



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Ruth Cobb,  
1971 October 26

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ruth Cobb on October 26, 1971. The interview took place in Newton, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. 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

[00:00:07.28]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is October 28, 1971, an interview with Ruth Cobb in Newton, Massachusetts, Robert Brown, the interviewer. Well, first, I should like to ask, anything you'd like to say about your childhood and upbringing, possibly indicating what early interests you may have shown, if any, in art, and anything you think became significant in your later career?

[00:00:42.80]

RUTH COBB: Well, I came from a middle-class, hard-working family. We didn't really have too much exposure to art, other than what there was in public schools for all the children at that time. And I grew up in Dorchester. But I think I was always interested in drawing, and I had lots of encouragement from teachers wherever I went.

[00:01:22.91]

I was the older child in the family, and I—there were just two of us, two girls. And I realize now that older children do have an advantage. They get more attention from everybody. As a matter of fact, I was the oldest child of two oldest children, so that I got lots of attention from grandparents and aunts and so forth, all over the place. And perhaps this made a big difference. Who knows? Nowadays psychiatrists seem to think that's true. So that whenever I did show an interest, I got lots of encouragement. And then as I told you, when I was in high school, I went to the museum classes after school, and I used to go every day, five days a week, because there was an opportunity to be exposed to more art. And I— Did you want me to describe some of those classes? I'm sure other people had.

[00:02:30.20]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Perhaps you could say something about what you think of the way they were conducted, some of the people involved, and the subjects.

[00:02:38.00]

RUTH COBB: Well, I'm not sure whether these classes were a help or a hindrance to a young person at that time, because they were so very inhibiting. There were two days of drawing from casts, casts of Greek sculpture, and that drawing had to be done very precisely with a needle-point charcoal. And the work had to be checked at every step by the teacher, so that one drawing could easily take a month, or six weeks. And they came up beautifully photographic. And of course, all the relatives thought I was a genius when I could copy these things with every little tone, and so forth.

Then there was one day when we studied the textiles in the Textile Department of the museum, and we used to copy those in watercolor. And there, too, every step had to be okayed by the teacher before we could go on. If there was a little area that was red, we would have to mix just the correct red in the paint box and have the little puddle of red there ready, so that when the teacher came along, she would check and say, "Well, all right," or, "Maybe that should have more red, or orange, or something else in it." And this, too, was a

very slow process.

[00:04:18.42]

Then there was another class in drawing in which I told you that I learned how to draw a circle perfectly, freehand, after a lot of practice. And we learned how to do spirals freehand, and that sort of thing. And the fifth class was at the museum school, where we studied anatomy, but the anatomy was purely theoretical, from diagrams. There were no figures, no models, and we had to learn the names of all the bones and all the muscles. And I found it very inhibiting, because whereas I had been very joyfully just drawing figures the way kids do before that, I became so worried about having the figures all seven and a half heads high, and the right proportion in the right places, that I was scared to death after that. So I think I went to those classes through the junior year of high school, and then somewhere early in the senior year, I finally left, because I was given the opportunity to be one of the art editors of the high school magazine and, of course, that seemed tremendously important to me at that time. [They laugh.] So it was probably just as well.

[00:05:47.00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In these various classes at the high school—classes at the museum, I wonder, did you see interconnections among these studies, the geometry, the freehand geometry, the anatomy, the cast drawing and the textile?

[00:06:02.42]

RUTH COBB: I'm afraid I never saw any at all. Maybe there were some. There must have been, but I just couldn't realize it at the time.

[00:06:11.67]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why was—the textile study, why was it done? Was it to learn from beautiful early examples, or what was the teaching purpose?

[00:06:23.64]

RUTH COBB: Of course, no one never told us any teaching purpose. And—[they laugh]. Do they now? [They laugh.] Well, they didn't then. One just went to classes, and did what one was told. I don't know, because our museum has a great treasure of textiles, and now they've opened up a whole new textile department, which I'm planning to go and see. And of course, one could get great inspiration from that. But this method I don't think was very inspirational, because we were so concerned with matching the colors exactly that we couldn't really enjoy the things with their beauty.

[00:07:05.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Well, were certain of your fellow students possibly going to go into textile design—

[00:07:09.94]

RUTH COBB: Oh, no.

[00:07:10.54]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —or anything practical?

[00:07:11.08]

RUTH COBB: These were all—no, these were all high school students, and would have the same general vagueness and ambiguity about their plans that I did, I'm sure. We were all relatively unsophisticated students who all came from similar, rather poor backgrounds, and were just very glad to be in the atmosphere of the museum, which was quite a wonderful place. Because one of the things, I must say, that I gained from it was being in the museum, and learning the various departments of the museum, and being able to find my way around there, and knowing where things were, and then being able to enjoy it on my own.

[00:08:00.61]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As art editor of your high school magazine, could you say what you did there? What did that involve?

