusiastically attended and very worthwhile, we feel. In addition to this, we have opened a temporary gallery for temporary exhibitions by redoing the garage. And this has been most satisfactory. We've had some fine shows, starting out with a large showing of the sculpture of David Smith.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, wow.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Early—

JOSEPH TROVATO: You started at the top. [They laugh.]

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Yes, well, it helped a little bit to have David on our board of trustees. [Laughs.] We probably couldn't have gotten him otherwise. But it was a magnificent show and very warmly received, because, as so often happens, he had not had a show in his own home country. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: I mean, the Glens Falls area.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Of course.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And following this, we've had popular shows and abstract shows. And currently, we have an exhibition of selected paintings from area collections, private collections—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Very good.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: —and this has turned out to be one of our most successful—some fine paintings, Winslow Homer, André Derain, [Canaletto -Ed.] and so on. That's a very good show. As of now, we feel that we are doing very well. But we don't want to fall back on our laurels. We expect to go onward and upward. And certainly, we're having the cooperation of the city of Glens Falls and the area to do it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, very good, Mr. Crockwell. I wonder whether I might ask you if you could go back to the collection itself. Could you please tell us, or name some of the artists that are represented in your collection? I mean, just you know, just a few. So as to establish an idea of the character of the collection.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: We have two very good portraits by Rubens, one of them has been much in demand in the past few years for touring shows, the *Head of a Negro*. The other is

Man in Armor, and these are both good paintings. Of course, our pride and joy are our Rembrandt, the *Christ with Folded Arms* [*Christ with Arms Folded*]. And this is one of the great paintings in America today. And we're very, very proud of it, I must confess. There are three Ingres in the collection, small ones, two sketches for larger paintings. And one small sketch figure scene which is most charming. We have Titian, Tintoretto, Degas, Picasso, Braques, Childe Hassam, Winslow Homer, and so many others that it's a little difficult to continue, but [laughs] they're good paintings. There's no question.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Well, this is certainly enough to give us an idea of the collection. I recall that some years ago, we borrowed from the Hyde Collection for exhibition at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, a small painting, and it was by Veronese. Do you have Veronese?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Yes, we have—

[00:10:00]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Yes, it was a beautiful little picture.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: —a painting of *Rebecca at the Well*.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. And I believe that was the one that we had in Utica, in this exhibition.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, I believe that was. Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now at this point, Mr. Crockwell, I should like to have you outline, very briefly, your background? Where were you born? Where—and where were you educated?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, and left there at a rather early age to go to the suburbs of St. Louis, and lived in the suburbs and the outer edges of the city until I was about 21, I think. I attended Washington University and—but in my third year I decided that I wanted to be an artist. So, I doubled up and went to the St. Louis School of Fine Arts. And another course taking both full-time college work and full-time [laughs] art courses simultaneously. It was a little difficult to—in the early stages, to know exactly what I wanted to do, as is in so many other cases. I did fine arts. I did commercial art. And I should say I practiced them. I wasn't actually selling anything at the time. But there were many fields that seemed to be open. And it just so happened that I had my first success in commercial art. And I did quite a bit of work at that on a small scale.

But then the Depression arrived, and there wasn't much, and I can't remember exactly when the Treasury Project started, but I remember reading about it in *the New York Times*. And that there were several artists invited to participate in a competition for the post office, the new U.S. post office in Washington. And this seemed like something I wanted to get into, but I hadn't been invited. So, I wrote to Washington and asked if I could submit sketches. And surprisingly enough, they did allow me to do this. And while I didn't win one of the primary wall spaces, I was guaranteed a future contract and did paint this, and it was pretty well received.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Now, this was a mural?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: This was a—

