



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ben E. Shute,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ben Shute on June 4, 1965. The interview took place in Atlanta, GA, and was conducted by Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: The most logical place to start would be to have you tell me something about your background and-

BEN SHUTE: My background? Well, I come from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1928 to teach, in fact almost take over the High Museum of Art. Walter McKinny was director at the time. He used to be director of Los Angeles County Art Institute and I think he sort of retired from the field. Well, there were only about a couple of teachers, there wasn't any regular course of study. Had to put one in, so we patterned it pretty much on the Art Institute of Chicago. A year later I brought Bob Rogers who has since passed on to head the commercial department. And so I have been here ever since and been director of the Museum, Dean of the school and every capacity you can think of. Head of the Fine Arts Department. And right now I am teaching painting and that's enough for me. I've had it in terms of all these other jobs.

MR. DOUD: This is with the Atlanta Art Association?

MR. SHUTE: Yes this is- yes, you see the art- the Atlanta Art Association has since merged into what they call the Art Alliance and they've got the name Atlanta Art Association and they're back again using the High Museum of Art.

MR. DOUD: Aha, sort of-

MR. SHUTE: That was a gift from Mrs. High, and for a while we didn't use it at all, but now they have the Art Alliance which means that the theater, the symphony, and the dance all pertaining to it and the art school are all under one alliance.

MR DOUD: I see.

MR. SHUTE: And we are going to have raised- oh there will be about 8 million dollars. We're supposed to let out a lease in August to start building this big project and included in it will be the art school.

MR DOUD: Oh, very good.

MR SHUTE: See?

MR DOUD: Very good.

MR SHUTE: So I never thought I would see that happen because when I started we had about two or three rooms and weren't very welcome, even then, you know 1928 in terms of art down here was the dark age. They had never heard of who Van Gogh was-

MR DOUD: I wish, since I hadn't talked to anybody else who was in this area in the late 20's or 30's, could you tell me something about the situation of the arts. You mentioned it was the dark ages-

MR SHUTE: It was a dark age. In fact, I remember going in an art store, seeing a large reproduction of a Van Gogh, would now sell for about \$16.00, and it was languishing and covered with dust, and I think I finally talked the man out of it for a couple of dollars, it had been there quite awhile and he'd never expected to sell it. And that pretty well reflects the general feeling. Everybody at this time, J.J. Haverty who is- was founded this Haverty chain of furniture stores that are all over the south was the only collector, I guess of any note at all. And he dealt mostly because he knew about them with Grand Central Art Galleries. And I think before I came they had a big art show at the Biltmore Hotel, where the Grand Central Galleries furnished the paintings and they just covered the whole hotel with paintings and had auctions and everything else, so this was about the state of affairs here. What with Mr. Haverty and his friends, businessmen, his weight carried quite a ways with all of them, so when they bought pictures they bought them from the Grand Central. Well, now that could be good or that could be bad, but as in most cases where it is the businessman doing it, it could be real bad. Because the gallery was out to sell their wares, regardless, and they did, lots of them. So when you think about art in that period, I would say

it was largely the influence of the Grand Central Art Gallery. And you see signs of it all over town. Then by degrees these men began to, Mr. Haverty became president of the Art Association, they began to take a little interest in the school- in other words developing the arts. And also in acquiring some for the Museum. But in most cases they would not acquire anything that was contemporary. If you received a contemporary work of art, it would be because it was a gift, of a number of people who insisted on it. No. They wanted something pseudo-renaissance or something with the old world flavor, even if it was bad. You see?

MR DOUD: Now why, why would this situation exist?

MR. SHUTE: Well, you see there weren't any art taught in the colleges; art has been taught at the university for only about 25 years; probably maybe a little bit more. There wasn't any art department. And very little art in any of the high schools. Colleges, a course in copying a few things; I mean this just goes back 25 years.

MR. DOUD: There must be a simple reason why? Maybe I should know why? Know why was there not an interest in art?

MR. SHUTE: Well, if there was an interest. Well I think people down here are pretty colloquial and they were interested in their own traditions, and they had been raised, sort of, on the Charleston tradition of who were the itinerant portrait painters, of dear grandfather and most of the taste of the sons grew up with grandfathers' taste and so forth. When they wanted a thing or bought a thing they went to New York and they went somewhere where they were familiar with, which would be the Grand Central Gallery. So you're right back again in a vicious circle, see? And the schools were doing very little about anything. We were doing the most, and there was a rather hostile attitude about the Art Association, about the kind of teaching we were doing. Because it was raising a generation of people who did know what tastes were. And, of course, there was bound to be some conflicts about that because this growing generation took a very dim view of what the museum was doing, what they were spending their money for, and so. Does that make any sense to you, sir?

