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Oral history interview with W. G. Constable, 1972 July -1973 June

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with W.G. Constable from July 1972 - June 1973. The interview took place in [Place], and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. 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

ROBERT: BROWN: Just say anything so I can get your voice.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, thank God we didn't have a thunderstorm last night, because we've had far too many recently.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: —in Derby, England. Derby is a fairly large town, about 150,000, so that there were plenty of facilities, plenty of things to see and, on the whole, for an English provincial town, a good deal in the way of music and so on. All this, and a certain amount of actual—we called them "picture shows," and so on. Works of art were fairly scarce. There was not a bad museum, but very rarely anything—but, on the other hand, all my mother's relatives lived in London. And so I was often there as a boy, a good deal. And so I did see a good many theatrical productions and was taken many times to places like the National Gallery. So I got a pretty fair acquaintance with works of art. As a comparatively small boy, I went to school—and this is a puzzling thing for Americans—at a small public school. [00:02:04] But it is not public in the American sense at all. It was a private school. And there I was lucky because it had an excellent staff and one that carried one quite outside perfectly ordinary things. It embraced a first class classical scholar and a very good mathematician and, among other things, an English country gentleman who had big estates in Leicestershire. He actually taught us Shakespeare. This is all rambling—but it was a most important thing in my life because he always ran Shakespeare by allotting parts in the play to members of the class. And you'd spend the hour taking that part; you'd learn it, or bring it back again by reading it. So you got very familiar with Shakespeare as a working instrument, not as something you studied as English literature, but as something that you worked with or worked with you. As a player I well remember I was cast in the part of Sir Toby Belcher, on my vacation, and things of that kind. Now those are the things which at school were of some importance. Altogether I think I was lucky. One of the mathematical masters coached me and I got, it all seemed rather indecent, an equivalent scholarship in mathematics at Cambridge. [00:04:05] So, off I went to Cambridge and then that perhaps was the most important period in my life because I was there for three years, and then spent another two years there and, one way and another, I have always been in touch with Cambridge because after I had taken my degree I got a fellowship. In fact I still am a Fellow at my college. One way and another I did meet a great many people who covered all kinds of things. Let's see. One man I knew fairly well was Rupert Brooke. I only mention him because he is well-known outside Cambridge. But a great many other men who ultimately attained considerable eminence. So you got a very wide acquaintance with a great many things. There my interest in the arts was intensified because of a whole group of people there who were interested in them and who could talk about them, were glad to talk about them.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of them?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, Brooke was one of them, after all, he was a poet. As for the others, I can hardly, scarcely remember. I could give you names but they have no particular meaning. One might have some meaning: D. W. Baud who became a Berlin correspondent for the Manchester Guardian. [00:06:04] That was before the war—Oakes, but there again that doesn't mean anything to anyone. P. N. F. Young, Let's see. He became a parson. Oh, he became a parson when he was at Cambridge.

ROBERT BROWN: What were your chief interests while at university?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I was mainly an economist. That's what I took my degree in an historian and economist with —but you were very much encouraged. You could always find people to talk about other things. So the arts always took an important part in my life, one way and another. Then the next thing to note is that I decided to go to the Bar and I moved to London and fixed myself up with another man in good lodgings in Hampstead, and very good lodgings they were. I hope everybody was as lucky as I was, comfortable and unpretentious. Of course Hampstead is a very agreeable part of London. For anything but what it's worth, I used to walk down. I

went into chambers. That means I paid a member, Blake, in the bar, who got a handsome fee to be allowed to work in his chambers. He later became a judge. A very able man and his chambers were in Lincoln's Inn. I used to walk down to them every morning, four miles, and walk back every evening. [00:08:07] So I used to do eight miles a day, walking, which was very good exercise. But, in chambers there again I met—they were all young men who were going to the Bar, and there I really began a legal career. I won't go into it. You don't get at that stage in your existence any paid work, but I did have to go into court on occasion to do something, unpaid work, that needed to be done in cases that come into chambers. Sometimes you'd find that the head of the chambers was in the house of lords and somebody else in the Court of Appeals and there was nobody else who could handle the case and got experience that way. Altogether, things were going very well until the war broke out.

ROBERT BROWN: You had mentioned in your article in Apollo magazine meeting some people in the art world even at this time in London—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: And seeing collections, and I think you mentioned something of very low prices for certain French work?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That is perfectly true. I used to go to the big auction rooms at Christie's and Sotheby's and, to a certain extent, to some of the bigger dealers. I made myself reasonably familiar, of course, I was not buying anything at the time but this was a matter of great interest to me and I got to know a certain number of people. Not well, but people like Roger Fry, for example, who was a great figure in the art world in London at that time, and similar people. [00:10:14]

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe Roger Fry as you knew him?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes, I knew him well, quite well.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe him?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Just how can I describe him?

ROBERT BROWN: As you knew him then, when you first knew him.

W.G. CONSTABLE: He was tall, dark, going grey, with curly hair, very intelligent face, hardly handsome but at the same time so intelligent and full of energy and interest in life. In fact, one of his—We were a whole range of people who were his friends in that circle, one of whom described him and said, "You know, Roger is so full of energy he makes you ill." And that was a rather good description of him. Everything with him was a matter of intensity and a very good man to know in that way. So that was my life, as a young man at the Bar. Then, of course, the war came and, like a lot of other people, I enlisted. And I am one of the few surviving people, I believe, of whom it was said, "I took the shilling." I enlisted in the famous regiment called "The Inns of Court Officer's Training Corps." It was best known as "The Devil's Own." It was restricted to lawyers. Hence the title "The Devil's Own." [00:12:00] [They laugh.] And as we went in to enlist—it was in Temple Gardens—a great, well-known cricketeer was helping. He had a big bag of shillings. He'd give you a shilling and I took the shilling and was straightaway enrolled in "The Inns of Court." Then I went to the camp with them. Well, the experiences in camp were the experiences, I think, of most people. When it was raining really hard, we were under canvas, but ultimately, they managed to get us into billets in a town called Buckminster. In due course, as it were, you were thought to be reasonably qualified. They sent you to see a commanding officer. You might get a commission. I went with three or four others. As it happened, my home regiment, "The Sherwood Foresters," properly speaking, had covered East Derbyshire and West Nottinghamshire. So, off I went with those people to France, in due course. Again, I met a few people—"The Girl I Left Behind Me" was actually played on a wharf. I think they have abandoned that. In the old days, when British troops went abroad they always played that tune. And they still kept it on. [00:14:00] There, of course, you met a whole new range of people who got themselves into helping with the army. The Master of Trinity, having put on a suit over a uniform, was looking after the distribution of coffee, at one point, in a French railway station, and what not. Imagine, he was still Master of Trinity and had to be told that the military were now in charge. Even though he was a great man as Master of Trinity, he said that he would go when asked in these circumstances. You see, it converted profoundly non-militaristic, civilian population to war conditions. All this was very early. Admirable people, you see, couldn't altogether see when the military took over these things, and the military weren't always very tactful or handy at it. This was England converting itself to a war basis.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you feel about it? Very patriotic?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Not very patriotic, but a great necessity. Because, you see, this was in the First World War. As you know, it was based upon the invasion of Belgium. This roused a great deal of strong feeling that Germany should, because of her size and situation, take upon herself to bully and annex a small country, which Great

Britain had placed herself, among other people, to safeguard. [00:16:03] But, after a time, those feelings got submerged by the immediate necessity of the situation where you had to learn to live in fairly disagreeable, very disagreeable circumstances. It wasn't very long before we were in the trenches. That was a very disagreeable mode of life because, in the trenches themselves, were a good many human corpses that we buried and we were very much plagued with rats. But it's an utterly personal thing that—rats—I became a very good mark. In fact my division, I suppose, was very sharp with a revolver. It was practice shooting rats in the trenches. The best way of getting rid of them. Altogether, though, the trenches were a very disagreeable mode of life. But still, they kept you reasonably safe and, if you worked hard enough, they could be kept reasonable dry. Food always came up from the base. So, under certain circumstances, it might have been worse. It was because though, in a sense, to begin with, an amateur's war. It became after that highly professional. One learned a great many tips on how to wage war and we learned not a little from the Germans. [00:18:00] At one period, the Prussian Guard were opposite my regiment. They were very good soldiers. But no better than my men, who were mostly ex-miners. In fact, one thing I ought to say, I learned a great deal about human nature from being in the Army because at night and particularly the small hours of the morning you could talk, and did talk, to these people. I learned a great deal about the way the Darbyshire and Nottinghamshire miners ran their lives. They were a very remarkable people. I could talk to them, knowing the districts from which they came. They did make very good soldiers. The only thing in contrast, the German guard would leap into out trench. My men would wait and look at me with the utmost amazement and would go down quite slowly. But when they got in they were just as effective. They disposed of the Germans. And, on the whole, things went—reasonably. That was a decent phase of warfare because was a place called Tes-du-bert where the row of islands between the British trenches and the German trenches and the game was to recapture a particular island and the Germans were quite civil about it. If they captured some of your people, or some of my people, they treated them perfectly well. The same way we treated them. If we captured them on an island. But that didn't last long. There was very little shelling. This was all World War One. [00:20:15]

ROBERT BROWN: Was this 1914?

W.G. CONSTABLE: 1914. Yes. 1915. Fifteen, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: No gas at this time either?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Gas hadn't come yet. I was in on the first release of gas. That was bad. One of these very early releases of the other stuff they used to send over.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it phosgene?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. We never ran into that.

ROBERT BROWN: Mustard?

W.G. CONSTABLE: The gas they were using then, certainly as I experienced it, was the—other. Then they had the stuff that they used that if you got it into your eyes you couldn't see because your eyes are filled with tears and that kind of thing. That was more of a nuisance than anything particularly serious. So we conducted a war.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the morale of your men go down when they sent the gas across?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. On the whole they took it quite philosophically. So it was that I got to know a lot of the people in my brigade and division. On the whole, they took it extremely well. There were comic, semi-comic episodes. You know, the Germans used to like singing. [00:22:01] In one place called "Plaque Strat Wood" they used to sing things like "Deutschland Uber Alles" and whatnot. I personally heard a cockney in my battalion say, "Thank you very much. Now you seem awake." That kind of thing happened. A great episode I missed. A friend of mine who commanded a Welsh battalion, he had his Welshmen in the front lines. Of course the Welsh are magnificent singers and he said on one occasion they got very intolerant of German singing and the Welsh said, "And now boy, give them 'The Men of Harlech.'" They did and they sang all the parts, even though they were all men. Countertenors took the air. Still this is a side of warfare which is not much written about, but it relieved a good deal of tension.

ROBERT BROWN: You must have wondered what the purpose was after you had been in the trenches for a couple of years.

W.G. CONSTABLE: I think it was borne in. Three or four days after some episode of this kind, there would be heavy shelling. All this time both sides were sending every kind of ironmongery into the other person's trenches. A very unpleasant business it was. That was the purpose of trenches. Then you had dugouts to which you would go when the shelling was intensive. And of course it was bad luck if a shell came down in the dugout. [00:24:02] That was that. But mostly they didn't. It's a kind of mode of life. It's a curious way to say it. It was horrible and you hated it at the time, but it went on. You nearly always survived to see another day. Though, of course, there

was an enormous amount of death and destruction. There again you've got to accept that as something. You've got to be. But then, this has nothing to do with the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: No. Except it certainly had something to do with your life. Several years.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. This went on for some time until I got buried, or blown up and buried, until my soldier servant dug me out. He was, incidentally, a Nottingham lace worker in ordinary life and he dug me out. I ultimately went into hospital where I spent a good many, sum of years. It was a big hotel named Harrogate, which is a great, what would you call it, not a resort—It doesn't matter. There they looked after me very well. Of course, by this time I had got fairly high rank, so that I had a room to myself most of the time.

ROBERT BROWN: How long were you there? [00:26:00]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh heavens. That's what always forget. I suppose three years or so—

ROBERT BROWN: Two or three years.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes, certainly not more. It was tiresome, boring.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you read or anything at that time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I read. Oh, yes, and reading was a great thing. They got a lot of books for me, and then you could occasionally play games of sorts with another patient. And often they had concerts in which patients would be led down in blankets and that sort of thing. They'd lie on anything. People who could sing would sing and whatnot. They did very well by you.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel and did your fellow soldiers feel you were brave? You seem to talk as though this became almost inevitable, your conduct in accepting the length of time in the trenches—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And hospitalization. Did you become very stoical about these things?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. People just took it. It was just part of life. Just as they took the trenches. Now and then I—I remember one very distinguished American lawyer had to have a hot—

ROBERT BROWN: A heating pad, or a hot water bottle?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not a hot water bottle. What are the beastly things you plunk on a person's chest?

ROBERT BROWN: A poultice?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Poultice. Yes. He wept. He cried out he found it so painful. There were occasional amusements such as that. Everybody knew it didn't really hurt him. His fuss was quite silly on his part, and so there were all the variations you get in a hospital, in other words. But you could almost, as it were, lie still, and think what you are going to do. [00:28:22]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do that a lot then?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No, I didn't. I mostly read. Then I finally asked the medical board, because the doctor said there was no hope. I applied for occupation in various ways in military offices and that kind of thing. But they wouldn't take me. The doctors—

ROBERT BROWN: This was still during the war?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. The war was going on. Finally I applied to the military board. The doctors waited upon me. How many of them I forget. Four. Six. Eight. They examined you and reported and finally I was discharged. Also, one of the great things there was in hospital they had a very good medical, not medical, musical orchestra, the Harrogate Symphony. I knew somebody who knew the conductor and two or three other men. We got freedom to go in, if we could go in, to hear their rehearsals or performances. So, one way and another, you can, in a good many years, hear performances of first rate things by a first rate orchestra, though it was very much depleted. Everything was depleted. Everything was done "on one leg." One just has to remember that. But, it was a nice thing that it was done at all. [00:30:11]

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: —they thought it was a good thing to be drilled and to have some knowledge of military

things. They got us a sergeant major from the guards to come and drill them. An episode, I think. There was a very grand old Royal Academician, a sculptor, and he had hopes of being president. There he was standing with the others in line and the sergeant, the guard sergeant, of course, treated them just as he'd treat any people. He looked at this man and he said, he said to him, "What would your name be?" and Frampton said, "Frampton." "Well, Frampington," he said, "For god's sake, hold up your head. Straighten your back, straighten your legs and try to look something like a man." Of course, that is good [they laugh] and he was a sergeant major.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in the beginning, the eve of war?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh no. This was halfway through. These people, you see, there were all kinds of jobs, assistant military. These people could be put on guarding things. So it all relieved the regular army. It didn't want to use comparatively young men, like myself, on that kind of work and so a lot of these fellows, and very well they'd do it. They'd perhaps put in two or three hours every day, and some kind of drill was very useful to them, really. That was what they were after. [00:32:14]

ROBERT BROWN: Of your Sherwood Foresters group, were there many left after the war? Of your group from Nottingham and Derbyshire?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Very few. When I went through my college at Cambridge, St. John's, the Leicester people who had survived were extraordinarily few. We were just the age when everybody went and the earlier you went the more quickly you were killed. That was why, as Olivia said, I had scarcely a friend from my own period at college surviving. One way and another a most tremendous number of the early things like the Artists Rifles, apart from the Inns of Court took these men at once, or the men volunteered at once, and they went early. I don't think the generals then were particularly wise in their handling of some of the matters of men. Of course, towards the end, the moving barrage, when you went over with a curtain of shellfire moving ahead of you. Well, when you arrived in the German trenches, the Germans were pretty well shattered because they'd had all this stuff on them. But that was a much later development and applied much later, the training in the artillery and so on. In the early days we just put over and men were shot down. [00:34:21]

ROBERT BROWN: You were a lieutenant, in the beginning?

