



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with Mose Tolliver

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with Mose Tolliver at the Artist's Home in Montgomery, Alabama

March 5, 1984

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

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," "theirselves," 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

MT: Mose Tolliver

WV: Willem Volkersz

AW: Allan Winkler

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. T1-A]

[Volkersz made a tour of the artist's home, accompanied by Allan Winkler—Ed.]

AW: . . . and what got you started?

MT: Well, I couldn't do nothin' else. [unintelligible]

WV: Do you paint right in here in this room, or do you paint on the table, or what?

Willie Mae Tolliver (WT): He paints in here.

MT: Right here.

WV: Oh, right there?

MT: He set on the floor or something.

WV: Close to the bed, huh?

MT: If it warm, I paint on the porch. I'd rather paint on the porch but this. . . . [gesturing at the cold weather outside—WV]

WV: The weather isn't too good, is it? (chuckles) ____ ____.

MT: Nah. Then it won't get dry. I painted pictures out there one time. Stayed out there about two weeks and they didn't get dry.

AW: Stayed wet that long?

MT: Then when they did get dry, they were messed up. Well, the wind had done blowed trash and stuff up on it.

AW: So you started painting because you couldn't do anything else? Had you ever made any kind of pictures before that at all?

MT: [shakes head no—Ed.]

AW: Nothing.

MT: I never made any. ____.

WV: How'd you start doing the first one? What got you started on the first one?

MT: I started with flower, started playing with flower. Then I couldn't paint nothing but flower.

WV: Huh.

MT: And everybody come, you gotta paint something else different than. . . . We don't got too many flowers, and I started out with something else. And I started out with birds and animals. [I mean what I will send for you.] He was a big, big old painter. He went to school to paint.

AW: Who's that?

MT: ____ ____, [the painter]. [I believe this may be a reference to the owner of the furniture factory he worked for, who was also an amateur artist—WV] He wouldn't sell no pieces under \$200.

AW: Well, that's a lot of money. He probably didn't have too many customers, did he?

MT: Well see, he had a big [furniture] bin. So he could put 'em in the shows himself.

AW: Oh, uh huh.

MT: Like they set up a shop up front, well, he could put his pictures in there and sell.

AW: And how did you first get, your. . . . How'd you first get your paintings outside of your house here?

MT: Um hmm.

AW: How'd you get 'em out? Galleries?

MT: No, I [get] paid for them paintings. And then I got some in books [books and catalogs on contemporary American folk art—WV].

AW: So is it fun, making these things?

MT: Nah, yeah, but it used to not be. I mean, I started quitting one time. Everybody told me ____, I wouldn't quit.

WT: There's a few down the hall.

WV: Oh, there are? Oh, yeah, they're beautiful.

MT: There was a man, name [Bree], he used to live in Kansas City. Now he bought all the pictures I had, just about, for about three year. He'd come by and git 'em. He had his whole house full of. . . . His garage, too. See,

he lived _____. Now he'd say, "I might see you no more, more than about two or three years." He done gwan all over the worl'. And he left. He's gone two years before I saw him again.

AW: Huh.

WV: I like the way they're all out in the open, so you can look at them real easily. It works out real well, the way they're on the wall, you know.

WT: Umm.

WV: It's a nice way of looking at them. They're all out there in the open like that.

WT: Oh yeah.

AW: Well, do you have more paintings besides these, or is these all you have?

MT: These all I've got right now. [unintelligible] Started one, but I never got through with it.

AW: So what did you do before you made paintings, though?

MT: Build furniture.

WV: Build furniture?

MT: [Nods in the affirmative—WV]

WV: Hmm. How old are you now?

MT: Well, about 65.

WV: About 65? You don't know exactly?

MT: Not exactly.

WV: Uh huh. Huh.

MT: I build this bed down there where I used to work.

WV: Oh, it's terrific. Huh.

MT: Then I got hurt bad in there. [To WV, who is examining paintings:] You wanna stand that against that wall over there.

WV: That's nice, uh huh.

MT: You [fell].

WV: Uh huh. That's good.

MT: Someone paid me money on it, but they never come and got it.

WT: Fifty dollars, ____ ____.

MT: They say they'll come and get it that next Saturday. It's been three months, and they ain't got up here yet.

WV: Would you let us take some pictures and put them in the show and try to sell them for you?

WT: Well. . . .