[00:08:06.77]

RUTH COBB: Well, yes, there were two of us, and the magazine had a cover every month, and it had a couple of pages of cartoons inside. And so one of us would take one of those assignments, and the other, the other. Then we'd swap around the next month. And I remember doing just dreadful, horrible covers and cartoons [they laugh], but I enjoyed it tremendously.

[00:08:37.24]

ROBERT F. BROWN: A good deal of emphasis was put on quality work in high school then, you think? And was art encouraged generally?

[00:08:45.07]

RUTH COBB: Well, to those who were interested in it. I took art as an elective every year that I was in high school, and there again, I got lots of encouragement. There was a perfectly lovely elderly woman who was the teacher, and she gave me and my co-editor special interest and encouragement. In fact, she cleared away a little space in one of the storerooms connected with the art classroom that we could have as our private workroom, and we would go up there in our study periods or our free time, and either study, or work on art, or do whatever—work on the school magazine or anything. But it gave us a very special feeling, and we enjoyed that very, very much.

[00:09:37.49]

But again, it was a great deal of attention, and apparently, obviously, this is what people need in order to continue in some field. And you know, all the years that I went to school in Boston—I was born in Boston and grew up— and the classes then were just as big as they are, or ever have been. I remember being in classes of 42, where there were only 40 seats, so the couple of us would have to sit at a table, and yet the teachers always seemed to know everybody. They knew every individual in their class, and seemed to give them the attention they needed.

And I was very sad when, many years later, as a mother, I went to visit one of the schools where my children was—not in Boston. That was a little town outside of Boston. And at that time, there was great talk about apologies that the school wasn't doing better because the classes were overcrowded. Now, those classes, I think, were maybe 30, and they were shrieking that the teachers were overworked, and, therefore couldn't give enough attention to the students. And when I went to visit my daughter's homeroom teacher, she really didn't know who my daughter was. She had to look up her little card in her records, and quickly fill herself in about whom we were talking about before we could go on with the conversation. And I was shocked, because why couldn't a teacher remember 30 when those others used to remember 42?

[00:11:23.50]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Hmm. Do you ascribe a good deal of your interest in going further than art school to this encouragement?

[00:11:30.93]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Yes, I think so, mm-hmm [affirmative], because I remember when I was making a decision about where to go from high school. I might have done any number of things. And I'm sure that it was because of encouragement that I went in that direction.

[00:11:53.19]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, could you say something about your decision to go to an art school, and possibly describe something of your time there?

[00:12:01.25]

RUTH COBB: Well, about the decision, there was no great choice of art schools. I mean, I

came from a very unsophisticated family, and the art teacher had indicated that Massachusetts College of Art was a good place to go, and so this is where we headed, and there was no worrying about getting in here or there or there. We just went to one place, and were very glad to get in and have that opportunity. And of course, it was a great thing that this was available to people who didn't have a lot of money. At that time, I think the tuition was \$100 a year for me, and people who took the teaching course, it was \$50 a year. So that was even better.

[00:12:50.87]

So I went into Mass College of Art, which was then called Massachusetts School of Art. It didn't give any degree. Well, yes, only the teaching course had a degree. The other courses didn't. And eventually, I went into the design course, which was for advertising, commercial art, and this is what I took as my major. And then when I got out, I did commercial art for about five or six years after that. I'm sorry about some of the things I missed at that time. I think I could have had lots more drawing and painting, which, of course, there wasn't time for in the kind of course I took, because we were pushed into doing layouts and lettering, and all that sort of thing, which, of course, is necessary in that kind of work. But I did miss not having more life drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you given a bit more freedom within the classes than you had been as a high school student at the museum?

[00:14:02.85]

RUTH COBB: Well, the courses at Mass. School of Art were all very carefully laid out at that time. The students had to be in school from nine [a.m.] to three [p.m.] every day and do all the work in school, plus work at home. There was no choice of doing your work somewhere else and bring it in. It had to be done right there. And attendance was taken, and if you weren't there, well, that was marked against you. And there were no electives. The first two years, every student in the school took exactly the same courses, and then the second two years, they would make a choice of the major and, according to that choice—again, the courses were all laid out for them, and they had no preferences at all.

[00:14:57.60]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the teaching like? Could you describe any of it? Or a particularly important class for you?

[00:15:08.46]

RUTH COBB: Well, there was one man, Ernest L. Major, that I'm sure everybody who was in the school would remember at that time, because he was one of the last of the Boston painters of this group that's now being shown at the museum, and he was an elderly man at the time. As a young person, you can't guess exactly, but I should imagine he was in his sixties, at least. And he was a prima donna, and that's why I'm saying that everyone remembers him. I don't believe that I learned anything from him, or very much, because he was a big personality, and he was so unpredictable in his behavior, that I was just terribly afraid of what he was going to say at any particular time. And I must have stayed out of his way. [They laugh.] From the stories I had heard about him—I heard from other students he would faint in class, and he had all kinds of dramatic ways of making himself known. [Robert laughs.] Well, that was Ernest L. Major.

