Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Hudson Dean Walker, 1965 August 21

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 Hudson Walker on August 21, 1965. The interview took place in Provincetown, MA, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Hudson Walker on August 21 in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Mr. Walker, I wonder if you'd begin by telling us a little bit about your family background particularly your grandfather and his connections with the art world in the Middle West.

HUDSON WALKER: Well, my grandfather was Thomas Barlow Walker who was born in Zenia, Ohio in 1840. He went to Minneapolis about 1862 and first got a job as a government surveyor which put him in touch with the timberlands that were in northern Minnesota which he gradually acquired, and as early as about 1875 he had formed a small art collection which he opened to the public. The collection has been open to the public free of charge ever since. So that it was really a pioneer venture on his part. He kept on collecting and built the present Walker Art Center, which has been altered considerably, beginning around 1926. It opened in 1927, and he died in 1928.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of art was he collecting?

HUDSON WALKER: Well, he had quite a large collection of Chinese porcelains, 18th century jades, Hudson River School paintings, Old Master paintings. He never found out about contemporary experimental American art or expressionist art in Europe. Characteristic was the story that Charles Bittinger, Marin's half-brother told me: his mother was a great friend of my grandmother and at one point he suggested to Grandfather that John Marin would be a good, young artist for him to look into, and he said he would ask Knoedler and see if they thought that Marin was someone who should be in his collection. So naturally that was scotched immediately. But he came that close to being in on that period in the development of contemporary American art. Fortunately, he left an endowment which was added to by my Uncle Gilbert to which he attached no strings so that should the trustees wish,they could sell the whole collection, turn the building over for a library or any other use and he bound them down with no dead-end rules, which is rather unusual. On this basis the collection, and the building, and the activity is now know as the Walker Art Center. I always like to point out at this point that it's a combination of two pioneer ventures: Grandfather's interest in art - and we've never found out where he got the interest because he was only about thirty-five when he first opened his collection to the public. He was largely self-educated, although he put in several terms at Baldwin Wallace College in Zenia, Ohio. And then, as I say, - and this went on till his death - and during the depression, the lumber business, which provided the means for his acquiring works of art and for the continuance, was at an all-time low. The WPA came along and set up the center activities, the art center activities. And so the present operation is a combination of his pioneering thinking and the pioneer thinking of the WPA, which people are too prone to lose sight of these days. Under the WPA the building was the largest permanent building in the program and with the largest permanent collection. The WPA repainted the building and set up an art school. The collection was gone over during that time, and afterwards, by experts in the various fields, and paintings that weren't of sufficient museum calibre were removed. Since the recovery of the business we have in general had a reasonably good purchase fund. It's still rather small but we have acquired a very good nucleus of contemporary American paintings. We bought Franz Marc's "Blue Horses"; Brueghel the Younger - I forget - Carnival - Battle of Carnival in Lent; and a very beautiful Feininger Church of the Meroda. I think, altogether probably 125 contemporary Americans and various things like Couture, Courbet, miscellaneous things that filled in the Collection, always keeping in mind that there never seemed to be any need or desirability in competing with the Minneapolis Art Institute in acquiring the same type of thing. In the field of jade, for instance, the Institute has one of the best collections in the Alfred Pillsbury Collection of early Chinese jades, and the collection at the Center is still strong in late jades, so between the two a scholar gets a very good cross section of the development of Chinese jades.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Going back for a moment to your own career, Mr. Walker. When you were a boy you were surrounded by, you were aware of this environment of art collecting; and is this how you began to become interested in art history and development?

HUDSON WALKER: Well, I started collecting colored stones and natural history specimens and so on when I was about eleven, and at one point when I was, oh, in my teens, my father built the so-called "playhouse" which was twenty-five by fifty. Upstairs was a sort of gymnasium where we used to give plays and where we had tumbling mats and so on. And downstairs was the collection. In the collection, before it was broken up when I left Minneapolis, we had thirteen cases which comprised guns and swords and colored stones - semi-precious stones

- stuffed birds, Indian material, Chinese porcelains (most of which were borrowed), Syrian glass, glass beads and things like that. So there was a fairly large young person's collection.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I should say. Then you decided to become an art historian partly as a result of this?

