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Oral history interview with James Herbert  
Fitzgerald and Margaret Tomkins, 1965 Oct.  
27

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with James and Margaret Fitzgerald on October 27, 1965. The interview took place in Seattle, WA, and was conducted by Dorothy Bestor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

[Bracketed remarks added by James Fitzgerald upon review of transcript.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, let's see, before you went to the Art Center [in Spokane] you had gotten a degree here in architecture and you had worked with Thomas Hart Benton?

JAMES FITZGERALD: That's right.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Had that been any of the WPA things?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No. [Tom Benton to my knowledge did not work on any WPA murals.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I thought he — well, didn't he get some commissions for Treasury murals?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No. [His commissions came from the Whitney Museum, New School for Social Research and the State of Missouri.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

JAMES FITZGERALD: In fact, when I was out in Missouri there wasn't very much of an art project. It was very small, and they didn't do very much at all in real art.

DOROTHY BESTOR: So the Spokane one was your first contact with any of the government art projects?

JAMES FITZGERALD: [My first contact with government art was in the year 1933 or 1934, when Vic Steinbrauch and I were selected by the Treasury Department Art Program to depict the landscape of the West. Vic was sent to do scenes of Washington and I was sent to Idaho. We had letters that enabled us to live in Forest Service stations and C.C.C. camps, etc. I spent all summer hiking in northern Idaho from one mountain fire lookout to another. This summer was valuable to me and I imagine these early studies of nature have some bearing on the abstractions of our western landscape I am doing today in bronze.

I also worked as Boardman Robinson's assistant at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center on his Department of Justice murals for the Treasury Department Fine Arts Commission. That was in the summer of 1938 as I recall. Then in 1939 I lived at 46 West 8th Street in New York City with a group of artists that worked on the New York WPA Project.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

JAMES FITZGERALD: And so I had one visualization of what I thought the art projects of America were like, from seeing the New York artists. They were real artists, painters and sculptors, working in their studios, and they made personal things. And I had been in California earlier, and Margaret had become acquainted with the type of programs they had down there in California in art, which were quite different from that of New York City.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What would you say they were like in California?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Well, in most cases the young artists would be working in their studios on paintings. They'd turn in so many paintings over a given period, and they'd get so much money for their time and effort spent, and then in addition they would also work on a mural, being awarded special mural commissions in high schools or sometimes public buildings.

DOROTHY BESTOR: But they were really going on with their own work?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: That is correct. They'd show up at the director's office there to pick up their checks or to have an opinion exchanged, perhaps about once a month, and that was about as frequently as they would see it. Other people that worked on the Index of American Design and that kind of thing, they were tied more to the office work.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: But the regular artists were on their own in sculpture and painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, then you went to the Spokane art project with perhaps rosy expectations of something that didn't materialize?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, I left New York and then came West. Where I lived in New York was with Jackson Pollock in the Village and he worked on the project.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

JAMES FITZGERALD: And Bill Hayden and Manuel Tolejian worked on the project and they all had a small salary they got from the government, but they made their own things. And Eddie Cahill ran really a good project in the New York area. And so then I left the New York area after the year in the Yale graduate school on a fellowship and came back to Seattle, and at that time was the first time I had met Inverarity. That would be about in, I guess in. . . .

MARGARET FITZGERALD: '39?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, '39.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You applied to him to get on the project then?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, I contacted him as I was interested in painting and working on my own.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. You started as a watercolorist, didn't you?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, I'd worked in painting, drawing, and tempera painting.

DOROTHY BESTOR: When did you get on the project?