[00:16:22.29]

I think the teacher that I got the most inspiration from was a young woman who was the head of the commercial art class at the time, when I was in junior. And she was a very lively young woman who was working in the field herself. She would come in only one or two days a week to teach, and the rest of the time she was out doing commercial art, so that she gave us the closest touch with the outside world, the only real feeling that someday you are going to leave this cloistered institution, and go out and have some relevance to the outside world. Because I don't know how it is with college students now, but at that time, I felt so insulated. I really didn't know what it would be like to go out and look for a job, or anything like that. And she gave us this feeling of reality, which makes me feel that people, teachers, should be working out in their own field, and not have to spend their complete time in the classroom, because in that way, they can bring life into the class when they come.

[00:17:44.73]

I know that my husband had to spend much too much of his time in the classroom, and it was only because he is so devoted to art, such an artist from head to toe, and he had so much determination that he would continue his own artwork, his own painting in his free time. At the beginning of his teaching, I think he used to teach five days a week, five full days a week, and then he would paint on nights and weekends, and vacations, and all the time. But nowadays, the hours are much better for the people at the school, and they really do need time to develop their own work, so that then when they come into the classroom, they come in with some ideas about art.

[00:18:39.48]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But someone like Major, had an idea of—I suppose he'd worked out his painting long before.

[00:18:45.88]

RUTH COBB: Yes, I would think so. He had developed when he was younger, and then he was just finishing out his time there.

[00:18:54.88]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you able to paint? Were you painting at this time?

[00:18:59.35]

RUTH COBB: I don't think so, no. Well, I was busy doing all the assignments. You mean while I was in school?

[00:19:05.89]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

[00:19:06.61]

RUTH COBB: No, I was busy doing all the assignments that were given to us, and they were very, very time-consuming. And that alone just took up all my time. And then as soon as I got out, well, I was looking for a job. And this was in the midst of the Depression. I graduated in 1935, and then it was very difficult to get a job. So the first job I got was in a place that's well known in Boston for the people of my age. It was called Vincent Edwards. Did anybody mention that to you before?

[00:19:46.33]

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

[00:19:47.06]

RUTH COBB: Well, Vincent Edwards was the sweat shop of the artists. [They laugh.] This was a place that was turning out mass advertising. I think it was called mats. They would style these drawings, services, to various kinds of businesses who weren't big enough to have their own advertising department, say, a little clothing store, which would like some drawings of ladies' underwear, let's say. Well, they'd have several pages of underwear, which the store could buy clippings, obviously, and reproduce in their own ads with their own name—or drug stores, or food stores, or just general figures doing things, housewives cleaning the house.

[00:20:45.01]

And there was another department, a furniture department. Well, each one of these was a separate service. And so that this Vincent Edwards employed at one time, I think, about 35 artists doing all these various drawings, turning out a service every month for each one of these departments that I mentioned. And we started working five and a half days a week at the great salary of \$15 a week, [laughs] and I can tell you I was very proud because I got a job. [They laugh.]

[00:21:26.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that was also time-consuming, wasn't it, you were at this work?

[00:21:30.01]

RUTH COBB: Oh, yes. It was very time-consuming, and it was very—oh, it was heavy on the spirit, because when we were doing the drug ads, for instance, we would have endless little drawings of bottles and jars of cold cream, and tubes of toothpaste, and the various things you find in the drugstore—and drawn very small, so that—you know what a drug ad looked like. They were always—they're the worst. [Robert laughs.] When the time came for the drug service, that was terrible. Everybody hated that, because drug ads are always chocked full of hundreds of little items, and they're very small, so that you get a very black page. And this is what the drug thing was.

[00:22:17.19]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Well, were you at all—this was some five years you were doing this kind of work?

[00:22:21.06]

RUTH COBB: Yeah, yeah.

[00:22:21.57]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you at all able then to continue studying, or painting, or sketching, or—

[00:22:28.92]

RUTH COBB: Well, very little, because when I got finished with working from nine [a.m.] to 5:30 [p.m.] and half-days on Saturdays, my eyes were tired. If nothing else, my mind was tired. My mind was numb, I would say. And I worked there for a couple of years. And then we got married, and then after that, we had our apartment, and you know, the things that young couples have when they're first married, the life that they set up, so there wasn't too much time.

[00:23:05.43]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then when did you—what did you do after you finished your stint with the—

[00:23:10.23]

RUTH COBB: With Vincent Edwards?

[00:23:10.95]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

[00:23:11.37]

RUTH COBB: Well, then there finally came a time when I just couldn't stay there any longer [laughs]. It was just unbearable. I couldn't possibly tolerate the thought of one more drug service coming through, so I quit. But by that time, we were already in the war, and business was better, so that I was able to go out and get some freelance work, and I did freelance work for a couple of years. And then, finally, when I had my first baby, I stopped working entirely.