MR. DOUD: It sure does.

MR. SHUTE: And all over this area I can't think of a place where art was being taught. Now, for instance in Macon, Georgia, Wesleyan College has had a fairly good art department. A woman by the name of Goulhnar Bahj (?), who is head of the Florida State College in Tallahassee- in fact I went to school with her in Chicago- well she was the head of the art department at Wesleyan which is in Macon, Georgia; well that went on, say for several years, and then that being a religious school, the English Department, French Department, all very much resented anything being spent on the Art Department, and so there was a constant warfare and Goulhnar and her husband Jerry, who at one time has studied with Picasso, and he is a wonderful ceramist, developed a fine ceramic department, and it was growing fine, but the people finally got worn out with the friction, with the people in the town wouldn't buy pictures, couldn't care less- although the little theater was thriving there at the time.

MR. DOUD: I wanted to ask about that.

MR. SHUTE: Yeah, the little theater was thriving. I have an ex-cousin of mine who is also related to Lamar Dodd, and an architect, Ella Mae League. She's sort of like one of these "Gone-With-The-Wind" characters, a woman architect, very successful, well she and her son and a number of others were all backing these little theaters all the time, although the art field was languishing, nobody on the painting, nobody wanted a painting, they couldn't care less what was going on at Wesleyan, so they didn't raise any fuss. Finally the Art Department, I think is practically nothing but a place where they teach a kind of warmed over history of art. And yet it had achieved quite a bit of success, but nobody was in favor of spending any money in that direction, because of the reason I just said.

MR. DOUD: Well, that's strange that -

MR. SHUTE: That sounds like the middles ages, doesn't it?

MR. DOUD: It does a little; quite unfortunately, it certainly does. Well, what was the state of say music, you mentioned the Little Theater?

MR. SHUTE: Music--- this has always been a music town. The- Caruso has been entertained, they've had grand opera since I don't know when-for generations down here. The Metropolitan, these singers have been feted and made over and we're still doing it. Just got over another opera week, when the Metropolitan comes down here and plays for maybe several matinees and at night and for about a solid week steady. And people come from all over the South, and stay just at the Georgia Terrace Hotel, they have the room reserved ahead, tickets bought a year ahead and they just make a week of it. Well music, and I would say also in terms of these music clubs, the Atlanta Music Club, probably one of the strongest ones in the country. They run what is called an all-star concert series for probably 30 years or more. The music club makes the profit and they bought the finest pianist and the

finest sopranos and the finest in music to Atlanta and, they've packed an auditorium that holds 6,000 people. And it is usually packed to the hilt every time this concert, which is probably more than you can say about New York.

MR. DOUD: Yeah.

MR. SHUTE: See?

MR. SOUD: That is very difficult-understand-

MR. SHUTE: But in the art field it seems like an unrelated segment, and now after all these years. Usually there have been great warfare among the different groups in the art field, and now all of a sudden we have-I don't know if it is a shot-gun marriage, or what it is-but-

MR. DOUD: Could it be (ha ha) -

MR. SHUTE: Maybe it's because of this necessity, but here are all these groups, diverse groups interested in the arts and most of them are entertaining the same audiences, are now getting together on a 8 million dollar art center.

MR. DOUD: Well, that's progress anyway. You have-

MR. SHUTE: Well, I think it is. You have- we're all waiting to see what that word progress really means. But we're going to have the physical end of it anyway.

MR. DOUD: Well, I want to wish you the best of luck. Well, could we go back to the depression? Could you tell me a little bit of something about what did happen as far as the WPA art does?

MR. SHUTE: Well, you see, there's a little kind of paradox too. I was here and yet I wasn't here. I was part of it and wasn't part of it. I happened to be employed and happened to be on a continuous job in the art world all the way through, so I never took part in any of the activities of WPA. Occasionally an exhibition would be arranged and I would be part of that. I happened to remember a man who did have something to do with it, but I think his name was Hartley Anderson from Mt. Air, Georgia, and he has since passed on. I remember seeing him occasionally about-he would come out and decided what he wanted to show on an exhibition. But I know that post offices and things had been done all the way up and down the mountain road to Cornelia and Gainesville and places like that, but I couldn't tell you at this distance who did them, whether they were commissioned out of this state or whether they came from Washington.

MR. DOUD: I think quite often they were out-of-staters.