JAMES FITZGERALD: I never did get on the project.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: No, as I recall it, you didn't go to them. Mr. Inverarity came by one evening. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, when I first came back to Seattle I did go down and talk to Inverarity and he gave me a long rigamarole. You had to be certified, they called it, and you had to show need, and so on. So I didn't bother to go back to see him again after that. I felt I could make it on my own much better than get involved in this certification because it was a kind of degrading thing. If you went through this it was like you were in the almshouse or something. So I didn't see much of him until he came by, and that's how we even got to go over to Spokane. The director, Carl Morris, and Hilda Morris had left. So Inverarity came by our studio and wanted to know if we'd go over and run the Spokane Art Center.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: You were just through with your teaching job at the university, and I had taught the year before at the university.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, Margaret the year before had had an assistant professorship there teaching painting, and I had just taken Ray Hill's course in teaching drawing and painting to architectural students. This lasted up until Christmas.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well then. Were you saddled with the job of running the whole place for the time you were there?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, that's right.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You did what Carl Morris had been doing?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, and in order to get membership sponsors, Inverarity got a fellow called LaFollett over there to act as business type of person, and would go out and try to raise local sponsorships and get memberships.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, good. I'm glad he finally got a business person on there, because I've been reading some of the correspondence that was haphazardly saved and is in the basement of the university library, and the first few years there was the most amazing amount of red tape and letters in triplicate back and forth to Washington, and from Seattle to Spokane, and great to-do about how many certified people they could have and how many non-quota people. He must have gone in. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, LaFollette didn't really get involved in that sort of thing. His work was mainly the local scene, to try to go out and get businesses and various people in the community to be members and get this local sponsorship. This was his main activity.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, so you had to worry about all the liaison between. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, we didn't have too much of it. The WPA had several people in the office and they would do the paperwork for the WPA.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, then did you get a reasonable chance to do some of your own work, or was the main amount of your time spent running the Center?

JAMES FITZGERALD: The first thing I did when we got to Spokane was to set up a school program. They had had a school going, but it was disjointed. Instructors had left and the entire center needed quite a bit of re-organization. We asked to get John Davis over, and also we asked for a friend of Margaret's named Tanci Bristol, from California.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: She had graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from the University of California and was a very fine painter. So she came up to teach, too.

JAMES FITZGERALD: So with that staff — we had Guy Anderson, Margaret volunteered her time, we had Tanci Bristol and John Davis, and then there were several people that taught crafts over there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's an unusually well-trained staff. Did you have a large attendance? How many people did you have in the school, do you suppose?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, I don't remember the exact number, but we had a wide variety of classes. Every instructor taught two or three classes, and all the classes were filled.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Adult and children's classes, as well?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: There were probably about twenty, twenty-five in most of the classes. Some would get down to about a dozen, but they were offered during the day and during the evening. And you were going to say something about how you scheduled it out so that everyone got painting time as well as teaching time.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Most of the artists there were practicing artists, and they weren't interested in a teaching schedule where all their days were broken up.

DOROTHY BESTOR: No.

JAMES FITZGERALD: So I worked out a schedule whereby the artists would teach their classes in a group of days close together, and then they'd have a span of, say, three, maybe four days, including weekends where they could paint four days straight. And it wasn't so frustrating as it had been before. And the artists were happier when they had time for their own work.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, there does seem, from those bulletins, to have been quite a turnover in staff. Vanessa Helder had been there I guess since. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, she was there for a short time when we were there. She was there, I don't know, about six months.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And Kenneth Downer had. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, Ken Downer was a friend of Carl Morris's and when Carl and Hilda left, he was interested in leaving. When we came over we knew that Downer was going to leave.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh. Incidentally, do you know what has happened to him? I've tried to follow him up and he just seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth. Is he still alive, do you know?

