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Oral history interview with George Rickey, 1965 July 17

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with George Rickey on July 17, 1965. The interview took place in East Chatham, NY, and was conducted by Joseph Trovato for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JOSEPH TROVATO: This interview with Mr. George Rickey is taking place at his house in East Chatham, New York July 17, 1965. Before going into the subject of the post office mural which you did on the Project and your experiences of the thirties, I want us to have on this record a resume of your background, so I'll ask you first of all, Mr. Rickey, where were you born?

GEORGE RICKEY: I was born in South Bend, Indiana in 1907.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now we know of your considerable accomplishment in the field on kinetic sculpture and so I would like to ask you how did you prepare yourself for all of this? Where did you study?

GEORGE RICKEY: Of course I didn't prepare myself for the kind of thing I do now with any anticipation of it because the sculpture that I make now was undreamed of when I was a student. I was taken to Europe when I was only five years old and grew up there. I had a European education. I began going to art school in England in 1927 I would say it was, or 1928, to the Ruskin School of Drawing in Oxford, where I was also enrolled in the University. There I studied drawing and painting. After that I went for a year to Paris and studied in the Academie L'Hote which offers a kind of academic Cubism. At that time, that was 1929, 1930, I was a cubist, a cubist painter. And then I came to this country, began teaching, continued to paint, and went back to Europe in 1933 for about a year or a year and a half, painting - not going to school - but learning a great deal from talking to painters and talking to artists my own age and to older artists. I returned to New York in 1934, in the fall of - I think September or October of 1934, and by that time the depression was thoroughly ripe. The WPA Project had started a short time before, and I returned to New York to a climate of, I suppose, economic despair but also of this hopeful activity in the arts.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mentioned, Mr. Rickey, that you were involved in some teaching and I believe that you have done considerable teaching.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I have taught all my life. My earliest teaching was in a language school in Paris. I helped support myself as an art student in Paris by teaching English. From 1930 to 1933 I was a teacher of history - my college degree was in history - in a boys' school in Massachusetts. When I came back to America in '34 I worked as a painter. I did not teach at that time. Then in 1937 I received a Carnegie Grant to go to a small college in Michigan as artist-in-residence. This was the first grant of that sort that Carnegie had made. In fact, it was the beginning of putting practicing artists in colleges. There were very few artists in the United States on college faculties at that time and I think I was the first to receive a grant, a foundation grant for this.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What was the date of this?

GEORGE RICKEY: This was in 1937.

JOSEPH TROVATO: 1937? As early as that? Yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: And I went to this little college, Olivet, in Michigan, for a year and then the grant was renewed for a year, I painted a fresco there on the walls of one of the college buildings. My assignment was to carry on this painting and to mingle with the students in an informal way, but it turned out that I also taught a class. So that was the beginning of my college teaching in art in 1937, and I've been doing it ever since.

JOSEPH TROVATO: How much more have you done in the way of teaching?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, the list is so long, maybe it's too long --

JOSEPH TROVATO: As a matter of fact we would like to know this.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I was two years at Olivet College on this grant, then I taught for about a year at Kalamazzo College also in Michigan. Then I received another Carnegie grant as artist-in-residence at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. I painted a mural for them there. That must have been 1940 I think. And then with still another Carnegie Grant in '41 I went to Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania to start their art department. So

at that time I changed from artist-in-residence, really, to a professor of art, but with Carnegie money. The college received a grant to start an art department and Carnegie proposed me as the chairman, so I went as that. After one year I was drafted into the Army and my teaching was interrupted in 1942 by Army service. I was in the service until 1945. When I was discharged I went back to Muhlenberg because we all had a sort of tenure that the law provided, although I hope that was not the only reason, and continued my teaching there. I taught art history and taught painting there then until 1948. I then took a leave of absence. I had become very much interested in the Bauhaus and in the Institute of Design in Chicago, which was the daughter to Bauhaus. So I enrolled on the GI Bill, in Chicago at the Institute of Design, and was there until the spring of 1949. Then I went to Europe. I had not been in Europe for fourteen or fifteen years, and I went back, I think it was April, 1949, and was there until September then I went to Indiana University as a teacher of design. I was in Bloomington until 1955, then was asked to go to New Orleans to Tulane University as chairman of their art department. I went in January 1955 and stayed until 1960 when I received a Guggenheim Fellowship for sculpture. I had taken a leave of absence but I got a renewal of the fellowship and resigned from Tulane. It was at that time that I came to live permanently up here in East Chatham. Soon after I was asked to teach at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where I still am on the faculty.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You're on the faculty?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. In the School of Architecture. [Note: Since the interview I have resigned from RPI to have full time for sculpture. G.R.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, you've had considerable teaching experience.