W.G. CONSTABLE: At the beginning, yes. I was.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your task to lead the men out of the trench towards the Germans?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I did my share of that. In the case of an attack, I'd have to take my platoon. Actually, I commanded a company. Very early I was promoted to Captain. The only thing was you got caught up on a trench, blew a whistle and took them over. Have you ever seen that film called "Oh, What a Lovely War?" You saw them doing that. That was what we did do.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, as we see in that play and film, did you have any feeling about people who were exploiting the war? In the play, they show the financiers and the like. You wouldn't have had an awareness of any of this?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I didn't have any. There were a certain number of one's contemporaries who had not volunteered. People had fairly strong feelings about them. But that wasn't the same thing at all.

ROBERT BROWN: But from beginning to end you had a feeling that this was duty?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. And a very unpleasant duty. But something that everybody had to do. The amount of cursing and swearing that went on was just something terrific. Well, naturally. [00:36:11]

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps it's necessary.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, it's just a means of letting off steam. But by and large it was a job and the job had to be done.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were discharged, what was your fist thought? To Go back to the law?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you did then?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I went to see the then Lord Chancellor who you know in England is, he's head of the law.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was that then?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Stanley—it will come when I am not thinking. I asked him and he said, "No. It's no good." He said, "You know, better than I do, what the job of a junior at the Bar is." You see, when I was actually in Chambers before the war, I very rarely got to bed before three in the morning. And you had to get down to Chambers between 9:00 and 10:00. And you keep on doing that. It's very rough. You have to be young, physically fit and in good health. So, His Lordship, perfectly rightly, said, "You could never do it." I knew I couldn't. So then he said, "If there is anything else you think you can do, better turn to that." As I still had this great interest in the arts, you see, I then turned to people like Roger Fry and hence, the Wallace Collection. My foot was in. [00:38:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, then went to the—at that point, is that when you went to the Slade School in London, the Slade School of Art?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Roger Fry recommend that you go there?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Let me get the order. When I decided to go into the arts, I went to the Slade. I forget who recommended that. Some artist. Some artist whom I met down at St. Ives where, by this time, I had gone to recoup my health.

ROBERT BROWN: In Cornwall?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. then I went to the Slade. Then, when I was more or less through with the Slade, I made much more definite attempts to get a job.

ROBERT BROWN: Could I ask a bit about your time at the Slade? I'd like to ask what was the school like, the Slade School?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, very good, indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: What was its structure? Was it fairly strict and formal? What kind of school?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Very informal, but with great, as it were, pressure upon you. But, not a direct pressure, an indirect pressure which was the most exciting of all. It was a great drawing school, drawing rather than painting, though you painted a good deal. The head of it was Henry Tonks and various other people. [Phillip - Ed.] Wilson Steer used to come and do the painting. And Russell, who was a Royal Academician, a great fixture, and one way and another they—but you were much more—you were left very free. You could either mess things up in your own way or ask, as it were, for instruction or help. [00:40:10]

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a curriculum, a certain curriculum?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. You went in and you tried to draw. You drew and you were told by different people, "That isn't a drawing." You'd try again next day and make a drawing and that way you did learn. And practically every draftsman of my generation all came from the Slade.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Did you have an early success at the School?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, I was one of the better people, in that when Tonks went there was a great discussion among the instructors as to who should be the new head. You know, I was much suggested. You didn't know that? But I couldn't have done it. I wasn't good enough.

ROBERT BROWN: I would like to hear about some of the people: Henry Tonks, George Moore, Wilson Steer.

W.G. CONSTABLE: George Moore was just a friend of Tonks and Tonks used to ask a few students, a few of the younger men, to dine with him once a week, always on Friday. Steer and Moore would be there. Little things one remembers. He warned me. He said, "Never mention Thomas Hardy in George Moore's presence." [00:42:00] George Moore hated Hardy's work. And I did once, not realizing what I was doing, and Moore went up like a burning hayrick at the mere mention of Hardy's name. Moore, of course, was a very interesting man, as you could imagine. But he was a very pretentious person. He would now and then begin explaining to this little group all about French technique of painting. And all the time he was keeping his eye on Steer because Steer had actually worked in Paris for years. And suddenly Steer would turn on him and say, "Moore, you know that's all balls." And Moore would then go down like a collapsed balloon. But all those episodes, unless you got to know them—and you did learn an enormous amount indirectly. This was quite apart from the teaching in the school. In the school the great thing was to ask.

ROBERT BROWN: You had to be forward? You had to be a rather bold student?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Or it didn't matter. If it was an intelligent question, so much the better. That was the secret of the Slade, that people were encouraged to ask. It's quite on the side, the history of art. They didn't do anything in that way at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you doing something in it at this time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: On my own entirely.

ROBERT BROWN: Travel? [00:44:00]

W.G. CONSTABLE: What little I could. It was a question of money. But I had got a very good grant from Cambridge and, one way and another, I made a little by painting, what not. So I was able, then, you see, feeling I might take a job if it came along. I think, at first, I went into the sculpture school at Slade. And I remember the head of the sculpture school. He wrote to MacColl [Dugald Sutherland MacColl —Ed.] about me. And I remember MacColl's letter which he showed me in which he said, "Your friend sounds like the phoenix," which was rather a good remark.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you painting at this time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, painting and sculpture, because the sculpture helped one's drawing. I was primarily a painter all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you exhibiting?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I did a few times, but not very much. But then I got the job at the Wallace, and that was an entirely new phase. I was now definitely in the art history and museum world.

ROBERT BROWN: Your training for that was having trained yourself on your own?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: When you went to the Wallace you were still training yourself. Is that correct? You were reading on your own and visiting and going to collections?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. Just as other young men in the museums. It's very like English universities. Self-education is a much more important thing than people imagine. That's where your associates are very valuable in many cases. [00:46:15]

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe Henry Tonks a bit? Or Wilson Steer?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Tall. Tonks was tall, thin.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his personality?

W.G. CONSTABLE: His personality. Devastating, or apt to be. Yet very kindly to anyone who was really trying. I can't remember the various stories about him. Anyone who was lazy, anyone who was casual, he'd be down upon like a ton of bricks. And he didn't like them. But if they were people who were trying and had got brains and would use them, then he'd be kindness itself. Steer, on the other hand, was a much more lethargic person and you had to dig for what you—I'd better not describe him.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he come around very much or was he very busy painting?

W.G. CONSTABLE: He'd come around about twice a week, Steer. Tonks would come every day. Then there were others. Those were the two who influenced me most.

ROBERT BROWN: Walter Sickert, was he in on this at all?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. He didn't come as a teacher. I knew him, but he was a great friend of Steer's. Through Steer I knew Sickert and went to Sickert's studio. He was a curiosity. He used to take a canvas, finish it, do something, put it up on the shelf. [00:48:06] Then it would go up there with unfinished canvases. And in his studio there would be about 60 of these things. A dealer would come into his studio to see what he could get. Sickert would say to him, "Well, you can have the whole lot there, about 60 canvases. Give me a half a crown for each one." Some would not be worth tuppence. Some would be very, very nice. But this was just the kind of gamble Sickert liked. I do remember once he came to call on Steer and I was in Steer's studio, or rooms, rather. I was with Sickert and they went on and on and it got very late and suddenly he remembered he'd left a taxi ticking up outside. About two in the morning. He was eccentric in that way. But a very good painter and a very lively mind. He was more lively than most of the Royal Academicians. I meant a certain number of them—

ROBERT BROWN: What did you think of their work?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, I didn't have much—they could paint so much better than I could paint. I was interested and got a tremendous amount out of the sheer technique of the painters. There were a whole group of them: Down at St. Ives, called the Newland School. They always painted fishermen subjects. [00:50:00] The technique was extremely able and one admired them. They did find—there was one discovery I made of what they called "Hopeless Dawn" by Frank Brandley, who was a Royal Academician. The great thing was a pile of things on the table. Obviously they were waiting to see whether the fishermen would come home. The bread and butter on the table was in lumps and it was red towards the rising sun. You see, the red light came in, and cool blue in the —that's the kind of thing, of real sharp observation that one got out of a lot of those R.A. people. But I do remember the red and blue done on the bread and butter as something that hit me at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a great deal of patronage of this kind of very acute observation in painting?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not a great deal. But, on the other hand, they mustn't be neglected. Because there was one famous picture called "The Doctor," a marvelous study of Doctor Charles Olson. You know the picture. And there was another one called "The Casual Ward." It was a pioneer that all these poor down-and-outs were waiting outside the Casual Ward to get in. Sharp observation of their clothes and so on. There was a lot to be got. I didn't appreciate it, I remember, at the time. I did learn a lot from them. [00:52:09]

ROBERT BROWN: Were these men interesting to be with, otherwise?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I never found them so.

ROBERT BROWN: Why [laughs]?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, I don't know. It's difficult to say. The few I knew were rather more intent on selling their work and becoming high-ranking in the Royal Academy than otherwise. I think that was a lot of that went on.

ROBERT BROWN: But if they behaved as Sickert did, they weren't going to make much money from their work.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, Sickert made a great deal.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't always sell them for half a crown.

W.G. CONSTABLE: He might. It would vary. But he did very well, indeed. A good painter could always do well.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned at this time a portraitist, John Sargeant. You met him around this time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I was supposed to be going to be the world's great portrait painter. Tonks thought so and so he sent me to Sargeant to get to know him and learn the ropes about really fashionable portrait painting, because no one could tell you more than Sargeant. He was perfectly frank about it, because he'd made a colossal sum and he did say to me, he'd say, "Don't get caught in the way that I got caught." He knew perfectly well what had happened to him, because his friends told him quite frankly he was wasting a great talent, and so on. But he was a very nice, kind man. After all, to let a young painter loose in your studio, and so on—[00:54:08]

ROBERT BROWN: Did he have a very winning way with people or did they so admire his work?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. His winning way was simply that he could paint amazingly vivid portraits very quickly. He was like Augustus John. Again, he could paint a portrait very quickly. And to save people sitting for hours—You see, Sargeant could do three, or at least he told me so, three women's portraits in a morning. I don't believe it. But he was very speedy, very quick.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he in London about half the year?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I don't know. I should think it was, perhaps. He came over to this country, you see, because he got very good commissions here. But on the whole, he I think preferred to let them come to his London studio. Of course, it was very good and comfortable, much better than you can get by any temporary.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you begin to do portraits?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I did a few but I was no good, no good whatever. I had no gift for it. Well, he agreed, you see, thoroughly—not that he'd seen any of them.

ROBERT BROWN: At this time, while you were at the Slade, you were doing some writing then, weren't you? [00:56:05]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Doing some criticism?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Every week I wrote for—

ROBERT BROWN: *The New Statesman*?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. It was *The New Statesman*. That was it. That was a tremendous effort. But, there again, money was important.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you, in that way, meet most of the dealers and some collectors? As a critic did you go to a good many art galleries? What was the nature—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, it depended. I was free to choose myself. when there was a rehanging at the National Gallery, it gave one a chance for a review of the whole of the National Gallery. Another time it would be some particular exhibition. They were very good in that way. What they wanted was somebody who could write in a lively and reasonably intelligent way. But it was hard work to sit down every Sunday morning and you turn out an article.

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ROBERT BROWN: Any few—say a few words, please.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: He wants to get your voice level.

W.G CONSTABLE: How far did we get? Did I tell you anything about MacColl?

ROBERT BROWN: You had made a few efforts. I don't think we got very much into that. It might be a good point to begin.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is October 5, 1972. We could, perhaps, start out by your discussing your time at the Wallace Collection. What led you to go to the Wallace Collection? What did you do there? Could you, perhaps, describe the man you worked with, principally?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That would be very easy. I came to go there because I had been working at the Slade, in particular, in the sculpture department and the head of that department was a friend of MacColl, who wrote the head at the Slade, and said, "Here is a student who is looking for a job." MacColl wrote back and said, I think his words were, "Your friend sounds something like the phoenix." It was a reference to my name, a revival of the name Constable. That was a typical piece of MacColl's humor. So I went along to the Wallace and there was employed, in the first place, as lecturer. That was my business. And that I developed to a large extent from being just a spasmodic affair into a systematic affair with a lecture to a group before going around the Wallace. [00:02:07] But also I was used in a good many ways by MacColl and another member of the staff, a senior member called Camp [Samuel James Camp —Ed.], and I helped them in various ways. In particular, I helped MacColl with the cataloging of the 18th-century French furniture, which is particularly fine in the Wallace Collection. Out of that arose an amusing incident, because eighteenth century French furniture nearly always has the maker's name stamped on the underpart of the piece concerned. As long as you can turn it up, you could read it. Otherwise, you had to put your head under it, and look up, and find the name of the 18th-century maker. Anyhow, MacColl wanted to go to Windsor Castle where, again, they had a magnificent collection of 18th-century French furniture, to get some information to compare with the Wallace Collection. Of course, he had proper permission. One day he went there and the next morning he appeared again at the museum and I said, "How did you get on?" And he said, "Oh, very well. Unfortunately Queen Mary insisted on coming round with me." Then he made the remark, "Little did I think I should spend my declining years hobnobbing with the Queen of England underneath a French commode." [00:04:10] [They laugh.] She'd insisted on getting underneath the furniture and looking up with him. And various other worries. I worked on things to help him with cataloging. This was all very useful preparation for application to the National Gallery where a vacancy occurred about that time. Finally I transferred to the National Gallery because I was already in the English Civil Service, the Wallace Collection being the National Collection. So I went along to the National Gallery and there spent many years as assistant to the director, Charles Holmes. Ought I to go into the story of Holmes?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Could I ask you something of the Wallace?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes, I wish you would.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the Wallace Collection then, at that time, not completely catalogued? Had it been given

to the nation but not completely studied?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It had never been fully catalogued at all. The job as director had been regarded rather as a prize thing for a man who was approaching retirement because no acquisitions—and, therefore, it was comparatively easy. [00:06:02] MacColl, he'd been at the Tate Gallery and was quite a remarkable authority on, not on contemporary art, 19th-century art, I wanted to say. But it was somewhat of a change for him. But the Wallace suited him, to use his own words, in his declining years.

ROBERT BROWN: In England, at this time, though, the study of history of art was in its early days, wasn't it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It was a systematic study in the—and similar places. It didn't exist but it was very seriously pursued by museum people. Not only—the Wallace Collection is rather small compared to, say, the British Museum, where some of the best research of the century was being done. And the National Gallery, that's much smaller than the British Museum, at the same time there was some systematic work being done. But there was no preparatory step, as it were. No place to which anyone could go to have foundations laid.

ROBERT BROWN: You laid yours, then, principally at the Wallace?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, it panned out very well for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you set yourself a program of study while you were at the Wallace or was it simply your involvement on the catalog?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I did work involved that had to be done. [00:08:00] There were other members of the staff who were working on and I was roped in. Now, for example, one of the finest things at the Wallace is their collection of armor. That, I never touched. To this day my knowledge of armor is incredibly sketchy. But Camp, who was also a member of the staff, he made a special study of armor. That was the way it went in English museums, developing some special interest and at the same time running sort of general work of the museum on the side. So a rather remarkable group of men—and later occasionally—developed, but it was all learning your job in the job.

