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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Carlen,
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Transcript

Interview

MP: MARINA PACINI

RC: ROBERT CARLEN

MP: This Marina Pacini interviewing Robert Carlen for the Archives of American Art. The interview is taking place at Mr. Carlen's Gallery on March 17, 1988. Mr. Carlen, I would like to talk with you today about black artists. Could you tell me who, other than Horace Pippin, you represented?

RC: You didn't get in touch with the Pyramid Club, did you?

MP: Well, actually, that was one of the questions I was going to ask you, if you could tell me about the Pyramid Club.

RC: That was down on Girard Avenue, the 1500 block of Girard Avenue. The place you could get the information on that is from that Negro museum on north 7th Street.

MP: The Afro-American [Historical Cultural Museum]

RC: Yeah, yeah, they would have the early records.

MP: Did you know anything at all about it? Did you attend any of the exhibitions there?

RC: Yes I did; yes I did. I used to when they had exhibitions. They had a nice group of artists who were members of the Pyramid Club. They showed their pictures there. Quite a number of 'em people I could tell you a bit but it's hard for me **MP:** OK, actually, I have a list here of some and I will go through the list. Well, let's start off with Dox Thrash.

RC: Dox Thrash was a very talented young Negro painter. He did both prints and paintings.

MP: Did you know anything at all about his . . . any biographical information? When he was born?

RC: No. He must have been born about I guess 40 or 50 years ago. All that stuff you can get from that museum there without, you know

MP: I went there and they do have information on a few black artists, but none of the ones that are on this list here.

RC: Oh, really! That I can't understand.

MP: Well, it's because it's so new; they haven't had chance to . . . they've really only been there for about 12 years.

RC: How about the Academy; did the Academy have anything?

MP: No.

RC: The Academy and then . . . how about the Print Club? **MP:** We haven't gotten to their records yet. They're at the [Pennsylvania] Historical Society; we will be filming them.

RC: That would be a good one because they specialized in prints these fellows all, were specially, you know

MP: Did you ever sell Dox Thrash's work here in the gallery?

RC: No, no, I didn't.

MP: Well, OK. We'll go down the list and come back. Well, one thing I found interesting in organizing your papers [the Robert Carlen Gallery records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution], I came across the draft of a speech that you wrote and, from reading it, it sounds like a speech that you were to give for the "Negro Artist Comes of Age" exhibition organized in Albany. Do you remember anything like that?

RC: No, I don't.

MP: There's about ten or fifteen sheets of notes; it certainly looks like your handwriting, about many different black artists.

RC: No, I didn't do that.

MP: You didn't. OK. That brings up an interesting question because there's also some correspondence in there with Madeline Blitzstein.

RC: She lived right across the street, here, and ah, she's a cousin of my wife's by marriage. She just died in Florida, in Fort Lauderdale. I gave you the things, didn't I? Didn't I give you . . .

MP: Yes.

RC: . . . the article that she wrote on Pippin?

MP: OK, it looked like she was corresponding with the Harmon Foundation about black artists, that she was interested in writing a big article.

RC: Yeah, she wrote . . . you got the article there.

MP: OK, well, then, is it possible that she would have been the one who gave the speech at Albany?

RC: It's possible but I doubt it very much. It must have been somebody else, dear.

MP: So you don't know why those . . . the speech, is in your papers? [Laughs.]

RC: No, I don't. I asked her to write that article on Pippin, you see, and she wrote it.

MP: Well, maybe then this is just her information that she put together. OK, well, let's go on. How about Edward Loper? Can you tell me anything about Edward Loper?

RC: Edward Loper lives down in Wilmington, Delaware. He's a self-taught painter. He's in his seventies now.

MP: Oh, so you think he's still alive.

RC: He was just up here, recently, to see me. He's a very brilliant boy, and he has . . . he's very popular. He has big classes of painting, he teaches, he makes his living from that. Oh, he paints in Canada, too. He goes up there every year to Canada and he's got a dealer up there in Canada who handles his paintings.

MP: How about Humbert Howard?

RC: Well, he paints around here. He shows his paintings in difference places in some of the galleries, local galleries.

MP: Did any of these artists ever come to you and ask you to exhibit their work?

RC: Mmm, I didn't know them too well. I don't think . . . I wasn't interested in his work so I never asked him to show but he had a number of shows here.