JAMES FITZGERALD: I really don't know much about him. I never knew him very well. I know Caroline Kizer said she met him in Japan one time, but that's been quite a few years back.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh. Well, to get back to what you did when you were there, did you have any good people as students in the classes who went on in the arts, do you think?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, I would say that there might have been a few, but I don't think too many. You found a lot of the people were older people and there were a number of people that wouldn't be exactly misfits, but they were maybe not too bright. It was quite a strange group of people you would have. It wasn't like an art school where you'd find a real dedicated group of young people wanting to be artists. Do you have the same impression, Margaret?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Oh, very definitely, yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: There were people doing it for therapy and as a hobby and that kind of thing?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: It was during the end of the Depression, so that as far as any young people were concerned, they didn't have time really. They should be trying to do something, often probably helping if there was any business, or on their farms or in their homes, so they didn't feel that they had time to sit around in art classes. You didn't find too many of the younger people for that reason.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Not younger fellows at least. There were some younger girls, but not the kind of a group that would really produce artists, I wouldn't think.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I get the picture that you may have had, or at least looking back, you now have the feeling that the enterprise, at least over in Spokane wasn't terribly worthwhile. Is that your feeling?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No, that's not right. My feeling. . . .

MARGARET FITZGERALD: It was most worthwhile in the period in which it was done. Now if you did the same thing right now, you'd have any number of talented people, any number of interested people that would be interested in studying and also interested in supporting a place like that. At that time everybody was flat broke and there were even more of the misfits that finally would come to the gallery to study. Some of them did pretty well, but they weren't basically training to be artists, nor was the program really set up on that complicated a structure.

JAMES FITZGERALD: It was more service, I think you'd call it, and for that reason it wasn't dedicated to making professionals in the arts.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, one of the statements in there [the brochure published by the Spokane Art Center], I think by Guy Anderson, brings out the point that as the writer sees it, he thinks of the WPA art project as having a function almost identical with that of the public school, a service function. Was that the general feeling you had then? That it was a public relations and an education thing?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, it was the — you see, I think they felt a commitment to the community because the community had put up some sponsorship. They wanted to give a service, and consequently they really didn't train people to be artists. But they did give a service. We had lots of illustrated art history lectures that were interesting and good classes. I would say the classes were far above the caliber of the students. But Spokane at that time was a pretty dead community, too, and it was a very reactionary community.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: As a matter of fact, it was so Republican many of them wouldn't even be showing interest because it was a Democratic type of program.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I was wondering about that. So often the federal art programs got support only in so far as people were pro-FDR. Did you have to deal with a lot of criticism from the community or was there just apathy?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, the papers here were run by — I think his name was Cowles that ran the Republican papers there? It was quite difficult to get anything in the paper that would even inform the community, just little terse notes. And one of the things which we felt was a high point of the time we were there was when through Ilo Liston we were able to raise the money to get that exhibition of original Van Gogh paintings. I think there were fourteen original Van Goghs. Well, this community had seen nothing as far as works of great art. There were no galleries or museums at all, and so we felt that of course the papers would be enthusiastic and show reproductions.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, you'd think so.

JAMES FITZGERALD: And you'd get a small line in the paper when an important exhibition like this Van Gogh show was on.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: I think it was even before the Seattle Museum was here and even the large town of

Seattle saw any Van Goghs. Wasn't that about nine years ago, something like that, when they had the big recent Van Gogh show here? But we're speaking now of 1940 when this Van Gogh show was shown in Spokane.

JAMES FITZGERALD: It was a very beautiful show of fine paintings and it made quite an impression on the community, but, again, as I say, that as for the people of position in the town, it was difficult to get them to back it. Mrs. Ben Kizer was very enthusiastic and she worked really hard, and Mrs. Samuel Weaver was another one, and Mrs. Baldwin, they all worked very hard to try to get the people in the town to realize what was there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Mrs. Truman Reed was one of those too, I've heard.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes, Mrs. Reed was another one, yes. She's a fine person and she worked hard.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I'm going over to talk with her next week. I've talked with her on the phone.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Yes. Well, she'll have some interesting insights into that phase of it. And then we put on a membership drive in which we got an artist in California to make an original lithograph as a gift when one purchased a membership. Each person would get this original lithograph.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, good.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Which stimulated quite a bit of patronage for the Center, you know.

JAMES FITZGERALD: It was a very small sum they paid for the membership. I don't think it was over five or ten dollars. I've forgotten what it was, but it was a very small sum. But they got everything, like the lectures in the school and the lithograph classes and everything.