ROBERT BROWN: Now when you went to the National Gallery, did you come on the basis of what you had done at the Wallace? Was that your chief recommendation?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Very largely. But also one fact: that I had been at the Slade and was a trained artist. That counted for a good deal, with the then director of the National Gallery. He himself was considered quite a good painter and he liked having people around him who were also painters and knew what paint was an what it could do and so on. So that was a recommendation. Then I had read quite widely in the history of art. But, again, it was expected that I should go into the job to learn the job in the job. And I did. [00:10:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Was it at this time that you began developing some of your special interests?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was a few years before. In fact, that was one of the things I set myself to do. And ultimately I became especially interested in Venetian painting. And in a few years' time I was concentrating, to a certain extent, on 18th-century British painting. But at the same time I was working on a lot of other things that had to be done, because I was doing a lot of the cataloging in the gallery. That, of course, meant spreading your interests and knowledge fairly wide. It also mean a good deal of working in the archives, because the gallery had a large amount of documentary material that had been accumulated by past directors, that I had to read.

ROBERT BROWN: You were trying to establish provenance?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. It was all that. And also I wrote a little on the history, the early history, of the gallery. There again, I had to go into early documents. So, it was a fairly wide field. But, provenance, that was important because some directors hadn't bothered, other directors bothered a good deal. You know, you had to find out from their correspondence what they might have found out about a particular picture, or hadn't found out. [00:12:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have to deal with potential donors to the museum or did you have to involve yourself in raising funds? Or was this all taken care of?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I didn't have to do anything about that. That is the director's domain. I would help him the whole time, and you had the usual kind of troubles in that connection, but that was his business, though I knew about it all the time. I was, in a way, in training for it, and learned the deficit, deceit, and troubles which some dealers could sink. It was an amusement sometimes when one, I remember him very well, he just appeared and nudged me in the side and he said, "It's 10 pounds in your pocket if you can persuade the old man to buy the picture." But that's a commonplace episode in some museum work, but put in a different form.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you describe some of the other colleagues? Could you describe Mr. Holmes first and could you characterize some of the people you worked closely with at this time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Sir Charles Holmes, he'd been at the National Portrait Gallery and then was appointed to the National Gallery and that was when he got his knighthood, became Sir Charles Holmes. The other man with whom I was most closely associated was a man called Colin Baker or C.H.C. Baker. Other people used to call him Colin, which was one of his Christian names. He was a very considerable authority on English painting. He wrote a very good book on chrome. One way and another, he, perhaps, more than Holmes, was—and I collaborated with him on one or two books we wrote together. [00:14:15

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: *Early English Painting*, was it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: He went to America later, didn't he? He went to the California later, didn't he?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: Was it the Huntington Gallery, or where did he go?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Huntington.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: So he would be known in Annals of American Art.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a particularly noted authority on English painting at that time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. He was invited to go to Huntington Gallery, especially to work on their archives. They had a pretty good bit of material stored away. He published a fair amount of the stuff that they had there.

ROBERT BROWN: You were writing a great deal at this time, as well as your duties at the National Gallery?

W.G. CONSTABLE: At the National Gallery I was only writing every week for *The New Statesman* as their art critic. It was left very much to myself what the topic would be, whether it would be a current exhibition, or something of that kind, or developments at the Gallery, and so on. So, that was a Sunday morning chore of the most disagreeable kind in that you had to get done by a certain time to get your thing written, so that I could get it typed up. I didn't type and I can't type now. So I would get it typed at the gallery and hand it in. [00:16:17]

ROBERT BROWN: At this time did you have a good many acquaintances among artists?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. A good many. Bond, from working at the Slade, and one way and another, a good many of them came into the National Gallery. And so I would see them there and I would hear from then how they feel about their work. Also, I took the opportunity of visiting artists and museums on the continent. In that way, I wanted to know, and I met and talked with Renoir and Degas. Monet I missed. I forget how it was. But those two were outstanding examples of acquaintances with really active artists. Do you think that the story about Degas is—[inaudible]—I was on a walking tour in Western France and there I met two students from the Ecole des Beaux Arts. One was English, which enabled me to talk much more easily with him. The other one, who was French, could get on and we had some meals together. [00:16:04] When I got to Paris—when we all got to Paris, I invited them and in return they had had an invitation to go to a show of some kind at the studio of Degas and they took me along with them. I didn't realize what a privilege it was at that time. I'm sure it was very difficult to get in. Anyhow, I was led into Degas' studio and was introduced by these two; he shook both their hands. Then he said, in breathless words, "I speak English. Please adjust your dress before leaving." [They laugh.] This very great and devastating man.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: He hated the English, didn't he?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, he hated them.

ROBERT BROWN: He was trying to put you down as an Englishman?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of a man did he strike you as being?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Devastating in his wit and his comments. He didn't say very much. He did express the opinion that Renoir was the greatest living sculptor. It was not what most people would have thought. But everybody had to pay attention to Degas' views. And it was at this time, too, when I saw, I always forget his name. It begins with F. [00:20:00]

ROBERT BROWN: A painter?

W.G. CONSTABLE: A French painter.

ROBERT BROWN: Fantin-Latour?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It was later than that. I'll call him "X." And he very much wanted Degas to come to a private show he was giving. Well, Degas didn't and he wouldn't, but suddenly apparently he decided that he would. Went to the gallery concerned and it ran around immediately that the great master was here. He came in and then said, he looked around and said, "I was told that this was a private view of paintings by X." He said, "What is that miserable, wretched imitation of Rembrandt doing here?" Everyone just stood. They thought he had gone mad. He walked over to the picture, turned around the painting and said, "No. I made a great mistake. That's not a foul Rembrandt. It's a magnificent X." Then he went away. That is a sample of—

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: He was really a horrible person.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Really horrible, but he made up for it, of course.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Renoir, whom you met, a very different sort of person? He had a very different sort of background, didn't he?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. You know one of my, I think, most pleasant stories about Renoir. It happened in the museum here. We've got in the museum a splendid painting by Renoir, the Bal a Bougival and it used to hang at the head of the staircase. [00:22:00] One day I came into the museum, and it was very awesome; the museum had just opened. For some reason I was going up the staircase in the direction of that picture. Ahead of me was a small girl and I saw that she went up to that painting. I watched and she looked at it and then she picked up her skirts and danced in front of it. A great compliment. I spoke to Renoir's son, who was then a dealer in Paris and he said, "My father's comment would probably be, 'And why do you think I painted the picture.'" I think he was that kind of a man.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a very simple, direct man?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes, who loved painting above everything and was kindly and as far as I can make out, but remember I never knew him to be intimate with him. I met him, heard a lot about him and that's all.

ROBERT BROWN: The French artists had a status that they did not have in England, isn't that true? You mentioned Degas as the great master with an entourage. Was there anything comparable to that for English painters?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Not really. There were a lot of big groups who worked together. But there was no one of Degas' stature at all. But you had different schools, like the Newland School, Newland in Cornwall. A whole group of artists had settled there and worked there. Generally they showed all their things. One Sunday morning—during the winter, the previous summer's crop. [00:24:08] But they were a distinctive group. There were other distinctive groups among English artists. But there was no one dominant figure. Do you remember any?

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: I suppose Wilson Steer.

W.G. CONSTABLE: But not in the way that Degas—

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: No. I think not.

ROBERT BROWN: A man like Henry Moore—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Hadn't emerged then.

ROBERT BROWN: That was in the 1930's.

W.G. CONSTABLE: He hadn't emerged. He was still a student; incidentally, at the Slade. But he wasn't there too long. And, of course, he was a sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: You were lecturing also, at this time, weren't you?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not yet.

ROBERT BROWN: At the end of the 1920s you began?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. Before that. Shortly after going to the National Gallery I began lecturing. Again, it

was almost, you might say, part of one's work, because it enabled you to tell people about the gallery, or rather to give them the knowledge that was basic to understanding the gallery. Also the National Gallery, they had lecturers, official lecturers. I was never one of them. You see, I was on the staff, and that wasn't part of my job at all. But, on occasion, I'd be asked to lecture in the gallery, taking people around. [00:26:00] So, the education of the public was developing considerably during the period that I was connected with the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think that was a good thing?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. Emphatically. It as indispensable because otherwise, I mean, what purpose would the National Gallery, or the South Kensington Museum, or the British Museum and so on, serve if they were intended to become merely mausoleums? They had all these things in them, but the minute you began throwing them open, encouraging people to come and listen to somebody who could explain to them what it all meant. It, I think, was a very important thing to do. And it had importance in enlarging, not only in enlarging the public, but enlarging a public that could understand and appreciate works of art. Not only works of art, but archaeology, where all the things, in fact, covered by museums would otherwise have been a sealed book.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you lecture outside of London? Beyond the gallery, around England and in other countries, possibly?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I used to travel a good deal.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: When did you begin lecturing outside of the gallery?

W.G. CONSTABLE: As soon as I got to the gallery. Though that developed—the extent to which that was done—and in fact, I stopped because I was getting much too busy. [00:28:11] They paid lecturers, as lecturers, who would take on things. But I travelled a good deal, of course, to see other museums and other works of art which were of great importance.

ROBERT BROWN: You saw many private collections?

W.G. CONSTABLE: A fair number. Oh, I'd say, a good many. One of the important things being I wanted to know what was in a private collection in the event of the gallery being able to get it or buy it, or in some way get hold of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you generally welcome to look at private collections?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Everywhere. Nowhere did I receive anything but a welcome. Well, people got, of course, a good bit of information about their possessions, you have to remember. Dealers were the same. They were always extremely polite and welcoming whenever we went to see them, because, generally, you could tell them something they didn't know. That could be, to them, very useful. So, generally, you were very often invited to go to see a particular picture in Bond Street, which is the 47th Street, or became the equivalent of Bond Street, the dealers' street.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: The Estate Duty Office. Tell them about them. The work you did for them. That would be interesting. [00:30:00]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. That was already then, part of the gallery work, since in England you had to pay tax on your possessions. One of the things that had to be, as it were, vetted, were collections of art and archaeology. The art was done by the staff at the National Gallery. The Internal Revenue people would send a list of a collection and he would have to go down and see it. That, incidentally, would have been already valued by their lawyers and outside valuers. You'd go down and check the valuations and, incidentally, that would mean very often checking the attributions, simply because a change in attribution might mean a considerable change in value. I mean, this way—and as these were all collections of people who had died, that had been left, it was therefore very valuable knowledge from the gallery point of view. Because you might find an unknown this, that or the other in a collection, or you'd find that there were admirable examples of something that you knew existed there but which nobody had ever made a list of. And you'd now have a list in your hand which you could then expand or correct, and so on. [00:32:04] I might almost finish it off. I got very accustomed to doing that sort of thing. But, ultimately, long after I had left the National Gallery, the people in England, or was it here, asked me to check evaluations.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: That was here, after you had left the Boston Museum, quite recently, you were asked by the Internal Revenue to be their art expert for very valuable works of art which people were claiming. You see, they don't have the same thing in England, that you don't have to pay tax on gifts. But here, of course, people get immense tax rebates and when they claimed enormous sums he would be asked to see if that is justified or not. He only did it a few years before—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Essentially the same thing.

ROBERT BROWN: But in England, you were helping in the process of valuations for estate duty purposes?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. The purpose of these visits for checking valuations was for tax purposes. Because the variations in value, tax—had to be checked.

ROBERT BROWN: If they could be given to the National Collections, what would happen then? [00:34:01]

W.G. CONSTABLE: If they were given, there was no payment.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were to determine whether they might be given, that they would be worthy of it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That had to be left to the director and trustees. I might make a recommendation.

ROBERT BROWN: This time was the first years of these very heavy death duties in England—were some of the people or their families very resentful of the fact that unless they had works that could be given to the national collections they would be asked to pay a very high tax on them?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I never found them so. They didn't ever say that to me. I think I was regarded as a kind of agent of the tax collector and treated with politeness, given every facility, but otherwise kept at a distance, which is the normal attitude of anyone towards tax collectors. But now and then, of course, you come across exceptions. Now and then you met people who were extremely friendly and were very anxious to get whatever you could tell them about their collections, so that they could take advantage of anything like remission taxes by giving and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any feelings then whether things should stay, say, in a great country house or whether they should come to the National Gallery? [00:35:52]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Not very strong feelings. By and large my chief thing was to keep my eyes and ears open for possibilities for the National Gallery, which I could then report to the director and he could, if he wished, discuss it with the trustees. It was all much more informal than it sounds because the whole thing was thrown into the middle of gallery discussion by people who were either experts or becoming experts. Then the results would be communicated to the trustees and a decision would be reached. That's really how that side of it worked out. Then, of course, there was the deliberate going into the market to see what could be purchased, one way and another. There, of course, a lot depended on dealers who came to you, and dealers were very anxious to sell a thing to the National Gallery. It was a great advertisement for a dealer to sell something. So there was nearly always a kind of string of people. Every morning there would be three or four people with pictures under their arms which they wanted the director to see. It also had the result that they got an opinion. It as a way of getting the director's views of the authenticity of a particular painting or its authorship. Say if you bought—A man, for example, might bring in something which you called a Rembrandt. [00:38:00] The director would look it over and say, "You know, that is not a Rembrandt and never has been a Rembrandt. There is no reason to call it a Rembrandt." That would be the thing that would take place. You knew you had got an unknown value. Otherwise you might say, "Well, that is a fine picture I remember, by so and so." Particularly in the case of an artist like John Constable, who was very difficult, sometimes, and a dealer would then, if the director would say, "That is by John Constable, in my opinion, and a fine example." Well, he got several hundred pounds for him on Bond Street. That was how the gallery was used, you see. But there was complete freedom for the gallery to refuse an opinion or refuse even to look at a painting. It worked, on the whole, very well.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the trustees enter in?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, they came in because they had to finally be depended upon. The director would put up a painting. It was a recommended picture.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they a knowledgeable lot, the trustees?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not particularly. You know more about some of them than I would. but they were generally, mostly—I've got a very favorable recollection. They were cultivated men, anxious to do their best and quite ready to listen to reason. [00:40:07] They were a good lot, by and large. But they varied from individual to individual. I remember two cases of Minsters of the Crown who wanted to be made Trustees of the National Gallery. They persuaded the prime minister to make the appointment. Each was a lamentable failure. But on the whole they were better than that.

ROBERT BROWN: By a failure you mean a person who is utterly ignorant?

W.G. CONSTABLE: So ignorant that his ignorance was unpalatable. Either they sat still and did nothing, which is not much use if you are a member of a committee, or expressed views which were obviously of no value to

anyone. But then you risk that by all political appointments. And that's not a special risk of the British National Gallery. It applies to every public museum which has governing trustees.

[Audio Break.]

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: You're just doing it for a test. [00:42:01]

W.G. CONSTABLE: He's doing it for a test.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm trying to pick it up now.

