



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert
Claverhouse Graham, 1976 Nov. 19

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant
from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Claverhouse Graham on November 19, 1976. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SIDE 1

PAUL CUMMINGS: Today is November 19, 1976 and this is Paul Cummings talking to Robert Graham at the Graham Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue, New York City. Okay. The gallery was really started by Samuel Graham - right?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. The business was started in New York City sometime in the 1840's but it was not until 1857 that we are able to find in the New York Registry a listing of the family business.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. At 66 Third Avenue?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, I don't know what the address was in 1857.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. That was later?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. That could have been later. That was in the 1880's. It might be the original place but I don't know; I haven't done enough research on it. The only thing else that I can think of is that my great-grandfather Samuel Graham - and then his son was called James Graham - ran the business. He also owned three butcher shops up on Lenox Avenue. He also wrote the catalogues for the most prestigious auction house in New York City at that time which was called Silos (S-I-L-O-S) Gallery. And he wrote very good catalogues. And sold this work. He was sort of semi-retired in running the business. And my father then when he was twenty came in the business. And during my father's early time in the art business he --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now he came in when roughly?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Father came in I would gather in 1900, 1905 - I don't know - around that time, the beginning of the twentieth century. For a short period of time he took in a partner called Marshall Clapp. Marshall Clapp's father-in-law owned an antique shop in New York which was very prominent. And eventually they merged that into my family business. Primarily their business was artifacts and bronzes; not too many paintings. To go back a little bit, I'm sorry I forgot --

PAUL CUMMINGS: The early business was furniture though, wasn't it?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. That's the point I wanted to bring out. In the early time there were no dealers selling paintings in the 1940's and 1950's. Basically they were selling prints or they were selling carpets, as they were called at the time, which were Turkish rugs. They sold bric-a-brac, Meissen, things like that: they sold umbrella stands.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anything and everything.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, that's right. And my grandfather Samuel made more trips to Europe in one year... At that time they had these steam clipper ships and they were very fast. My grandfather made twenty-two trips in one year. He used to go to France and buy these things. He went to Bordeaux, Marseilles and Paris; but primarily to Marseilles. And he'd buy antique furniture and these various things for the gallery. That was what the business was. It was only in my father's time that they got into the painting business.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now who would they sell to - just private homes for decoration?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were no museums really buying or anything like that.

ROBERT GRAHAM: You're quite right. Now when Lord Duveen - Henry Duveen was the first Duveen to come over here. He was on Fifth Avenue. He knew Delft porcelains, he knew European porcelains. He didn't know anything about Chinese porcelains and he knew less about paintings. My grandfather used to help him to buy things and advise him. Henry was a lovely, very nice man. And then his nephew Lord Joseph came over and he was really a

high pressure salesman and he zoomed off, you know. So our relationship with them ended after a short period because Lord Joe was way ahead of us, he was running too fast for my grandfather. So they modestly went up to Union Square, I think it was. And from there to 40th Street and Fifth Avenue, to 53rd Street and Madison Avenue, and up here. They were very much set back by the Depression of 1929-1933. We were saved by Mrs. Horace Dodge who was a friend of many years and a client. One time at the bottom of the Depression she came to my father. He looked very downcast. She said, "What's the matter, Jim?" He said, "Well, I don't know how we're going to survive. We haven't paid the rent and we have no money." She said, "Well, isn't there something you could sell?" He said, "There's nothing really; the only thing is that a couple of wealthy Texans came up and they wanted to buy Remington drawings and I don't have any of those." A few days later a truck backed up to our gallery and six or eight Remington drawings were left with us. My father didn't know what it was for. He thought that maybe they were to be appraised or something like that. She came in the next week. My father said, "Did you leave those drawings for me?" She said, "Yes, I had them sent." He said, "What's the reason?" She said, "I want you to sell them." He said, "Well, really?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Well, what price?" She said, "Set any price you want and take a good commission." And she saved us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. One thing that was intrigued me is the fact that the family has stayed in this business for so long. It's extraordinary. You know, most people's children don't continue on. How come it has happened that way?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, I don't know. In my brother's case he automatically went into the business because it was sort of like second nature; he grew up with it and never thought of doing anything else. I went to college, I graduated from Yale, I majored in fine arts. I knew I would inherit all the business. I wanted to look around, I went downtown, I worked in Wall Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that? When did you go to Yale?