GEORGE RICKEY: I taught for thirty years. That's a long history.

JOSEPH TROVATO: For thirty years.

GEORGE RICKEY: Of course, there have been additional smaller jobs. I taught one summer in Seattle, for example, and incidentally, I taught in the Army.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You taught in the Army as well?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, I taught in an Army school. So even in those years I was a teacher.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, perhaps you can offer us a little bit of advice for the art student in view of your teaching experience. Today we have so many diverse manners of expression and what is remarkable is that all, or almost all of them are given attention. This must be confusing not only to the public but to the serious art student who is trying to find his way. Now what advice would you give to such a student? Perhaps this is quite a question but it's your teaching experience which leads me to ask you this.

GEORGE RICKEY: What would I tell a young student in the way of advice?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, there was a time when, in the old days when there was the apprenticeship system. That was one thing, but today we have so many directions, as I mentioned, we have so many ways -- individuality of expression seems to be the important thing. I would be curious to know what you emphasize in your teaching.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think that, in general, I would advise a student not to learn how to do the latest thing. They always want to do the latest things, but I think that a student cannot in fact start where his elders are. He must start where his elders started. I think that I would urge him to draw a great deal and become sensitive in observation and skillful in recording what he observed. But I would urge him at the same time to study deeply a kind of grammar of art so that he could organize visual material in a great many different kinds of ways with ease and a kind of "knowhow," even a kind of erudition. And I would like him to study the masters. You see, as a teacher I think I'm very conservative. I feel I've learned a great deal from the masters in spite of having gone in my time to extremely modern schools. L'Hote's was thought of as a very modern school in Paris. But I think that it is important for a student to be strongly underpinned by understanding his heritage as artist, and of his tradition. It is only if he is well underpinned like that, it seems to me, that he can be sure of developing a personal style that is not merely a fashion. If he's not well underpinned he will tend to follow the fashion and to try to change each year and he becomes in effect a sort of hat designer.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, this is very sound and I am glad that I asked you this question, Mr. Rickey. A moment ago you mentioned in connection with your teaching your experience at the Bauhaus in Chicago, it wasn't called the Bauhaus, but rather the Institute of design.

GEORGE RICKEY: It was first the New Bauhaus, I think, and then the Institute of Design.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. And you also mentioned that you started as a painter and now you are concentrating

chiefly in sculpture. I would be curious to know whether your experience at the Chicago Institute of Design started you in your new direction.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think that I had really already started. I think that it was because of a shift, or a new development of interest that I went to the Institute of Design. I think the change had already taken place, and I thought that as a school, the Institute of Design was harmonious with my interest and that I might learn a great deal there about myself and about the possibilities in that direction. Actually, I found the school somewhat disappointing. I thought that some of the foundation courses were fascinating, so very stimulating, but that the school was weak in providing the transition from a kind of general foundation to applications in a specific direction - interior design, graphic design, and so on; that the philosophy of the foundation course was not skillfully carried over into the work of more mature students.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Could I ask you , Mr. Rickey, was Moholy-Nagy teaching there at that time?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, he had died. I had visited the school a number of times before I enrolled there. My interest in the school began as early as maybe 1942 or 1943, when Moholy was there. I saw him in action with the students but before I was in a position to go myself he had died and a man called Chermayeff had taken over - an architect who later went to teach at Harvard, and I believe is now teaching at Yale. He's a very brilliant mind but not the happiest of administrators. In fact, sparks flew quite often. Yet the school was very stimulating, and the philosophy interested me very much and still does, but I think there were very serious weaknesses in the way it was administered and organized and in the handling of the students.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You sort of indicate that the main weakness was in the inability of the school to bridge, the more traditional grounding in the arts to the new concepts.

