



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Mary Van Meter,  
1971 November 9

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Van Meter on November 9, 1971. The interview took place in Boston, and was conducted by Joyce Tyler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

JOYCE TYLER: This is November 9, 1971. And I'm Joyce Tyler, and I'm talking to Mary Van Meter, who's a historical consultant for the Boston Center for the Arts. And we are in the Cyclorama Building upstairs in Mr. Royal Cloyd's office. And Ms. Van Meter is going to tell us a little bit about the background, from a historical point of view, of the Boston Center for the Arts.

MARY VAN METER: The art complex is on filled land which was accomplished at approximately the same time when the Back Bay was filled. That would be in the 1850s, 1840s. The land was owned by the Boston Water and Power Company, and it was subdivided into building lots. There were no houses built on it later on because commercial buildings, manufacturers and mills were—we're talking 1860s. The site of the present Cyclorama Building was occupied before the Cyclorama itself went up by a temporary brick structure known as the Moody and Sankey Tabernacle. And Mr. Moody and Mr. Sankey were revivalists who came to Boston and who held tremendous revival meetings. Crowds from all over the commonwealth came. They had special trains from the western part of the state. Dr. Eben Tourjée, who was the founder of the New England Conservatory, was the music director. And the Reverend Phillips Brooks pronounced the benediction on the first day of the opening. [00:02:04] Eventually, this building was torn down because it was temporary. And then the Cyclorama building was built in 1884. The land was owned by John Lowell Gardner, who was the son of John Lowell Gardner, who was the last of the great East India merchants and one of the very, very prominent Boston families. And, he owned not just the Cyclorama land but most of the ground that the Boston Center of the Arts is on now. When the Cyclorama was put up, it was put up by a Mr. Willoughby, a Chicago entrepreneur, who put it up for, of course, commercial reasons. And the building permit, which is incidentally housed at the Bostonian Society in the old statehouse, indicates Mr. Willoughby as the proprietor of the Cyclorama. But the land, the title, was with John Lowell Gardner. The Cyclorama—or, let's see now.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: The Cyclorama was opened in 1884. And, the crowds raved. It was a tremendous success. People entered through a darkened passageway and mounted platform, which was as if it was taken from the Cemetery Ridge. Since it's the Battle of the Gettysburg, we are on Cemetery Ridge now and have a panoramic view of the battle. And it commemorates the events of July 3, 1863, which was the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. [00:04:02] And the [inaudible] was the Pickett's Charge. The painting was done by Paul Philippoteaux, a French artist who was commissioned to do this tremendous canvas for \$50,000. The canvas itself was 400 feet long and 50 feet tall. And, it was absolutely fantastic. And it showed the events in very realistic detail. The spectators standing on top of the little hill found himself right in the middle of the battle. Underneath him, there were papier-mâché fences, rocks, bushes, implements of war, arms and pieces of cannon which eventually melted into the background, into the oil painting itself. So it gave a very plastic, three-dimensional effect. There were also binoculars for use of patrons because, as some of the events painted were in great distance, in order to see them, I guess you had to get your binoculars on. Philippoteaux came to this country to familiarize himself with the whole topography of Gettysburg, and he went to the battlefield himself. He went to Washington and talked to generals from both sides of the—both the Confederate and the Northern—to get the general layout of the battle. [00:06:00] And he went back to France to finish the painting. It took years. It's very interesting. He mentions in an article of the newspaper, 1884, that he was very conscious of the fact that America is composed of many different kinds of people. And, he tried to picture them on the canvas with the scene showing a distinctly Irish face, or the bearing of a Frenchman, or the desires of an Englishman. So, it was truly an American army. The picture was a huge success, and it stayed for several years. But, by 1889, the interest waned, and the picture was withdrawn. Another Cyclorama, *Custer's Last Stand*, was exhibited. But that wasn't a great success. There was another Cyclorama in the vicinity very near here on Castle Square. The Battle of Bunker Hill was exhibited. But that building was destroyed when the Castle Square Theater was put up, and the painting was lost. The Cyclorama picture itself was rolled up and put in a huge wooden box and was forgotten for a while. Eventually it went to Europe, and it was exhibited again in this country. It was at the Chicago World Exposition at one time. And, finally it wound up at the National Park Service in 1942 at

Gettysburg Military National Park. There's a new building that they built for it now, and it's exhibited there. It's a little bit smaller than it used to be. [00:08:00] The 400 feet shrunk, I think, to 375 because there was some damage during all these variations [ph], and the picture had to be kind of shortened. The Cyclorama building itself had various uses. It is reported by people who remember that far back that John L. Lewis [John L. Sullivan], the boxing champion, practiced here. Another fact that we know for certain is that Albert Champion, the motor bicycle racer and bicycle and automobile racer, rented space in the Cyclorama Building in 1907 after he won the bicycle race in France and came over to this country. And he experimented with his automobile accessories here. And this is where he invented the AC spark plug. He lived in Cambridge, and he rented a factory in Boston, but he also had his shop here in the Cyclorama building.