[00:23:56.27]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then there was also a time when you possibly could get into your own work, or were you still too tied down?

[00:24:01.22]

RUTH COBB: [Laughs.] This is going to be a very dull, uninspiring— [They laugh.]

[00:24:06.47]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'm trying to get you to the point where—

[00:24:08.15]

RUTH COBB: But you're getting me to the point where I started to work. And I really shouldn't bore you with these foolish details. The only value I can think of is that, after I started to paint many, many years later and finally had a little recognition— And young mothers would come to me and they would always have the same plight, "How do you find— how did you find time to paint? I have this baby at home, or two babies at home, and what am I going to do? They take up all my time."

[00:24:45.56]

And my answer was that the babies are very important if you have them, and you should give them all the time that they need, because they don't stay very long. In four or five years, they're in school, and that's the end of it. And then you begin to have more time, more and more time, so that really it isn't a very long period. So it wasn't until my second child—

[00:25:13.23]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

[00:25:13.86]

RUTH COBB: There we are now. When he was in kindergarten, then I could regularly spend some time. Oh, yes, there was times—when David was—the year he was born, we went to Provincetown.

[00:25:29.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Provincetown, right.

[00:25:30.09]

RUTH COBB: In the summer. That was in 1946. And so maybe it wasn't only the—not having the time, but not being in the right atmosphere, because we had been holed up in a little apartment in Dorchester, and Laurie was working, teaching school. And at the time, he was even working at a war job, nights, and so he was away a good deal. And I was home with babies, and completely cut off from anybody who had any stimulating ideas. But when we went to Provincetown that summer—that was the first summer we went—I did paint. And that made a big difference, being in that atmosphere.

[00:26:18.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Provincetown like, from your point of view, when you were there?

[00:26:22.16]

RUTH COBB: Well, it was wonderful. It was simply marvelous. And it was interesting that many years later, our children, when they were grown up, talked about their memories of it too. And they felt a big difference—of course, David was just an infant when we first went, but Nancy was three, and she felt change in the family from that point. She really—the change in the atmosphere, because we came, and immediately felt at home. Everybody we met was, well, near the same age, for one thing. They were all young, married artists, and they all had children about the same age. And they were all very enthusiastic about what they were doing, very excited about what they were doing. And we were just emerging from the Depression. Nobody had a lot of money.

[00:27:22.73]

Very few people had cars. We had never owned a car ever, until much later. We didn't have a car at that time. When we went shopping for our groceries, we'd have to take the baby carriage, and walk about a mile down to the center of town and load the baby carriage with



the groceries, and then push it home. We didn't have a car to carry it. So that it was really a very stimulating atmosphere for us. And that was a time when Laurie had great development in his own work, as he undoubtedly has told you.

[00:28:01.58]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what were you doing in your work?

[00:28:04.12]

RUTH COBB: Well, I just had to go back to very tentative beginnings, because I can't say that I had ever developed painting very much up to that point, and so I was doing watercolors of landscapes, and still lifes, and just really starting from rock bottom.

[00:28:26.04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And how did you develop in the next few years? Were you able to continue more and more steadily?

[00:28:33.18]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Well, of course, we continued to go back to Provincetown for about four or five summers, so we had the stimulation. And then, of course, as the children got a little bit bigger and were in school, there was more time to paint. And then there was a gallery in Provincetown, which was another other encouragement, which began to sell our work, and they were selling paintings for very, very low prices. But there was great excitement, you know. Well, maybe two, or three, or four, or five, or six paintings sold this week. And it wasn't very much money, but it was exciting to think that this work that you'd been doing in an ivory tower, suddenly somebody really wanted it, and it was being sold. And that, too, was a big inspiration. That was the Shore Gallery, which was started by Donald Witherstine, and he was the first commercial gallery in Provincetown. And he encouraged a lot of artists. He eventually was the one who came into Boston, and started the Shore Gallery in Boston. He was a great inspiration.

[00:29:54.96]

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were your summers, and there was a large group there that had larger parties [inaudible]?

[00:30:00.53]

RUTH COBB: Yeah. Oh, yes. There was a large group. They were all from New York. There were, it seemed to me, no artists from Boston there, at all. The only one I remember—and he came, oh, three or four years after we had been there. It was Khalil Gibran, but we were with Adolph Gottlieb, and Leo Manso, and Baziotos, and Byron Browne. There was a great group of artists, and it was a wonderful feeling there. And it was after the war, and it was 1946. You see, it was right after the war when we first went. And there was even food rationing still going on. You couldn't get any meat. And we were busy eating fish every day that was caught there in Provincetown. And all these little down-to-Earth, daily living problems were another thing that drew everybody together. Of course, Provincetown became more and more crowded, and eventually we felt that it was becoming a rat race. And that was the reason that we stopped going there.