MP: Gross McCleaf, I think had some..

RC: Yeah, that's right, several galleries around here that have his paintings.

MP: OK, how about Alan Freelon?

RC: Well, he was a school teacher, you know. And he was a very talented guy from an Academic point of view and he's now dead, though. He painted a lot of work in oil and he was very good. He showed at the Pyramid Club. All these people you're talking about were all shown at the Pyramid Club.

MP: Because . . . Then I take it nobody felt that because you were dealing, you were representing Horace Pippin, then the other black artists didn't feel that they could come to you and ask you to handle their work, none of that happening?

RC: No.

MP: OK, how about George Victory?

RC: George Victory worked at the Pennsylvania Railroad; he was a pullman porter. First series of things he

painted were pictures of locomotives and he did a lot of still lifes of flowers.

MP: Laura Wheeler Waring.

RC: Laura Wheeler Waring. She was a sculptress. I think she may be still alive. She was a very talented woman. She did a lot of portraits in sculpture.

MP: Henry Bozeman Jones.

RC: I don't know him.

MP: Lois Maylou Jones.

RC: I know the name but I don't know the work.

MP: Selma Burke.

RC: She was a sculptress, too. She's still living; she must be in her seventies now. She has a dealer over in New York now. I don't know which one of the galleries but they show here over there.

MP: Did you ever have anything to do with Sam Brown?

RC: No, actually, I didn't. He came here several times to see me. He was a very competent painter, that's all I know about him. 'Course every one of these people was at the Pyramid Club. Somebody . . . find out who's got the records of the Pyramid Club because somebody's got to have them.

MP: Did you notice, was there any sort of um . . . could you make any sort of statement about the black artists in Philadelphia? Do you know any thing about what . . . Other than the Pyramid Club, did they have any opportunities to exhibit their work? Were there any similarities in their painting styles, or were they . . . ?

RC: Another place where they showed was the socialist club, it was the John Reed Club. They used to show there.

MP: At the John . . . ?

RC: The John Reed, R-E-E-D. He's buried in Moscow. [Laughs]

MP: Oh, oh, the one from the movie. All right, in that case I think I'm not even going to bother to continue down this list of these other black artists.

RC: What about Paul, what was his name?

MP: Paul Keene?

RC: Yes, I don't know what he's doing now.

MP: He's retired; he lives in Warrington. I've been out to see him.

RC: Where's he living?

MP: In Warrington.

RC: Where's that, Virginia?

MP: North, no, no, just north of Philadelphia.

RC: He was a very talented boy when I knew him, when he was young.

MP: How did you get to know him?

RC: A very nice boy, very talented. He must be in his seventies, now, easily. I don't know why he hasn't continued with his painting, because he was a very good painter.

MP: Where did you meet him?

RC: Did you see a Negro painter just died?

MP: Romare Bearden.

RC: Romare Bearden, yeah.

MP: Did you ever have any of Bearden's work?

RC: No, he had . . . he was with in New York City. He did very well.

MP: But over the years, you never sold any of his work?

RC: No, he was a very intelligent person. If you'd heard him speak the other day on the television, he was a very intelligent person, and was very talented. He was with the group up there, Jackson Pollock and all that group and all. In fact, he's got a dealer in New York, Romare Bearden.

MP: Well, let's shift gears. There are a few other artists that I know you did handle their work that I'd like to talk to you about.

RC: Go ahead, just mention their name and I'll tell you about

MP: How about Albert Webster Davies?

RC: Who?

MP: Albert Davies.

RC: Oh, Albert Davies was white, he wasn't black.

MP: No, I know we're not talking about black artists anymore, I'm just going on to

RC: Davies was the one who did all these primitive paintings. He had a show down at the Abbey Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum. I sold quite a number of paintings for him.

MP: How did you meet him? How did the relationship begin?

RC: I think he came to see me and brought some of his things in. He was showing a lot of pictures up in New York. Some of the New York artists saw his work and liked it very much. He was a very talented artist.

MP: Did you have any sort of relationship with Jacques Lipchitz?

RC: I knew him personally but I never showed any of his work. I got some of his sculpture from a New York dealer and I sold a number of pieces of his things.

MP: In Philadelphia?