MR. SHUTE: I think they were. And I would say that there weren't too many people able to carry on in that capacity, they weren't trained. They are now. But there wasn't anyone you could point at and say, "There's a good mural painter," or even a good painter because there weren't any.

MR. DOUD: Were there any, do you know, galleries or schools that were established for art in Georgia at the time?

MR. SHUTE: You mean at the time?

MR. DOUD: By WPA?

MR. SHUTE: No, I don't. I think they had some kind of an organization, but that's what I say, I wasn't taking part in it, so I don't know exactly what it was and I don't know- I'm sure that they had a state head of it and that was why I suggested that it would be worth your while calling up Julian H. Harris, who lives on 5th Street. He's a sculptor of the same generation I am and he may have- he knows a lot of people here and has lived here, born and raised here, so he may know a great deal about it and some of the workings of it because he has done architectural sculpture for buildings and projects; you know a lot of buildings was done along at that time?

MR. DOUD: Yes.

MR. SHUTE: So he may have taken part in that. But I didn't- I don't know whether this fellow, Wendell Jackson, who has a studio here in town, would know or not, but that's just a name. Margaret Bush-Brown, Harold Bush-Brown used to be head of the architectural department at Georgia Tech. Margery was a painter, and one of the few good ones around at the time. Of course, she had classes and I grew up with her quite a while. Harold has since retired and has gone back to, I think, Massachusetts. Margery is still painting and now she might know something too, but she's not here.

MR. DOUD: I was just wondering, since you had so little to do with the WPA as far as being associated with it, could you evaluate in any sense what it did? Did it help much in Georgia or-

MR. SHUTE: Well, I've always been of the feeling that it helped a great deal. And that whereas we had direction coming from one or two people in town, when they was in the mood, when they weren't making money, and who happened to head up the art forces here and then we would get the divine assistance of the New York Gallery to ram things down your throat whether you liked it or not and they figured we were fairly stupid anyway. I think the WPA had a lot to do with generating enthusiasm, and interest, getting young talent interested in painting, who would otherwise starve to death, or become automobile salesmen. And I know that the business of putting murals and things in post offices and things up and down through Georgia has a whole lot to do with raising taste in the community. And I know over in Athens the tremendous effect of their art department, whereas they hadn't had one for- I was here when they didn't have an art department in the University, so since they have Gene (?) Charlow, the painter, I think he is in Hawaii, was hired as an artist in resident; he decorated the whole outside of the part of the building with frescos. And then he published a book on it in color in the making of a fresco. Well this all indirectly, I think has grown out, pyramided from the WPA Project. Now you hear all sorts of talk about, "Oh well, you can't, this regional stuff is all dead," it may be dead in terms of what some critics are looking for today, but it isn't dead in terms of people. And what it has done to produce more painters. I think it is a very live issue.

MR. DOUD: Do you think that anything along this same line could be done today to help encourage artists?

MR. SHUTE: Yes, I do, I do. I think a great deal could be done. I see buildings going up so fast like mushrooms. And they're not little buildings, they 18-20-25 story buildings. The government building, here, itself, covers- one of them covers about a block. Well what is in those rooms? What is there in terms of sculptor to identify that building as a government building, with a work of art by some of its own countrymen? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

MR. DOUD: Probably nothing. That's right.

MR. SHUTE: Well if it is true all over the city, it must be true all over the little places in Georgia. And here we still have painters who can't make a living in any way, shape, or manner. They have to teach full time, and give up most of their working hours when they should be producing. Whereas a little bit of teaching, and some substantial work would be just as good today as it was 35 years ago. In fact it may do a great deal more of good.

MR. DOUD: It very well could, heh.

MR. SHUTE: Yes. Very well could, because we have now a very art-conscious community. We have an art-conscious state and we have done a lot of reevaluating of what is important.

MR. DOUD: I think the country has.

MR. SHUTE: The whole country has. I think that all those art departments that have sprung up, all around in all the different states, all have competent painters in their art departments, competent musicians, many of them have done concert work and I think the whole level of art has been greatly raised and the people are decidedly excited about anything to do with art, in any form. So we've got the audiences; we've got a lot of artists, but we still don't have a great deal for them to do.

MR. DOUD: There's not enough patronage?

MR. SHUTE: No. And the painters are still languishing away. I know a lot of good painters that, golly, if they sold two-three paintings a year that would be great. There are only a few that sell at all.

MR. DOUD: It's pretty much the state of affairs all over.

MR. SHUTE: Yes. I know it is. It's practically- you could make the same speech in New York, Wisconsin, anywhere.

MR. DOUD: Well would you care to tell me a little bit about what your major interests in the art field are now? And what you've been doing with it.