GEORGE RICKEY: No, I think it was rather a failure to transfer the philosophy of the foundation course to more specialized students. The course was based on the foundation course at the Bauhaus in Germany, which had been taught by Albers and Moholy-Nagy, and was really a very sound kind of conditioning of the student to develop his thinking and make him sensitive to visual phenomena, to materials, to tools, the relation of tool to material, and these fundamentals of design. When it came to applying those fundamentals in a particular direction, whether it was architecture or product design or any of the various fields for which the Institute of Design was presumably preparing students, the philosophy did not carry over. And I think this is in part due, perhaps entirely due, to the lack of teachers of sufficient stature. They were using, they were feeding into the teaching staff, recent graduates who actually had too shallow an experience compared to Moholy and Albers, who had had deep, long experience; I think the grasp of some of these teachers was really not deeply enough rooted.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Perhaps I might ask you at this point, Mr. Rickey, when you began your work in sculpture?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, you asked me if it was because of the Institute of Design. I think it was not. I think that the interest that led to my present work had actually developed much, much earlier. I had always been mechanically inclined even when I was a painter, and as a painter I think this part of my experience and interest was not exploited. I think that even before the war I had begun to be quite interested in some of the more mechanical, geometrical, mathematical aspects of twentieth century art. And I knew, of course, in the forties -- perhaps even before - of the work of Calder. And I remember while I was still in the service, where I was a kind of mechanic - instructor in mechanical things, and had a shop available, tools and so on - making constructions involving movement. This was probably 1944-45. Perhaps a little playfully, it was something different from painting, although I was still a painter at that time. I continued to paint all the time while I was in the service. Then after I got out, although I continued to paint, I think I was always hungering a little for an extension of my expression into some kind of mechanical field, something that required construction. In the meantime the aesthetic climate had changed so that this appeared to be a much more legitimate or tolerable or tolerated direction. When I was teaching at Muhlenberg I put quite a good deal of emphasis on this aspect of art, and I did a few things myself, I then went to the Institute of Design hoping that this would open up avenues, and was, as I said, somewhat disappointed in it. However, after the Institute of Design I went to Europe, and then came back in 1949, in September and began to teach design at Indiana University. I was still painting but almost at once I began making constructions. My serious activity as sculptor began there at Indiana University in the fall of 1949, although it had been anticipated four or five years before by a growing appetite for something that went beyond painting. I never actively turned my back on painting, I didn't give it up, it's just that these other activities became more and more important. I began almost at once working with movement. There were very few people working in it then. In fact, besides Calder, there was hardly anyone. It was in a way almost virgin territory.

JOSEPH TROVATO: A couple of months ago I saw again the very fine piece of yours that I admired at the Staempfli Galleries and I'm sorry to say that it didn't come to the Institute at Utica. But it's the one, well, it suggests blades, they're vertical shafts that move at the slightest touch.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And, as I said, I admired it very much when I first saw it at the Staempfli Galleries, I can't remember when, but I saw it again recently at the Albright-Knox Museum - -

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is it there in their permanent collection?

GEORGE RICKEY: They bought it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. I thought that was a very fine sculpture.

GEORGE RICKEY: It had already been anticipated by pieces I had made while I was still at the Kraushaar Gallery. I made that piece I think about in the winter of '63 - '64, and I left the Kraushaar Gallery I think in the fall of '63.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is the one that is at Albright-Knox Gallery one of your largest pieces?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, no.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You have done larger things, have you not?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I've made a number of pieces that can't be shown indoors. I've a piece in - - well, let me think now, I've a piece in a garden in California that is eighteen feet high. And I have a piece that Rockefeller bought that is about twenty feet high. And I have a piece in a research center in Germany, and a somewhat similar piece in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York - those are both about thirty-five feet high. And I just installed a piece last week, a piece in a shopping center in Detroit, it's thirty-two feet high, and that is indoors, but they have a forty foot ceiling, you see, a rather exceptional circumstance. So I now think of these pieces that are eight or ten feet high as smaller pieces rather than large.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Could I ask you at this point - I don't know whether or not this is a good question to ask, but I'm going to do it anyway. What is the inspiration, what is the motivation in back of your kinetic works?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, this is the hardest question you could ask any artist - -

JOSEPH TROVATO: I'm sure it is.