ROBERT GRAHAM: I graduated in 1936. And I went down to Wall Street in 1937-1938. And I worked for a young company which was called Polaroid which developed into being something today; at that time we were doing marketing research and merchandising. Starting to develop other products because the only product they had at that time was the Polaroid glass. Then we went to a frozen food company which was competing with Clarence Birdseye and it cost about five million dollars. They couldn't put it across, not because the products weren't good but it was an absolutely incredible job of educating the retailer and the housewife that fresh frozen foods were different from cold storage frozen things. I would say that General Foods which was our competitor at the time and Birdseye brand - spent fifteen to twenty million dollars educating the housewife of the better qualities of fresh frozen foods. Anyway, I got into the family business after getting back from the Navy after the war. The stock was very rundown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were still when on Madison and 53rd Street?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, right. And the first show I put on - I met a man called Everett Shinn. He was the last of The Eight alive at that time. He was living down at (inaudible) place. He was a great gent and he was busted, too. So I bought a couple of pictures from him and eventually he let me put on a show which was incredibly successful really. Shinn paintings today are worth \$30,000 and \$40,000.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Then the next show I put on was a Peale Family show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was - what - that was 1941 with all those --

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right. You know all this better than I do. I remember I got two great acquisitions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But now up to this time the gallery hadn't handled paintings specifically, had it?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, it had part of that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did the paintings start?

ROBERT GRAHAM: My father handled - strangely enough, we were one of the few galleries that emphasized Italian Primitives. We handled Italian Primitives and American painters. And there's another story which you may find interesting. Blakelock was down in New Jersey at the time and he would come into New York about once a month. My father used to smoke cigars, big Cuban cigars and they came in these fabulous boxes. He used to save the boxes. When Blakelock would come in maybe once every two months or something we'd have four or five boxes and my father would trade the boxes for a painting. We bought some, too, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic.

ROBERT GRAHAM: We had Bruce Crane. We didn't have artists exclusively at that time. I don't think anybody had anybody exclusively. They just went around from one gallery to another to see what they could do, sell what they could. We pushed people like Bruce Crane, Ranger, Blakelock, a lot more that I just can't remember. But we didn't have a stable like they do now. We would buy from whatever they would bring in. That was the painting aspect. We specialized in American silver; we had the preeminent position in that. Francis Garvin was a very rich customer. And a man from Philadelphia by the name of Walter Jefferson who gave his collection to Yale who also had probably one of the greatest collections of American silver were two very substantial clients of my father. Henry Ford came in one day and Henry Ford said to my father, "I heard out in Detroit that you have a private collection in your safe which is one of the best collections of American silver." My father said, "Yes, would you like to see it?" Henry Ford said, "Yes." He took it out and Henry Ford said, "How much do you want for it?" My father said, "Well, I never thought of selling it. I've been collecting it for myself just because it's something I like." Henry Ford said, "You can't do that." My father, you know, was taken aback. Mr. Ford said, "Unless you put a price on it and sell it I'll never come into your gallery again." This is true. And he scared the life out of my father. My father thought about it, he thought it over, and said that in a way Mr. Ford was right. A dealer shouldn't have anything, you know, to whet the appetite of your client and sell him something not as good. So my father sold the whole collection to Henry Ford.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For lots of money.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. What it sold for in those days today would be a thousand times more. I don't really know what the figures were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did he become so interested in silver? Was it just that he was attracted to it?