RC: Yeah, to Philadelphians. I just . . . I just had a catalogue from a dealer in Switzerland who had two studies of Lipchitz's and I wrote to him and said I wanted to buy 'em and how much and it's been months now. He says the owner is out of town and he doesn't know what price to quote me. If he quotes me and they're reasonable, I'm going to buy 'em. Barnes was very much interested in Lipchitz's things and he has a number of his things out there.

MP: How did you happen to get to know him personally?

RC: I met him and he was a nice guy. I knew him in Paris, too. He had a studio in Paris, in the Rue Cherchmidi [?]. I liked his work; he was a very talented guy. Barnes liked his cubist work, you know, and he didn't like the later things. He had a fight with Lipchitz. He'd always find a reason to fight with people he didn't want to . . . he wanted to drop them. Lipchitz was one of those. He liked him in the early days but in the later days he didn't like his work, like that one over there at City Hall that looks like worms, you know. He didn't like that type of thing at all.

MP: How about Leonard Baskin?

RC: Well, he came here to see me once. He had a dealer; he's a very talented guy. Personally I didn't like him. He's running an antique shop up in Maine with his wife. [Laughs]

MP: Why did he come to see you?

RC: Oh, he heard that I had a lot of primitive art which he liked so he used to come in to see if I had any that he liked and was for sale and that's why he started coming here.

MP: Was he buying for himself or for his gallery?

RC: No, he was buying for himself. At that time he wasn't interested in a gallery. He married; it was a long story at the gallery but I sold him a few things now and then. He used to come down to Philadelphia and he used to be friends with a fellow that was here, who died, the guy just died recently and he was a very good friend of his. What was the name of the guy? The guy who bought the Eakins house?

MP: Seymour Adelman.

RC: Seymour Adelman, yeah, he was a very good friend of Seymour Adelman's and then there's another fellow he was very good friends with, Sylvan, Sylvan . . . he wrote a book on Eakins, Sylvan Schindler, no, not Sylvan Schindler

MP: Well, Adelman wrote a book on Eakins.

RC: Yeah, yeah.

MP: But somebody else you're thinking of . . . ?

RC: He was forever stealing other people's ideas and that's why I didn't like him.

MP: Adelman?

RC: Yeah. I didn't have any time for him. He had an awful lot of lying. He was really very, very avaricious, I mean to get money. He didn't care how he got it.

MP: How about Adolf Dehn?

RC: I knew Adolf Dehn when he was . . . I remember he came here and he was told that he was awarded a Guggenheim scholarship. He came over here the afternoon he got it; they tipped him off in advance even before the Guggenheim people announced it. They called in advance and told him he was being awarded a fellowship, a Guggenheim. He was a lithographer. He did an awful lot of satirical things. He was very much influenced by Daumier and he also was a very fine water color painter. I sold a lot of things for him and then the interest tapered off.

MP: When would this have been?

RC: Some time in the 1940's. I think he's dead now; I don't think Adolf is alive.

MP: I think that I saw something about the Carl Schurz Foundation [In the Carlen papers].

RC: Yes, Carl Schurz Foundation. I bought that famous collection they had of graphic arts of the German expressionists. I bought the prints, drawings and watercolors because they were being disbanded, you know what I mean. The interest had died out and they were going to sell their assets and so I bought the collection.

MP: When would this have been?

RC: This must have been sometime in the Fifties, I guess.

MP: And then you sold the works . . . ?

RC: And then when I sold 'em, I sent them to Germany to be sold.

MP: There wasn't any interest in Philadelphia?

RC: I couldn't sell them. Oh God, the people I offered them to; today they realize . . . they said they were very stupid and why didn't they buy them.

MP: Do you remember any of the people you offered them to?

RC: Mmmm, I offered them to the Harvard, the German museum there, you know. I offered them to a number of dealers and collectors. There were about two hundred and fifty items in the collection.

MP: And you ended up having to sell them off in Germany?

RC: You see, the war was on and Nazis, and people wouldn't buy them here.

MP: You must have been selling them in the Forties then.

RC: Yeah, yeah.

MP: Mrs. Carlen one time mentioned something about the Valentine Gallery and that at one point you had considered buying it.

RC: You mean, what's his name in New York -- the Valentine Gallery?

MP: Yeah.

RC: I used to do a lot of business with them; I sold a lot of things for them here. They had sculpture and they had prints, drawings, watercolors. They had a very fine gallery and eventually he died when he was quite young.