GEORGE RICKEY: - - what it is that makes him do what he does. Often I think he doesn't know. A question like this makes one think back into how it came about that one made these things. They've evolved, one step leads to another, one doesn't begin years before with this in mind but years afterwards one realizes that it came about step by step. Since I began in this kind of work in the 1940s I've been interested in the essence of movement, not just in making objects with move, but in trying to use movement as an expressive means, as a painter might use color. This was difficult at first. I made rather complicated things, complicated in form, but I began to realize that if one was to use the movement as a kind of essential expression, one probably had to try it with extremely simple forms. And this led me gradually to pare the forms down until I arrived simply at lines. These pieces with long blades are really just an exploitation of the simplest means I could find at the time for showing a kind of ordered and related set of movements. Having made them small it secured a natural development to see what the effect was of making them larger. With anything moving, anything swinging like a pendulum where time is an important factor, and where time is related to the structure and to the relation of the weights and the distances, it actually becomes different if it is large. It is not simply an enlargement of a small piece but actually its performance is different. This led me about two or three years ago to make a very large piece that is now out in my garden here, a red piece, I don't know if you saw it on your way in --

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. I noticed your house by it.

GEORGE RICKEY: That was the first of my very large pieces and that was done as an experiment to see what would happen if one got up to a scale of thirty feet or more. And then that led to several other pieces.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I would like to ask you whether you can tell us if there is anything in the history of art that relates to the use of movement in sculpture. All I can think of offhand are the Chinese wind bells, now there must be other sources.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I know the wind bells. As a matter of fact I have a vivid recollection of seeing a wind bell like that in a neighbor's house when I was a child of perhaps seven or eight in Scotland. And I liked it very much, I liked the sound, and I liked the movement as you opened the door, and a little breeze blew in. But as far as the history is concerned I think there has been a fascination, a preoccupation, a study of movement by men since the earliest times. It seems obvious that the dance, which is one of the oldest art forms, is precisely this. The

order, the movement was made with human bodies rather than with metal or stone or wood, but it was organized movement and it was a very important expression in all cultures. There has been concern with movement in nature, movement of clouds, movement of water - it appears in poetry and literature - but also with moving objects. In the Renaissance, for example, they made clocks and moving chess men, and you know, mechanized chess men - -

JOSEPH TROVATO: Weather vanes.

GEORGE RICKEY: And, dolls - - there have always been dolls, puppets, and so on. This has not come only in our time. But the development of abstract art in our times, non-objective art, suddenly provided a kind of release for these ideas because they work much better if there is no attempt to be figurative.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right. Right. Well, I'm afraid that you have had such a rich experience and you have so much to say about so many things that - -

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, this takes you quite away from the thirties.

JOSEPH TROVATO: - - perhaps we ought to get back to our subject. And perhaps I should ask you now at this point if you would tell us about the mural project which you did in the 30s and I'll ask first of all whether or not this was done under the WPA or was it one of the Section of Fine Arts murals?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, it was the Section of Fine Arts. I was not on the WPA. I was living in New York at the time and many of my friends and acquaintances were on WPA, but I was not. I had been employed up to a short time before and had managed to save a little money and wasn't in a position to take the - whatever it is - the pauper's oath that seemed to be required. I managed to get along. By 1937 I got myself a job, that job at Olivet College. Although I was close to it in many ways, I was not part of WPA. But I had already become interested in mural painting. This began, I think, when I was in Europe in 1933-34 and I learned some of the rudiments of fresco painting from an Austrian painter in Paris, and had experimented with it. When I got back to the United States there was a great deal of interest in Rivera and Orozco. I worked in fresco -- others were working in fresco and we talked about it, though it was not until 1939 that I went to Mexico and got some instruction from one of Rivera's helpers. At any rate I was interested in mural painting and in techniques other than oil painting. I had become interested in tempera techniques and had read a book by a man called Doerner, Alexander Doerner, which I had obtained in German through this same Austrian who had taught me fresco. I was interested in the technical matters which had been like the lost secrets of Renaissance painters. Within a year of my return to New York from Paris that book was translated into English and it had a tremendous effect on New York painters, something that I might tell you a little about because I have some records of that. But at any rate, I was very anxious to paint a mural and there was mural painting going on all around and I submitted several things for competitions and eventually I was given a job doing a small mural for the art - for the Washington office - what's it called again? -- that is, not the WPA -- the?