ROBERT GRAHAM: He was collecting everything at the time. He was collecting American furniture, he was collecting miniatures, he collected the whole range. I guess he just wanted to collect it in one lump so that he wouldn't have to go beating around. That was one interesting incident. I can't think of anything else. There are hundreds of them but they all don't come to my mind now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were fewer collectors in those days, weren't there?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, very much so. And most of the collectors were in the Northeast area. It was very seldom that you'd have anybody come from the West or the South. It was all Philadelphia, New York and Boston.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the collecting of American furniture and American silver and decorative arts was just sort of beginning, wasn't it?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, you're right. Well, I tell you the thing that stimulated American collecting was the exhibition that the Metropolitan Museum had, I think it was called the Washington Centennial - the big catalogue - I don't know whether you've ever seen it. They had the greatest things in American silver, painting and furniture and this was really the thing that started the American collecting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was put together and people saw it on a good level.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right. It was the first time they realized... Oh, there are a lot of stories. Mrs. Dodge said that she'd like to have a Revere bell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of bell?

ROBERT GRAHAM: A Revere bell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, a bell.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, a bell from a church belfry. We heard of one up at Taunton, Massachusetts where they were tearing down a church. We called up Mrs. Dodge and she said yes, she'd like to have it. So my brother took the train and went up there. They wouldn't sell the bell without the church. So he had to buy the church. Then he had to get it down. It probably cost more to get it down... Then he had to get it to Mrs. Dodge. She was happy. That was what you had to do in those days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Much more exciting than now.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. It was very pleasant. And then another thing which is interesting. When I first went into the business we had the last of the New York carriage trade and these people used to come in. Originally they came in their horse-drawn carriages. But then they would come with their chauffeurs and their footmen sitting up in their Rolls Royce or something like that. At eleven o'clock in the morning they'd stop in and buy something and then they'd say, "Could you send your man up. We want to get rid of some old silver," some old something. Constantly we were getting things - things were coming in that you don't see any more. Today I guess they go to

the auctions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think has happened to that kind of client? Have they just disappeared?

ROBERT GRAHAM: They don't exist today. They don't exist. Once in a while... I do a tremendous number of appraisals, all the appraisals in the New York area, all the vast estates. Occasionally you'll come across one of these old families. But the great estates are finished. Taxes have wiped them out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you find the shift in that kind of client has affected the market? I mean now some people seem to come in and buy for a few years and then they disappear rather than buy over and over and over.

ROBERT GRAHAM: I find that the art business is an entirely different business from what it was at the beginning of the century. Up until, say, something like the Depression it was a gentleman's business. Harsh words were hardly said. People did it by shaking hands. I remember we had a gentleman who owned the building that we were renting down on 53rd Street. His name was Mr. Spring. He eventually became head of the company that makes Spring bed sheets or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Springmaid.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Springmaid, right. He was in the carpet business. He'd stop in in the morning and say hello. He'd look at something. We'd have a Henry Price Mather or Blakelock or something in American paintings that we'd show him. He'd ask the price. He'd say, "Well, I've got to go downtown, Jim" - that was my father - "and if I do well in cotton I'll take it. Put it aside for me." He'd go downtown. Later he'd say, "I did very well. I'll take that. I'll take also that other one like it." And he'd buy like that. And there was no money, I mean there were hardly any bills passed. We'd deliver it to his house and the next morning he'd stop and write out a check. And that was the end of the thing. There were no bills, no taxes, no estate taxes or anything at all. It was very pleasant. I'll tell you one very funny story about this Mr. Spring also. My father sold him probably the greatest Blakelock there was at that time. And he was terribly proud of it. He had this house in New York where he'd be up on the second or third floor and he'd walk down the staircase like that. Down on one side he put this Blakelock so that it would be one of the last things at night he'd see he loved it too much. He had it there for about ten years and there was always a lot of sun coming in. Well, Blakelock used bitumen at that time and it wasn't stable and with the heat on it it eventually ate through and so he had a mirror because the glass reflected the black behind; the more and more the Blakelock disappeared, the more the mirror came in. When it was completely gone he said to my father, "Well, Jim, if it weren't for the fact that I could adjust my tie I'd be mad at you for selling me that Blakelock." That was fun.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about somebody like Garvin who really built an astounding collection? Would he be a frequent client? Would he come in to look a lot and buy occasionally?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. He was a very successful lawyer as I recall. He'd come on the run as you might say. "Got anything new?" Or something like that. My father would open up the safe. He'd say, "Yes, we'll put this aside for you." He'd come in maybe once every two weeks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that there are still collectors like that in the decorative arts? Or is it more --

