



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Henry Mattson, 1964  
Nov. 4**

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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Henry Mattson on November 4, 1964. The interview was conducted by Joseph Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Mattson, I feel that artists are as a rule pleased to be known by their work and in this sense I feel that I have known you for quite some time. For me you typify the romantic artist and the chief example that comes to mind is your painting of the sea that is in the Metropolitan. But you know of course that we have two of your pictures at the Institute in Utica, New York. They came to us from Mr. Edward Root. One of them is a still life Summac and the other is a smaller painting called Sandpit. Then of course I've seen your work down through the years at the Rehn Gallery. Do you devote your entire time to painting Mr. Mattson?

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, I do more or less. I have some...in fact I don't do anything but paint really. But I don't paint all the time as it were.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And how long have you exhibited at the Rehn Gallery?

HENRY MATTSON: Oh about, since 1928.

JOSEPH TROVATO: that's a good long time.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, about 37 years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Just for a moment we would like to have a little bit of your background. Could I ask you, where were you born and then where did you study and so forth?

HENRY MATTSON: I was born in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1887 and I came here to this country in 1906, then about 19 years old. And what else?

JOSEPH TROVATO: And where did you study painting?

HENRY MATTSON: Well, I'm practically self-taught except I went to evening school in Worcester Art Museum [Worcester, MA] in 1910, for a cut the winter there but that's about all the schooling I've had and I've actually learned in Woodstock and I've been more or less self-taught as I said.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Have you been living here quite a few years?

HENRY MATTSON: Yes. I've been living here since 1916. Which is quite a long time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. [Eugene] Speicher...of course this is an artists' colony and Mr. Speicher I remember I saw him here some years ago.

HENRY MATTSON: Oh yes. He came here a little earlier than I did. But there were very few people at that time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: He was sort of a pioneer you might say.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, yes he could be called that. That's true.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now I understand, Mr. Mattson, that you executed a mural for the Portland, Maine, post office.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, that's correct.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Was this done under the Section of Fine Arts program?

HENRY MATTSON: It was. The only thing that I would like to emphasize is that it was ordered during the Hoover administration and then it was given to me during the Roosevelt administration.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And so that it would have been done anyway whether or not...yes. Now was this a large mural?

HENRY MATTSON: the murals are at the entrance of the post office.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh there are two murals, are there?

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, yes. One on each side of the entrance to the post office.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, to the post masters' office.

HENRY MATTSON: No, to the main post office. It's quite large, you know, the Portland post office, you know the building is quite large.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What is the subject of the mural, murals rather?

HENRY MATTSON: Well, the subject of it...it represents the state of Maine. One is the sea coast and the other represents the woodland, the pines and the sort of thing that they're hung opposite each other. They were very well like there because, well, they seemed to be what they wanted, what they liked, the Maine people I mean, the people of Portland.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What medium did you use?

HENRY MATTSON: It was made in oil, oil on canvas. And then it was attached to the wall itself, there was a recess in the wall and the marble walls continuing below and it was set into this recess. Well, that's about all I can say about it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Have you seen them in place?

HENRY MATTSON: Oh yes, many, several times. I hope they're still there. As a matter of fact I went up there to hang these myself, it was quite an undertaking. I enjoyed it. But the murals were actually painted here in Woodstock in my studio.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Well now did you do any other work in connection with the projects? Were you under—or rather did you do any easel painting? Under the projects?

HENRY MATTSON: Oh yes, yes indeed. I don't remember exactly the method at the time but I believe it was that we submitted one painting every two weeks or something of that sort, as far as I remember. And I made a number of landscapes and paintings at that time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Can you remember the year, how long a period did you do this?

HENRY MATTSON: Well—Well, this happened all around 1934 or '35 I believe. There were a good many of my friends that were connected with it here in Woodstock. There were quite a few people that painted at the time. One of my paintings was hung by Mrs. Roosevelt and the President. They selected one for the White House at the time. A landscape.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, this is quite an honor then.

HENRY MATTSON: Well, I remember that Mrs. Roosevelt said that I was one of her favorite painters. I didn't know who she had known that but she must have seen my painting somewhere I guess.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that must have set you up pretty well.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, I was glad to hear it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do I understand, Mr. Mattson that you were awarded a scholarship or fellowship of some kind during the thirties? Now when was that?

HENRY MATTSON: Oh yes, in 1935 they gave me a Guggenheim fellowship and at the time, I went abroad for three months and then came back and I didn't need to be on the project anymore.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

HENRY MATTSON: I had quite a success at the time. The Metropolitan Museum bought one of my pictures and a number of museums bought paintings of mine. It seemed that somehow during the depression I had a better time than I had after the depression.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's marvelous. Sort of a reversal.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: When you consider that most artists were in tight straits and you were helped out by the government projects.