DOROTHY BESTOR: This was the only one of the art projects that was over in Spokane, was it? There was no branch of the Writers' Project?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Not at that time, to my knowledge.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Or no visits from the federal theater troupe or anything?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No. Well, one of the good things, I think, about it too, was that you didn't have the type of supervision over the Spokane Center that they must have had here, because a lot of the Seattle artists resented the confining quality and the lack of a chance to go out and paint or work in sculpture on their own quite as much. Over in Spokane, we had quite of bit of freedom to experiment and there wasn't anybody looking down on your work all the time. The Seattle artists have some strong feelings on the quality of supervision they had to put up with in Seattle.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, that would have been a help. When you were running it, then, you could decide to have any kind of program you wanted to?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And you could be completely autonomous, I gather?

JAMES FITZGERALD: A lot of artists had disparaging remarks to say about Inverarity, but my experience with him has been that he was an okay person.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, good.

JAMES FITZGERALD: I mean, I really found nothing that — because maybe I didn't have too much to deal with him, you know, he being over in Seattle and we were over in Spokane. But he was as cooperative, I thought, as he could be, and made every effort, like when I wanted Tanci Bristol up to get somebody to really paint and draw. He made every effort to get her there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, wonderful, that's very refreshing to hear.

JAMES FITZGERALD: But these people in this city had evidently a very different experience.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, they were supervised to the hilt, at least a good many of them.

JAMES FITZGERALD: That, and from conversations I've gathered that a lot felt there was too much effort on this applied art, where they were making hooked rugs of Indian designs and they were doing, oh, a lot of silkscreen things or craft things. The real artists didn't develop, and so for a national program like that, I think the worst part of all these programs is that the help doesn't get directly to the artists that need it. It goes into committees

or organizational groups that aren't artists, and in any one of these cities there are artists that if they could get immediate help so they could go on and create, then it would be fine, but they often get dictated to by non-artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, but the trouble is, I suppose, that artists don't want to take the time from their real work to be the ones to run the thing. They don't want to be administrators.

JAMES FITZGERALD: But somebody can administrate it with the idea that he should give the artist the materials he needs, and the time, and let him produce his work, but not be under so many restrictions.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Right. That's certainly the ideal. Well, as you look back, do you have any other criticisms of it? Do you remember any of the doubts and misgivings that the thing engendered at the time, or do you have any other memories of what was good about it?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, I think the worst part of it was that it wasn't an atmosphere really to draw young people that could be real good art students. I think the caliber of students was poor because it was a therapy type of approach. If it had been done differently, I believe you could get more of a stimulating and real alive young group of people that ordinarily could develop into artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, well, you say "if it had been done differently." What would you suggest, ideally?

JAMES FITZGERALD: [Well, first don't put a frustrated artists in as head. Too often they resent a real creative artist from "taking off" and moving in creative directions he does not understand. Then separate the fine art people from the crafts. For both groups establish courses and training on the techniques of the particular art field they are working in. Without the tools of his craft, no painter or sculptor will have an easy time of expressing himself. Be selective in admitting students and make each student pay at least some small tuition. Work scholarships, et cetera, can cover those that cannot pay anything. But give a person everything for free and he doesn't appreciate what he is getting. Include art history, philosophy, et cetera, so some personal idea of concept can be developed. Too many artists today create works that have no spiritual concept that is unique and personal, but enough of that. Times have changed the people of even a small town like Spokane. What we experienced in 1941 should not be the basis for any center we might establish today.]

MARGARET FITZGERALD: You must not forget what Spokane was like in 1940 and '41.

JAMES FITZGERALD: That was a particularly isolated type of town.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

JAMES FITZGERALD: So it was difficult. I don't think the town is that now.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Well, times have changed, so. . . .