MP: I think that's what Mrs. Carlen was referring to; she said something about the possibility of your having bought the gallery after his death. Is that something that was ever discussed?

RC: I didn't hear, yes. I tried to find out about it but I couldn't find out about it. I don't know who got the gallery.

MP: Did you ever at any point in time, think about opening -- you know, expanding and opening up a gallery in New York, as well?

RC: Yeah, Edith Halpert wanted me to come with her in the Downtown Gallery, you see.

MP: And that must have been in the Forties.

RC: Yeah, that was in the Forties.

MP: So you were supposed to go into the business that she already had?

RC: Yeah.

MP: What happened?

RC: I couldn't afford it. I had two children -- the cost of living was too expensive over there.

MP: So you never really had . . . ?

RC: No, I didn't have the money necessary for that.

MP: So it wasn't just that you decided that you preferred to stay in Philadelphia?

RC: I didn't prefer to stay; I wanted to go to New York. [Laughs]

MP: OK. Well, the final question that I have for you; I was told you started collecting, trying to buy Federal furniture at an early date. Was this . . . ?

RC: Not Federal furniture.

MP: You've never been interested in Federal furniture?

RC: No, I was interested in American antiques. You see, I started buying antiques and selling them, Pennsylvania Dutch. I liked Pennsylvania Dutch folk art; I liked very much. I sold one watercolor, Fraktur piece, watercolor, to a guy for \$250 and the only other one I ever knew of brought \$39,000 in a sale.

MP: You have sold furniture through the gallery?

RC: Yeah, sure, look at that piece over there. That's supposed to be made for a very famous Philadelphian; they're doing a lot of research on him. They're fixing up the house on 4th Street, 4th and Delancey, the Physick House. That came out of there. I bought that out of the Physick House. It was made for Phillip Syng, he was the silversmith, and he made the inkwell for Independence Hall which they signed the Declaration with.

MP: Then you never really did collect Federal furniture?

RC: No, no, not Federal furniture. [TAPE OFF/ON]

MP: What is this? [Looking at photograph]

RC: That's Penn signing the Treaty with the Indians by Benjamin West; it's the second copy that he made. The first one is in the Academy of fine Arts. It was bought over here in 1860 by an American collector, he bought it, the painting. A library, a Quaker library in England, wrote to the Haverford College and asked them if they knew anybody who would be interested in the painting because of the association with Pennsylvania. So they were

nice enough, they gave my name and I corresponded with them and I finally bought it and I, very foolish, I sold it to somebody in New York and they sold it to the Gilcrease Foundation, you know, American Indian, so they have it out there at the Gilcrease Foundation in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was a shame; it was almost five foot by nine foot that, was the second version he painted and it was sold at the auction when they sold the contents of the studio in 1828. The picture was sold at that time.

MP: Who bought it at the auction?

RC: I think the library bought it. Years later when they decided, you know, to close up the library, they wanted to sell it and they thought the most sensible, the most logical place to sell it would be to somebody in the United States, in Pennsylvania, because of Ben West's associations.

MP: How different is it from the one at the Academy?

RC: This was painted a little freer. The one at the Academy is painted very realistically, tight. I told you about that silver piece that I sold to this committee of men that gave to the King of Sweden as a gift because it was made by a man who worked in Delaware which was the first state set up in the new colonies. Delaware was the first state. This man worked in Delaware for a few years and then he moved to Ohio and he founded the town of Zanesville, Ohio. He founded the town.

MP: What was the guy's name?

RC: Zane.

MP: And he was a silversmith?

RC: Yeah, very few pieces that he did, I mean they've been able to identify. That piece was bought by a group of friends of the King of Sweden when they came here during the Bicentennial. They wanted to give him a gift and they wanted to give him something that was made in Delaware and had associations with Delaware, one of the earliest states here.

MP: And when does it date from?

RC: Mmmm, I think somewhere in the 1790's. They'd been hunting all over the country to find a piece of silver that answered all those questions, because it would tie in with the Bicentennial and they wanted give a gift of the King. It's in the Royal Palace in Stockholm.

MP: Do you remember where you found it?

RC: Yes, I bought it up in New York state. Yes, the probably got it from the family, yes, I bought in New York. They hunted all over, they . . . they heard about me, but I was the only one that had what they wanted.

[END OF INTERVIEW]