[00:31:29.08]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, then the rest of the year you were in Boston, and it was quite a different thing then. Then were you—how soon were you exhibiting in Boston?

[00:31:40.35]

RUTH COBB: Well, we moved out to Natick in maybe about 1950, I think. And there, too, I found myself getting a lot more work done, and probably because the children were in school. When we first moved to Natick, we were in the midst of doing murals. My husband had an assignment from the American Export Line, and he did murals for the *Constitution* and the *Independence*. And I helped because the murals were huge maps of the route that this line took between— It showed about half of the United States, and then the whole

Atlantic Ocean, over as far as Israel, because this was the final destination of the ship. So we did these huge mural maps, and we were faced with a tremendous lettering job, all the place names that had to be lettered, so I was doing the lettering. This is where my background came in handy. I did all the lettering. Well, this took a lot of our time when we first moved into Natick. And then after that, I really got going, and spent most of my time painting. And I was showing at the Shore Gallery, which was newly opened in Boston. And I think I was chosen for a Young Artist Show at the Institute of Contemporary Art when it was still on Newbury Street.

[00:33:25.21]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:33:25.39]

RUTH COBB: So that was the beginning, and then somewhere along there, a couple of years later, I had a one-man show at DeCordova Museum, and that got things rolling.

[00:33:36.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you find fairly quickly that the Boston institutions were encouraging you and showing you?

[00:33:45.33]

RUTH COBB: The Institute of Contemporary Art was very encouraging, yes. And DeCordova, which came later on.

[00:33:57.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you involved at this time with a number of other artists around?

[00:34:03.76]

RUTH COBB: Not very much, no. Of course, finally, when we moved out to Natick, then there was a distance problem, and we couldn't get into Boston that easily. And my husband was teaching full-time, and when he drove home at night, he wasn't apt to go back driving into Boston. So that made quite a big difference.

[00:34:30.19]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What kind of media were you using at this time?

[00:34:33.07]

RUTH COBB: Well, I seemed to always be working in watercolors. I seem to be drawn in that direction, and that's been my major interest.

[00:34:42.97]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Any particular reason why you've chosen watercolor?

[00:34:47.77]

RUTH COBB: Really, I can't put my finger on it. No, I just seem to go in that direction.

[00:34:53.34]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you like about watercolor?

[00:34:55.55]

RUTH COBB: Well, I like the transparency of it, the lightness, and the freshness. Well, maybe one of the things is now—one of the things that undoubtedly pushed me in that direction was Oriental art because in that, of course, there's not much watercolor—painting on silk, and I loved the transparent quality of that. Another artist that we liked very much from that period was George Grosz, and his watercolors were very exciting to us. I remember going to a lecture given by George Grosz—and Laurie and I went at the Fogg Museum. And we were

simply thrilled, because we were going to see George Grosz in person, and we listened to every word he said. And we hardly understood a single word he said because he had a very heavy German accent, but we came away completely inspired just the same because we had seen him.

[00:35:59.97]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you taken also by the social content of his work? Or was it—you didn't—it was his handling of the medium?

[00:36:06.46]

RUTH COBB: Well, of course, his handling. Well, naturally, the social content was very satirical and very tragic, but of course, as artists, we were interested in his handling of the medium. And it was very sad that later on, when he had been in this country for a long time and no longer was stimulated by the social content, the work was not as good. I think it was not only the content, but also, he changed from watercolor to working in oils. And there, too, he lost the lightness and the freshness that had been there when he was younger.

[00:36:50.04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What were the—can you say what were some characteristic types of subject matter in your work?

[00:36:58.03]

RUTH COBB: Well, I seem to be drawn principally towards still life, and I've done a lot of painting with children, too. Now, it may be that—because Cubism was a very major interest, and Cubism, of course, has so much of still life in it that probably that was one of the reasons that I went in that direction. Also, I suppose still life material was much—I'm being very practical, do you see? Still life material was always easier to come by than models, and so I would paint what I had, and what I could see.

[00:37:44.59]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Cubism, what do you think you've been interested in?

[00:37:50.62]

RUTH COBB: You mean the quality?

[00:37:51.97]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, what particularly of Cubism has drawn you to it?

[00:37:57.34]

RUTH COBB: Well, I think the elegance of it, the organization, the—of course, some of the color harmonies, particularly in the Braques, are so beautiful, just a very thoroughly satisfying construction.

[00:38:32.01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Would you care to say that this is a carryover from your study of layout and design?

[00:38:39.16]

RUTH COBB: Well, that never occurred to me. I don't—I never thought of that. I don't know whether that's true, or not. Maybe it is.

[00:38:51.12]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And in your own work you organize very carefully, don't you?

[00:38:56.28]

RUTH COBB: Yes. I have, up to the present. I think I'm trying to get a little bit freer, but it

usually works out better if I have a fairly clear idea of what I want to do.

[00:39:12.26]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you—I'll ask the big question. Could you talk a bit about the intention of your work? What would you say you, subconsciously or deliberately, are trying to get at?