W.G. CONSTABLE: A considerable part of my work at the National Gallery was accumulating material, investigating for writing. In particular, a book I wrote, a biggish book—

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: While I was at the National Gallery a considerable part of my work, apart from all the routine matters connected with gallery administration, was with cataloging and accumulation of material relating to paintings, putting it into shape. Another thing on which I spent a good deal of time was the accumulation of material for writing. It was while I was at the National Gallery that I accumulated most of the material for my book on Canaletto. For that book in particular, I spent, I ultimately spent a year in Venice to become familiar with the city. The book has become a standard work on that particular artist. Then again, one thing that occupied a good deal of my time and, with the assent of the staff and the director, was connected with a series of exhibitions that were held at the headquarters of the Royal Academy, Burlington House, and which covered some of the major schools of Europe. [00:44:06] The first one I was entirely responsible for and that was an exhibition of early English art, medieval English art. This was very largely a pioneer affair. I managed to get some early paintings of the churches and a certain number of illuminated manuscripts. Altogether the exhibition was a success, although its appeal was only a limited one. Actually sprang out of it a big book on English medieval painting by E. W. Tristram in which I gave him a good deal of help and support. That took shape finally in an elaborate publication by the Oxford Press. But that was only a preliminary. More important was a series of international exhibitions. First was Dutch art, and there associated with all the leading authorities on Dutch art because they lent their support and advice for the organization of the exhibition. In particular, the catalog of that exhibition was an achievement largely because of the fact that I was linked with Dr. Schneider of the Hague, a very eminent scholar, who had very firm ideas on how a catalog should be organized. Between us, we worked out a scheme, we'll call it a plan, on which cataloging of pictures and works of art should be followed, which, to our surprise, has become practically universal. [00:46:12] Almost every catalog of pictures that is written is written on that particular plan which Schneider and I hammered out. But at the same time, there were some personal contacts one made. I don't know whether George V's reaction—Anyhow, I was taking the king around the exhibition and the director of the Rijksmuseum, that's of course the great museum in Holland, and said that the king was speaking to a number of members of the royal family in the middle of a big room in which there were twenty Rembrandts, and it would be deeply interesting if I could get near to find out what he was saying because—he said, the Dutch people would love to hear what the King of England thinks of their great artist. So I sidled up to the group. The king, very eloquently, was discoursing to about twenty members of the royal family. He said "If you want them to fit you go to my man." They were talking about false teeth. [They laugh.] But at the same time royalty were thoroughly appreciative of all the time and the trouble, particularly the Queen, Queen Mary, that had gone into these exhibitions. [00:48:00] The next one was an Italian exhibition. That was the most elaborate of all because the pictures were largely, a large number of them were brought over from Italy, and I became great personal friends with the Italian commissioner, Modigliani, who remained in England most of the time. In fact, I traveled with him through Italy for about six weeks or more in choosing the pictures we should ask for the exhibition. It was a great success. The catalog of that exhibition was a most elaborate affair and, again, I had to do most of the writing. There again, the royalty were to perform on one or two occasions and in a fairly amusing way. The ding, I think, had got to the end of the exhibition with some discreet help from myself. You see, I had shown him the most important things and so on. When he came to the end, I said, "Well, that's the end, sir." He turned to me and said, "Where's the queen?" I said, "I think she's looking at the objets d'art. Shall I tell her you've finished?" He said, "Tell her 'no,' man. I want to get out and go home." But these are good examples, I think, of why these people had so endeared themselves to the English people. They were human beings. He put in his energy and time in looking at pictures and I guided him and gave him information and then he wanted to go home. [00:50:04] [They laugh.] It was no more than natural. The next big exhibition, which took a good deal of time, was the French exhibition. There the French, various French officials, mainly from the Louvre, collaborated with the English committee. It was, on the whole, a great success, but not the success of the Italian Exhibition. Then, lastly, there was an English exhibition which we thought we should finish. That, again, was very hard work because many of the things had to be sought for and brought from English private collections. But it was, again, a great success. Organizing the catalog on that was quite a business because little was known, in many cases, about the origins of these pictures. But it was dug out and incorporated in an elaborate catalog. Well, that ended that particular series and that particular chore with which I was largely

associated. I thought it worth mentioning. Quite incidentally, the Canaletto book really had its origins in the Wallace Collection. Accidentally, the Wallace collection had a great many near-Canaletto pictures and it was MacColl who suggested that I might really look into the problem of the authenticity of these pictures. [00:52:04] And that would form the basis for the book. I got then permission to go to Windsor to see their Canalettos and that really began the whole business. Then I went on with it in the National Gallery. Now, what else?

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: You were decorated by both France and Italy.

W.G. CONSTABLE: You've got a question?

ROBERT BROWN: I wanted to ask how long did these exhibitions take to prepare? At least a year?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. At least a year, because the task of settling what you'd ask for, and then you'd have to ask for it, and each time it would mean an elaborate long—sometimes some people would—you know, very regularly. Others would need a sidelong approach, warming up to the desirability. But for the most part everybody was very good indeed. They realized the importance of these exhibitions because they were international in scope, international in the sense of their lenders and they didn't want to be left out. So, you really got a very representative group of things in every one of them. particularly, I must say, in the English one. But that you'd expect. The others, having had such a great success, people were anxious to see that the English one should at least rival them. And, indeed, it did. [00:54:06]

ROBERT BROWN: In the English exhibition, were there paintings from all European countries?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Very few from outside England because there were very few English ones in other collections, they were limited to just a few. But even so, there was no need to go to the expense. Same thing abroad. You could get anything you wanted in England itself. That was much easier and, incidentally, very much cheaper because transport is much easier. So, I don't think we had anything from the United States, though there were pictures we would have liked to have had, but you could find an exact equivalent in England.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these among the first exhibitions in Europe which grew from so many different sources?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh no. There have always been a number, and in other countries. But in England, there had been exhibitions of this type but they were more spasmodic. This was systematic, with a lot of time given to preparation, and it stopped. There again you had to get people to work on it who know not only the material but where to go for the material. Then, you had to have people who do all the work of writing up the material for the objects and arranging for their transport, and so on. [00:56:04] Organizing a big exhibition is a very complicated and laborious business. And people, I don't think, realize how much they owe to the Royal Academy, because their staff devoted almost all their time to the mechanics of the exhibition. Incidentally, I formed a very warm friendship with the secretary of the Royal Academy because he and I, of course, had to work together very closely and we became very attached to each other.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was this?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Lang. W. R. M. Lang, who was an eminent scholar, a classical scholar, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He had become secretary of the Royal Academy. A certain very determined and fearsome person to anyone who didn't really fit into the, how shall I say, the pattern of reasonable behavior. One Scots collector who had been asked to lend something came up to the Royal Academy and threw a fit because he hadn't been asked for something else. He wanted to lend something else and not that other thing. Then he began abusing the Royal Academy and the committee concerned, and Lang simply took him by the arm and said, "No. You can't do that kind of thing here. No, no. You come with me." And just walked out. He could handle people of that kind. [00:58:00] Another point of these exhibitions was in every case the chairmen of the committees would be outstanding people. For example, the Italian exhibition—Austin Chamberlain, the brother of the prime minister—himself and his wife were very active indeed. A man who did a great deal of work in connection with it was called Longdon. His name will crop up in time. But Austin Chamberlain and his wife really buckled to like heroes and gave a great deal of time and trouble. That was one of the reasons that the success of the committee people—or of people on the committee that were willing to give time and trouble and expertise to help make the exhibition a success.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was about this time that the idea of the Courtauld emerged because it was quite evident there was nowhere in England where a person could get systematic training, teaching in the history of art, as you could in many other countries, particularly Germany. But, also, of course, in this country. One of my preliminary explorations was my first visit to the United States to talk about this with Paul Sachs and Edward Forbes, particularly, the whole group at the Fogg Museum, to find out what they were doing and how they were doing it. [01:00:10] That was most enlightening and tremendously helpful. I must say the early days of the

Courtauld were largely shaped on the model of the Fogg Museum. That I think should never be lost sight of. But, personally, Paul Sachs had a great deal to do with it, because he was full of information, full of enthusiasm and encouragement.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you go to Paul Sachs? To Look at the Fogg to see what they had done? Why did you come to Cambridge?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, for this reason. That the Fogg had been very energetic. Paul Sachs was known throughout Europe by art historians. He made a great success of his own classes at the Fogg. He had what a called a "museum class." He brought over people from Europe to speak to his students here. He brought here—When we first arrived there, there were two French professors who he, I would say, had imported, eminent men. The whole atmosphere of the Fogg was then international and, at the same time, Paul had made it evident that serious scholarship was necessary and wanted. [01:02:00] How he got it was another thing, how he approached it. But it was invaluable to find a man of such determination and such ideas and that helped a great deal. Then, in England, Lord Lee of Fareham took the idea of a training ground for art historians up. He was very enthusiastic and it was he who, ultimately, secured from Mr. Courtauld a financial backing which enabled the Courtauld Institute to be established as a department of London University. In fact, this was just the thing we wanted done and Mr. Courtauld added to that particular generosity the handing over of his magnificent house in Portman Square as the home of the Institute. And so, not only the idea but the realization began to take shape. Now, what year was it?

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: About 1932.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe how you came to be involved with this project?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, that was fairly simple in the sense that I was one of the outstanding figures among the younger art historians in England. I had had considerable academic experience at Cambridge, my own university. I taught there. So I knew about handling young people, and about lecturing, and how to manage academic affairs. [01:04:08] Consequently, a committee was formed to inaugurate the Courtauld Institute. I was, of course, without being specifically mentioned—it was understood that I should be the director. That was how it began and how I was brought into it. So, when the Courtauld Institute first began, there I was The first thing I did was to form a library and we moved that into the new home of the Institute and various other things of that kind which are indispensable for a learned institute to obtain, and lectures began. The number of students that came was surprising. I think we opened with something like 70 which is amazing to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these all English students, students from England, this first group?

W.G. CONSTABLE: England, but a few from abroad. Very soon, once the thing was a going concern, we had quite a number from abroad, especially from this country. To this day, former students of mine are major figures in the history of art in the United States, I'm proud to say. [01:06:00] You don't have to look very far for some of them, if you look around Boston, because many of them were Harvard people and it was rather a natural thing for them to further their education by a visit to England and then settle in Boston. But I had a few French, a certain number of Germans and several ones stepped into the international arena, which was really what we wanted. It has been, I'd say, a great success, the Institute, as part of London University.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you look at all into German art history? You mentioned earlier that Germany was the predominate center for training in art history. Why was the German model not studied, as well as the Fogg?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was. Very carefully. But you've got to remember that the structure of the German university and the system of degrees in a German university is very different from that in England. It would have meant reshaping a university. So you had to adapt your institute to suit the structure of the university.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it from the beginning to be primarily a teaching institute?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was hoped that from teaching research would emerge, as it had in other universities. Remember in Cambridge and Oxford, both of which I knew well, people would go on very often from being students to taking a degree and then going on to research. [01:08:12] And that has happened. There were some of them who, quite late, entered the institute and are now doing research. Why, one rang me up only a few weeks ago, telling me exactly what he'd done, how he had taken a degree, a senior man and then was sitting down to do research on a particular problem.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about selecting your faculty for the Courtauld?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Just looked around.

ROBERT BROWN: Mainly in England, or were they an international faculty?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. They started with English. A great deal of teaching could be done by men who were in other occupations. For example, people in museums had time to do that. One or two of the best teachers were actually dealers, young dealers, who were in eminent dealers' firms, who had wide experience and a great deal of knowledge. It wasn't difficult. The difficulty was selecting. You see, they were good enough but there were plenty who were, in fact—

ROBERT BROWN: How long were you with the Courtauld? Several years?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes—

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: About six. You must tell them what happened. [01:10:00]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Early in the Courtauld Foundation there was a certain trustee who put the notion about that this could be or should be a kind of means of conveying light learning to young ladies and, in other words, that this idea of a serious university department was out of place and that this was where you would learn how to talk about the arts at tea or over drinks. That kind of thing. Well, this was absolutely contrary to my ideas and from the beginning I opposed it vigorously. Well, he and two or three others, because they had, you see, a miscellaneous committee, pressed for this change in outlook and the pressure got so high that finally I decided the only thing to do was to resign. That did the trick, I must say, but it was the only way. I couldn't go on with people pulling in that direction while I knew that the only safe direction was serious study and research. And so it's turned out—but it was quite a blow to me because I was very fond of the place. It was, by then, to a large extent, my own creation. Only in idea, but I built it up in its various ways, and to resign, to give up, was a blow to me. [01:12:00] This country, again—Paul Sachs knew of this and he, it was, steered me into the museum here as curator of painting. And it was, to me, at least one great joy from the great burden of teaching, and it's a great burden. I was able to turn to looking for and hanging works of art. Do you remember?

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: I do. I also remember that, about a year before you left, you were offered the National Gallery, to be director of the National Gallery in London, but couldn't leave the Courtauld. This was before the difference, before these troubles. As a matter of fact, you were much happier in Boston than you would have been at the National Gallery.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I was offered that, but I felt my engagement at the Courtauld—I couldn't accept. But I think my wife is perfectly right. I am much happier here than I should have been there.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you find it here? Was it much different from what you had done at the Wallace collection?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, very different. You see, it's a very active museum here. Acquisition has always been one of its great features. Of course, it depended on the departments. And so, one was associated with a whole group of curators who were active in the market in the sense that they were keeping their eyes on what was happening and at the same time were cataloging. In fact, this was a much more living museum than the Wallace collection where, you see—[01:14:04]

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: That was more like the Gardner.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Much more like it.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the Museum of Fine Arts compare in this respect with the National Gallery in London?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, it's much more miscellaneous. You have to remember it's much more—The comparison would be with the British Museum, though it isn't anything like as large. You see, it had many departments and its departments—It had the Classical department in the museum here, which, for example, was very important and the National Gallery is only paintings. It has no Classical department or Egyptian department. All those departments in the Museum of Fine Arts which paralleled the departments in the British Museum—And their scholars are parallel to the curators in the British Museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe some of the highlights of your career here? That is, what are some of the acquisitions? Are there any which you particularly could discuss?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I can't dependably. But really—I know I added a great deal, with the support of Edgell, the then director. The main developments were on the modern side. One or two eminent private collections in Boston came there during my time and I also developed the 17th-century side: Dutch, Italian, Spanish. You see, it was increasingly difficult to add early Italian. [01:16:06] They had been snapped up in the past. The National Gallery in London had got a lot of them, the Louvre and so on. But, the 17th century was still—you could go out and get first rate stuff. So I did my best and did secure some of them. I know quite outstanding examples which were—that particular development, the 17th century, was commented upon by many colleagues. But it was a

curious combination then to add a good many contemporary works of art, French, almost entirely.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Edgell give you entire support?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Wholly. He was excellent in that way. Of course, he left it all—he was very good. He left it all to his curators, if he really knew them. In that way he was a very good director. He didn't interfere. You see, he was a Harvard man, as you know. So he approached the whole thing from rather like a university point of view. His particular departments were rather like university departments in his eyes, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: And should be given considerable autonomy? They should be allowed to run their own affairs?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Oh yes. He was very good in that way. [01:18:00] And the trustees. I got on extremely well with them. They were a combination of Harvard, a few were Harvard, and old Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find the outlook of your trustees here as broad as that in England, or was it different in any way?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Just about the same kind of thing. Some of them were—their views would go back to 1802. Others were tremendously forward-looking. One of the activities which was very interesting was the secretary of the symphony approached me and I organized a success of exhibitions in Symphony Hall, trying to make them harmonize with the music that was being played. Koussevitzky was then conductor. I remember how successful—he had one concert entirely composed of modern French music and I put on an exhibition of Monet, which had a tremendous success because it harmonized with that. In that way everything was quite lively.

ROBERT BROWN: At the museum, did you have exhibitions there, very frequently?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Always.

ROBERT BROWN: Special exhibitions?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was one of the curses, I'm afraid. [They laugh.] One had to think of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Several a year?