JOSEPH TROVATO: That you did. Can you tell us where this mural was located? Can you tell us the post office or the city where it is located?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, my first project was for the post office—a new post office, in White River Junction, Vermont, which is over near the New Hampshire line, not too far away from Glens Falls, about 100 miles, I think. And this—the painting itself was based on Vermont industry. And as so many of the other paintings of the time, we got a little bit of everything into them. And interestingly enough, David Smith, the sculptor, helped me stick it on the wall [inaudible]. These were done on canvas in the studio and later mounted in the post office.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And where were you living at that time, Mr. Crockwell?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Right here. Right here in Glens Falls, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: My studio's on the edge of town. And then, on the basis—the completion of this in a fairly satisfactory fashion, I was given another commission for a post office over in the western part of the state. [Laughs.] I can't remember the name of the town.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: But it involved paper making industry and—which was the prime industry of the town. And I made a rather complete sketch on that. And at the last minute, it was decided that they wouldn't build this post office, so the project was canceled, but I was given another one for Endicott, New York, and I made a sketch around the first business that was there, the Endicott-Johnson shoe factory which is located there. And this involved—portrayed—depicted the excavation for the first factory building.

[00:15:12]

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And this was done at home and mounted on the wall in the post office. Then after this, I did one more for the post office in Macon, Mississippi. And this was based on the historical incident of the locality, the signing of a treaty with the Indians. And showed a clearing in the woods with the Indian Braves and pioneer surveyors and some government men sitting around a very crude table on the center of the clearing. That actually was the last one that I did.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Were these murals executed in oil on canvas and then mounted, or was some other medium employed?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: They were painted in oil on canvas. And in the case of the Macon, Mississippi mural, it hung on the ceiling of the studio for quite a long time because just at this moment, it seems that my commercial art started to break, and my—demand from my time was becoming a little greater. And I had to put this aside for a while, but eventually, I did complete it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: And this, as you say, done on oil on canvas and mounted with adhesive on the wall in the post office.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Did you by any chance take part in any of the other government projects, such as the—say in any of the graphic arts projects or easel projects? Or was your participation chiefly in the field of the mural painting and, as you have just outlined, which you completed three murals?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, this was it. I had some friends who were in the WPA project, and the other projects associated with it. And I knew some of the men—quite a few of the men who are doing it, but for some reason or other, I can't remember exactly, why I didn't actually get into the program.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And who were some of the artists of this area who were on the Project? Do you recall the names of any of them?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, there weren't any artists in this area except David Smith on the Project, but these others were New York men, well-known people.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, I think that David Smith was involved in the projects. I have not interviewed him as yet. But do you recall whether or not he was?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Yes, he was. I think on the WPA painting project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Can you recall who headed the Project here in your area? I mean, who had the WPA Art Project? The administrator, was there an administrator here?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: There was no administrator here. Actually, the center for this area was New York City because, as far as I know, there was nothing in Albany either. And my dealings were with Mr. Rowan in New York City.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, Edward Rowan. Yes.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Yes, Edward Rowan.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Crockwell, you have already told us of your position here at the Hyde Collection. But will you please tell us what you are doing at the present time in the field of art? I mean as—and I know that you are an artist, and this is in addition to your administrative duties here as the Hyde Collection, of course.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Sometimes I wonder about this myself because I actually have six major projects underway at this time, any one of them that would keep a person busy full time. And I'll run over these quickly, and then we'll forget about most of them. I'm acting as director of the Hyde Collection, and this is turning out to be a full-time job. I can assure you that. Especially the publicity and handling the new developments.

[00:19:58]

Then, of course, I'm chairman of the planning board for the city of Glens Falls, and this is a full-time job. And we're starting into urban renewal. And it looks as if we're going to be twice as busy next week as we are this week. Then, at home in the studio, right this very moment, I'm working on a calendar painting for Brown and Bigelow, St. Paul, Minnesota. And this is one of a series of church paintings, which I have done over a period of 12, 15 years. And shows a number of children in Sunday school, singing along with a teacher, and it's kind of a sweet little picture, we might say, with warm yellow light coming in through the window and everybody happy and undisturbed. And the mere fact that [laughs] it's such a happy picture usually disconcerts a lot of people who criticize it from an art point of view, that it can't be good if it's sweet. Well, I'm inclined to agree with them [laughs]. But it proves to be quite a satisfying profession for me, this thing of making paintings for advertisements and for stories and magazine covers. And I've done a lot of them over the past 30 years. Occasionally, I must confess, I prefer to do something else. Along with this work, I have pioneered in the field of abstract motion picture, animated motion pictures. And I think it was back in 1935 that the Museum of Modern Art first showed my abstract animations.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And what would be the name of some of your films? Some of the titles?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, this is a difficult thing to say because from the very beginning, what was one picture, usually was broken up and turned into another picture. The titles were sequential, so—[laughs] the—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I simply wondered if I—