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, we have one client, I wouldn't like to mention his name because he doesn't like publicity. He's of a very wealthy old New York family whose relationship is traditional as it is. I go salmon fishing with him in (inaudible). But he doesn't really want publicity. So --

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you love fishing, don't you?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Fifteen other guys and I have a forty-year lease on a beautiful river up there and I go up there every summer and fish for a couple weeks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Now over the years the business obviously had grown in size. Were the early locations on Madison Avenue downtown and 14th Street considerably smaller?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, they were. As far as I can remember they were always on the ground floor on one level, well, basement and first floor. Yes, we have a much larger stock, very diversified stock, and we're very close to Victor Sparks and we do a lot of things jointly and we keep all the expensive Old Masters over there. You can't have expensive paintings in an open gallery. You get ripped off and I wouldn't go through that. If you don't glue it down it's gone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's been a rather recent development though, hasn't it?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, it has been within the past five years. You get three types; you get the hard type that is

looking for something to steal so that they can get their shot; you get more professional people who are casing the place and they're looking for a particular item where I guess there is a demand for them. And you get the third - people who break windows and they dig holes in the walls here and do everything but tunnel underneath.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible. You moved to this building in - what - 1955 or thereabouts?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about from the other building - 53rd and Madison?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, we felt that area was changing down there; it was becoming very commercial. Which was true. And we wanted to move up here. The only people up here at that time was Duveen. Duveen is around the corner. Parson's School of Design was moving from here - they had another location. We bought the property. It happened to be a good buy at the time because the school had closed up. There were three buildings for the school here. We got a good buy in those days. We've never regretted it. It was considered way uptown in those days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was nothing. It was a big jump.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the art market in terms of the gallery certainly followed along.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. You don't have the traffic problems you have down on 57th Street or 53rd. And when we were at 53rd Street and Madison Avenue the people were curiosity seekers. They didn't buy anything at all. And you'd spent all your time trying to educate them, they'd ask you a lot of simple questions; they were nice people but they were wasting your time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Too much traffic.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. You had to sell to people who wanted to buy a post card or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now your children have come into the business - right?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Two sons are in the business. My daughter isn't, she's doing social work here. And there is Mr. Rosenauer. His family is one of the oldest families in Germany and his uncle did a great deal of business with my father and my grandfather. They were an old firm in Munich; a very famous old house. I can tell you stories that --

INTERRUPTION

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not to jump around too much, during the Depression years I guess the whole business tapered off in terms of everything?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But one gathers from other dealers that they did continue to sell small decorative art things rather than major works; and prints of a certain kind and things like that. Was that pretty much the same here?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Big things weren't sold. We were fortunate in having Mrs. Dodge. During the Depression we sold her that fantastic Houdon Head of Franklin which sold recently for \$300,000 and some odd dollars which I was under the bidder on, for the State Department. We sold that to her for \$5,000. She was the only buyer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: \$5,000 was a lot of money in those days.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right. I mean I don't think you could have gotten anybody to give you \$2,000 for it at that time. We sold a few things like that, a few important pieces to a few clients. But what they tell you is true. The day to day business was a trade business; you consigned business. You'd buy something for fifty dollars and if somebody offered you seventy-five or eighty-five dollars for it, it was a good day's work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But now after the Depression and after the war it seems that a million dealers sprang up all over the country. And there seems to be an incredible amount of dealing.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Today - not immediately after World War II.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, at the beginning of the fifties.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Well, yes, that's where they start. You're right about that. And there are a tremendous