JOSEPH TROVATO: The Section of Fine Arts.

GEORGE RICKEY: The Section of Fine Arts. Section of Fine Arts in Washington. And I had discussions with Rowan there, Ed Rowan, and I submitted sketches and then finally did a mural painted in egg tempera on canvas for a post office in Sellinsgrove, Pennsylvania.

JOSEPH TROVATO: What was the subject of the mural? Do you recall? And you might also give us an idea as to the style.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, the subject was really just a kind of reflection of the life and landscape of this part of the Susquehanna River. Sellinsgrove is a little town on the Susquehanna River, hills on both sides, farmland, and in general a kind of agricultural environment. And I painted -- of course, I had to adapt to the shape, it was on the two sides of doorway and above it so it was like an inverted U. I had studied enough of the composition of murals, I mean Renaissance and also the Mexican to be interested in adapting to the space and so I did a male and female figure, as I recall, with the idea simply of the agricultural cycle, the sowing and the reaping, and then in the long stretch above the doorway did a sort of stylized landscape of the Pennsylvania hills. In style I suppose it was a mixture of Renaissance and Rivera.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is it still in place?

GEORGE RICKEY: So far as I know it is.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Have you seen it recently?

GEORGE RICKEY: I haven't seen it in probably fifteen, maybe even twenty years -- well, how long ago did I do that? I did it, I think, in 1938. That is twenty-seven years ago, you see. I don't think I've seen it in twenty years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now was this your only mural on the project?

GEORGE RICKEY: This was my only mural on the project. I did other murals but this is the only one on the project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And do you remember how much you received for it in the way of payment?

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't remember exactly but I have the feeling it was $1,500. And if that's what it was, that was a lot of money at that time. But I can't really remember.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You said a little earlier that you were very much a part of the New York scene, and therefore you must have come in contact with some of the artists who were involved in the various projects at that time. Perhaps you might give us some of your remembrances of the time.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, in 1934 I think it was, it might have been early '35, I got myself a studio on Union Square in a building on the ground floor of which there was a dress shop and then above it there were studios. At the time that I moved in there and rented my studio for fifteen dollars a month - I remember that - there were only two other occupants of the building. One was Kenneth Hayes Miller, and the other was a young student of his, called Leo Raikin. The rest of the building was empty. I was the third to move in. But within a year a great many other artists had moved in - Doris Lee, Arnold Blanch, Kuniyoshi, Morris Kantor, Harry Sternberg. Then Rico LeBrun moved in, later, maybe it was two years later, Whitney Darrow Jr. of the New Yorker. Kenneth Hayes Miller remained there. In fact, I think he had his studio there until he died. Well, these people were all around and I think they were almost all on the project in one way or another. So the life of that building was involved with WPA. But also I know other artists. I remember one, Joe Solman, who is now a portrait painter. He was on the project, I saw quite a bit of him, and we used to go out sketching together. He was very interested in the New York City landscape. Another one I remember was Tchakbasov (sp?), who later got very much involved in the color slide business. One doesn't hear about him as a painter any more. Reginald Marsh had a studio across the street from me also on Union Square. And in 1935, I think it was, I went to Woodstock for the first time because Arnold Blanch and Doris Lee were in this building. Because of that contact, and I rented a house in Woodstock where I met Karl Fortess Refrigier and Stuart Edie. He and his wife, Elizabeth Terrell, were both on the project. Austin Mecklen I remember was on the project. Well, others too numerous to mention. The names would begin to come back to me if I began to talk about it more.