HUDSON WALKER: No. I didn't. I went to the University of Minnesota for most of three years, from '25 to '28 - then I went to the Fogg Museum from '28 to '30. I remember the first Sunday night that I had dinner at the Paul Sachs' when I told Mr. Sachs that I was inclined to go into the art dealing business. And he said, "Well, we'll have to think about that." And that's all that was ever said. I went to the Fogg for two years and the subject never came up again. After I left the Fogg I went into partnership with Nelson Goodman in Boston - the firm of Goodman-Walker where I was from '30 to '32. There wasn't enough business to take care of two of us so I went back to Minneapolis and the family's lumber and real estate business until '36 when I was married and my wife and I opened a gallery in New York at 38 East 57th Street, which we continued until 1940.

[Machine turned off]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Walker, after you set up your New York gallery how did you become interested in the artists for which it later became very well known, particularly Marsden Hartley and Alfred Maurer?

HUDSON WALKER: Well, I've already recorded the history of my meeting Hartley and handling his work and can't add very much to that previous tape which was recorded with Bartlett Cowdrey and Elizabeth McCausland about two and a half or three years ago. I have not given the story before on my getting acquainted with Alfred Maurer's work. When we opened the gallery in New York there was a notice in the paper that I had come from Minneapolis and was connected with the Collection out there. An older man came in really within the first six weeks of our being open. His name was William Waldemath, who originally had come from Minneapolis. He was a painter who had studied at the Minneapolis School which in those days was in the basement of a public library. Incidentally, the Public Library was largely started by my grandfather who was its president from about 1882 until his death in 1928. And the present Minneapolis School of Art at that time was in the basement of the library. Mr. Waldemath used to go to the collection, he used to run across Grandfather in the Collection and Grandfather talked to him about the paintings; so he came in out of curiosity to see what I looked like. Well, as we got better acquainted he kept mentioning the name of his friend, Alfred Maurer. And frankly I had never heard Maurer's name before. Eventually we decided to give a show to Waldemath. My wife and I went out to Hempstead to see his work and there was the first painting by Alfred Maurer that I had ever seen. It was a very good beginning because it was the portrait of George Washington which now is in the Portland Museum. After Maurer's death, Waldemath had helped Maurer's brother Charles with the work getting it out of the studio, putting it in storage and so on; and he had given the painting to Waldemath. Waldemath also had a few other things but this painting was so exciting that I got Waldemath to get hold of Eugenia Furstenberg who was Maurer's sister. She was living in New Jersey at the time. I went with her to the Manhattan Storage and she opened it up, and for the first time I saw the bulk of the Maurers which then belonged to the estate. I can't remember the exact dates but certainly in 1937, in the spring, we gave our first show of work by Alfred Maurer. We showed many of the things which are very well known now, like the self-portrait with a hat, now in the Walker Art Center, the large portrait of two girls which still belongs to me, the still life which is in the Phillips Collection, the arrangement which was done in 1901 and won the Carnegie Prize that year - the Carnegie International, with Eakins and Homer on the jury. That painting I gave to the Whitney Museum and I think it's probably the earliest painting in their present collection because they sold the collection that was previously formed up until 1900, so I believe everything in the Whitney Collection is 1900 on, as of now. We were in the gallery till 1940 and with the exception of two or three things which I bought, I don't remember that we sold any of Maurer's until about the time we closed when I sold a Still Life with a Doily and Portrait of Two Girls which was known as The Florentines to Duncan Phillips. I believe those are the only two paintings by Maurer that I sold when we had the gallery. When it came time to turn the paintings back to the estate, Mrs. Furstenberg and her nephew, Alfred L. Maurer, came in to look the things over and at that point I purchased - I don't know - 6 or 7 small things which I agreed to pay for over a period of time. The amount was very little actually. Then I went out to Westwood, California, our sawmill town, and was there for six months working through the plant. When I came back to New York in the spring of '41 I wrote Mrs. Furstenberg that if there was anything I could do to help her promote her brother's work I'd be very glad to do it. I said in that letter that she had once said that she would like to sell the whole collection because the burden of paying $5 a month on the storage irked her, although she was not indigent. It wasn't a matter of the $5 - the whole history of Maurer weighed on her and she didn't know what to do with the paintings. She felt her responsibility, but she didn't know what to do about it. (I might interject here that after his death Robert Godsoe became interested in Maurer's work, had several small shows including one at the then Uptown Gallery -this was before I knew anything about the situation - and he was in the process of arranging a show at the Whitney Museum. Anybody knowing Juliana Force would realize what a bad mistake he made when he insisted that the exhibition be billed as presented by Robert Godsoe and the Whitney Museum. Mrs. Force didn't buy that and so the show was never held. That's only an interjection.) Anyway, Mrs. Furstenberg had said that she might consider selling the whole collection. So I wrote her and said that if she still had that idea and if she'd let me know how much she wanted for the collection, I'd see if I could