number now. I can't possibly estimate the number.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has that affected your business? I mean do you deal with a lot of dealers, say, in Chicago or Cleveland or Dallas?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, we do have associated galleries that we buy together, sometimes we consign things, sometimes we sell directly. Yes, we do business with Vose [Galleries], we have been doing business with Vose for a hundred years. They're very tight and very tough. Don't quote that "tight and tough."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, everybody knows that. One thing that has interested me in that starting in the fifties you began to show - well, you did an Arthur B. Davies exhibition, a Jacob Epstein Retrospect, Bluemner, Dickinson, all of that. It's rather interesting in terms of that kind of attitude toward American art as opposed to all the abstraction that was going on. Did that not interest you in those days?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. I was in the abstract field very early. This is an exhibition of Three Dutch Artists which were the preeminent -

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, we had abstract art. Elaine de Kooning --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you did that architectural exhibition of her columns --

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Norman Bloom and Elaine.

ROBERT GRAHAM: And Al Jackson is quite a preeminent abstract artist. He didn't start with us, but he was with us at one time I'm just trying to think of some of the ones that are in the abstract area.

(A female voice) Martin Canin.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, Martin Canin is a contemporary. No, I'm thinking of years back. Nakian is a recent one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that your clients overlap? I mean do people who buy things on the ground floor - the bronzes and decorative arts - are they interested in some more modern pictures?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Sometimes they do, yes. Sometimes they buy from contemporary back. But generally the people who buy modern stay with modern.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the nineteenth century and early twentieth like that.

ROBERT GRAHAM: They collect in that area, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had Thomas Hart Benton here for a number of years?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was it showing Benton in the fifties and sixties when everybody was doing something else?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, like Edwin Dickinson, it took a long time to get Benton re-established. It took time to get Shinn re-established. Benton had gotten out of New York. He broke his relationships with it because he is a very arch-conservative, a great American, and the Communists were bugging him and irritating him and so he packed up his stuff and went back to Kansas where he felt more comfortable. He didn't like the New York scene. He was ripped off by a gallery that held his prints for him. And he was furious. It was only because I met him at Martha's Vineyard in the course of the years and talked to him that he was willing to come back to the scene. And we had, I think, one or two incredibly successful shows with very good acceptance and very good sales. And today I'm handling the estate and trying to have a large memorial show which will open at the Met. And I think when the public sees this great work of Tom Benton - a lot of which has never been seen - some of his early mural work is really good - Tom will have a very big place in American painting. Tom, like a lot of artists, did very mediocre things. He's not an even artist. We had John Steuart Curry and Curry was experimenting at the time. Tom was experimenting constantly trying to use the baroque forms in a modern way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a much more interesting artist than Curry though, I think.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Oh yes, he went way beyond Curry intellectually. And successfully.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also in the mid-fifties Albert Duveen got involved with the gallery?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Well, I met Albert after the war and he said he wanted to open a modern gallery. Oh, and I guess I had just bought this building. I said to him, "Well, you know I have a building and you can come in." I was thinking of having him as a tenant. But he didn't have any money. So we made an arrangement that he came in and we had a partnership on this floor, right on this floor and he ran the gallery and I really worked between the three floors as I do now. It was a very good relationship. Albert had a good knowledge of the contemporary scene. We sold some great paintings. I'll never forget the time that - it was after the war - one of the great Japanese families came and had heard of Albert Duveen. They approached him, they said: we want to send our son to Columbia but we have no dollars, we'd like to sell some of our paintings. So they sent up the paintings. One was a Kandinsky, one of the great 1914 ones - it's down in - I can't remember the name of the.... They just bought it. The price on it was \$5,000. We were happy to sell it. Today Lord knows what it's worth. And then we got onto some things in Japan. It was very interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that you have people who call you up and say, "I bought this twenty years ago and now I want to sell it?"