JOYCE TYLER: let me just interrupt for one moment. I think you meant John L. Sullivan.

MARY VAN METER: John L. Sullivan, the boxer.

JOYCE TYLER: Yes.

MARY VAN METER: What did I say?

JOYCE TYLER: John L. Lewis.

MARY VAN METER: Isn't that funny? He was a boxer, too, right? See, this is how much I'm interested.

JOYCE TYLER: I just also would like to ask you something about the physical changes in the building on the outside. I noticed that there are some turrets in the original picture. I wondered if you might make some comments on when the physical change in the building took place.

MARY VAN METER: That's right.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: The original façade did look like a feudal tower, battlements. [00:10:01] But, the first change was made in 1888 when a small wooden entranceway was added on the Tremont Street side. And further additions were put on in 1889 on the back side, on the Warren Avenue side of the building. Eventually, in 1923, the Boston Flower Exchange took the building over and completely renovated it—or remodeled it, rather—to serve their purposes for flower exhibition, refrigeration and making of wire wreaths and all the accoutrements of the flower trade. And the Boston Center of the Arts does have the plan of the remodeling. Now, just a few words about the architects of the Cyclorama Building. The architects were—the architectural firm, rather—was Cummings and Sears. Mr. Charles Amos Cummings was one of the very well-known Boston architects who built many public buildings in town here, among them the Hotel Boylston, which used to be down on Boylston Street but which is now destroyed. He built the library and chapel of the Phillips Exeter Academy in Andover, the first Universalist church in the land. He also was a very prolific writer, and he wrote, with Russell Sturgis, in 1901 and 1902, the *Dictionary of Architecture and Building*, which is a standard textbook. He was also the author of several books on Italian architecture. [00:12:01] He was a charter member of the Boston Society of Architects in 1867. He served as secretary for a while, then as vice-president. And, in 1896 he was elected president and served in that capacity for five years. His partner, Willard T. Sears, was also a charter member of the Boston Society for Architects, and he was born and educated in New Bedford. And then, when he came to Boston, he joined the office of Gridley J. F. Bryant. He's best-known for designing the house of Mrs. Isabella Stewart Gardner.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: Maybe this is a good time to say a few words about the other buildings which are part of the Boston Center for the Arts complex. The first building is the Saint Cloud Hotel, which is located on the corner of Tremont, Union Park Street, and Montgomery Street. This is a white marble, elegant structure built in the French manner with mansard roof in the 1868-1869 period. It was one of the very first Boston apartment hotels. Its architect is Nathaniel J. Bradlee. The plans, the elevation plans of the building, are found in the Boston Athenæum.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: Mr. Bradley was a well-known Boston architect of public and commercial buildings. [00:14:04] He designed the old Boston and Maine railroad station in Haymarket Square, the Hammond Bay building on Tremont Street. Those are both gone now. He also was the architect of the state insane asylum in Danvers and also of Grays Hall at Harvard College. We traced the deeds, the owners of the land, that the Saint Cloud Hotel now stands. And it clearly illustrates the land speculation going on in the South End at this time. The first sale from the City of Boston took place in 1862 for the sum of \$2,163. There were many different owners during that period of time, one of whom was T. Bigelow Lawrence, who bought the land in 1866 for \$11,000. Mr.

Lawrence at this time was Consul-General in the Kingdom of Italy and lived in Florence. And the transaction was conducted there at the consulate in Florence. Mr. Lawrence was the son of Abbott Lawrence, who was the founder of the city of Lawrence in Massachusetts and who was also minister at the legation in London. Mr. Timothy Lawrence was attaché there at the same time. Incidentally, it was T. Bigelow Lawrence's collection of armor to the Athenæum which was kind of the last push to establish the Museum of Fine Arts because the Athenæum ran out of place. [00:16:03] And they had to find more room to put Mr. Lawrence's collection into it. The building itself was put up by two men, John H. Lester and George Bigelow, who bought the land in 1869 for \$19,630. So, there was immediately a profit of nearly \$5,000 from the last sale. And they only kept it for two years or so when they sold it to the next owner for \$165,000. That owner only kept it for two years, and then the price dropped to \$125,000. And the landlords rapidly succeeded each other, and every time the value of the building was going down. And the property deteriorated just like the whole neighborhood did. Originally, the building was—had nice stores on the ground floor, like a fancy grocery, family-type shop. But that was turned into taverns and a laundromat. And then it was finally abandoned. The exterior is in poor shape. The stone is flaking. The windows are broken. But the former grandeur still shows. And, the center, Boston Center of the Arts, has plans for its usage as a kind of headquarters for designers. It will be mostly a commercial building where they're going to sell art supplies for the artist' use here in the center. The next building is adjacent to the Saint Cloud, 557-563 Tremont Street, known as the Mystic Bridge Building. [00:18:08] It's a four-story, red brick building, and it was built in the 1860s on land owned by John Lowell Gardner. It was built for commercial business purposes, and one of its early tenants was the New England Organ Company, which is interesting because right across the street, in one of the other Boston Center of the Arts Building, in the Tremont Estates Building, there was another organ company called the Smith American Organ Manufacturing. So, there were two organ companies right here. After—in 1889, the building was leased to the Boston Dental College for 10 years, and it was used as such for very low rent of \$800 per annum. Then, the building was sold in 1909, and it was used for small manufacturing purposes and also as a school for floral decorations. And, in the 1940s, commercial florists occupied the building [inaudible] complex. The building is in good condition, and a lot of repair has been done on it. The brick work was pointed, and until recently, quite recently, it was occupied. [00:20:00] Now—