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: I mean, most people are now going to the universities. At that time they couldn't even afford to go to a university, so the people that weren't going to university were too poor, and not enough concerned with art to be studying it. Now you have people going to the universities so that if you started an art center in Spokane right now you still would be getting your high school dropouts rather than your university people because they want a degree in order to get a job. There are no other art schools in the Northwest, but still I think they might go to an art school outside the region. I question in this state if you started a small regional art center, unless you had a very disciplined way of controlling the type of attendance and the type of students, you're going to have to have therapy again, because you have no discrimination and no means to eliminate the people that should necessarily not be there at all.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Right, the "little old ladies in tennis shoes."

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Yes.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Frankly, I think there were too many people there trying to be artists that never should have been artists, and I believe that goes right now to a great degree.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, it does.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Art as therapy produces bad art.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Definitely.

JAMES FITZGERALD: And they don't have a conceptual idea of the spiritual quality of art, they don't have any idea of the technical things required or the dedication, so that I think that America produces a lot of people that just aren't artists. They're soft. They work too often in a half-assed way and there's nothing strong that comes out.

DOROTHY BESTOR: There's a lot of non-art all around Seattle.

JAMES FITZGERALD: A terrible lot of it, yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You can hardly avoid looking at it. Quite true. Well, do you think Seattle should have had, or might well have had, an art center comparable with Spokane in addition to the studio workshop here?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Well, I'm sure there was too much pressure on from other people. Since the university didn't even have enough to keep their own faculty together, they certainly would have enough political pressure to stop the organization of schools which would be competing with them, I presume, during the Depression too.

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, there's Cornish, too.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: And Cornish, too. You'd be putting people out of business.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: I think they only had something like 6,000 at the University of Washington during the Depression.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Did they really?

JAMES FITZGERALD: Well, this was after the Depression period. It was dragging on, but these were bad times for artists anyway.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Cornish School wasn't very flourishing at that time, was it?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: That's when it was flourishing.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: In '39, at least that's the first time I ever heard of it. I thought that was a time when Cage was there, and they had a very active program.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Yes, I think so, in the late thirties.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, as you look back, do you have any other pros or cons that emerge about it, or queries about anything that might have been done differently?

MARGARET FITZGERALD: Well, to look back and learn from such an exceptional situation that was prevalent throughout the whole world in that Depression period, and then try to apply information from that period as being relative to problems right now — there might be a few elements, but I think generally you'd have to take a pretty fresh appraisal of everything.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I agree. I don't think anyone would intend to apply anything literally, but there might be just a sort of distillation of. . . .

JAMES FITZGERALD: There was a certain feeling, I know, that the artists felt too, that you had to be on the dole practically to get the WPA job. It gave them none of the feeling of dignity that they deemed in their humble way, at least, for the work they produced. You could have been making almost anything to get the same check, but I think the artists felt that there wasn't quite the dignity in the work, and so a lot of artists didn't want to even get involved with it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, that's true. Some here in Seattle who were involved with it don't really want to think back to it or to mention it now.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: But some of the great artists that — now they're not all around — but Pollock worked on the art project.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I know.



MARGARET FITZGERALD: Franz Kline worked on the art project, a number of your top artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I know.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: And so I would say that it gave them a paycheck; that would be the greatest contribution it made. I don't think it educated new artists at all. It supported a few that had great things to do with their time after that and developed into great artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: [Did the Washington WPA Art Project produce any important murals or commissioned sculpture works?]

JAMES FITZGERALD: [Not to my knowledge. I have heard it said that the three large sculptured reliefs on the first floating bridge tunnel entrance were a product of the project. But that is not true. I was paid by the Washington State Highway Department as a field foreman to make the three, one-inch-to-the-foot models and Lloyd Lovegreen and I molded the full size works in clay out in Ballard.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Right. Well, thank you very much, both of you. Any last thoughts?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Let's turn it off and see how it sounds.

MARGARET FITZGERALD: We don't want to hear it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You don't want to hear yourself?

JAMES FITZGERALD: No.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Okay. Thank you again.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated... *September 19, 2002*