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, we do. We get a lot of recollect things from people, people call me up - I went down just this morning - I also have an appraisal company - a lady called me, they had a Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Stanton Macdonald-Wright started that movement, the Synchronist movement in this country. It really comes out of Delaunay in Paris. He was there at that time. He introduced those forms and those colors in the Synchronist show. The early ones from that time are very, very valuable but he also was an artist like (inaudible - sounds like Tilla Rosso). After he came back from Japan he wanted to show. He was painting these Synchronist paintings very much in the manner but not as good: you know, the spontaneity wasn't in it. I was a little bit distressed but we put the show on anyway and they sold very well. So this morning I got a call to go down and appraise - they wanted a \$40,000, \$50,000 appraisal on a Stanton Macdonald-Wright. I knew that unless it was a really good one and of the right period in the 1920's... Well, I went down and sure enough it was a beautiful Synchronist painting. And the insurance valuation is \$50,000. People, you know, sometimes they call and they want to sell because they want to have an appraisal on the current value.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that the art business has changed enormously in the last twenty years, say, in terms of the money that comes into it, and the kind of buyer?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. It's becoming high pressure, it's more subject to promotion, public relations than scholarship and so the hard sell is successful. The print people have these editions they put out and they tell people... A client of mine, a classmate of mine, a very wealthy guy sent his financial adviser up and his question to me was did I think it was worthwhile to invest in the Pop artists' contemporary prints that are coming out? I said, well, why does this classmate of mine, whose name I withhold, want to do this? Well, somebody had told him that if he bought \$100,000 worth of these new prints - Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and things like that - that at the end of three years' time he could give them away to institutions and he could get \$300,000 right off. And I hit the ceiling. I said if he does that I think that is corrupt. And I said I would.... I have a position in this thing that I would absolutely try and stop that. That's what they did, you know, originally in certain galleries. That's what our panel was formed for, to prevent these things. But getting back to your original point, it's a highly competitive business. The morality, the morals are hardly what they used to be. But any time you get into big money - we're talking sales now of \$50,000, \$100,000, \$500,000, \$600,000 - the sharp dealing goes on. And it's not as much fun as it used to be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Why? You mean because business is bigger? Things are more valuable?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well - I'll tell you a story and I'll use the name on it - it's a typical case - one of my contemporary dealer friends. I got a call to do an appraisal on a Remington up in the country. And I went up. It was The Wounded Bunkie which is one of the very rare multiple casts. The man asked me how much it was worth. I told him what the market was; I said one sold at this price, one sold at another. He said, "Would you be interested in the sale of it?" I said, "Yes. I would take it on a commission basis." The man was a naval officer, he's a partner in an investment bank. His grandfather who bought this in about 1907 was the head of Anaconda Copper. A very well-established family. I brought it down. Another gallery sold it to a client. The gallery that sold it was Hirshl and Adler. The man invited Louie Wunderlicht(sp?) out to look at the Bronze. He told him, he said, "Lets say, I don't like the bronze. Can I have it sent to the gallery?" He sent it to the gallery. Then he went up to the Met to make a comparison. He said, "It differs in three ways." And what he was telling - and he got the client very upset - leading them to believe that it was not a genuine cast, that it was a recast. So with Hirshl and Adler and ourselves we got a Wounded Bunkie from the Metropolitan and one from Yale and ours. And we had a group of people there. One of them was the Director of the museum in Detroit, another was Peter -----from the Cody Museum, the head of the department up at the Metropolitan, and a foundry man. The conclusion was that there were variations in the three of them, there were slight differences; and if there weren't variations one would be suspect because it would then have been recast from another - from a bronze, because the good ones