[00:39:30.26]

RUTH COBB: That is a difficult question. [They laugh.] I don't think I can answer that very simply. As I mentioned, I like the quality of transparency, of luminosity, light shining through things, um—just light. I think that light keeps—that word keeps coming back no matter what I start with.

[00:40:00.55]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is there meaning involved in your work, would you say?

[00:40:05.18]

RUTH COBB: You mean like a social content?

[00:40:07.33]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Possibly, or a mood.

[00:40:10.39]

RUTH COBB: Consciously, I would say there is absolutely no social content, no meaning. But sometimes, of recent years, when I've looked back over the things I've done, I think there must be a great feeling of nostalgia in the paintings that I do because of the reactions I see in the people who buy these paintings, and also looking at them myself. There's just a feeling of nostalgia.

[00:40:44.95]

ROBERT F. BROWN: For a particular place or time?

[00:40:52.18]

RUTH COBB: Um—I suppose for—well, some of these things that I have around me that I've done like that lace, they all go back. These things would be, say, 40, 50 years old, and—but that would be about the time. Maybe they suggest a time that was a little bit slower, a little bit more tranquil. Because I think that I've been in somewhat of an ivory tower, anyway, because, being able to stay home and paint all these years, I've been very lucky, and I've been very protected from the outside world, and having to—there's so many artists who have to earn a living and paint at the same time. It's much more difficult. And as I said, I've had sort of a private Guggenheim by having a husband support me all these years [they laugh], so that I could paint. Well, it's no small thing. Very, very important.

[00:42:20.09]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Also, in looking at your work, the colors certainly are a very important factor. Is this a fact—is this an aspect of your interest in light, or—

[00:42:28.83]

RUTH COBB: Well, the color has been changing the last few years as I've been looking at some of the older paintings. You've seen them downstairs. And I realized that what I was doing before had very little hue in it, but a lot of value contrast, as I was particularly interested in light and shade, chiaroscuro, and so that I was working with lots of sepias, and umbers, and browns, and that sort of thing. But now I'm using much more color and very little chiaroscuro, and trying to get the luminosity through warm and cold colors, and the forms through warm and cold colors, rather than through light and shade. So one thing that happens is that they're much harder to photograph now, because the values are often quite close, and when they're photographed in black and white, of course, you can't see that. The

early ones were easy to photograph for that other reason.

[00:43:40.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And these colors of the group of lace, and pottery, and tankards, and pitchers and things like this—it all gets back to what you said about something of nostalgia or at least tranquility, doesn't it?

[00:43:57.28]

RUTH COBB: Well, no, I don't want to force this point because—and I don't want to make a big thing out of something that really wasn't there. I think the way it started was that I was doing still lifes, and so after I used up all the material that was around, well, I would begin to look for more material. And as people cleaned out their attics and handed me all their junk that they were throwing away—

[00:44:23.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: More of a question of accidental— [laughs].

[00:44:25.27]

RUTH COBB: Yes, I would have those things, and then as I started to pick up things on my own, and would be mostly looking for a shape that was appealing, or a color or a transparency, I collected all these things. And the fact that they turned out to—many of them are old, but some of them are not, like these glass things you see. Those are new things. But they seem to take on this quality.

[00:44:57.73]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, Boston as a place to be an artist and your relation with dealers and patrons here— could you characterize that? I know you said you lived outside Boston and you—

[00:45:10.36]

RUTH COBB: Oh, well, we lived in Natick, and that's not very far. That's in the Boston orbit, of course. When we were in Provincetown, then that was part of the New York world, and it's very different. Uh, well, I don't know. Boston is a lot easier to live in. It's a lot less hectic, and I'm not even talking about New York of the present day. New York right now I think is impossible to live in, but I'm talking about New York of that time— about, say, 1945, '50, '55, when it was possible to live there. But it was becoming increasingly a rat race, as there were more rewards for the artist. In other words, more collectors were appearing, and more museums were buying things. Then the artists were all scrambling for the rewards that were available, and there seemed to be more of that going on in New York than in Boston, at least as far as I was conscious of it.

As I said, I stayed home and painted. I did my painting, and I did my cooking, and took care of my family. So I really didn't have that much opportunity to see the Boston art scene. And I had a gallery, the Shore Gallery, which, again, was very protective, so that they handled my work, and I didn't have to worry about going out and seeing people about it myself. Eventually, I had a New York gallery, Cober Gallery, which was a very good gallery, and I had a number of shows there. But they unfortunately had to close because the building was sold.

[00:47:09.80]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But they, too, took care of everything?

[00:47:12.02]

RUTH COBB: Yes.