JOSEPH TROVATO: The name of the woman that you were trying to remember, wasn't it Audrey McMahon?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I think Mrs. McMahon was very high in the hierarchy of the project in New York. And I can remember there was an Artists Union and I remember Philip Evergood was quite prominent in that. I had known Philip Evergood earlier. The Union was probably quite leftist at that time, well everything in New York tended to be rather leftist, it was the climate of the time. At the Artists union meetings there was a lot of talk and every now and again there would be a march on the project offices. I think that it was really a kind of play, and even at the time I thought that there were those who were active in politics and those who were active in the studio and they were not always the same people.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, you were certainly in the swim of things, and even though you did only one project, you were right on the scene, in the midst of it, and I would like to ask you then how you would evaluate the Federal Art Projects in relation to the development of American art. Do you feel that it contributed or not?

GEORGE RICKEY: I thought at the time, and I still think that it made a tremendous contribution because it made it possible for many artists to make art a way of life. This went on for a decade, and that was enough, it seemed to me, to make American art, or art in America a going activity instead of a rather private province for a few very gifted or well-to-do people, which seems to me what it had largely been before. It was a kind of mass activity but out of that mass came the artists that we know today, who seem, in the intervening time, to have made an art in America which is not dependent and not following or subservient to art done elsewhere. It grows out of the European tradition but it has its own independence and its own kind of vigor. What marked American art as something of its own kind rather than a colonial version of European art really stems from the activity of those ten years of the project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you value that experience in relation to your own development as an artist, Mr. Rickey?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm not sure that it made any difference to me. This may seem strange after what I just said, but I had determined, even before I came to this country to teach, to be an artist. That was in 1930, before the project started. I found a way to earn my own living and to continue to paint. When I had saved a little money I went back to Europe and continued to paint. When I arrived in New York in 1934 with the project under way I was already self-propelled as an artist quite independently of this. My background at that time and stimulation and impetus was European. I was not nearly as American then as I am now.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I am fascinated by the collection of works that I see on your walls and I am curious to know when you acquired them because there is Albers; shown by two examples, there's Backmann; there's Millman. Perhaps you might tell us when you acquired these wonderful things.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I've been acquiring since about 1933. The earliest painting that I bought was bought from John Xceron in Paris in 1933. And I also bought an Ivory Coast mask in Paris, I was interested in Negro sculpture at that time, I'd seen a little, I suppose, in the Musee de l'Homme and I remember this mask which I have in the other room, I bought for fifteen dollars, you see that was a lot of money for me at the time but I was very glad - -

END OF SIDE 1
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JOSEPH TROVATO: On the other side of the tape we were on the subject of your collection as I couldn't help but notice some of the marvelous pictures that you have on your walls, and after lunch I had the pleasure of touring your house with you and all I can say is that you have collected extensively. Perhaps you might like to go on naming some of the things, some of the artists represented in your collection and how you came to acquire them.

GEORGE RICKEY: I have never thought of myself as being a collector and don't really think of these as a collection. They were not acquired with any idea of establishing a core or group with any particular character. They are just things that I happen to have been interested in and to have liked at the time and to have been able to acquire by one means or another, sometimes buying, sometimes exchanging, and there have been one or two gifts from artists. I suppose some of the outstanding things are these two paintings of Max Beckmann, one that I bought from him, on time, after visiting him in his studio in St. Louis; and then a portrait of my wife, which he painted in 1948-49. And we have a couple of drawings that he did at that time.