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: —the material—

JOSEPH TROVATO: —had seen any of them. This is why I asked.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: The one that's received the most attention and has won international prizes is the *Glens Falls Sequence*, and then followed a little later on by one entitled *The Long Bodies*. And they were made up in a number of techniques. Of course, almost in all cases on the animation stand—which mine was homemade, and made to serve my purposes, and a great hulk of a black machine that I worked under, it was very ominous looking but most effective, and I had a great deal of enjoyment out of making these motion pictures in my spare time. And they've been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, I say, and Cinema 16 has circulated them all over the world. And most satisfactory sort of thing. Now, more recently, I've taken this idea of animated abstractions and put them into the Mutoscope machine, the Mutoscope machine of—

JOSEPH TROVATO: What is a Mutoscope?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, the Mutoscope is, to most people, a familiar object that they have forgotten about. This is a turn-the-crank moving picture machine that you found in every penny arcade. You put a penny in the slot, and you turn the crank, and for one minute, you saw moving pictures. And the early ones were great. The later ones were not so great. But this seemed like a very interesting medium. And so, I translated some of my animations into Mutoscope reels, and, well, the Museum of Modern Art had one of those on display for a number of years down there. Now I'm going into this particular thing on a bigger scale, more of them.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. But how do you get the chance to work on all these things?
[Laughs.]

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, usually, you have to let something slide. I forgot to mention that I have a real estate development which we're developing—building houses and laying out lots and all of the things that go with the development of the real estate. And this doesn't take up too much of my time, I must confess, but it's of vital importance [laughs] in other ways.

[00:25:14]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, you certainly keep yourself more than occupied. Mr. Crockwell, I'm intrigued by this work that you're doing by this Mutoscope, I think you say. Will you tell us a little more about this?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: The Mutoscope machine was developed almost exactly at the same time that the motion picture as such was developed, the motion picture on film. And this was around 1895. At this time, even the film motion pictures were about one minute long. So that the Mutoscope and the Kinetoscope, which was the Edison patent, I believe, came out just about the same time, and they were shown in arcade parlors, that is, motion picture parlors, I guess, because largely the machines at that time were of this type. Later on, the nickelodeon developed, and longer films were made, and we went into *The Birth of a Nation*, and the motion picture industry was off to greater wonders, you see. But strangely enough, the old iron horses, which were the Mutoscope machines—and they were called iron horses, I believe, because they weighed just about as much as a horse in iron. [They laugh.] Solid cast iron, beautifully ornamented, and in some cases, there were dozens and dozens of them around these old arcade parlors. There are still some of these in use. This is a surprising thing.

But up until about 1907, the most important age of Mutoscope filming took place. And there were quite a number of rather interesting original, naive films developed, sometimes on the comedy side, sometimes on the newsreel type of thing. But they had an authenticity about them that was just as important as some of the early work done on film. And, of course, all of the actors were anonymous. And the directors were anonymous, and it was pretty much of a hit-or-miss proposition. Nobody had any money to put into it. And—but they did turn out these Mutoscope reels. The Mutoscope reel is a motion picture on [about 1000 -Ed.] cards that are flipped or ruffled, as you know. They put out what they call thumb books at that time, and heaven, later on. The thumb book was ruffled with a thumb, and a Mutoscope reel was ruffled by a little metal bob that ran around along the top of the cards. But in the—during my career with a Mutoscope, I suddenly came to the realization that these old-time reels were disappearing. And I put on an intensive campaign to try to collect them. And I found one man that told me that he had thrown 68 of them into the alley just about 10 years ago. [They laugh.]

And I've gotten together now about 55 or 60 of the old reels, and I believe that I probably have more than anyone else in the world has. This is—[laughs]—there are only 50 of them—50, 55 in my collection, and when you think there can't be over 200 or 300 in existence now, all over the world, when at one time, there were 100,000 of these things in use, these reels themselves. It's a very fascinating occupation. And I'm getting a great deal of fun out of collecting them and making my own reels. Of course, making my own reels is more important.

