



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of a taped monologue by Robert
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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Monologue by Robert E. Smith

How and Why I Got Started in Art

at the Artist's Home in Columbia, Missouri

Sometime in 1984

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "themselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

RS: Robert E. Smith

WV: Willem Volkersz

[**Tape 1, side B** (reverse side of Dow Pugh tape); Volkersz' Nos. S2A & S3-A; 23-minute tape side]

[RS recorded this on his own tape recorder, which was of poor quality. Hence, the sound is relatively poor throughout—WV]

Now, Mr. Willem Volkersz, as to your questions on the history, and my history, as to how did I got started in art. I suppose it could be a long story. A number of years ago, I had the interest when my own dad was living, but he died young, at an early age, of a heart condition and high blood pressure. He used to sketch around sometimes in the kitchen and be drawing things on the kitchen table sometimes—women and other scenery—and it fascinated me, when I was only four years of age. And I began to feel like I wanted to do things like that.

My dad not only was good at drawing things and objects but he also had a very good bass singing voice. My singing voice is a little higher than my dad's, it's baritone. My dad was able to play guitar, which I had never been able to see or do, like my dad, or play like other people because of a handicap. It's a defective eyesight condition I've had practically since birth. I wish I could see, although I play some other instruments, but I don't see like I'd like to in playing them; but at least I play them sometimes as good as my dad did his guitar. I play drums good.

And then my dad sort of liked country music. And he was rather a good dancer. But he would be drawing these pictures before he started to work sometimes in the shoe factory, or other things. We lived in a small town, Union, Missouri. And then I got interested in art when I started to school, and I had worked on my dad's things just for practicing, and I took an interest in art when I was in school, when I lived with my aunt and uncle after my dad died.

But my stepdad took a different version of it, because several of the things that I was trying out, I wasn't as strong and athletic as other young boys my age, and handy at doing some things with my hand because of my handicap eye position—like carpentry and mechanic things. So my stepdad sort of ridiculed my art and made fun of it, and that discouraged me, even though I had had a little encouragement from teachers in my last year of school to continue it.

My mother didn't think it was so bad, but she didn't seem like she said anything to my stepdad about the way he was riding me on drawing. And so I didn't feel like I had anybody to back me up, and I gave it up for a number of years.

I will continue later on, my story of why I got into art and things, and it's quite a story, if I must say so. And as to other questions that you want to ask me, perhaps I can, in the interview, Mr. Volkorsz, answer those questions later. But right now this is the best knowledge and detail I can give you as to why I got started in art, and so forth.

[Interruption in taping]

I would say, Mr. Volkorsz, that from all during the _____, from 1943 up to 1950, or practically 19, or 1966, and I worked 23 years, I was interested in nothing but music and singing a lot, maybe writing. I was interested in writing some. I wrote poetry and I sent songs to recording companies to try to get them to publish them or sell them and make a song out of them, and singing, and some dancing. But I didn't take much of an interest in art. And then it happened that after my army discharge, in the service, but didn't. . . . Let's say I didn't have a very good time in the service. And also the fact that I was hard of hearing. If I hadn't of got in with the wrong fellows at the camp before I was supposed to be shipped overseas, I would say that anyhow, if I'd of went to a doctor I think I would have got a general medical discharge on my hard of hearing _____, and also the fact that I had a small rupture when I was accepted in the army in 1948 as a volunteer. But I didn't. But nevertheless, when I was discharged from the army, I watched for some good jobs for a couple of years in St. Louis, and tried to get work, and paying on my government insurance after my discharge. I wanted to have insurance for myself. And I would of got a job with the, with these companies—they were good jobs—there'd have been retirement benefits and insurance. But I couldn't pass a physical by a company doctor for insurance.

And I got depressed and my nerves got to bothering me, and I had to be in a hospital for a while. And I was there for seventeen years, and later on sometimes being locked up, I began to turn to my interest that I had been advised to do by teachers when I was in grade school, and even some in high school, that my stepdad never did think I was any good at. I began to take my natural ability in my heart—[correcting himself—Ed.] ah, in art, doing. And it began to occur to me then, that I had some things as good, if not moreso, than my own dad was. So it didn't matter what my stepdad thought anymore, about it. I began to think of myself as an individual and a human being. And from 1966 on, I have worked on that art, and took serious interest in it. When I got out from this place, I got me a part time job, selling as a salesman in Bush Stadium for three years.

And also I had had three years of high school before I went to this hospital and would have been attending college if it hadn't of been for my stepfather again, who had two sons he was trying to get to finish high school, but they never did. And so it didn't do him any good to be more interested in his young sons than he was me, because they didn't turn out the way he wanted, but he seemed, my stepfather seemed like—who drank, he was an alcoholic—he seemed like he took everything out on me. That's why so long I never considered myself as an artist, or anything.