Remington himself did some of the finishing work on them and there were variations. We've had early bronzes with his fingerprints on it where he had worked with the wax and things like that. But to make a long story short, this was just purely a knifing, to throw out... And this is what the business is more and more especially in the big money artists. As I say, in these days there isn't a sense of ethics among dealers, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Remington, I think, is a classic example of somebody who has always had a certain kind of market. It seems for years you could always sell Remingtons.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And recently the prices have just gone like a skyrocket.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that? Is it because people are interested in the Western image? Or American?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Who knows - the Remington market was a very small market primarily in the East.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it seems to have been very steady for years.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. But it was only when Amon Carter, who is a newspaper man down in Texas, came into the market, and three or four other guys supported that market and from then on it increased the interest in the West. And now the buyers are all the way from the Northwest down to that area. And it's a insatiable market there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They have huge houses and it takes a lot to fill them up.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right. And they have the money. And they want it. They're the old Pittsburgh millionaires of today. They buy what they like. And I don't blame them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think motivates the collector who goes beyond buying a few things to decorate his house and just buys and buys and buys - somebody like, well, say, Joseph Hirshhorn, as a collector?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Well, Joe is a brilliant chap, I've known Joe for years. I did his appraisals for the estate. For the things he gave the museum down there. Joe really loves it, he really loves paintings, and he loves the artists. It's... I don't know how to describe it, but it's a very strong emotional force in people like that. Which is good. Those kind of collectors are good collectors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They support lots of other collectors, don't they?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, they do. That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They buy and then other people make up their minds to buy.

ROBERT GRAHAM: That's right. Roy Neuberger is another insatiable collector. Roy has done a lot of good things for artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find it very different handling - well, you know, you represent artists who are a very different thing than in handling estates, or dealing in pictures.

INTERRUPTION

ROBERT GRAHAM: I'm sorry -

PAUL CUMMINGS: Representing a living artist is a very different dealing situation, very different than dealing in pictures.

ROBERT GRAHAM: In a way, yes. Well, in answer to the modern aspect, I got into it through Albert Duveen and I continued it primarily because I find it a very exciting area and working with artists is stimulating. It has a lot of problems; financially it doesn't warrant itself. Many years we ran in the red on our contemporary gallery, but we support it by the old masters or the classical painting. With Albert I did a lot of experimental work, working in artists who were during that period. And I don't regret it. I'm becoming more conservative. You know, I mean Dickinson and Benton are sort of old guys. But that is also my age. I'm not moved over so much by it, bowled over by it. Experimentation. But I think somebody should support it and expose it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it becomes the next generation.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, it's a job for the young dealer who is in his thirties.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the Art Dealers Association? Were you part of that early on? Or --

ROBERT GRAHAM: No, we didn't join the Art Dealers Association and the primary reason was that I have developed a very large part of our business; appraisal business. The Art Dealers Association, I think, originally did not want to have their members doing appraisal work. So I didn't join in that way. Later they defined it, that it is only primarily a question of gifts. Which I do very, very little of. I refer most of it - unless it is something personal - they say that's alright. I have a working agreement with them and he will come up and touch bases. But I do very little of it. And I think that the Art Dealers Association from the panel point of view is a very good thing because there's just no question about it that there were certain dealers that would come up say, "Do you have anything that I could buy for, say, \$5,000, an old master?" They'd buy it and sell it to a man for \$10,000 and say, "I'll give you a re-appraisal two years from now for \$40,000." And this went on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know - a lot.

ROBERT GRAHAM: (The Association) has curbed it a great deal. I think it --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it strengthens the market, I think.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. And I think it's the best thing in the world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How has the auction business affected you, because that certainly has boomed all over the country in the last decade or so.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, you're right, the auction business has always been with us. I must say that E. D. Wilson has done an incredibly good job and through their application of publicity and public relation they attract a lot more of the art which is in private hands than they used to. It is a bit of a pinch on some of the dealers. But in a way I don't mind it because you may find discoveries at these small auctions and bid, and if I buy something at Parke-Bernet it's something which is a little bit off the popular trend or something like that. I try to anticipate by five or ten years. So it's a convenience for me to get the material brought and put on exhibition a block away rather than driving three hundred miles.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you ascertain where you think the market is going to go? I mean can you tell by what's being sold and the prices?