[One of several grown sons living with them (SON)]: You got a cigarette?

WT: . . . see, I mean. . . .

WV: What's the best way?

WT: I mean, he do the painting, and I do the selling. See, I'm his wife. You see, I rather, you know, to sell 'em, sell them to you.

SON: You got a cigarette? You got a cigarette?

WT: And you can put 'em in the show, I'll let you have 'em , sell 'em to you.

WV: Okay, okay. What are the prices, approximately?

WT: They're different prices, and I'm the one that price 'em. Different prices.

WV: Okay.

MT: Here, pull you some down, and she'll give you the price.

AW: ____ ____.

WT: ____ you ____ ____ to _____. [two conversations going on for a while: WT and WV discussing price, and AW and MT discussing MT's paintings—Ed.]

MT: Some you like?

AW: Yeah, I like 'em a lot.

WT: Yeah, you get 'em all together.

AW: I make paintings myself.

SON: [unintelligible]

WT: [to SON:] Git your ____ going out of here.

AW: I like your paintings.

WV: Do they go by size, or what?

WT: Oh yeah.

WV: How much is a picture like this?

WT: It's. . . . I sell that one for \$25 dollars.

AW: Twenty-five dollars?

WT: Um.

WV: We'll try and pick a few and. . . .

WT: And those are \$150, right over there. Like those ____ right there. Those latest, that's a lot over there.

WV: Um hmm. How much are those?

WT: I get \$150 for that.

WV: Oh, really?

WT: Um hmm, ____ ____ ____ the sale.

AW: You're the business manager?

WT: I'm the business manager. (chuckles)

WV: Right.

WT: He do the paintin'; I do the selling. I've been doing it all the time.

AW: Good. Good for you.

WT: ____ ____ . Yeah.

MT: She oughta be paintin', and I do the sellin'. (general chuckles)

WT: [unintelligible]

AW: Maybe you should paint and he should sell.

MT: [unintelligible]

WT: I [poke] the paint one time, which I was, with God's [riddance, bidding], and made out of ____ [boat], my [boat]. I ain't painted another since.

MT: She paint [boat].

WT: I ____ them tears, my mission, and ____ me talk. Them [antiques] so ____ horrible, they ____ me here, me out of town. ____ before we started business, and it [bought] my eyes. And that's why I ____ later than ever.

MT: She can paint purty good.

AW: I'll bet.

WT: Um hmm. [unintelligible]

MT: I can't get her to paint nothin'.

WT: I can't do that, there's too much wrong.

MT: The boy wore her too much.

WT: My son, don't pay any attention to him, ____ my boy.

AW: That's your son?

WT: I got eleven children.

AW: Eleven.

WT: Um hmm. Maybe he's nineteen [my boy]. He's ____ all of my ____ _____. Um hmm. See, they ain't here with me, ____ _____, you know.

AW: How many are still here?

WT: Just about. . . . Three of these right here now, ____ _____. But two more out. Um hmm. They're upstairs and downstairs—all over the whole house.

WV: How much is a little portrait like that?

WT: That right there?

WV: Yeah, this one right here.

WT: I'd say about \$80.

WV: Oh.

WT: You take down the one you want, and ____ I could give you a price, you know.

WV: Yeah, I understand. Yeah, okay, great.

WT: Yeah, um hmm. One you like, you just put 'em I'll tell which painting ____ _____.

WV: Yeah, yeah. I'll. . . . That's what I'll do, I'll pick one.

MT: Gonna sit in that chair.

AW: Huh?

MT: That chair.

AW: What about that chair?

MT: You can set in it. That's an antique. [referring to dog:] That poor little thing.

WV: And you'll take a check?

WT: Um hmm.

WV: Great.

AW: Oh yeah.

WT: Your checking, you got a little cash here? You have the cash?

WV: I got the mon—what?

WT: Little cash money?

WV: I have a little, yeah. Well, actually I'd have to go to a bank. I have traveler's checks with me.

WT: Oh yeah, uh huh.

WV: So, if you want cash, I'd have to go to a bank.

WT: Um hmm.

MT: Here my last _____, put this hook back up.

[Interruption in taping; sounds as though they've moved outside. MT is working, and there are continual machine and intermittent hammering noises. It appears the WV has placed the tape recorder next to MT, leaving it running to catch whatever he happens to say.—Ed.]

MT: [unintelligible]

WV: Who made this cross with the matchsticks?