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: —the building known as the Tremont Estates, which stands on the corner of Tremont and Clarendon Street, is a four-story red brick Victorian manufacturing. It's in good condition, and it has nice architectural brick work on the windows. It stands on land owned in 1864 by Henry Lee, Jr. of Brookline and John C. Lee of Salem, coming from a very prominent Salem family. And it was this John C. Lee who founded the Lee Higginson banking firm on State Street in 1848. The Lees sold the land to Samuel and Henry Smith of Boston, who were manufacturers. And they built the American Organ Manufacturing on the site. Later, pianos were also made here, and they became the Smith Piano and Organ Company. It was one of the many pianoforte companies. The South End was very well-known for all the organ and piano manufacturers. Chickering [and Sons] was here, too.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: In the 1940s, the commercial flower exchange also took over that building and did so until 1970 when they moved out. The next building is the so-called Pennock Building, which faces on Clarendon Street and Warren Avenue. It was built in 1916. It's a fireproof building, and it was used as a garage. And, it also—Pennock, incidentally, was a nationwide concern of wholesale florists. [00:22:02] So, it fitted right in with the other florists in the area. Right now, it's also part of the Boston Center of the Arts, and the Community Music School of Boston has its headquarters there. The next building is the National Theatre, which is on Tremont Street adjacent to the Cyclorama building. It was built in 1910 as a vaudeville house and has been in continuous use ever since. At present, it plays third-run motion pictures. It has a 3,000-seat auditorium, and it needs quite a bit of refurbishing. The last building in the complex—

JOYCE TYLER: What will that theater eventually be used for?

MARY VAN METER: It will be used for performances, hopefully for concert, opera, like another, Symphony Hall. It kind of complimented Symphony Hall for many—not for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but for other visiting orchestras. When the Richmond Series expressed an interest in it eventually they made it [traffic noise] [inaudible] fixed up. The last building in the complex is Warren Street, number eight Warren Street. And it is referred to nowadays as the Children's Art Centre. It is a four-story Victorian house with a mansard roof. And, we don't know exactly when it was built, but we are pretty sure it was between—before 1874 because it is—was an atlas [ph] of that year, and it used to have a frame stable behind it. [00:24:00] But it's still occupied, and it is in pretty good condition.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: Maybe I should say a few words about the South End in general. It started out as a

residential area for the Boston bourgeoisie, the well-to-do middle class. The buildings that were built in the 1850s and 1860s were quite elegant—15, 20-room townhouses surrounding Chester Square, Worcester Square, Blackstone parks. And the side streets had somewhat smaller but still very elegant structures—10, 15-room townhouses. They were built in a Victorian manner, red brick full front and with more decorative detail than you would find in the Back Bay. The vogue for the South End faded rather rapidly. Manufacturing interest increased and moved out of the Boston business sections and kind of spread down on Huntington Avenue and Columbus Avenue, and Tremont Street, and then encroached on the residential areas. Also, the streetcars were introduced into Boston at that time, and people went further out to the suburbs of those days like Boston Highlands. And, the South End was entering a phase of neglect. There was always a very hard core of South Enders who stayed, though, while the rest of us fled to the suburbs. After the well-to-do middle classes had left, the lower-income but steady-working blue-collar classes took over, which also left after a while when their life turned better. [00:26:13] And then a more ruthless population took over. And houses deteriorated, and the whole area is in kind of sad condition now. But, there is a group of people who is moving in again, and there is kind of a little boomlet in real estate these days. And many people are fixing up these very-well-built houses. And, it's amazing how little money you have to pay for a five-story marvelous townhouse with a back yard. So, there is a definite hope of its becoming what its original planners intended it to be. It is a very polyglot neighborhood, and we can find every race, creed, color, language. And it's true to the American scene.

[Audio Break.]

MARY VAN METER: In 1970, the Boston Redevelopment Authority designated the Boston Center of the Arts as a tentative developer of this area. So, a whole new era begins in the neighborhood. There was considerable enthusiasm on the part of many citizens and neighbors. There was also some opposition. Namely, people expressed fear that if the arts are concentrated in one region, maybe other places in the city would stagnate. Also that if a whole neighborhood would have improved image, the rents and land values would increase. [00:28:05] Hence, the poor people would have to move out. And the BRA took all these point of views into consideration but still decided that the center is a good thing for Boston and is a worthwhile thing to pursue.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]