MR. SHUTE: Well, my major interest, of course, is painting. I'm a landscape painter, and I'm also a portrait painter. And I also do a few pastels now and then and I teach painting at High Museum of Art; it's called now the Atlanta School of Art and I don't know what it will be called when we get into our new building. Maybe it will be the same. But I only teach about two and a half days a week. The rest of the time, I am painting in the studio.

MR. DOUD: You are fortunate.

MR. SHUTE: In fact I'm doing portraits all along; I just finished one of a Superior Court Judge, Jessie Wood, which will go into the capitol-no, it will go into the court house. So, I do things like that all along, but that's something you can't be sure of.

MR. DOUD: That's right.

MR. SHUTE: And I frequently go to Maine during the summer to do a number of water colors. This year - last year I went to Portugal and Spain and did a series on that. And come back and have an exhibition. Well this Fall I'll have an exhibition-my wife and I, Keenan, will have show in the Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia. And there's a section that did not have a museum 15 years ago. Edward Shorter who is a painter, and is independently wealthy and has been well trained, has taken on the job of director. In fact he has been one man behind the whole museum. And they have quite a nice museum over there; they have Kress collection and a school, and all sorts of things like that. So, Keenan and I are going to have a show there in the Fall. We're going off to Mexico to some things this summer. We'll show of those and some of the things we did in Maine, some in Portugal. But that's the way I spend my time.

MR. DOUD: It should be quite a show this fall.

MR. SHUTE: And I'm not starving to death yet. But I can't say that for-I don't know-many who are doing well as I am. I'm not bragging, just state of affairs.

MR. DOUD: Well, outside of Atlanta and the Fine Art Department in Athens, and you mentioned the Museum in Columbus, is there much going on in Georgia?

MR. SHUTE: Well, there has been in Savannah; there's been a school connected with the Museum in Savannah. And David Ries has been the Director and he was a former pupil of mine here in this school.

MR. DOUD: Oh really.

MR. SHUTE: Yes. Served in the Army. Left art school. And came down and became director of the school and the Museum, where he has been for the last ten years. He's built up a tremendous interest in Savannah. Done a whopping good job, and has since gone to Orlando, where they are building a new Museum, and he is going to be head of it there. I think his one feeling about Savannah was that no matter what he did, the tradition down there was still staring him in the face, and he just wondered if you could ever build anything with your name on it that was really your product, with all of this tradition and background that they persist in.

MR. DOUD: It's a real problem down there.

MR. SHUTE: Aha. So I think he was glad for the opportunity to start fresh with a new Museum. And I don't think you think of Florida as carrying on with too much tradition. I don't.

MR. DOUD: No.

MR. SHUTE: I think of Florida in the same sense that I think of California. They're busy about the future.

MR. DOUD: I don't suppose you know too much about what is happening in South Carolina?

MR. SHUTE: Well, I happened to have been over to Charleston this last winter and judged the South Carolina Artist Show. I was a one-man juror, and so-

MR. DOUD: Well, good.

MR. SHUTE: And do I know a little bit about that.

MR. DOUD: I haven't been hearing anything, I don't know too much about South Carolina and art.

MR. SHUTE: Keen, Keen (he calls his wife)-

MR. DOUD: Well you were about to tell me something about South Carolina.

MR. SHUTE: This was a South Carolina Artist Show and I think I gave Bill Halsey the top prize. Bill has had a gallery in New York, and he's a marvelous painter and I think he is on his way to Portugal this summer. But he is one of the best painters in South Carolina and the number of others, I can't name them all right off, but I was able out of all the things they sent in to pick out a very good show. And they had a number of prize awards, and most of these awards were purchase awards, so they either went-I know one of the prizes awards was sent, I think, to a Museum out of town-one of them went to the Greenville, er-might have gone to the Greenville Museum and the other went to the Museum in Charleston and a number of other museums were benefiting from

this show, as gifts of these prize awards, and I was agreeably surprised, of course there is the same, there is the usual run of the mill horror stuff that you have to wade through-but they do have some top flight painters and when I checked up on them, I found almost everyone of them was a member of an Art department of a University or a college or something.

MR. DOUD: Oh really.

MR. SHUTE: Yes, the best painters were-and they were the ones who held out for standards and had knowledgeable technique and knew their way around and had absolute command of what they were doing.

MR. DOUD: Well that's indicative of something-

MR. SHUTE: Well, that's very encouraging and while there wasn't a great deal of top-flight things, I think they would compare favorably with things we would select here, only on a little smaller scale, because I think in Atlanta there are more good painters in this 50-60 mile area around here than anywhere practically in the south. And that I would just about include Sarasota in there too. And you know there are lots of people in Sarasota.