find anybody who might be interested. At the time I had no notion that the price she might quote would be anything that I could undertake at all. So when she wrote back and gave me such a low figure - this was, say, April 1941 - I wrote her back immediately and said that I wasn't able even at that low price, to buy the collection then, but if she would give me until the following August I would see if I could raise the money.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were then working with other artists too, including some Americans that your gallery introduced.

HUDSON WALKER: Well, that's right. But I think maybe we ought to just finish up this story of the Maurer's because I did acquire them in the summer of 1941. We had them all moved out to the house and although I had explained to my wife when we were married that I would be bald, probably deaf, and would collect pictures, the approximately thousand items in the Maurer estate was slightly more than she could stand and that was a very tense situation for a while. However, that's all been ironed out. A similar thing happened after we closed the gallery because we'd handled Marsden Hartley and had given him three shows in '38, '39 and '40. Afterwards we saw quite a lot of him until his death in '43, and in 1942 I acquired the first batch, although I had several others of his paintings before. I got 23 of his paintings that had been circulating since we closed the gallery, and subsequently bought others from him and later from the Stieglitz Collection, so that I have built up a large collection of Hartley's work over the years. Most of these at the present time are on long-term loan at the University of Minnesota, although they also have been given five. In 1937 we showed the work of Kathe Kollwitz. I believe it coincided with her 70th birthday and an article in the Parnassus by Elizabeth McCausland about Kathe Kollwitz. I think she was the only one who at the time remembered that Kollwitz was seventy years old. My connection with Kollwitz, although it was never direct, goes back to the days when I was in business with Nelson Goodman in Boston, when he saw drawings and prints of hers reproduced in the Gudekunst and Klipstein catalogue from Berne; and we had at least one show of Kollwitz in Boston at that time. It was evident that whereas she had no large popular appeal, there were a number of people who were most enthusiastic about her work and we actually did sell quite a few in the depression days. That's what put me in mind of looking up her work when we were on our wedding trip in 1936. When we were in Lucerne I took the day off and went over to Berne and made the connection with Gudekunst and Klipstein to get her work. As I say, we showed it in '37. One of the dealers who was near us came up the morning that the show opened and said they were great works, he'd shown them before - they're great works but they wouldn't sell.

[Machine turned off]