W.G. CONSTABLE: A long time ago—I remember one particular exhibition that gave me great trouble. Edgell was a great—he used to shoot, that kind of thing. [01:20:03] He wanted a sporting exhibition, and I had to find paintings and objects that were concerned with every form of sport. This was very difficult because there were a fair number at Yale but they had all been pushed into the gymnasium there or the swimming baths and to see them was a great difficulty because I had to have one of the Yale—one of the women in the Yale department had to take me around to show me the blessed things and yet she had to make elaborate investigations as to when, with safety, she could invade the gymnasium and so on. There were similar difficulties elsewhere, of course. They'd banished some of these incredible pictures. And it was quite proper. They should be. But they had to be dug out. But it was, on the whole, a success.

ROBERT BROWN: But you occasionally did have to deal with someone else's wishes for an exhibition, as in this case?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. There were suggestions very often for exhibitions that would come from other sources altogether. Then, in the case of the exhibitions in Symphony Hall, one trustee was very anxious that they should be exhibitions of contemporary American art, of what was actually being produced here and now—But I was reluctant to do that because the Institute of Contemporary Art had got going and they really were looking after that in another connection. [01:22:12]

ROBERT BROWN: In general, did you try to acquire contemporary American art?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Because there was no need to. There were a few cases where I wanted a thing. You could get it given to you. You see, contemporary purchases were mostly things from abroad which otherwise you wouldn't have gotten, Matisse and that kind, who were contemporary. But there wasn't much. And you had to be rather careful because, I can say this with safety, old Boston didn't altogether approve of some. And so you had to see that what you got was, from their point of view, appropriate to the museum. That wasn't difficult. It merely mean exercising a little common sense. I could point to a Matisse, which when it was first acquired was not by me, but by a predecessor of mine, was received with shrieks of horror when the announcement—one elderly gentlemen said he is no longer able to bring his wife to the museum.

ROBERT BROWN: But this is something you had also noted in Britain as well?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. I think you could say it is universal. You find it in France and in Germany and in Italy.

[01:24:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Your position was not to try to force things on people, against their taste?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, no. There was no need to because it was in various ways, through an exhibition, for example, you could familiarize people with things. And then, in the case of acquiring something at the same time they did become accustomed to it. That, really, is the secret of museum administration. That you have to know your staff.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: The Spaulding Collection, I think, was one of the best things that you did because he had a lot of marvelous stuff.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. The John Spaulding Collection.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That was one of my coups.

ROBERT BROWN: This took some convincing of the Trustees?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. None. No, that was all right.

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ROBERT BROWN: Just say something.

W.G. CONSTABLE: There's a good deal to cover—

ROBERT BROWN: This is January—

W.G. CONSTABLE: —before we can get on to some subject.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is January 25, 1973, continuing the interview with W. G. Constable. At this time I would like if you could say something of your extensive work in Canada with Canadians, with collectors, with galleries, your lecturing. You could pick up at whatever point you wish.

W.G. CONSTABLE: It all started with a warm personal friendship with the former director of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and that was Eric Brown. I got to know him, how I can't remember, but he fastened onto me because it gave him somebody in England, and it gave him a personal connection with a great English gallery. He made a point of coming to England frequently to see what was in the market and generally to see what was doing in the museum field. So it gave him a friend, a personal friend to whom he could talk about these things. So I used to hear a good deal about the Canadian situation from him.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in the late 1920s? [00:01:58]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That's it. Also, he would get from me a good deal of the information he wanted. Now, that was the beginning, but it was a personal connection. Though, I got to know all the people at Ottawa, and when Eric died, I succeeded in this informal relation with the previous assistant director, Harry McCurry, and he, again, used to come to me in England and I was invited for the second or third time to come out to Canada and this time Harry took me right across Canada. So I am one of the people who have been literally from sea to sea, calling at some twenty places en route and meeting Canadians of every kind or shape and, I say, color. But certainly every kind of political opinion and kind of interest. But, on the whole, it was a most stimulating visit.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this a lecture tour?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I lectured whenever a lecture was desirable. I got half a dozen lectures ready and then it was up to Harry. He'd talk to the local people. Generally they did want a lecture, perhaps two or three. But I got—and I could do it, give them. But it was not a formal lecture tour. It was rather a series of intimate visits to people and you saw something of the quality of the people. [00:04:06] What was so interesting was how keen the Canadians were on developing some kind of art center even in comparatively small towns. Of course, the name of the town I always remember because it is a queer one, Medicine Hat. It's a biggish place, now.

ROBERT BROWN: You were there to give them the courage, to advise them, on what they might do?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was one of them. What they could do. And I talked to them generally. Anything that

might help them to stimulate interest and to keep them off being too ambitious but at the same time to show them lines or at last to indicate the lines on which they could develop. Because they had a very good model in Ottawa. Because Eric Brown did a very good job there indeed. Starting from almost nothing, he did develop the Canadian National Gallery so that it really became an important collection. McCurry continued and it is now one of the more important collections in North America. The present director, who again I remember as a young woman, she was trained as a lecturer and now she is director of the gallery and is doing very well indeed. It's an important gallery and has organized some important exhibitions. Their example has spread to other Canadian galleries. [00:06:00] Toronto, for example, has expanded, developed and, there again, this is where my Canadian connections expanded because other places besides Ottawa, taking pattern from what Ottawa was doing, asked me to help them organize an exhibition, to come specially to give two or three lectures, but all with the idea of developing the place as an art center.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you lecture on?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I lectured on anything, dates, anything that I offered them, half a dozen lectures. They'd pick them out. I never really bothered much which they chose. But they were interested in almost anything. English art was, perhaps, more popular than other things. But, after all, Toronto chose to organize a first-rate exhibition on Canaletto. That was an exhibition and I, of course, gave lectures on Canaletto and 18th-century Venice while that was going on and, in fact, gave it in various other parts of Canada so that people coming to Toronto should have some background for the exhibition. That has become the standard exhibition of Canaletto because, you see, I knew the ropes and I was able to borrow from the English Royal Collection. Anything to do with Canada was always—the Crown always turned a very sympathetic ear, always was very ready to help in any way. [00:08:06] Well, for one thing, they knew the Canadians are a highly responsible people who would look after anything that was lent to them very well indeed. They knew that the whole thing would be well done and so we had a good many drawings and a number of pictures from the Royal collection, quite apart from borrowing from other sources who took pattern, really, from the example of the Royal collection. They knew that Ottawa was responsible. In that way Canada has, I think, made itself almost a peculiar position. Everyone knows, that is in the museum world, that things are well looked after, for example, that things will be properly packed for return. Now all this sounds pettifogging and housekeeping. But it's very essential if you are going to lend a valuable picture to any borrower to know that it will be properly packed after and properly sent and so on. Now the Canadians have developed a very good reputation in that way. I've always regarded Canada as my second home in the museum field because I have travelled the country over and seen a great many museums which have, now, of course developed considerably. They were late in the field because they were handicapped by financial considerations. [00:10:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What were they when you first went there? Many of them were very small?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Very small, some were.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of collections might they have?

W.G. CONSTABLE: They generally had miscellaneous collections built up from local collectors, of whom there were a fair number. But, of course, the same man in Ottawa, would have perhaps 30 or 40 pictures in his house and those would go up to the local museum. Well, keep that up long enough, and do some buying, and you can soon get together quite a decent collection. But the local collectors have been quite important in Canada. I should get their names. Their names don't matter. They wouldn't mean anything to anybody. But they were great men in their community and wealthy men. Very often, generally, if I was anywhere near, I'd be brought in to talk to them and tell them something about the local situation. But actually, of course, Canada got far nearer to England than it was when I first went there. Not physically nearer, but psychologically nearer. Canadians think nothing of or thought nothing about stepping on the boat and saying goodbye to any Canadian port and going to England. [00:12:00] I found, when I was going there with fair regularity, a dozen Canadians on board, both ways. In that way they did keep up a good deal of touch with England. Much more than with France.

ROBERT BROWN: In other words, their tastes then, as collectors, would have been pretty similar to those then current in England. Is that correct?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Except that they knew they couldn't get the things they'd like to have. For example, you can't buy a good Sir Joshua Reynolds. They just abandoned that until some wealthy man in Canada could plunk down the money. Then, he'd get it. Ultimately it would come to the local museum. There was a good deal of that. Well, that happened in Fredericton. That was rather an interesting example for the whole of the Fredericton collection was built up by Beaverbrook and Beaverbrook never hesitated over money. I remember on typical example of his boldness and it amused me. I had not had to do with that kind of tycoon. This is not on the record.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd like me to—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, it shows what a measure of a man he was. People were rather frightened of him. I never was. I thought he was a deeply interesting man with wide experience and pity, and very tough. [00:14:04] Anyhow, he'd go to Scottborough's one day. He took a big daiquiri. He said, "Pretty good daiquiri, that." I said, "It's not a good daiquiri at all. It's quite a bad one." "Oh," he said. "What's wrong with it?" and he was very angry. I said, "There's not enough rum." Then, typical of him, a few hours later, he said, "You were quite right. There wasn't enough rum in the daiquiri." And afterwards, if you had a daiquiri at his house, there would be the proper amount or rum. Now that's, in a way, rather endearing. Though people were afraid of him because he would blare out.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he always intend to endow Fredericton with his collection?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He was very attached to his birthplace?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That was it, you see. He'd actually built a gallery there, paid for the gallery quite a bit. One of the first things he asked me to do was to come over and inspect that gallery. Well, it was built by a local architect, an eminent architect. He'd never built a gallery before, so a good many changes had to be made. The kind of thing he didn't realize, you've got to have doors big enough for a big picture to get in and the same way for a big picture to get out. [00:16:00] He hadn't thought of that kind of thing. He didn't know what gallery work was. Well, we managed to get all that and the necessity of it. This was a good example of how Beaverbrook worked. I happened to say quite casually, "There's a first rate Sir Joshua coming up at Christie's." He said, "What is it?" I told him it was a very good portrait. I knew it. "Oh," he said, "I'll get it." then and there, on the telephone, he got hold of one of his people in Fleet Street and told them exactly how much he'd go and it was a big sum. He got it and there it hangs in the Fredericton Gallery. All this was one, I would say, in a quarter of an hour.

ROBERT BROWN: He was an exceptionally willful man, wasn't he?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Also, when he made his mind up he didn't hesitate and he knew enough, I suppose, about me to know that this was a good thing and anyhow it had a beautiful history. It was a really good buy and I gave him a price within which he wouldn't be swindled if he went quite high. He just went ahead and got it and got it on the telephone.

ROBERT BROWN: In a quarter of an hour.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That was very typical of him.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of a collection was he trying to build? Certain schools, certain periods?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Mixed. The line that he was going for was a good picture, a collection of good pictures. [00:18:01] I must say he was not interested in modern painting at all. It was old masters. Not very old, some of them. But he was very interested in the English 18th century and if anything at all good came along that way he'd try to get it. The whole setup, of course, at Fredericton was interesting. You see, Beaverbrook was a Presbyterian. People don't often realize that. His father was a Presbyterian minister. How shall I say, a good Scotch Presbyterian atmosphere. He didn't practice it at all but the kind of attitude which you find in a solid Scotch town managed to pervade in Fredericton, much to our amusement. I used to know Scotland fairly well. This same kind of—but that was only heightening the whole area of the Maritimes where the whole atmosphere is non-conformist. There was a great deal of French and Huguenot and then—one of his great friends was always known as The Brigadier. The Brigadier was a real Brigadier, a member of White's. I knew him well then in England. Beaverbrook got hold of him and gave him the local paper which he edited. [00:20:01] That, again, was very well done. This is a side of Beaverbrook which—and it was a very generous side. I liked him. I could quite see how Winston Churchill had a great faith in him because, when you set him on doing something, nothing could hold him back and God forbid that the guy should ever be a prime minister. If he had been in Winston's position, I know he'd hold only a half a percent of the people. "We must get this done!" And heaven and earth would be moved. Except, oddly enough, in a small country town in England, a historic town in the south of England, the former site of an abbey, two women live. One is a very good painter—and the other one is a former journalist in Fleet Street and worked for Beaverbrook. She always stood up to Beaverbrook and she'd always get everything she wanted. He liked it, you see. He'd say he wanted an article of a certain kind and she'd say, "I'm not going to do it." And didn't. He accepted that because she'd proved herself to be a good, first-rate journalist and incorruptible and he knew—well, I once said to her, "Didn't you think he'd kick you out?" "Oh, no. There was no risk of that," she said. "I knew and he knew that I had only to walk out the door of the *Daily Express* to have half a dozen papers offering me jobs." There you saw the practical side of Beaverbrook. He knew when he had got a first-rate woman writer. [00:22:25]

ROBERT BROWN: This same thing carried over to the way he went about acquiring his collection?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He wanted first-rate and he brought in people like yourself to tell him whether he could have it.

W.G. CONSTABLE: To advise him. The only thing that disappointed him was that he couldn't always get what he wanted. So he might bid at auction but somebody else would bid more. The rich man loose in the art market has a lot to learn. There was a very, very wealthy man in this city who was very anxious to give to the museum here, in Boston, two first-rate English pictures. A Turner and a Constable. So I set myself to look, to look out for these things. And at one point in history, this was a long time, a good long time ago, a group of Turners came into the market, which had been bought by that institution donkey's years ago, from Turner himself. You couldn't have a better history. So we discussed—but this has it's amusing side—what should be done. [00:24:01] At the auction somebody had to bid and I said to him, "Should I get a dealer to bid for them?" "No." He looked rather shame-faced and he'd got a business associate with him who laughed and then said, "Bob, you don't know Mr. X. He's been bidding all his life." He said, "He buys potato fields and so on by the score. He's very used to auction rooms." And finally, rather shame-facedly, my friend said he'd like to try his hand. Anyhow, he went to the auction and came back empty-handed. It was for a very simple reason. He and I had fixed the sums, you see. I didn't want him to be swindled. We'd fixed quite high prices to which he could go and not beyond. They'd all gone beyond it. But he had, really he had. [They laugh.] I was in New York only a day or two afterwards and one of the great English dealers who had come over to bid especially, said, "Who was that remarkable collector? He out-bid everybody." They finally had bought them, from a firm I knew wouldn't have held back. So he didn't get any but he was rather amused. Because I asked him about his account. He said, "Those fellows didn't know anything about auctions. I made them all pay about twice what they'd wanted to pay for them. You know, I just bid them up." [They laugh.] [00:26:09]

ROBERT BROWN: The joy of bidding up was more than acquiring the paintings.

W.G. CONSTABLE: That's one example of the kind—it's a pity because they were very good Turners.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think Beaverbrook particularly liked 18th-century English things? Because men in this country in the twenties, such as Huntington, bought heavily in that era.

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was tradition. You've got to remember the 18th century in Canada was buried in Wolfe, who smashed the French. "They run. They run, Who runs? The French. I can now die happy." To a great many Canadians that's part, in a way, of their psychological heritage.

ROBERT BROWN: And the 18th century is that time.

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was the time of something that's been handed down to them. They don't over-evaluate. They are a very remarkable people in that way. But the 18th century is the foundation of their country on which they built. That's why.

ROBERT BROWN: It's not at all then, like the American tycoons of the twenties who bought Romneys, for example, because they were pretty.

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Oh, there was that element in it. But it was the other element. It was very strong, I found, in Canadians. [00:28:00] It as the historic side of things. That's why. Because they had this—people can't often realize why the Canadians don't come in and join up with the United States. It's partly historic. Quite apart from the French side. Of course, that, again—the French don't come into this picture business. The French Canadians.