[00:47:13.04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very solicitous from—

[00:47:15.11]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Of course, maybe I was easily satisfied. Perhaps this was part of it, too. As long as the gallery took the details of a showing and selling off my hands, I was perfectly satisfied, and I wasn't concerned about making a fortune, or having a great big name, or anything like that. And whatever pace they went along was fine with me, and they didn't go that fast, certainly. [They laugh.] But I was happy as long as I didn't have to worry about it.

[00:47:55.08]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'll ask a current topic. Women in art—any comments on that?

[00:48:00.45]

RUTH COBB: Well, my comment, as you can see, is that I've had a Guggenheim that's lasted all these years. From the time that my children were in school, I would say, before that, and I was busy—I never had any domestic help, so I didn't have much time. But from the time they were in school, I had this long Guggenheim that went on year after year. [Robert laughs.] And also, I had a wonderful husband who was an artist himself, and a great inspiration, and encouraged me tremendously.

[00:48:33.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you, and do you discuss things quite a lot, as to what he was doing?

[00:48:37.58]

RUTH COBB: Oh, yes, absolutely. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, when he was first teaching, as a young teacher, and he'd come home and talk about his classes to me, and things that were going on—he was an awfully good teacher. He always was, all his life. And I used to think to myself, "Gosh, I wish that when I'd been in school I had had a teacher like that," because he gave so much attention and so much encouragement to his students. And one day, I said to myself, "I have a teacher like that. He's right here in the house."

And this is what was happening. Whenever these little timid, tentative beginnings—and whenever I would show him anything, he would give me the greatest teaching in the world. You know, he would encourage me, and he would bring home all kinds of material from the school library—magazines with reproductions, and art books, and all kinds of things. And he was giving me the greatest teaching in the world, so that I really had that great teacher.

[00:49:47.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. What kinds of things did you have to be pushed into doing, or needed encouragement to do? Was it a lot of it confirmation of—

[00:49:57.97]

RUTH COBB: Confirmation.

[00:49:58.36]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —progress.

[00:49:59.12]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Yes. As I'm telling you this, I realize this is the secret of anybody's achieving anything—getting lots and lots of encouragement. Would you agree that's true in any field?

[00:50:18.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you think you'll be doing in the future? How does it look as far as your own work goes?

[00:50:26.22]

RUTH COBB: Well, I've been working a little bit with acrylic on canvas, and I probably will try more of that. Meanwhile, I'm also doing the watercolors, because I feel more at home with that. As I said, I think that there's more color in the work now than there was, more hue than

there was before, and I like the idea of the vibration that comes of the clear colors—hot and cold colors in juxtaposition, so probably that sort of thing. As far as subject matter, I think that would—as far as I can see, wouldn't change too much because the subject matter is only a jumping off place, and if the ideas of form and technique change, then they can always be latched on to any subject matter. It doesn't matter.

[00:51:28.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, I know you've traveled together a bit to Mexico, and did that play a part in what you've done?

[00:51:38.75]

RUTH COBB: I don't think that played too much of a part because I think that my type of painting is inspired from other directions, as I mentioned. There was Oriental art, which was very important, and Cubism, French art. Well, more lately, I've been interested in French artists like Bonnard. It is much more interesting to me than Cubism now. I think that Cubism has sort of worked out of my system. But always it's the art of France and of the Orient, so that Mexican art is a very different kind of thing. I enjoyed the architecture there tremendously. It was a great thrill. But, well, there wasn't too much, really, painting in Mexico. It was mostly sculpture. It was interesting to see, but that Primitive kind of thing didn't reach me particularly in my own work. And the Contemporary art in Mexico is nothing special. That is merely a reflection of the art in the rest of the world. I think that of the art—the painting that I saw, the contemporary painting in Mexico—I was quite impressed with the murals by Diego Rivera, much to my surprise. I had seen reproductions of them many, many times, but I had never seen an original. And when I saw the originals in Mexico City, it was really a very, very inspiring thing to see them full-size, and in the atmosphere that they were intended for. They're really very moving works.

[00:53:33.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, French art—what interest does that now hold for you, would you say?

[00:53:38.88]

RUTH COBB: Well, I suppose French art has a great elegance, whether it's the Cubists—and of course, in the history of Cubism, I think that Picasso and Braque invented it, but Picasso soon left it, and invented lots of other things. Braque stayed with it much longer, and Braque was extremely elegant, so that the Braque was just height of elegance. And then people like Modigliani and Bonnard, even going a little further back to Renoir and the Impressionists, that period.

[00:54:29.72]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. One last thing I should have asked earlier, in terms of composition of your work, can you—how do you go about that? What do you try to achieve in terms of relations of forms, and of areas, and relation to the frame, and other surroundings?

[00:54:50.52]

RUTH COBB: Well, I think an all-over composition, which works like a tapestry, something that's on the picture plane, and in which the foreground, and the background, and all the various pieces play a part. I mean, I enjoy some of the more avant-garde artists like Marca-Relli, for instance, who takes just pieces—used to take pieces of canvas, and just put them in juxtaposition, very simple pieces. I had a reproduction right here. This, I find very, very intriguing, and each piece is equal to each other piece. And it makes a beautiful all-over tapestry of composition. And my work doesn't look like that, and yet I think it's organized in a similar way. I think of it in a similar way.