HENRY MATTSON: Well, one never knows what happens to artists but you know there's always a time when it seems to be their day and I often think that when an artist is around the forties, that probably is his best time. It seems to me – it seems that if he can then acquire some sort of recognition, then it usual works a little easier for him in later days. That's been my experience anyway.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Mattson, I notice one of your paintings on the wall and it is on of the sea. Do you usually paint subjects of the sea? Is that your main motive?

HENRY MATTSON: Well, I've been known as a marine painter, as a painter of the sea. However, I've painted a good many other paintings too. I find that when I paint water I'm perfectly at home with it and I understand it. I understand the anatomy of water and subconsciously it comes to me very easy.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now what does it come from? Is it based on experience? Or is it pure feeling for water?

HENRY MATTSON: Well, when you ask me that question the best way I could answer is that I've been told by people that because I was born and lived by the Swedish sea coast in my childhood, but I don't think that has very much to do with it. I think that instinctively I feel water and feel the elemental side of water. And it, as a matter of fact, it doesn't make any difference what I paint, I painted through the same source. I can paint a portrait or flowers or I can paint a still life and I can paint a landscape and whatever it may be, it must be an emotional quality to it and what I sense while I paint it's the same. It's from the same source so it's difficult for me to answer the question directly you see.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Have you worked directly from nature?

HENRY MATTSON: No. When I first came to Woodstock I had painted, like a good many others, from nature: I painted landscapes but I found out as time went on that I became too preoccupied with facts and details and things of that sort that didn't have anything to do with my work whatsoever. At least I felt so and finally as time went on I was able to paint without any images of any kind and in that process, through that way of thinking and feeling I was able to express myself much more directly and more clearly. I think I attributed that as an experience in my early life you see because I always have felt that I wanted to express something that came out of me and not by observation, direct observation. I hope I make myself clear.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I think you make yourself amply clear, Mr. Mattson.

HENRY MATTSON: That's a McFee you're looking at.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You have a Henry McFee. He was associated of course with the Rehn Gallery.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, he lived a very short distance, about a quarter of a mile above me here. He was a great friend of mine. He gave me that as a present once. One of his early paintings.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Is your studio here at home?

HENRY MATTSON: yes, upstairs.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Do you recall Mr. Root. I mentioned at the beginning of our interview that we have two of your pictures which he bequeathed to the Institute and I wonder whether you met Mr. Root, did you know him?

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, I met him many times. I met him at the Rehn Gallery often and he bought a painting called Summac and he wrote a very interesting letter to Mr. Rehn. As a matter of fact, I think it was his habit to make notes and then write a letter to describe his appreciation for the pictures that he had purchased. He wrote a long letter and Mr. Rehn gave it to me to read and I thought it was very well understood, it had the feeling and understanding about what I was doing and how I felt and how I was thinking. Sometimes an artist is a little bit condescending in relation to the person they're explaining to because it's difficult to explain exactly what you feel and it has to be done, it's often done in a more abstract sense so that you, verbally, don't have to explain anything really. It's really: you feel, you understand, and as far as Mr. Root is concerned I remember that he was a person that had a great appreciation for my work and I was very glad of it at the time, because it's always nice for the person, if they feel some sort of understanding of their work, it makes it easier all around.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I know you're right because I read not too long ago an analysis of this painting Summac that was written by Mr. Root and it spoke most highly of this picture. I seem to

recall that he mentioned the very simple elements that you used, simply the sum of the branches and the table and that was all, but he remarked about what you made out of this very, very, simple subject.

HENRY MATTSON: It's always been my desire to be able to paint pictures that has all the elements of that picture in it, but no more. No! I don't like to torment a painting with a number of details and that sort of thing because it's apt to—it distorts the painting and creates confusion. If you come into a room you don't see everything in the room, you see probably little corners and objects that happen to be around you and that is the impression of the room, the atmosphere of it and the space around it, that sort of thing, then there is less confusion. If you achieve it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I, not to long ago, saw a picture of yours. I think it was a self portrait. Was this yours? I think I saw, it might have been at the Rehn Gallery I think.

HENRY MATTSON: yes, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you do portraits?

HENRY MATTSON: Well, in my early days, about twenty-five years ago I painted about seven, a good many self portraits and they—Mr. Rehn nicknamed them Henry the IV, Henry the VI, Henry the VII, Henry VIII and Henry IX and so on. Every time I came in with a self portrait, he'd say, "well, is this Henry VIII or Henry IX," I said, "well, I don't know we, can call it Henry IX"—it might be – I missed one, I don't know.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Rehn had a wonderful sense of humor I remember.