[00:30:00]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Is this something that can be borrow—do you lend these reels, to interested people or organizations or not?

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: I don't have enough of them yet to do this. I hope to put on a show that I'll send around a few places. But I have about five or six reels in process now. Three of them are together. But I think that I've got the secret of it now so that I can turn them out a little easier. It's been very difficult.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, when you do and when you're ready, please let us know. As I would be eager to see these reels, and perhaps we might be able to show them in Utica.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Interestingly enough, this machine was invented over near Utica.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh. [They laugh.]

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: It was a man—I think his name was Kastner, Casler. I can't— [Herman Casler who lived in Canastota -Ed.] I'm a little uncertain about that, but it was invented by a man in—who lived over near Utica but worked in a machine shop in Rochester.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, this is all the more reason then, please let me know. For a moment, Mr. Crockwell, I'd sure like to have us go back to our—well, what I would call our main subject. And that is your participation in the Federal Art Projects. And I'd like to have you give us an evaluation of this experience, both in relation to yourself as an artist, and then perhaps you might even tell us whether you think that the Projects were a good thing for American artists, and in American art in general.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, I do believe that this Project was very beneficial. Certainly, the artists were finding no one at that time to buy their work. And especially the fine artists, there was a certain amount of commercial art being sold. But I do feel that it was done well and handled properly. And the WPA Project, as I knew it, came in contact with it, it seemed to me that there was a great deal of freedom allowed the artist, and they earned enough for a living wage. And they did have a chance to practice their art and show it, which is important. And the Treasury Project that I worked on was, in some senses, very much the same because we entered the one competition, and subsequently, we were given commissions on the basis of that first competition. There was no need to compete again. And up to that—if I remember rightly, up to that particular time, mural commissions were big, elegant, important things that—in which prices could run up to as much as \$100 a square foot for the work of the fortunate artists who are in. But with the Treasury Project, a general figure was set around \$10 a square foot, I think, on murals which is enough to make it worthwhile and still not to be extravagant.

I feel that I had a chance to express myself. I'm not sure that my murals were the best things that I've ever done, but it certainly no one's fault but mine [laughs]. I enjoyed doing them. And it kept art alive. There's no question about it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Crockwell, because of your own involvement in what we might call the—you know, the field of illustration, I wonder whether you could tell us what you think about the Pop artists, or at least some of them, having taken over many of advertising arts techniques for their own form of expression. Do you have some opinions on this?

[00:35:08]

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Well, I have some very definite opinions. I feel first of all that pop art is dependent for its new material upon the banal side of commercial art. That is, I haven't noticed that they're reproducing any of the better illustrations in their paintings. In other words, the raw material is the banality of some of the forms of commercial art. Now, very interestingly enough, this same art form is bouncing back from the Pop artists into commercial art again, so you find that the banality has stepped up into the elegant form of advertising art, [laughs] and this is very certain to kill Pop art very quickly [laughs]. Because it is the difference of point of view that makes Pop art seem novel. The minute it comes popular Pop art, then it ceases to have any novelty and should die. Although this—I should say that I believe that Pop art basically is much wider and broader in concept than the form that we're talking of right now. I'm very much in favor of Pop art. I'm in favor of Op art. I'm in favor of found art. I think even monkeys can produce art if there's someone there to discover them doing it and call it art. And my tendencies are very liberal. And I'm very sympathetic with the concept of creative art. I'm all for anything that anyone can devise and persuade people to call art. I think persuasion is one of the important factors here. Agreement on what the art form is most important.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I can see that you are, by all means, interested in the new forms of expression, and certainly, Pop art and the more recent Op art, are new forms of expression. Well, Mr. Crockwell, I can't think of anything further to ask you. I think we've covered things pretty well. Or at least you've answered my questions beautifully. And I know that what we put down on this tape will be of value to the Archives of American Arts' record of the New Deal and the arts. And I want to thank you very much, Mr. Crockwell.

DOUGLASS CROCKWELL: Thank you, Mr. Trovato.

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