GEORGE RICKEY: That was one of the studies for the painting. And there is a third study which is in the Beckmann exhibition that is now traveling, but which is now way beyond our means. Then I bought something from Feininger who I'd admired very much and have acquired one or two others things of his. He used to send out little drawings as Christmas greetings and I'm very glad to have those. There's a Millman, Edward Millman here and I have another painting of his, I knew Millman as a colleague at Indiana University. We taught there together and then he was instrumental in having me teach at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute where he had taught for some years and where he was teaching when he died. He was an old friend and colleague and I'm very glad to have that painting. Then Albers - there are two paintings of Albers and also one of his engravings with this play of ambiguous space. The first painting I got, I think, in 1941 when I put on an exhibition of about thirty of his paintings at Muhlenberg College where I was teaching. Albers was then teaching at Black Mountain College and I bought that little painting from that exhibition. And then the one of the Squares I acquired quite recently, I got that in Paris. Then next to it is the painting of John Xceron that's the first painting I ever bought, I got that from him in Paris in 1933, and it is I think just a straight Cubist painting. He was really quite an important exponent of Cubism at that time. The one next to it is Maviguier, unknown in this country though he was in the Responsive Eye Exhibition in New York, where there were two of his paintings. I think this is the only other painting in America of his.

JOSEPH TROVATO: In the dining room, Mr. Rickey, I notice that you have quite a collection of what we're now calling optical paintings, and since I can't quite see them from here except the Vasarely would you please comment on them.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I've been interested in some of the recent tendencies in abstract and geometrical painting for a number of years and have been writing a book about them. In the course of pursuing that I've met a great many of these artists in Europe and here. I've always wanted to have work close to me that I was interested in, and have been fortunate to get some of these things. I've done quite a bit in the way of examining what their theories are, I've got their catalogues, quite an archive, which I got as material for my book, and it was this material that William Seitz looked at when he was preparing the Responsive Eye Exhibition in New York. It was natural that a number of the artist I have here should appear in the Modern Museum...

JOSEPH TROVATO: Would you care to comment on the relative merits of, say, optical painting in relation to some of the other recent trends, such as pop art, and so on?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I would say this, the optical art is not good because it's optical. This is just a matter of style and I think the style is never what establishes the quality of the painting, I think it must have quality apart from the style so that if any of this is good, it is good in spite of being optical and not because of it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, today there are so many trends going on at the same time but the tendency is for people to consider them as sort of fads and it's in that connection that I ask my question. Do you feel that this is a significant trend in the sense that it makes a contribution in the field of art?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, it is very new, or at any rate the interest in it is very new, and time has not yet sifted out who are good and who are bad, who are good and who are insignificant. A style is important only if artists with something important to say with some seriousness and with some depth of insight, go into it. That will make it important. The style itself can come and go just like a fashion. But if gifted and serious artists commit themselves to it they will make it into something. It's not something of itself. It is not something of itself without the artist.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I'm reminded, for example, of Schwitter's work. Well, you know it had a name -- what was it? -- Dada, and so on. But he was an artist, and as far as I'm concerned he produced art of a very high order because he was an artist, and I suppose that the good optical artist will do the same.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, that's exactly my point. Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: During my tour of your house I have also noticed some examples of pre-Columbian art and I'm sure a lot of other things that I have missed.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, my interest in Primitive art goes back a long way. I spoke of the Ivory Coast mask that I bought in Paris over thirty years ago. And when I began to be aware of what was done by the Northwest Coast Indians on this continent I began looking for things. This was maybe fifteen years ago and it was relatively easy to find some things then; now they have become very rare and one can't buy them any more. Then I went to Mexico and began seeing things there that interested me and I studied a little and of course there's nothing to make you study like acquiring a piece of art and then trying to find out what you've got. And I think that probably my principal interests have been Latin America -- pre-Columbian, Middle American art, and Northwest Coast Indians as far as this country is concerned, although I have a number of pieces from the Indian mounds of the Middle West.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, Mr. Rickey, I think that I have just about run out of questions and you have given us so much wonderful and useful information for the record, not only on your experiences and recollections relating to your participation in the projects of the 30s, but also in relation to your own work as an artist and about your collection. I want to think you very much for all that you have done for us. I know that this will be a most valuable contribution to the Achieves record of the New Deal and the Arts, and I want to think you very much, Mr. Rickey.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I'm very glad that you came, Mr. Trovato. It's been an interesting conversation.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *October 21, 2002*