ROBERT GRAHAM: You can tell, you can anticipate what's going on. There's no problem about it. Sometimes you get your first cue from the artists yourself. I've felt that this movement of book illustrators and comic strip people, cartoonists, were an area that was definitely under-exposed as a fine art. I'll take you down and show you the John Held Junior show that we have on. And you'll be amazed at this man. We've developed that field and it's a very good field. The prices are very high. Sometimes some people can sell for \$5,000 or \$6,000 for a single page. It's the original I'm talking about. Before we got into it you could buy anything for \$500 from small collectors. The museums are taking it up. I'm having an exhibition of - I hate to use the word because it's really only for communication - the area of Mysticism, Symbolism and the Occult - not so much the Occult. And this area is moving very, very fast. Arthur B. Davies, we had that estate and, you know, people weren't very much interested in it. But he probably went further in Symbolism than any artist; that was the real drive he was very concerned with. Today the Whitney Museum found out they never had an Arthur B. Davies and they realized that Arthur B. Davies is a very important man. We had just sold the one that was in the memorial exhibition that the Met had at the end; at his death. It was illustrated in the catalogue. We had just sold it to a private collector. I've had two museum directors in the past two weeks ask me for an Arthur B. Davies. We anticipated him by twenty years. We were way ahead of our time. But you can tell which way the wind is blowing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do you find, though, that you have a different type of collector who would, say, come in and buy an Arthur B. Davies or Edwin Dickinson as opposed to somebody earlier?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well - I don't know - there's hardly a question on that. There are similarities in collecting back at the beginning of the century and now. There wasn't as much availability, there wasn't as wide a choice as there is today.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But say if an artist has a museum retrospective and they do a good catalogue and it travels to three or four institutions, does that affect his market appreciably?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. In most cases the answer would be yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the newspapers? If you do a show and the Times gives you a review with a photograph does that make a difference?

ROBERT GRAHAM: Sure. That's tremendous. Canaday has more influence than anything else. Sometimes

Canada has come in and given us a review and, God, you have to wait outside to get in. They didn't buy too much but they came to see the show. Which is good. We like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, sometimes they'll come back next year or later.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It takes a little bit of time. I think one other thing in Archives terms; do you have records of the gallery that go back to the middle of the nineteenth century?

ROBERT GRAHAM: No. Well, I have a few things, you know, statements and things that were my grandfathers, he brought me. Old bills. No, the real records were thrown out one of the times we moved, I mean the records would be from here to 60th Street if we had kept them all. I don't know - we had a flood in the cellar, I went down there, I hadn't been down there in 5 years, and I went down and I looked at some of the things and they were so dusty and so old that I just didn't want to turn them over. They've been there for thirty years and they're going to be there for another thirty years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know that some of the galleries that are old - but not as old as this one which is now about 120 or so years - constantly kind of delve back to see what they sold twenty, thirty, forty years ago.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Well, we don't. I don't even want to see them. I'm allergic to dust. [Looking at things] French painting. This is 1959.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, this is the Three Centuries.

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. Henry we had a show on --

PAUL CUMMINGS: So really there is a vast range of things that --

ROBERT GRAHAM: Yes. This was a very interesting man who has been forgotten.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Bluemner. Oh, yes.

ROBERT GRAHAM: He was with the Stieglitz Group, you know. He had tremendous influence on Burchfield, more than anybody else. Many of his forms and shapes are the same as Bluemners.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A couple of other things which would be: what kind of advice would you give to someone who wants to go into the art business now?

ROBERT GRAHAM: [Laughter all around] That question I don't answer.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *December 11, 2002*