ROBERT BROWN: They do have this museum in Montreal. What of that?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That, that's largely English-run. You've got to remember a large part of Montreal is English or British. There are more Scots, I think. But Quebec has a collection, the less said about it the better, and it's a collection largely compiled in the New World by religious folk. Nobody talks about it much and nobody goes to see it much and so on, but Montreal has quite a good—but it's only recently they began to get good enough men to buy the right things. Montreal was always behind Ottawa. Ottawa did the best of the lot. Toronto comes next. You wouldn't go to Canada now to see great collecting. The best is Ottawa, without any question, and that's good. [00:30:00] People miss it in surveying the continent, artistic wealth, miss one of the best things. They'll never become formidable unless they manage to involve a wealthy man or two who—I know all the people concerned pretty well at the Ottawa National Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there jealousy then of the United States' collectors and museums?

W.G. CONSTABLE: There are people—you see, Getty is the kind of person. If they got a Getty in Canada, they'd buy on a larger scale. But Getty, as he got that Titian which—people hung back, not realizing that here was a

chance of getting an example of a first-rate man, a great painter, Titian, which has passed for years under the most scathing examination. It comes out thoroughly accepted. Well, here was a chance but it went at a price. Well, it needed a Getty, you see, because Wildenstein bought it and paid God knows how much for it, but a huge sum which was not huge to Getty. [00:32:02] And that is what Canada needs. It needs a few top notch things. It needs a couple or three Gettys.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your experience with the Canadians and then your experience here in Boston and the United States—can you compare the public, the museum publics of the two countries? Are they somewhat different, or are they quite alike?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That's very difficult to say. Of course there are far more people interested. Boston, of course, is again rather more exceptional than the United States, as you know. I would say, in proportion, more people go to the museum than most collections. Though, many of them want now—things are altering so much. Now a place like San Diego—20 years ago that was small beer. Today, it's got one of the best collections in the country and a lot of people go to it. So, one can't dogmatize and you've got to consider what the collection is in relation to the people living in the area and the type of people. You see, you might have in certain places people who haven't any particular interest or feeling in the arts and someone starts them off that this is a symbol of not only cultivation but of being well-educated. Then the thing spreads. [00:34:18]

ROBERT BROWN: And you have seen this spread very widely now in Canada?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And in the United States?

W.G. CONSTABLE: And in the United States.

ROBERT BROWN: When you first went to Canada, going across to the West, there mustn't have been any professionals to speak of, were there?

W.G. CONSTABLE: There wasn't very much. But there was the real scent of interest. It might be only, say, a couple of hundred people. But that's enough. They had been saying, "You know that fellow who was here, Betrie [ph]?" It's quite clear we've got to get more Betries in this town." You can almost hear them saying it. And they did it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the same happen when you came to the Museum of Fine Arts?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, no. That was a very well established—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Were you able to pursue a fairly aggressive acquisitions program?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. Yes. Of course they had been excellent, the Museum of Fine Arts, in Certain directions. Their—what do you call them, objets d'art collections? They bought a fine classical collection. The classical collection is one of the best in the United States. Then, again, their Oriental collection is a superb one. That, again, was largely due to large and to great handsome gifts of money. [00:36:08] And any Bostonian who sees the thing is wanted, is a good thing, he opens his pockets, does it to sum too. They hadn't had anyone, this is I think very Boston, in the picture world, whom they really respected. They had first-rate people in other directions. They'd take their advice and follow their example. But then the picture department needed a shot in the arm. They've now got one of the best single collections in the United States.

ROBERT BROWN: Of European painting?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. In painting.

ROBERT BROWN: So that you were very active in acquisitions.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Very active. Well, in a way. They had a few fine things, a lot of fine—But they were patchy. I added a great deal to the 17th century which had been neglected and first-rate examples of every kind could be obtained and so the collection has been built up. The museum wrote me a letter a few weeks ago saying that I was now curator emeritus and that I had built up the painting collection and so on. [00:38:06]

ROBERT BROWN: Could you mention some of the people who gave you close support while you were at the Museum of Fine Arts? Were there any particular—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Of course I had it at different times. But there were certain people like [Maxim —Ed.] Karolik in various directions and then, I always forget his name, the man who gave us a collection of modern paintings.

ROBERT BROWN: Spaulding, John T. Spaulding?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. John Spaulding. And the thing was, of course, that's interesting to me, that I helped them build their collection. Spaulding had some very splendid things. With that and the Karolik it has made the museum one of the best collections. Then there were other things which had to be added. Its weakness would always be you can't get them. Thirteenth, 14th-century things. I was lucky to buy a few and, unlike, I mean—the Yale people, who were delighted to get a collection of about six 14th-century Italian things. Actually, I knew very well the English collection in which it had been, and the son of the man who had collected and sold them over here and they were bought en bloc by a tycoon at Yale who gave them, though they were nothing to boast about, there. [00:40:09] I wouldn't have bought them for the museum here. They just aren't gettable unless you can find an example being sold from a collection that has been early in the field or has, perhaps, bought so extravagantly that he has got first-rate things. Now there is one first-rate 14th-century Italian picture in the museum which is here, which is, how shall I say, known to most all the kind of world that has done that kind of a thing. That was a Pierpont Morgan picture that happened to come on the market. I knew that it was a good thing and so we went after it and got it. But that's luck very often. So most collections in this country, of course this applies even more to Canada, are very weak in that area as compared with what happened in England. See, England was a good deal of fun. The English collectors of the 18th century and early 19th, they were particularly interested in that period and that kind of art but the Prince consort hadn't a thing and he set a fashion and the British National Gallery bought some of the early Italian pictures very much in the teeth of the current collectors who were against it. [00:42:17] But they are now—it makes one of the best smallish groups of that kind of painting in existence. All these things show that it's a much more chancy business, building up a collection, and you've got to be ready to pounce. Now the collection here, there's no secret about it, would benefit by an addition of more 17th-century Dutch pictures. Where would they come from? I can tell you some places where they could come from, but there's no immediate prospect of doing that. The only way is to watch and to wait. To take your chance if it comes. We did that for certain things. The trustees here are a very good lot, from my point of view. They always backed you up for anything of that kind. You did tell them, of course, ahead; you had to go ahead and get the blessed thing and get them to buy it. Because you couldn't and I couldn't get the money. But they always did because, well, they are a very good lot. Say I wanted a Meigs [ph]. There's a history of education—of course, as somebody once said, "Boston is largely educational institutions." And the result is it comes out with first-rate boards of trustees. [00:44:13]

ROBERT BROWN: Usually very knowledgeable people.

W.G. CONSTABLE: I don't know if they are knowledgeable, but they know what knowledge is and they've got, how shall I say, a developed, not exactly sensibility, but an awareness of people who are handling the thing or recommending the thing to them. But this—I am not going to embark upon characterizing Boston. And of course you have to remember certain places, like San Diego, have done extremely well, have a fair amount of money and brought in people from elsewhere. I found working with Mr. Edgell easy because he never interfered in the department and he always backed the department up in any proposal before the trustees. Those are two very good points in a director. But otherwise I'd really rather not, because criticism of directors is not becoming.

ROBERT BROWN: All this time you were also privately giving expertise and you were also, if I may ask you about it, the American agent for Christie's. You were the agent here in the United States for Christie's. [00:46:13]

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Advisor. That's a very different thing. I wasn't an agent at all.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that—could you describe that, how you went about that work?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was quite easy. If any fine thing turned up in the market, Christie's would get onto it. Then they would ask me what I thought about it. I would give them an opinion as to its quality and its state and so on and there was very little more to it. It meant a good deal of work but there was no elaboration of procedure. See, Christie's had their headquarters in this country in New York and if ever I was in New York I used to drop in there and find out what was doing and then, later on, when I gave up going to New York, they would write to me or ring up about something that was happening in the art world, in the market, and then if I could tell them anything about it I did. I've still got warm relations with Christie's, though not, interestingly enough, with the people in this country. They know I am not sufficiently in the market now to be very useful to them, but I am on personally the warmest terms with the head of Christie's in London. [00:48:08]

ROBERT BROWN: You felt you were doing your duty to give them the best advise they could have?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, no, it was commercial in a sense. They are a great commercial firm. They were occupying a peculiar position. They had a reputation for things which to a certain extent—now I won't say it's lost—for doing things, how shall I say, in public interest as well as in the interest of Christie's. Remember they have been going as a firm since the 18th century and if you wanted anything, when I was at the National Gallery, if you wanted anything done as regards an item, you could rely on their giving you all the help that they could,

which doesn't mean that the thing would fetch less and affect upon its value, but that they would do things like saying to the seller, "You know that the National Gallery is interested in this picture." In that way they were always very cooperative. Sotheby's, of course, always adopted a rather different attitude and of course they got ahead and made enormous business out of it, much more, much bigger than Christie's. [00:50:00] But both are first-rate firms, absolutely reliable. Christie's, again, always had someone on the staff who knew something, which was about all one could say of any of these. Dealers are not very knowledgeable people with a few exceptions. They haven't the time. They haven't the opportunity. They can't sit down and read books. And if they travel, it's to go to see something with a possibility of buying it, not merely studying it. Though a few dealers in, certainly, in England, in London, like the Agnew firm [Agnew (Thos.) & Sons, Ltd. —Ed.] and Colnaghi's [P. & D. Colnaghi & Co. —Ed.], they, you might find travelling simply for the sake of knowledge. But it's an expensive business and it takes a man out of the actual seat of custom unless there are partners who can handle that side of things. So it's a difficult job for a dealer to become a learned man. If he does, he stops, he more or less stops dealing. I know one or two men like that, and in fact one of them who became head of Colnaghi's, did make himself a thoroughly learned man. [00:52:02] And if he would now—He's an Oxford man. He takes charge of the pictures and doing Christ Church, Oxford. He's Christ Church and that has nothing whatever to do with the market. And there have been cases of that kind where a dealer has made himself a considerable authority and moved into another sphere. On the other hand, of course, some dealers are little short of crooks. But many people think all dealers are. But my experience has been that they are not. They are decent, honest people, most of the dealers. But you have to remember they are dealers. After all, what is the poor devil to do? He's got to make a living.

W.G. CONSTABLE: What was it? Oh.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: I expect you'll—

[Audio Break].

ROBERT BROWN: How's it? Hello, hello.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: —close connection with scientific aspect of the arts. [00:54:02] It was still, to the establishment of the National Gallery, England, of a scientific department, and the leading figure in that was a Cambridge, England scientist, Ian Rawlins, who subsequently became a close friend of mine. There, I became familiar with another several scientists, who had their minds turned towards the arts. One realized the importance of knowing various scientific facts, I can only call them such, concerning materials, and the behavior of those materials, in a work of art. Similar department was established in the British Museum, and there again, I knew the leading figures connected with it. Since then, every institution with which I've been connected has had a scientific department. Some good, some inferior, but at least there has always been a friendly attitude towards the scientist, and in some cases, remarkable achievements being recorded. [00:56:00] The kind of thing that, quite early, became of great importance. Such things as X-rays, by which underlying features of a painting could be recorded and discovered. But perhaps the even more important source, the work of scientists in determining what were the best, or at least, let us say, the least harmful, materials that could be employed in cleaning a work of art. Or, perhaps even more important, the best materials that could be employed in repairing it, or in making it. Due to their efforts and discoveries, though the painter himself, or the maker of the work of art, would perhaps be less influenced than he should have been, yet the people responsible for looking after works of art have made great steps forward towards the preservation of what's in their charge. When people, for example, blast—I'm really thinking about the atmospheric conditions in museums, and to what [ph] should be established to be least harmful to whatever the objects concerned may be. [00:58:17] Then again, the actual cleaning of what is in a museum, or, again, I say, a private collection, is much more efficiently and safely taken in hand than it used to be. A period witness to this is the higher standard of—not exactly perfection, but a higher standard of quality in a great many of the works of art, certainly in the public hands. So here and there, I'm bound to say, they're sad, they're [inaudible] from what could be done, owing to the fact that a good many people still in charge of works of art are not properly instructed in the necessities of establishing good conditions, and of handling of them with a proper view to the quality and character of the material of which they're composed. [01:00:00] Some of the—some of the more interesting things, however, are the things that—information that's being open, obtained, and the conclusions that have been established by ascertaining the materials of which a work of art is composed. For example, I remember one good example. A few years ago, when an eminent authority insisted that a certain picture was by Goya, the style was all against him, but no, he knew what Goya's work was, and this was certainly by Goya. There were large areas of red [inaudible] painting. Samples of that red were analyzed by eminent scientists, and it was quickly established that it was a pigment. It was unknown until some years after the painter to whom the picture had been attributed was dead.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this become increasingly frequent from the first time you encountered signs of—

W.G. CONSTABLE: No, this was not the first time. It happened several times, because I had curiosity, very often, to establish, or to get, information as to what particular pigment was in the painting. [01:02:06] The same thing happened with other works of art. People would find out that there were elements in it that could not have been introduced by the artist whose work it was credited, because they were not known for their time.

ROBERT BROWN: You were instrumental in getting science used to verify the authenticity of works of art, were you not? Weren't you involved in the beginnings, in the 1920s, of—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes, I had a great deal to do with it. I can't say that I was instrumental. Other people had done it. But I relied upon it, and pushed its use a great deal.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about pushing the use of it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: The simplest thing in the world—the owners. If, for example, one was in charge of some particular group of work of art [inaudible] starting a business. And so these—there was no one to consult. On the other hand, you had to explain, very often, to the collectors, owners of works of art, what could or could not be done. Sometimes, some of them, with good reason, perhaps, refused to have any investigations made. But then that was simply the horror that any kind of scientific investigation concerned himself. It's exactly the same kind of fear that some people have of going to a doctor. [They laugh.] [01:04:03] Find out something they don't want to find out.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you begin—you people at the National Gallery, then did you begin sharing information with similar curators and scientists elsewhere?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come about?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It happened more frequently with places where there were less—how shall I say—not exactly rigid rules, but less formalities. A body like the National Gallery in London. There, it's very much under public scrutiny the whole time, and therefore it was very desirable that whatever you did should be very carefully considered, and all its implications made clear. The other hand, you take a good many American museums, which are virtually private institutions. There's no public responsibilities, or declared responsibilities there, so they consequently could be more free to—I won't call it experiment, but to do what was considered desirable and necessary. Since I've come to work in America, I'd say that the whole use, the whole application of science to keeping looking after works of art, has been extended. The results have been—very early in my career, we established, here a branch—England has already got one—but a society, which was concerned with scientific examination and treatment of works of art. [01:06:13] Scientists and people that conserved the works of art were members, and it's a flourishing affair. I happened to be its first president. Now, I ought to write down for you, if you remind me, a kind of certificate that was given to me that explains my position in that affair.

ROBERT BROWN: As first president of this international institute, what were your duties there?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was to encourage extension, say, particularly in museum, also in private collections, of scientific investigation, or the use, let's say, of the results of scientific investigation.

ROBERT BROWN: Where did you get your scientists from? Were there a number of scientists who were eager to be involved?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. Scientists were most responsive. A good many of them were deeply interested in the arts, and were very ready to do anything they could. An institution like the—Massachusetts Institute—

ROBERT BROWN: —of Technology.