MR. DOUD: Oh really?

MR. SHUTE: Yes.

MR. DOUD: Yeh, that's quite a center over there. Well, can you think of anything we should mention that we haven't quite covered?

MR. SHUTE: No. I just happened to when you speak about the state of painting here, think its-painting is much better here, than a lot of officials want to acknowledge. In fact I think we're-there are some top flight things, and I think a lot of the time, we're sort of sold down the river. People sending in shows say galleries and so on are not really aware quite of what the tastes really are here. They've got some old red pins they have been using ten years. Tastes have come up considerably and in this city there probably are 11 or 12 or 14 galleries that weren't here six years ago.

MR. DOUD: Oh boy.

MR. SHUTE: Yep. And some of them are thriving. We, Keenan and I, helped found an Artists Association Gallery which is probably the most successful one and since then many others have sprung up-Howard Buckhead on the north side, on the west Peachtree, all over.

MR. DOUD: Whose fault is it when South Carolina artists and the state of South Carolina art isn't better known-maybe its-

MR. SHUTE: Well-I don't know. I think if you look-

MR. DOUD: In Georgia, I'm sorry.

MR. SHUTE: You mean in Georgia?

MR. DOUD: Yes.

MR. SHUTE: Well I think if you'll look at most regional shows around here you find right off who are a lot of the good painters. But, I don't know how much information is carried anywhere else about the state of painting here. But we have-I started a regional show at the museum myself, created it and helped raised the money and kept it going for 18 years-called the Southeastern Annual. And this will be about the 19th or 20th year-I've forgotten which-this year.

MR. DOUD: Right.

MR. SHUTE: And Arthur Harris about 6-7 years ago, who is with the paper company-Mead Paper Company-here started his-I helped on that, he doesn't know about that-but I did. It was called Paintings of the Year." Well, he has since changed it to a National Show, but it originated right here at our museum. So we have had this top-notch regional show going for close to 20 years, and up to that time, there wasn't a real good show in the whole southeast that you could send a painting to.

MR. DOUD: Well it sounds like the south is indebted to you-

MR. SHUTE: Well, I don't know that they are, but it is just a case of necessity. We found that our best painters were sending their paintings off to Washington, sending them off somewhere else. Most of them were moving up there fast as they could. But we got up this southeastern and got the prize money up to around 22-25 hundred,

and the acquisitions that were-got the prize awards for many years-the acquisitions became part of the public collection of the museum. So we outsmarted the board quite a bit by acquiring contemporary paintings currently through this show and that was part of the idea. Because they wouldn't buy them, we made them take it.

MR. DOUD: It's a shame you have to be sneaky.

MR. SHUTE: So I would say it was sneaky. But I would say that the museum collection here would probably total over 75 paintings as a cross section of painting in the last 18 years.

MR. DOUD: That's very good.

MR. SHUTE: So that was a fairly good piece of business.

MR. DOUD: It certainly was.

MR. SHUTE: It's still going on.

MR. DOUD: Well, I hope it continues.

MR. SHUTE: Well, I do, too. But you see when this was started, it was started because no show, Georgia artist or anything, offered more than a \$50 award of any kind. Well, that was no kind of incentive, to even take you picture down.

MR. DOUD: Sure.

MR. SHUTE: It cost you that much to go through the operations of takings it somewhere. So that's why all of this came about. But, since, I mean, in most of the openings of these shows, the galleries are full-thousands of people come-and we've sent these shows to the-Southeastern Annual goes on tour-most of it is out for a year. And people can borrow paintings from this collection. I mean, a college can say, "I'd like to have about 15 paintings from your past prize winners," which we'd gladly loan.

MR. DOUD: It's good business.

MR. SHUTE: So we've used the paintings as-for people to take a look at their own painters. And very educational purposes. They don't just sit around.

MR. DOUD: Well, that sounds encouraging.

MR. SHUTE: Now that does not have a great deal of to do with WPA, and yet, I don't know, indirectly, it may have something to do with it.

MR. DOUD: I think it does.

MR. SHUTE: I think it's all pyramided one on top of the other-

MR. DOUD: You can't set out one block of art history from the other.

MR. SHUTE: That's right-and at a time when we needed it, we got WPA and then when we got enough courage to go ahead and do the next step, I think this all adds up to a good firm fabric.

MR. DOUD: It certainly does. I appreciate you giving me the time to tell me about it.

MR. SHUTE: Well, glad to sound off about it.

MR. DOUD: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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