Mr. Cohen has had and has a great collection of Kathe Kollwitz, George Grosz, and many other artists and he undoubtedly had acquainted Edward Alden Jewell with Kollwitz's work before our little show. Actually during the week we had the usual number of people in. I think we had about a hundred on the Saturday before Edward Jewell's review came out in the Sunday paper. It was the first big review we got. I got the Sunday paper. I saw a reproduction of the Woman and Death and two paragraphs beside it and thought that was the review. It took me until later in the day to realize that it was the whole first column and half of the second column. So people started coming in at the rate of a hundred a day, which was terrific for our small gallery. It was impossible to even try to sell the Kollwitz's: a) you can't sell Kollwitz unless somebody wants to buy them because they are very difficult subject matter-wise; and physically it was impossible to anymore than see that they weren't torn off the walls, not that they were trying to do that, but we didn't have space to show separately and we had a large collection and could only put up a few. The second Saturday we were jammed with over four hundred, and then it was around a hundred a day for the rest of the show and four or five hundred on Saturdays when the elevators were jammed in both directions. Actually the success of the Kollwitz show and our subsequent sales kept us in business for probably two more years than we would have been able to negotiate if we had only been handling the largely younger contemporary Americans who in those days were selling very, very slowly. Among the artists who we handled were Mervin Jules, to whom we gave his first one-man show in 1937; Joseph De Martini, Harry Hirsh - we didn't show all of these but we had examples of their work around - Arthur Silks, who unfortunately was killed a few years back in Yucatan by Indians when he was looking for artifacts; he was a German refugee. Catherine Sturgis, who became the wife of my former partner Nelson Goodman, a fine watercolorist. Let's see - Hartley. It's just a little hard to recall offhand - well, Rothko was included; we showed a collection of his paintings and washes, most of which belonged to Morton Goldsmith, then of Scarsdale; and we did sell one or two but in those days even Rothko was selling very slowly. In the summer of 1946, Joe Hirsch, the painter, was in Provincetown. We had come first in 1943 for two weeks, again in '44 for a month, and '45 I was abroad with the OWI. So 1946 was the first summer that I really began meeting the contemporary artists as such. As I say, Joe Hirsch lived two doors from us and he was telling me that Hugo Gellert had established - was talking about a group - an organization of visual artists based on Actors Equity, or ASCAP. And so when Joe Hirsch went back to New York in the fall he got a hold of Leon Kroll and subsequently there was a meeting at the American Federation of Arts of which I was then president, at 22 East 60th Street. Present were people like Sam Golden, Edith Halpert, Kuniyoshi, Sidney Laufman, Joe Hirsch. This was called a pre-organization meeting so that any artists who hadn't been invited wouldn't think that he or she had been forgotten or overlooked. During the winter of '46 and the spring of '47 the artists had continuous meetings and in March or April I was appointed the first executive director of Artists Equity Association. The first annual meeting was held at the Museum of Modern

Art in the auditorium on April 30, 1947. I remember it well because we flew out to the Derby the next day. It was the only time we've seen the Derby in Louisville. And for the next ten years approximately I was, first, director of Artists Equity Association, then simultaneously the director of the Association and of the Fund, and finally for the last two and a half or three years director of the Artists Equity Fund. I have not had any connection with the Association for about the last six years. I became involved in the jewelry business ten years ago and wasn't able to carry on with Equity because I figured I'd put in about all the time that I could spare in the previous years. That just sort of gives a skeleton.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to talk a little bit about your experience here in Provincetown, the character of the community itself as it was when you first arrived and the way it's changed in recent years?

HUDSON WALKER: Well, as far as the artists' community is concerned I think the largest change is in the number of new and younger artists who have come to town, many of them buying their own homes so that they have brought their families up here. I think the art community is based on the really now lesser number of artists who live here the year around and the number of permanent summer residents who find Provincetown not only a good place for their children but a good place to work. People don't bother the artists by and large in their working hours. It's generally understood that they are not available when they're working and I hear very little criticism of people dropping in and bothering creative artists while they're at work. One thing I always like to point out to people who come to town is that driving through it is only a geographic gesture; they get very little out of it until they're here and find where the artists live and work. You can't spot artists on the street as is true everywhere else, particularly these days when many of them are much more successful than artists used to be. And there appears to be something in the light that intrigues the painters and sculptors. Not being a creative person myself that doesn't have special significance for me. But as a place to spend the summer I find that Provincetown has the combination of beauty of the works of humanity and nature that makes it a very pleasant place to be. We have found that it's an adult atmosphere for our daughters to be brought up in, they have gotten to know the artists not as personages on a pedestal but as people. They have heard them talk, they have discussed things with them, and I contrast it with having been brought up at Lake Minnetonka in Minnesota where nothing like this existed. There was no art colony - not that that in itself necessarily proves so much, but the exposure to the individual mature artist I think is invaluable to children growing up, giving them a more serious point of view in a light and informal way. At the present time our daughter Berta is working for Ed Weiner. Her twin, Louise, is working at the East End Gallery. Our oldest daughter is now permanently employed in Denver in an insurance company, but when she was growing up here she also worked for Ed Weiner, did quite a little teaching swimming. As far as we can see, our interest in Provincetown is mirrored a great deal in the activities of our children as they've grown up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think it would be good to add just for the record something about your work in the Provincetown Art Association - just the fact that you are at least the president of the Association now.

HUDSON WALKER: Well, there are two changes: one, I mentioned before, the influx of serious visual artists since the second World War; and as far as the Association is concerned, the recent addition of the Murchison Gallery which now allows the Association to hold, I believe, one of the largest, if not the largest summer exhibitions of painting and sculpture in the country.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *December 20, 2002*