And so, as I might say, after I got this job selling as a vendor at Bush Stadium in St. Louis, I went down to the employment office to put in for work as a custodian or food service, because I knew a lot about cooking and liked kitchen work then. I had done some kitchen work on assignments when I was in the hospital, on rehabilitation; it was an activity ward for people. I passed a test to work as a food-service helper, just like almost a test I'd taken when I volunteered for the army.

So I began to think that my stepdad had been all wrong about me, that I wasn't a dumbbell, and not only was I an artist, but I was able to pass a test like I had passed when I went in the service. And I sometimes was sorry for the years that I had been, and being away from my art. But I worked at this hospital food service, and also a janitor later on, then decided to go to Texas for a while, and leave my folks.

And it was down there—I still was drawing, and some—and read a library ad and sent a painting of mine to New York, that was having an auction in a gallery. And when, 1973, when they accepted my drawing, but didn't know

what they'd get a price for—and I had to wait for six months—and then I got a check, I began to think that maybe, sometimes, I could sell a painting. I didn't know how much and how often, but I was going to stay in art. And so that was my serious reason and why I began to get into art, because I felt like there were some people that liked and felt I could draw.

So I came back to Missouri, from Houston, Texas, in July 1973, after living in Texas for two years. And I worked as a custodian, janitor, at the state capitol in Jefferson City, and entered a county fair in Jefferson City, some paintings, new paintings I worked on. I got a ribbon. I didn't get enough money, just ribbons. And from then on, I was working as a custodian and state work, here in Jefferson City and Columbia, and then was [working in a health center] in Columbia, in 1974. I entered paintings in the county fair in Columbia and got some ribbons, and it was a little prize of five dollars. It wasn't like I make nowadays, but it helped.

Anyhow, still attending college, and then I decided in 1975 to move down to Springfield, to relocate, to see what. . . . I was interested, really, in getting in with a theater group down there. They had a little theater group that held plays, and dramatics has been kind of a little, another hobby and pleasure of mine. I'd done a little, I think; not a lot, but some parts in plays, and I played one at Fort [Port] College. I was a waiter, in a play for Fort [Port] College, when I entered my, as a freshman student back in 1970. It was called Golden Boy. So I kind of liked dramatics sometimes.

But nevertheless, I moved down to Springfield, but I wasn't working much, but I went to college to get enough credits so I could teach school. And from then on, I entered the county fair down at Springfield and other art shows, and then. . . . But my paintings circulated and got known and I entered some at the state fair—I never have got prizes at the state fair, but people come out and see me. . . . Since 1977 I've been working for some people who are antique dealers, who saw some of my work at the state fair, come down to Springfield, found out that I was living down there, and come down to Springfield to look me up, and bought a bunch of paintings on me. And I had worked for them and other people, and I'm thankful to God that my income in paintings has been anywhere from maybe \$500 to \$700 sometimes a year.

But it isn't the money, and the fact that it's been bread and butter and it's helped me save some. It's the fact that sometimes it's an idea, a thought, a subject, something to do. In bad weather if I can't get out, it's something to do. And it's something that I'm doing for somebody that they like. I mean, if they don't like, sooner or later I hope they'll find somebody that does. It's the idea of doing something for somebody that somebody gets a joy out of. That is how and why I got started in art.

And then, selling a painting to a fellow after he was elected president in 1980, even though I didn't get a check, if I should ever hear from someone like that again, that is another milestone that is encouraging to me. It gives you the feeling of importance. And then the painting sometimes tells a story, which I can almost write a poem from.

And putting in my recording, the sound effects, like radio programs, is another thing that I like. And enjoyment. I used to like to listen to radio in the old days before TV, back during the forties. In fact, I just sent to a radio company and got a tape from the Amos and Andy Show. In 1985, I plan to do one of these tapes and subject matter as a painting, and paintings from other tapes. But I don't need to do it till 1985! I've got subjects for about fourteen paintings from now until December! And I feel that's going to keep my pretty busy. But it's nice to build up some for the next year. But there's no sense in trying to do it all one year. Try. You have to have time out to yourself sometimes.

I thank you.

[Interruption in taping]

I should add to this story that also the fact that when I moved down to Springfield in 1975, to relocate, I still wanted to get in, like I said, enough credit hours, to be a substitute schoolteacher, and I got my chance in 1981, getting in my 61 credit hours, and I went to St. Louis and put in my application as a substitute teacher, and from my background, and what I've had in art, I was given a chance to be a substitute teacher in grade school as an art, in an art class for grade school children. I only got to work three days as a substitute school teacher, but since I had been wanting to be a schoolteacher for forty years, and teaching art in school was still an assignment, and something to do that I liked. And is another reason why that I still to continue in art, because I did have a chance to teach school, a forty-year dream of mine.

[End of tape]