WT: Oh, my son-in-law, when he's _____. He's gave it to me. I sold one of 'em. That's an old friend now, I think.

WV: That's real beautiful.

WT: Um hmm.

AW: Could I maybe take some out in front and take some pictures of 'em?

MT: Um hmm.

WT: You mean, on the front porch, _____? If you want to.

AW: Can't take them in here.

MT: Too dark in here.

WT: Um hmm.

MT: You want to [shake, shape, scrape] that over there, he _____.

WV: Would you sell a cross like that? That's beautiful!

WT: Oh, it's the only one I got, what you wanta buy [it]?

WV: That's one. . . . Well, I mean, I'm really interested in it. I really love it, and I'd love to put that in the show.

WT: _____, huh. It's real nice. The nicest. Let you have it _____. And that's my _____ my boy. [away from mike:] It's a nice _____. [unintelligible]

WV: How you doing?

[Another son enters (SON)]: How is you? Pretty fine.

WV: Nah, come on.

MT: I'm gonna to get ____ ____.

WT: [inaudible]

WV: [Is that a what? Instead of what?]

MT: I gotta have [\$35]. It belongs to me.

WV: Right.

MT: You never ____ it.

WT: That's why I sold it.

WV: Your son-in-law, did you say, made it?

WT: Huh?

WV: Your son-in-law, or your son?

WT: Oh, no, I said it's my baby boy; he's nineteen. But my other, my son- in-law, he made that [the cross—WV].

WV: He made that.

WT: Uh huh, he made that in a prison ____ ____ . He made it. . . . What place where he was at? I think it was ____ ____ .

MT: ____ ____ .

WT: I've had it about three years. I had four I sold. [God], it can go over there in ____ ____ .

WV: He made them all?

WT: Made with matches stems.

WV: Yeah, right.

WT: Put them back ____ in something like that.

WV: Uh huh.

MT: I seen a man made a house with some.

WT: Um hmm.

MT: I tried, but I ____ only get two with mine.

WV: He took some outside that I might be interested in, so we'll get 'em all together. Did he take a picture of that, or what?

MT: No, hanger was off.

WV: Oh, you're just working on that one?

MT: Um hmm.

WT: Yeah, [he] put the hanger on it.

MT: I put the [hanger] on it.

WV: You just make it?

MT: Hm mm. [negative—Ed.]

WT: Yeah, [he] put that other [hanger] on. See, it fell off the wall.

WV: Oh, I see. I get it.

MT: I gotta put the hanger there.

WV: That's a real good one.

WT: It's ____, something like that up there.

WV: That one could go right there, right.

MT: That's ____ there.

WV: Yeah. [inaudible] Boy, they're sure nice pictures. You do a real nice job.

WV: They're beautiful. They really are. Gosh.

MT: Thank you, thank you.

WV: I've been seeing them in catalogues and books, you know.

WT: Um hmm.

WV: But I'd never seen this many together. It's wonderful to see them all together like that.

WT: Yeah, that's right. ____ some of ____ [watching, washing] them too.

MT: Yeah.

WT: On the walls, ____ ____.

MT: You know that one book, I have a lot of those. They can all go.

WT: [getting out Black Folk Art in America 1930-1980, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1982—WV] ____ book.

WV: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've seen that book.

WT: Right there.

WV: Yeah, I've seen that. You're right in there, aren't you.

MT: Um hmm.

WV: Yeah, I've seen it.

MT: ____ ____ mudwork. Takes a mudwork job. [referring to a clay artist in catalog—WV]

WV: Some of the. . . . Could you leave that one down for a second. I might take that one.

WT: That ____ ____.

WV: We'd like to do take pictures [of it, over] there. I like that one.

MT: There's a self-portrait, s'posed to be me.

WV: That's a self-portrait, right there?

MT: Um hmm.

WV: Oh, that's great. How 'bout this one here? Who's that of?

MT: That's a. . . .

WT: Looks like George Washington, wasn't it? ____ ____ on like that.

AW: George Washington?

MT: Um hmm.

WV: Hah, that's great! I love it.

WT: Sold one like it.

WV: I love it.

WV: Can we walk back there?

WT: Um hmm.

WV: There's one up there that I might be interested in ____.

WT: You want a board to reach when you came to it.

WV: I can do it. [whispers: Nice one.]

WV: So where do you get all the boards to paint on. Somebody cut them for you?

