



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Walter P.
Chrysler, 1964 September 5

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 Walter P. Chrysler on September 5, 1964. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Mr. Chrysler discusses the Chrysler Art Museum in Provincetown.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Mr. Walter P. Chrysler in Provincetown on September 5, 1964, the subject of our interview being the founding and role of the Chrysler Museum in Provincetown. Mr. Chrysler, it's an unusual thing for a museum of the importance of the Chrysler Museum to be established in a small town and I thought we might begin by talking about the reasons why you chose this location.

WALTER CHRYSLER: Well, Dorothy, one of the principal reasons is that Provincetown is the largest and most active summer art colony in America. It is also one of the oldest art colonies as such in America. In addition to the Cape, as we know it, or Cape Cod, is a community that started principally as a fishing community after the Pilgrims originally settled or came here and then went on to Plymouth, and a poor community because of its only industry being fishing. When Hawthorne came to Provincetown from Long Island, from the Chase School there, he was looking for a community that would allow young artists to live inexpensively and be able to devote their time to painting. He wanted to find a community that has exceptional facilities for painting, light being one of the major requirements, and wisely chose Provincetown as a place to come. There were, of course, artists before Hawthorne here and on the Cape but the Cape, as it grew in its role and in its artistic capabilities, had no institution to represent it other than the art institutes that grew up in two or three of the centers: Falmouth, for instance; Hyannis or Hyannisport, and the Provincetown Art Association here. There was no art library; there was no educational institution and the role that a museum could play on the Cape and to a large art colony was an important role and these things were all important reasons why we decided to locate the Museum here.

The Museum therefore contributes a permanent educational institution concerned with the visual arts and promotes an interest in and knowledge of these arts. Since the late 19th century Provincetown has attracted painters and writers enamored by the peerless light and picturesque location here. The early marine painters of the picturesque, naturalists depicting provincial characters, the impressionists painting light, the abstract expressionists creating spontaneous forms, have through this whole last century helped establish Provincetown as a painters' place. The Cape plays a role in tradition of arts and crafts as well. There was the very important and early manufacture of glass in Sandwich and pottery and silver in Barnstable, the silversmiths going back to the 1670's. Also architecturally the Cape has contributed the Cape Cod cottage and the famous saltbox. In speaking of architecture, the Museum is a neo-classic, white clapboard structure rather monumental in character built in the 1850's to accommodate the largest church congregation of the town. In 1958 we redesigned the interior of the church structure to accommodate the galleries of the Museum. On the first floor there are four galleries and offices. On the second floor there are four additional galleries and these galleries are all different sizes and in most instances different ceiling heights so that in these galleries we can accommodate almost any size painting or work of art that might come to the Museum's collection. There is a third floor that is in the process of development at the present time. We have two small galleries open on the east and west wings of the building and behind them there will eventually be two larger galleries. There are in addition storerooms in the basement area and additional storerooms and an auditorium will be constructed in the basement and a sculpture court to the east of the structure will eventually complete the Museum building program.

In addition the Museum has a truly excellent art reference library that contains well over 10,000 bound volumes, catalogues, art magazines and publications and a large clipping file.

Membership in the Museum, which is a tax-free, no-profit, educational institution, allows the use of the library to its members and free use of the library to art students that come from various institutions located on the Cape or the Cape islands.

In speaking of the library, this naturally leads us to the permanent collections of the Museum. We already rank fifth in size among those of all other museums in New England and are constantly being supplemented by our active program of acquisition. The collections consist of Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities, pre-Columbian sculpture, late Italian Renaissance paintings, 17th century Dutch and Flemish paintings, contemporary American and European paintings, English paintings, 19th century French sculpture, 18th, 19th century American, English and French furniture, porcelain, pottery, silver, a photograph collection, an outstanding collection of Sandwich, New England, Martha Washington, Tiffany, Galet and other 19th and 20th century art glass, modern sculpture and ceramics. The neglected era of art nouveau is also superbly represented in the Museum's collections. And perhaps among the finest of its kind in America is to be found here at the Museum. We are also gradually forming a small but what we feel is a significant collection of Victorian furniture and objects.

Our exhibition schedule has been a varied one. The most recent exhibition contained a large section of our art nouveau material. The original exhibition, which we called our Inaugural Exhibition, in 1958 showed a series of major canvases of old and modern masters from Pisano to Van Gogh. This was followed by an exhibition of local artists called "Provincetown Past and Present." This was in the fall of 1958 and gave a survey of paintings by artists who during the past half century made Provincetown the locale for their work. In the summer of 1959 almost the entire Museum was devoted to an exhibition of the Chrysler Art Museum's popular and extensive collection of Sandwich glass. Even before the Museum's actual conception but when we knew we would be coming to the Cape to spend much of our time in the future, we began forming anew a collection of Sandwich glass since it was the only manufactory of any importance ever to come onto the Cape. This exhibition in 1959 was followed by a special exhibit of a painting, "The Daughters of Durand-Ruel," by Pierre Auguste Renoir since it had been a recent acquisition to my own personal collection and I felt it should first be seen publicly at the Museum here.

We followed this exhibition with an exhibition of newly-acquired treasures from Bosch to Braque that covered over 400 years of expression in painting. This was in the summer of 1960 and revealed for the first time the extent of what our collection interests might be.

The retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Hawthorne in 1961 brought together for the first time a whole body of work of the one man who most directly influenced the community's artistic tradition, the paintings coming from all of the principal museums in the United States.

In the summer of 1962 we had the controversial "Century Exhibition" which merited international acclaim and comment. It included major and minor works of most of the best known and some of the lesser known European and American painters and sculptors of the century 1850-1950.

In the spring of 1963 an exhibition of the winter's work of a small group of Provincetown painters was organized and included both established painters and young painters of various contemporary persuasions. In the summer of 1963 the Museum borrowed the 66 masterpieces from my collection that emphasized the comprehensiveness and careful documentation and historical sweep of the major works in the collection spanning the 15th to the 18th century of Western European art.

The Museum has entitled its current exhibition "A Museum's Perspective on Collecting" to draw attention to its aims as a unique educational institution on Cape Cod, to emphasize its individual concept of its function as a museum and of what it considers its immediate necessities. Its collections are diverse and uncommon based on artistic merit rather than on historical interest. In this present exhibition the Museum has collected what interests it rather than simply what has interested other museums. Whatever was considered of particular merit during the period of its creation is probably worth preserving. As artistic reputations fluctuate, are made and lost, a museum finds itself a sanctuary for works that otherwise might disappear. With the disappearance of many artistic objects that much less can be understood about man's capacities for visual imagination. To forget and to relegate to oblivion things of taste in an age is equal to placing restrictions on our current aesthetic perspective. The Chrysler Art Museum is not a museum of any one thing. It is not a museum of modern art, nor a museum of glass, nor a museum of furniture, nor a museum of archaeology. It collects and is interested in the visual arts rather than in any particular artists or group of artists or craftsmen. It makes an especial point to represent well whatever kinds of art it may find collectible. It makes some effort to specifically serve the broad interests of New England and more specifically Massachusetts and Provincetown but has no policy of limiting its acquisitions to this area nor to this continent, to this time, nor to any one civilization.

END OF INTERVIEW

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