W.G. CONSTABLE: MIT. The staff has always been extremely kind. [01:08:01] In fact, our investigation pigments at the museum, they're always done at MIT. They always showed, that particular institution, and other scientific institutions, great friendliness. Well, they finally got something new in the way from their—here was something that they regarded as [inaudible] as unapproachable outside their own—now, this was brought right inside their bailiwick, and that appealed to them. [Inaudible.] Two things of mine [ph] that were made extremely valuable. Again, they knew their limitations, in this sense. The way we found to get along best was to ask them a positive question, and they would, and they often could, answer completely [ph]. Asked them, for example, what is that pigment? And you, in due course, get an answer, which might even consist of saying, "I don't know." Which is—gives one great faith, I think, in the scientists, when it does happen.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you help to set up the conservation laboratories at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you bring in Mr. Young, who's there?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I didn't bring him in. He was there, but I developed—or with him, we developed a great deal. Bill Young—his descents—his father did the same kind of work, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. [01:10:09] So it was becoming a family affair. And the—and I inherited, at the museum—and they're still working there—men who were trained in—I'll call it traditional technique, repair of paintings. That, again, is a very old—and that still exists. In fact, one of the best restorers of my time, here, now, alas, dead, a woman who [inaudible] in Cambridge. Training was traditional. That is, the training of the apprentice, who learned what could be done, what should be done, what couldn't be done, what should not be done, and with the sensitivity of a woman, made her first-rate at repair of painting. A fair number of painters turned to that kind of thing. They know the technique is. One very good man, for example, has recently put an order for me a painting which I'd acquired a good many years ago, at Christie's, which was scaling badly. But he was able to lay the scaling paint.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was a man who had been first trained as a painter?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: How did their—was their approach modified then as this scientific information came in? [01:12:04]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. No question. Would seep through only [inaudible]. It was tied [ph] in a craftsman in the painter, getting a certain amount of information as to what was right and what was wrong, what was possible, what was very undesirable, and so on. How it happened, it's difficult to say. Because I knew, when this particular painter—I don't think he knows how to [inaudible] [laughs]. But he has picked up a certain amount of scientific knowledge. The interesting thing is to say how that—to me, has been how that knowledge has diffused itself. The great thing is, to my mind now, is that every young man, or woman, who is taken into the job caring for works of art should have it impressed upon him that he must—or she—should know something about scientific approach, so that when the time comes, he can—or she—can use it, if necessary, or call in a person who's competent in using it. In other words, that he or she should know the possibilities, and the limitation. Some people think that the magic word "science" enables you to paint a new picture. [01:14:08] [Laughs.] Of course, this is all in the effect of keeping pictures in good quality, an analogous business to medical care of human beings. Oddly enough, I established in [inaudible] in which I worked, I took my method and record from what was done in hospitals, certain hospitals, in London, where each work of art has its own folder, and everything relating to that work of art goes into that folder, including anything that—and exactly what that treatment is. You build up a kind of physical history of a work of art in a particular folder, and if you want to find out what that physical history is, you simply get the folder and open it. It might be very difficult to understand what it is. Activity was very largely in talking to colleagues and explaining what could be done, and encouraging them to do it. Of course, one of the objections, particularly in the small museum, is cost. That, again, I encouraged larger museums, where I had any authority or influence, to do the work for the smaller museum, of that investigative and scientific type. [01:16:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Did this work better, say, in England, where there's a network of public museums?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I'd say it's better here. By and large, the people in charge of the museums, they were more open to suggestions. I'll put it that way. They'd less—were less, I'd say, handicapped by professional standards than people who might have been trained in a local museum, and then had local museum ideas, and then handed those off. Often, to break this kind of tradition, very difficult—this country. There was less of that kind of thing, and you could more easily, perhaps, persuade a man, particularly if he was young, that this, that, or the other could be done, or persuade him, better still, to go and see what was being done at the larger museum, and model his work on that. Of course, now and then, you got the heads of big museums who were ignorant, and with ignorance, very often a constructive call, if not obstructive or ignorant and applied, anything that came their way wrongly. But then that happens all the time. It happens in medicine, for medicine of a human being. In fact, situation is very much the same, and you have to have similar kind of considerations acting with a work of art with human frailty. [01:18:13] So I don't know. Now, was there another point which you had?

ROBERT BROWN: Did you—the international institute, then, how does it diffuse this knowledge that you mentioned? Publication? International meetings? How did you go about—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Both.

ROBERT BROWN: Person-to-person contact?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. But publication and all those things. There was quite a bit in the annual report. The annual report would have, sometimes, long dissertations on particular things by particular artists, some of them very good indeed. I think you'll find every library of any consequence that has any concern with the art would

have quite a big place on the shelf for these publications. All over the world. The Italians occasionally published something, under, I must say, impulse of [inaudible]. Because the Italians, I should expect, are incredibly backward until [laughs] somebody else like [inaudible] came in.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they willing to learn, the Italians?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Who were willing to learn, because he's very tactful, and more often, knows his job so well. The institute in Rome has done very good work, but I don't think it's done anything like as good work as institutes, or let's say museums, in London and in the United States. [01:20:12] They've had greater difficulties. You can't—you take an institution like the Uffizi, or the Pitti Palace, I know very well, in Florence. Very hard to break the—except by individuals can—tradition, this, that, or the other. Still, it's happening all the time, by publication, then through meetings of the international institute, regularly. See, there's an American branch of the international institute, which is more or less an independent thing. It was decided that it was much better to have the American branch practically independent than to tie it into an institute operating in London. Very inconvenient. And so there were independent meetings with officers, but they keep in touch with—close touch—and any major things done by the parent institute are picked up and become part of the inheritance, as they were, of the American institute, which is, I say, now an independent thing, and does a great deal of independent work, with independent publication. You can only say that the poison is spreading. [They laugh.] [01:22:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Why was the international center put in Rome?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, simply because Rome is a kind of international center for the arts. One has to remember that. And there was the opportunity there. Bethany [ph] was able to get some money to set it going. It was also, I think I would say, a certain glamour attached to having anything established in Rome. That, I think, explains it. Because it took it out of—which is another thing that's very important in international things—took it out of the realm of controversy, you see. I can see a great many—well, not a great many, but a fair amount of Americans saying, "Why the hell should we pay any attention to what happens in London?" London people would say, "Why the hell should we bother about what happens in New York or Boston?" But if you have it happening in Rome, both parties [they laugh] will look at it far more detached. That's really, I think, the reason that Rome does establish it. But the Roman institute, excellent ideas. Does not have anything like influence [ph]. The museums, the big museums, certainly in England and the United States have had [inaudible] putting their nose in the air. [01:24:11]

ROBERT BROWN: Your book, *The Painter's Workshop*, was that partly an outgrowth of your involvement—

W.G. CONSTABLE: No, it largely had its origin in my own fantasy. I was trained as a painter, or had training as a painter, late [ph] school in London. Actually sold some of my paintings. I am not merely a theoretic painter at all. But I was then impressed with the need of knowing something about behavior of pigments, and particularly ways of putting pigments on, so on. So I looked into it, studied it, with the aid of scientific people. So I thought it to be useful for—the only collector and museum to have a kind of digest of this, and I called it *The Painter's Workshop* because I wanted to emphasize the fact that, essentially, the painter is a craftsman. I wanted to divorce the whole thing from fancy views about the arts, which don't come into this. It was simply how a painting built up, and you've got to be careful about what you can do and what you can't do. [01:26:00] It's been, to me, an utter and enormous surprise how popular it's been. A number of young people who are doing this, and taking art courses in universities, they all need this [inaudible] book because there is nothing else here. It's not overly technical. It's not instruction people on how to paint at all. I wanted to keep quite clear of that. There are books on that anyhow. I wasn't going to instruct anything on that. But the process—what are the materials you've got to have, what can you do with them, what can't you do with them, and so on. Even a chapter on the restorer—I call it "Restorer's Contribution." The idea of being a man's face to a painting, and the devil—how is it made? That's really the answer to thing to which I find, and certainly I say the restorer's contribution is to a love, or repaint [inaudible] which would be part of the constitution the painting and the looking at.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you come to write *Art Collecting in the United States*? Was this partly to be an instructive book as well?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, the book—

ROBERT BROWN: *Art Collecting in the United States*.

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was a historical affair. It came out of the fact that Francis Taylor, who was then director of the Metropolitan Museum, was to give a course on something of that kind, and he was sick, and in fact couldn't give the series. [01:28:04] He was sick, and never did give it. I was asked to give a course in England, because there was a foundation, and I took the same kind of thing, the collectors. There was no book which gave you all the collectors, particularly the early ones, so I rather concentrated in that book on the early collectors, who are forgotten even in the United States. When the book was published, the reviews were most heartening in the sense that [inaudible] about the collectors in the earlier part of the 19th century were almost forgotten, but

who had been active, and whose fruits were hidden in places like the New York Historical Society, which exists in [inaudible]. I will say an active collector in the '50s and '60s, he leaves things to New York Historical, and people forgot that kind of thing, and the consequence is that it's buried, almost, in such institutions where, oh, 50 or 60—I wouldn't say remarkable, but very useful and interesting pictures, reflecting the taste and knowledge of early American collectors.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that these early American collectors were comparable to those in England and Europe? [01:30:02]

W.G. CONSTABLE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Not at all?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. They had their views, and they had the resources, and I think they were entirely worthy people. I don't want to deemphasize or try to undersize, that really. These were people you had to respect, and see what they did and why they did it. This is the thing that nobody ever thought to ask. That was not a surprise, really. People go in—certain periodicals reviewed the book. This is opening for them, and new. In fact, it was making American collecting respectable.

ROBERT BROWN: Giving it an ancestry?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes, it gave it an ancestry, and that went much further back than imagined, and there were predecessors to Fricks and whatnot. And a different kind of collecting, in a way, because the Fricks and Mellons and so on, they certainly collected, but it wasn't their own collecting. I'm not going to sort of have—this is—Ms. Frick would have my head. I know her very well indeed. But her father, after all the collection, the Frick Collection, and the collections in the National Gallery, were ultimately made by people employed by those men. We shan't say that Frick and Mellon were deeply interested. [01:32:00] They were, but it was a side interest. They didn't go into the market. They hadn't developed the kind of instinct. They were very different, really, from the Karolicks of this world, or a great many other collectors, who collected themselves. Everything had to pass, but it was another—it was millionaire collecting.

ROBERT BROWN: Karolick, whom you knew and worked with, was very much involved in supervising and—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes, he used—

ROBERT BROWN: —in his collecting.

W.G. CONSTABLE: —go into the market. He was a great man, Karolick, at heading up things, and then they all—I saw them all, because he wanted—that's what he wanted me to do, and would pass upon it, whether I considered it a worthy example or not, his collection, and whether it was the best example of such-and-such a master, or whether it was a worthy picture by a new master. But Karolick was a great hand at hunting all those things out himself. But after all the Mellons and the Fricks, didn't have the opportunity, or the knowledge, and dealers, certain dealers, in both cases, helped to form their collection, and did very well. But it shows a difference when an eminent collector here in Boston—in fact, a man to whom we owe most of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pictures—he never asked the price of a picture. [01:34:11] This, the dealers told me. He never told me. I knew him very well indeed. His method of buying, he would come in and look at the picture. Almost incidentally find out the price, and if he thought it was too high, he wouldn't buy it. If he thought the price was right, he would buy it. Dealers knew this. Dealers told me. So they were very careful in quoting a price to make it a suitable price knowing what he [inaudible]. That's, of course, very rare, but still, it was a method of collecting, and his reputation is good. Very good expertise with such [inaudible] they put too high a price, but they knew he wouldn't buy it. Didn't put too high a price.

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ROBERT BROWN: —January 27, 1972 [Brown says the wrong date; it's actually January 27, 1973.]

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: A considerable part of my activities has been devoted towards helping or even building up smaller collections in different places and with different origins. An example is the Watts Gallery, which is established near Guildford, England. It was established by Mrs. Watts, the widow of the painter, George Frederic Watts, and consists entirely of works by him. I was a trustee of that for a good many years. In fact, I only retired after I finally settled in this country because I couldn't go down there with any regularity. There were no very arduous duties, of course. They added nothing, except work by Watts, and things that perhaps Mrs. Watts it was, it wasn't the young one, added herself. But there were various amusing things that arose out of it. For one thing, nothing was submitted to the gallery that was not by Watts and he was an uncommonly prolific painter.

[00:02:00] Consequently, there was never any doubt as to who painted them. But Watts, as a painter, had an extraordinary range of techniques and approaches. So the collection is astonishingly wide in type of painting. So much so that the very eminent German authority, and I won't mention his name, came to the Gallery and said, with great emphasis, to Mrs. Ochs, that really indeed the whole gallery needed expert criticism and rearrangement because at least half the picture weren't by Watts at all. That they were by this and the other brush. And he actually gave names to them. [They laugh.] If there was one collection in the world where the authorship was entirely known, it is the Watts Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your main job there?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, it was mainly, partly, scientific. I used to know—there was a succession of curators of the gallery, all of whom were friends of mine, because it was a very good job for a man who liked to live in the country. One of my great friends there was Roland Allston, himself a good painter. [00:04:03] It gave him opportunities to paint. He was a country gentleman by instinct. He liked occasional shooting and he shot. He could keep and did keep a variety of pets, which would have been difficult to keep in a town studio. He had a selection of cockatoos, among other things. In fact, he was the real—he had been brought up as a country gentleman in Lincolnshire and he could carry on there in that life.

ROBERT BROWN: And at the same time be a museum man.

W.G. CONSTABLE: At the same time. I used to go down—I knew him well. I could spend the weekend very agreeably in the country, because he had a boat on a nearby lake where there was some fish, if I wanted to do some fishing. But, at the same time, there were problems of arrangement, decoration of the galleries and above all the condition, that had to be settled and I could advise him on these and see—meetings of trustees were mostly local country gentlemen, again, and some relatives by marriage of Watts. That was one small example. Well, the Woodward Collection was, that was an example of a private collection in which I helped Mr. Woodward a good deal when he thought he'd like to [obtain] something or other, if it was a good buy and for a good sum. [00:06:13] His prime interest was in early Italian. He did manage to get very interested—

ROBERT BROWN: When was this that he was buying, in the 1920s?

W.G. CONSTABLE: He was buying in the early [twentieth? —Ed.], last century. When he died, his son inherited the collection and sold it in New York at Parke Bernet. There is an amusing episode then. I went to that other institution, then called Yale, and there I met a man who had been made consultant on painting to the art side of Yale teaching. He'd been at the National Gallery and some benefactor at Yale had left them six or eight paintings. All of them were just the Woodward pictures which I knew intimately and of which I had written a catalog. He was disgusted and horrified to find that anybody knew about these things. He wouldn't talk about them at all.

ROBERT BROWN: He thought he knew something very new. [Laughs.] Mr. Woodward a very astute collector to have been able to get early Italian pictures of quality? [00:08:04]

W.G. CONSTABLE: He was astute in the way that he knew what was a good thing. He was very good in getting good advice. He was an academic. He had been professor of education at a British university. He was very able at summing up a man's character and reliability and he was therefore very ready to take a glance. But then there were limits of his own liking. He had certain tastes. His tastes were primarily for early Italian but he wanted to be reasonably sure that what he got inside that field was what it purported to be, I'll put it that way.

ROBERT BROWN: And you had—at that time you did his catalog, you had done work in early Italian, had you not?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I knew the early Italian field, I would say, very well.