MT: Um hmm. I buy 'em and cut 'em on the porch out there.

WV: I see.

WV: ____ ____ in there. Yeah.

WV: What kind of paints do you use?

MT: Just regular house paint.

WV: House paint.

MT: Um hmm. I even use [crib] paint. Do you know what is that?

WV: Hmm. Those went together, huh?

MT: Um hmm.

WV: Family, that's real nice. They're real nice. [pause] What's. . . . See that little picture up there with the four balloons in it.

MT: They're balloons.

WV: Those are balloons and what else? What are the little lines in there?

MT: String.

WV: Oh, the strings on the balloons. That's neat.

MT: [Judy, Jule] [____—Ed.] gave me to make them. He nearly ____ ____ [with you]?

[Note: I did very little editing on this last part. I just left the tape recorder running as I made the transaction, and the information is not very useful or important—WV]

WV: What's that?

MT: [Judy] gave me to make them, ____ ____.

WV: I see.

WT: You ____ ____ lady ____ ____.

MT: [He, It] feels kind of ____ ____.

WT: [unintelligible]

MT: He never did get past [there].

AW: [Asks Volkorsz an inaudible question, probably about the picture- taking.—Ed.]

WV: Yeah, you did. I haven't been keeping track, I'm sorry. That one [inaudible] [pause] How much would you want for all these pieces together? ____ ____.

WT: How many this? All them together?

WV: Yeah.

WT: I already told you the price of that. ____ cross, and then the ____ ____ ____?

WV: Um hmm.

WT: See.

WV: I may not be able to afford them all. I'll have to see.

WT: _____. That be about [six, sixty]. You gonna get about six of them?

WV: Yeah.

WT: [I'm going to give you that.]

WV: Um hmm.

WT: Look like you run about four. About.

WV: Hm? Pardon.

WT: \$400?

WV: \$400!

WT: About \$375. See, they [is big], you know.

WV: Um hmm.

WT: Buy a bigger piece, and the price'll be, you know, more.

WV: Would you let me buy a few of them, and take a few to try to sell for him.

WT: No. See, I had somebody do the same stuff like that before, and he never returned, you know, nothing, you know.

WV: Oh, I understand.

WT: Maybe I'm saying to him once ____ ____ [the heart, hard].

WV: Okay.

WT: I told him. . . . This lady ____, this white lady, [I, he] said next time gon to, you know, sell 'em, ____ ____.

WV: Um hmm.

WT: This lady in Kentucky, with a ____ ____ ____ ____,

WV: Yeah.

WT: And he bought \$600 from me, cash. On the other hand, we ____ _____. [No dealer].

WV: Right, right.

WT: He's in Kentucky, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

WT: And he just bought my little ____ _____. He got a kinda art show too, you know, ____ ____.

WV: Yeah, I understand. Let's see. . . .

MT: You told call ____ ____ ____.

WT: Yeah, but I call and didn't the number, made a long distance call on the phone, and ____.

WV: Would you take \$100 for these?

WT: About \$175.

WV: \$175.

WT: Um hmm, be about \$175. See, the way he's _____, little boy's fist. See, I get a real good little big one there, you know.

WV: Yeah. Okay, I can write you a check for that?

WT: Yeah.

WV: That be all right?

WT: Um hmm.

SON: You can _____ to _____.

WT: Honey, I'm going there.

AW: I want to get some.

WT: He knows I'm going to the bank.

WV: Should I make it out to him, or to you?

WT: Willie May Tolliver.

WV: What's the name?

WT: Willie May Tolliver.

WV: Willie May, okay. Was Mae M-a-e, did I get it right?

WT: M-a-e, um hmm. T-o-l-l-i-v-e-r. Will it be all right _____ I go and cash it at _____ Bank?

WV: Say that again?

WT: _____, say I cash _____, the man come bring me cash money.

WV: Okay, okay. That'd be fine. [pause] Right.

WT: Okay, um hmm.

WV: Thank you very much. That's wonderful. I'll give you my card, too.

WT: Okay.

WV: Here's my card.

WT: You _____?

WV: I'm at the Kansas City Art Institute. And that's where the show's going to be.

WT: Okay.

WV: It opens March 26, of this month.

WT: Okay.

WV: 647, oops that was 648, wasn't it? 648. [entering check numbers in register? or speaking of price paid?—Ed.] Right.

[End of interview]