HENRY MATTSON: He certainly did. He was really—I tell you something about him. He had an understanding of painters. He could talk about the artists and he could talk about the painting, as one thing. That was one of the things that I think he was very good at. You know Mr. [Charles] Burchfield for instance, Mr. Rehn always said that, Mr. Burchfield always wrote a little letter explaining why he painted this particular picture. When Frank Rehn got this letter he used that as a point of departure for his conversation, about the painting you see, and he was quite able to make the person understand it awfully well, better at least than they would have otherwise.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, he was able to provide a kind of stepping stone to the understanding of the picture.

HENRY MATTSON: Well, you know it's very difficult for anybody to talk about – to explain a picture

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JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that goes without saying, there it is—

HENRY MATTSON: Exactly. And also there are people who are looking for stories and that sort of thing, in a picture, but not all paintings have stories they are not story telling pictures. Mine are not and I don't think that they are painted with that in mind. I don't have any pre-conceived idea of what I'm going to paint. I wait until something happens on the canvas and if I feel that something happens there, I can develop that and if I am successful it usually comes out better that way. You see, when you're actually thinking then you are more or less tormenting the painting. You become more of a writer, an author of something of that sort. To use the medium like a paint and try through that medium to acquire something that has some significance. It has to be divorced from a story. If a painting only represents something of a story it is emphasized to strongly on that, then the mind has been working on that very thing that happens—

JOSEPH TROVATO: It shuts off the emotions possibly—

HENRY MATTSON: Yes, yes and that one, the really good things are things that have been painted more or less in an unconscious state but if the artist afterwards says to himself, “oh, yes! I remember there was a ----, oh about a half an hour ago on that picture – I had ten minutes where I really painted.” You understand what I mean?

JOSEPH TROVATO: I do. I do, Mr. Mattson.

HENRY MATTSON: And consequently when we are under the spell of painting you cannot become conscious of yourself so that you can dictate to yourself or say to yourself, “now I can paint, no I am in the mood,” as you call it—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, you cannot order this, you cannot determine what now you are going to do it.

HENRY MATTSON: No, no, that’s correct. So in finding, you have to be interested in finding a moment, you cannot look for a moment to paint you have to find that moment and find it more in an unconscious state. By unconsciousness I mean your thinking as far as what you do, like mixing your paint and you are designing and controlling your canvas mentally of course, otherwise you can’t know what you are doing, but it’s those moments there, when you are in a state of abandonment in the canvas.

JOSEPH TROVATO: It just happens.

HENRY MATTSON: Yes. And then another thing too it’s almost like the picture is in control of you instead of you controlling the picture and so that the picture, if you’re successful, will in itself divorce itself from you, like saying I don’t need you anymore. Do you understand?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

HENRY MATTSON: Well, that is my—that’s they way I feel about it. It’s much easier for me now when I’m older to paint because I’m lest troubled today with anything. I paint much better than I ever did – seem to get much better results too.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, it’s so wonderful to have these wonderful thoughts from you about painting.

HENRY MATTSON: That is the way it works sometimes. An artist can never say this is the way I paint. I can’t, it’s impossible for me to say that, because I know if I did say why that would be—I would try to explain how I behave and then that state that I was talking about is a state of –I would say that you are abandoned, you know, in the state so that you can make a painting—to keep the painting in a state of becoming. Now if—it would be otherwise one would be apt to torment the painting, fill it up with a lot of details, working it so that you torment the surface. At the Metropolitan Museum one can see, at least I can very readily see a painting that is really a very fine painting because I notice how it is made, the surface, the speed of the painting, another element that’s very important—

JOSEPH TROVATO: What do you mean by the speed of the painting?

HENRY MATTSON: I will explain that. The way I feel about that is, well there is a painting there, *Nativity* by El Greco, a painting we all know. I think that at one time he worked on and built that

painting up into what he wanted in a the painting as a composition and the content was all there and probably I think, I'm sure there was a moment when the painting looked tired and worn out and all he could think of was in the painting, the story of the moment, the Christ child, and the shepherds and the angels. One day he probably came in front of that painting and said I will paint that painting now. And I don't think it took him more than—less than half an hour to paint the whole thing you see. And I feel that in all the good things. There's a speed there's a quickness, there's abandonment when you're not conscious of paint brushes or anything, it just comes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: It just happens.

HENRY MATTSON: It happens yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, Mr. Mattson this has been just fine and I want to thank you so much on behalf of the Archives of American Art for giving us your recollections of your experiences in the thirties and also the wonderful thoughts that you have given us on art and on painting. Thank you very much.

HENRY MATTSON: Well, I'm very glad that you came up to see me and come again sometime and maybe we can have another talk.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Why you're awfully nice and you know I might take you up on this because I enjoyed this visit so much. And now I'd like so much to look around your studio. This would be a delight to me. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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