[00:55:59.43]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because as you do work, you feel that painting has its own particular quality. You're not trying to represent something so much as—

[00:56:08.13]

RUTH COBB: No, I suppose when I started out, I was trying much harder to represent things, but now, no, the subject is the jumping-off place. And then the painting takes over. As a matter of fact, I never know what's going to happen to it after I get into the painting, and this last one that I showed you was one where I just did it completely from my imagination. And I hope that maybe I'll be a little freer, and go more in that direction.

[00:56:43.44]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you mentioned before that sometimes you turn them upside down, or sideways just to work out balance, I think you said before.

[00:56:51.66]

RUTH COBB: Yeah, yes. And you see with this sort of thing it would look good from any direction, and I think any painting should be able to be turned upside down, so that you can see how the weights are going, and what particular area needs working on.

[00:57:09.09]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would say this is even true of perspective construction?

[00:57:14.05]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Yeah, I would think so.

[00:57:21.96]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is there any general comment you'd like to make?

[00:57:24.27]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:57:31.70]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did non-objectives for a while. Could you discuss those, and why you got away from them?

[00:57:38.51]

RUTH COBB: Yes. Well, I found that when I tried non-objectives with no subject to start with, the forms were very hackneyed forms. There was just nothing very original or exciting about them. They would come out looking like whatever artist I had looked at last, I suppose. And starting with a real subject gives me a jumping-off place, so that I can then improvise on the forms from that subject, and I find that nature has many more interesting forms to offer than I can invent all by myself.

[00:58:27.45]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:58:28.29]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:58:28.53]

RUTH COBB: When we were married about four years, I think, we went to live on Beacon Hill, and we lived up there for a few years. And at that time, we used to see a lot of the other artists who were working around Boston. There was Dante Giglio, who was very prominent in Boston at that time, and there was Alexander Eliot, who later on became the art editor of *TIME* magazine and—was it *LIFE*?

[00:59:06.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: *LIFE*, too, I think.



[00:59:07.65]

RUTH COBB: *LIFE*, too. Well, he was a young married man at the time, and he was living on Beacon Hill. And we used to see a lot of him. And let me see. There was King Coffin was in the group. We had a little community of artists that we used to get together. I think we tried to have some—we did have some exhibitions, little local exhibitions, but after a while, of course, everybody moved off in a different direction. Dante Giglio was an interesting, colorful character at that time. He lived in a place that—[audio distortion.]

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[00:00:03.00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is Ruth Cobb, October 26, 1971, continued.

[00:00:10.18]

RUTH COBB: I was talking about Giglio Dante. He used to have an interesting studio. He lived over one of the theaters in Boston, down on Stuart Street. I don't know what the name of the theater is now because they changed it every couple of years but, it was down on Stuart Street. I think it was called the Plymouth Theater. It was mostly plays there. And this was a focal point for a lot of the artists of Boston. We used to meet up there a lot, because he had a great big loft-like space where he worked. And he was also a dancer. He was a ballet dancer. And he was a very interesting character, and he eventually went off to live in New York, and so he got lost to the Boston scene. And I think his interest in dancing eventually was greater than his interest in painting. There was somebody called Adams Garrett who was from Oklahoma, that sort of place. And he was doing some very interesting prints at the time he was in that group.

[00:01:31.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this the nearest you would say you came to having a large group of Boston area artists that got together informally?

[00:01:39.69]

RUTH COBB: Yeah. Yes, there were quite a number of them. I can't remember the—oh, well, now Jack Levine was in the Boston scene at that time, and Jack Levine was a very close friend of ours. We used to see a lot of him. And he was working in a studio, and that was about as big as a closet, on Huntington Avenue—literally, in fact. He did one of his most important paintings there. Painting took up the whole wall—a side wall of this little room. And the only way he could see it as a whole, was with a diminishing glass because he couldn't get away from it. I mean, the room was about as wide as—well, what would this be? Like about eight feet or nine feet wide. So that wasn't an ideal—with one small window at one end. And there was the Artists Equity going on about that time, and my husband was one of the executive directors for a period of time. So there were things happening.

[00:02:51.78]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Artists Equity an important factor here?

[00:02:58.15]

RUTH COBB: I think it finally petered out. It didn't actually accomplish that much. I think there was more going on in New York—the Artists Equity in New York.

[00:03:11.67]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And aside from the group that you were with, there were the—were there the more traditional artists who weren't involved? Or were there among your group, others who were landscape painters, marine painters?

[00:03:24.84]

RUTH COBB: No. That's true. We didn't—we weren't seeing those people at that particular time. I assume they had a group, too.

[00:03:32.58]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

[END OF TRACK AAA\_cobb71\_8463\_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]