ROBERT BROWN: You had mounted an exhibition at the Royal Academy, hadn't you?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. That was another affair. That was Italian generally. That, of course, had a great many succedent, 17th-century Italian and 18th, for that matter. This was the primary thing, the 13th and 14th century. So I was able—and he got some very good pictures, some of which are now at Yale. Perhaps half a dozen. The rest were sold. There were no great masterpieces. [00:10:00] He wasn't a collector who could find the money. Remember this was at the time when, for example, a painting we acquired at the Boston museum which was bought originally by one of the wealthiest of American collectors. He was a wealthy man but not a good collector.

ROBERT BROWN: Is he in Boston?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. He was in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Morgan?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. Morgan. Morgan had got it somehow. A beautiful picture. A superb, but I don't think Morgan cared much. Morgan was astute. More than astute. He had sensibility and at the same time he knew how to employ people. He realized this picture after it came into the market through one of the dealers, a cheap dealer who had been an advisor to Morgan. It was no secret about it, Duveen. We bought it from Duveen. Very lucky we were to get it because those early Italian pictures are almost un-gettable now. They are all sealed up in collections or museums.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, say in the 192's, were a number of the early Italian paintings still in churches or in other Italian places?

W.G. CONSTABLE: A fair number, but not—a great many had been bought. See, there was a time, it's on the record of the pictures in the museum here [00:12:00]—if you liked a picture in a church you could buy it from the local parson, the local priest, I should say. A fair number of our American collectors but, they'd see a picture in a church and, well, the little priest got the money and they got the picture. [They laugh.] No more was said. It frequently ended up in a museum.

ROBERT BROWN: You also did an exhibition of English medieval painting at the Royal Academy.

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was the first exhibition I did there.

ROBERT BROWN: Where did you find these things? Were these in private collections by that time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. But a large number were manuscripts which had elaborate paintings in them. There were very few of these English medieval paintings that had survived. A great many were on the walls of churches. Naturally one couldn't get them off there. But it was a case of having to make up things where you could get them. And it was a success, the exhibition, less—and I can say it because I did the whole blessed thing and wrote the catalog—less because it's a great exhibition, but it merely called attention to the fact that there was a great school of painting in medieval England, though a great part of it was on the walls of churches. And the efforts of myself were less than those of E. W. Tristram who [00:14:00] wrote a book—a bad book I am afraid—but Tristram thought he knew very much more than he did. What he did know were the paintings. And he copied them marvelously well, and did so. But when it came to writing about them he was rather infantile, unfortunately. That often happens. He was madly enthusiastic and was a dear, but he wouldn't take any advice about that book. The only sensible part about it is the catalog, which is a very good medieval. One of my pupils, Margaret Whiney, wrote it. Tristram wasn't happy about that. But still, there it was. It was much better than anything he or any of his collaborators could produce. But it did really make known that exhibition and writing about it, this remarkable school of painting in medieval England, but which had largely disappeared, owing very largely to 19th-century corruption—nobody called it corruption—of taste, the notion of ours, in 19th-century England of the bare wall, of also the austere simplicity of earlier Christianity. Actually, the great principle was that earlier Christianity liked to cover the walls of churches with the embellishments of [00:16:00] painting color, but they cleaned off a lot of these paintings because they regarded them as defacing the simplicity of early Christian art. Early Christian art is responsible for a great many crimes which people don't realize. Well, it was a concept they had and it had a disastrous effect in England because many of these paintings, wall paintings in England, had got into a rather bad condition, and what to do with them? And then one could see how a young man, bred in the tenets of the Oxford School at Oxford, people would feel now you must get all this messed up color—it doesn't mean very much, off the church walls—restore them to their pristine purity, and off they came. A great deal was lost that way. But Tristram did discover a good many and copied them before there was any widespread disappearance. He really did a very valuable crop of work and he was most credibly skillful in his copies.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you become interested in Venetian painting which then led to—

W.G. CONSTABLE: I started that in the Wallace Collection, when faced with this number of pseudo, or imitators of, the whole school of Canaletto painting and they are obviously of varying merit. [00:18:08] They had all been part of the original collection, and it was MacColl who suggested there was work to be done in separating them out. Well, that was a start. Then I found that, indeed, the 18th century had invented Venetian painting: it was one of the staples of a lot of English collecting. The English collector of the 18th century was a mighty man with a lot of money. He used to go to Venice and buy from the artists very often and in certain collections in England, not as collections but bought rather as reminiscences of his travels, a lot of Canaletto or Canaletto imitations, and so on. So I made it my job to see those. Then I spent a year in Venice and got thoroughly familiar with the city, so that the problem of "where" didn't become difficult because Venice has changed remarkably little. One could find out or make a very good shot about a particular thing represented and also didn't find much in the way of Canalettos and followers in Venice itself. You became familiar with the whole setup, as it were. Hence the book. [00:20:00] I'm glad I started one or two people on—the book will expand that. There is one book more or

less at the press on 18th-century Venetian landscape painting as distinct from Canaletto. While the book on Canaletto has had its influence on a remarkable man who went to Venice for a holiday, somehow he bought the book from some misguided Venetian bookseller, got the blessed thing there. It was rather an expensive book, two volumes and all that kind of thing. This man, and you will never guess what he was, he was furrier to the Queen. For years he bought furs and sold them. One of his great centers of activity is Winnipeg. He comes over there, but he became an enthusiastic follower of Canaletto. He's a first-rate man. A real brain. A real enthusiasm and there's got to be a second edition of that thing and he's doing it.

ROBERT BROWN: Who is it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Olivia will remember. It's to me, an extremely entertaining bit—the Queen's furrier should be a leading, really a first-rate authority on Canaletto [laughs] led to it, my book, and so on. [00:22:05] I think that's one thing about it. Richard Wilson is another one with a book with a kind of interior history. That came, again, almost by accident. I think I told you. Herbert Read was planning, it was when he was with Routledge, he was planning a series to be published by Thames, of English landscape painters. It didn't go far because Herbert died. But one of the things he wanted, which didn't exist, was a book on Wilson. Oh, it existed but it was all very inaccurate and poor. So I set myself down to doing a serious book on—serious in the sense of checking up all the things you had to check up. Nobody had ever settled his death date. Yet there was a tombstone in a churchyard in Wales and I just went over to it for the day he was born and death. The date of it, and the things of that kind. And now, of course, the book has been published and read and you find Welsh magnates come along and say, "You know, I read your book on Wilson with great interest because my house is three-quarters of a mile from where he lived. [Laughs.] He was a Welshman and Welshmen are entirely natural, you know. Of course, the nicest thing you can think about him was that he retired at the end of his life. [00:24:01] He was a poor man and he was in a bad way. He could have been a wealthy man but his painting capacities failed. He couldn't turn out as many paintings and he retired to Wales to the house of a distant cousin where he lived. He was a very elderly man. He used to go to a summer house up the garden and he was always accompanied by a dog. He used to go up there. Nobody bothered about him. He didn't want to be interfered with. This suited him, in a summer house, or call it what you will, a building in a garden to which nobody came. Then he didn't appear. Nobody bothered except the dog. The dog went up there and up to the house and saw that Wilson was dead and came down and told them he was in the house and that was how they discovered Wilson was dead. He died from his heart. But I always think that was a very good way to die—that a dog should come and growl, that he should be the person who said, "Now, poor fellow."

ROBERT BROWN: You've always been able to write about people with whom you are fairly sympathetic, Canaletto, Wilson, the early American collectors. These are people you can associate with.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, it's partly that you have to write a book where the gap is. It isn't always a choice as to—[00:24:00]

ROBERT BROWN: In other words, you felt that you had a duty to—

W.G. CONSTABLE: You have to. You see, in the first case, in the one case, Herbert Read chose an artist where there was a considerable gap. This, I mean, is not a matter of record, but it shows how necessary a book on Wilson was. I saw, in Christie's, it was, for sale a portrait of a man who had patronized Wilson, but above all had been a generous donor to Harvard, an Englishman. So I said to the Harvard people, the Harvard librarian gave me, you see, the information about this. I knew about this man, this donor to Harvard. It was of interest to Harvard. Then, at Harvard they, at the librarian's request—I wrote a short account of this portrait. But it came back, came back extensively corrected by this Harvard librarian. First, he worked so hard. He read all the out-of-date books and corrected my account which happened to be based upon my own book which he hadn't read. I had great fun teasing the Fogg people who hadn't got the book, though it was published by the University Press. [00:28:00] Well, Paul Sachs was very mortified, as he ought to be. Well, that was just an amusing by-product. It didn't affect the book, of course, nor Wilson.

ROBERT BROWN: What have you been pushing toward in your career, toward greater authenticity and accuracy of information about works of art, in an over-all way?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I never wanted in anything I had written to go into the question of whether it was a good work of art or a bad work of art. That's a thing people can find out for themselves and also to have them fake things somebody else put on paper. Now and then one can read it almost as a great historical event. When Ruskin writes, for example. But I know Ruskin. I don't fancy him. One doesn't want to waste paper. I'm tired of putting down my feelings. But what you can do is to give people much greater accuracy. Then, when they approach, say, the work by anyone you'd like to name, they have only to look at it with eyes that are much more open. You see and feel much more than would otherwise be the case.

ROBERT BROWN: But you do want them to feel.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: As you do.

W.G. CONSTABLE: I want them to feel. But the feeling has got to be between the artist and themselves. [00:30:00] I think I told you what has now become almost a famous story, I'm told, of an experience of mine which illustrates what the relation of artist and spectator should be. I came into the museum very early one morning. Nine. It was just opened. To my rather surprise, just ahead of me, was a little girl. I think she was 10, 11, 12. I don't know how she got into the museum, but there she was. She was going up the Fenway stair. Now, at that time the great Renoir, the Bal a Bougival, used to hang at the head of those stairs. It's right on the axis of the museum. She went up the stairs. I went after her very quietly. I wanted to see what she was going to do. She went up to the Renoir and stood in front of it, looked at it, looked at it, looked at it. I remained quite still. Then she picked up her skirts and danced in front of it! Now, there was a perfect way of seeing a picture. Renoir spoke to that girl in his own way. Well, alas Renoir was dead so I couldn't tell him. I told his son and he was delighted. He said, "My father would have been delighted. I know what my father would have said. He would have said, 'What do you think I painted the picture for?'" Now if you can establish that kind of relation [00:32:00] between a work of art and an onlooker, you've done your job. There's nothing more to be done, by an outsider. I don't suppose that young woman, she must be now an elderly woman, getting on in middle age, remembers the incident. It doesn't matter. The experience would have been there. That's possible far more than people would imagine. And most commonplace people have it. That's my experience. That's the whole justification of museums and exhibitions and it's far wider—But, you see, many people would be ashamed to say what they felt, even if they could say it. Putting those kind of feelings into words is, there's no question, very high-skilled and it becomes somewhat forced. Perhaps it is forced. but they're there. Well, that child demonstrated things or a sensation that the artist cannot avoid in them. In this queer kind of world—You know, one of the most amusing stories, when I was at the museum and yet it is one of the great things in the Egyptian department. They have a famous red bust. It's a bust of a man and it really is a magnificent thing. [00:34:00 It's red. It had been made with some red clay and I actually, by myself, overheard one of the guards, who were really forbidden to do this kind of thing. But they used to do it and still do, probably, try to turn a dishonest penny, by talking about the exhibits. He was in front of it and he was explaining to an assembled group. He said that the red color of the bust was due to the blood of the countless victims sacrificed to his lust. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: It was a legitimate response.

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was. It was a feeling. It brought them back to the extent they looked more intently. It opened a door to the feelings. That's what it is. And all this talking about works of art—its only justification to me is if it can open that door and awake sudden—it may be a remote thing. You might be talking about a Titian and say something about it and quite unknown to some member who overhears you: Click! And the job is done. And on the other hand you can talk till you are blue in the face to some people—nothing happens at all. You've just got to trust in God and hope for the best. [00:36:00] That's really what Ruskin did. But I mentioned it in the case of a man who wrote far too much, at least for me, but it didn't bother people. He opened doors for quite a lot of people, particularly in his own day. So this is the justification for anyone who has charge of a work of art or has to talk about it. There's a whole field of experience that can be opened and you never quite know where it's going to find its opening. But it isn't the learned and pretentious at all. It may be, God knows, it may be the little girl of ten and you've got to be—or maybe the elderly man of ninety who has his moment. That's the excitement of it in the whole bloody thing. [Laughs.] That you're moving into a field where things can happen that are outside the range of everyday experience, which is, of course, a tremendous thing to happen. That's what one hopes will happen. [00:38:00] That's why I despair about a lot of the art teaching in schools. It's, I don't know, I think ill-directed. I'd far rather spend a lot of the money that is spent on having works of art in the school and then chancing it. Something may happen. If it doesn't well, what of it? They had an agreeable wall decoration. That's something. But something may happen. And if so, you'll never hear about it.

ROBERT BROWN: You need that example of a work of art.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. And you'll never know quite what work of art it will be which has this peculiar—it is peculiar in the proper sense that it is a special thing between you and the artist that, through the work of art, the artist talks and says something. Renoir just told this child that dancing is an agreeable, pleasant occupation. Therefore, dance. And so it is with all the arts, you see. Music. You never know what, but I am getting right off my own. But all these things come in, in all the arts. Architecture. People don't realize how important it can be in a city, to have a work of art. [00:40:05] It is not a question of having a sensational house, but a house that will make people stop and think. Now there's a house just up there built by a modern architect for his parents and a number of people stop and look at that house. He had no idea of creating a great work of art. But it was a very well-designed, small house and there's crowds of people who've got great pleasure out of it. And the architect made that. I never told him. I only met him once and that was years ago so I never—but he's done his job. And it's the same way over—Of course, I think the whole of life, the opportunities of waking, excitement of, not so much excitement, as appreciation about things, are neglected and not thought of, and, on the contrary, they are

very often obstructed. See, a great chance was lost when they built this awful tabernacle in Brattle Street which, I think, is used by members of the original Christian sect. [00:42:05] But it's a very bad building, judged by any kind of standard. And for me, I am not exceptional, but whenever I see it, I get an unpleasant shock.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: —the kind of thing which I hope will continuously—may come, in the arts. Well, it justifies—oh, there's then and again, you mustn't forget the immensely important historical side in the museum work. After all, things are, quite apart—some of the greatest authorities on the history of art have less sensibility than the sofa on which you're sitting. But they have a hell of a lot of knowledge and knowledge of that kind is valuable because it will, ultimately, may ultimately lead you into the—But that's what makes the history of art worthwhile. It opens the doors. At least, that's what I feel. But, God forbid one should teach sensibility.

ROBERT BROWN: It can't be taught.

W.G. CONSTABLE: It can't be taught. It can't be taught.

ROBERT BROWN: You can provide the object which might trigger sensibility.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes and you can do everything that can be, may lead, may open the door. 00:44:05] Of course, history is a very valuable opening to the study of, not only a work of art, an event, just to know how it came into existence; why it came into existence. Someday somebody will write a history of the Greek church.

ROBERT BROWN: Which you object to.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Or likely will write a history of its being pulled down. What are some other things?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this has been very good, what you have been talking about. In your career were you for a long time aware of the need to let people experience the work of art for themselves, that scholarship provides information and may trigger it off, but that you are not to interfere with people's experiencing art themselves. Was this something that you always believed?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It has always been in my mind and it was in back of my mind when, ultimately, the Courtauld Institute was established because I, in a sense, designed it. The whole idea was the unity. Remember it happened here at Harvard and elsewhere in America. Universities were far ahead of British universities or other universities in Germany. [00:46:03] The Germans had a well-developed art history teaching and I thought we must have something in England that was equivalent that would help towards leading into the field of the arts. The Germans and the Americans came over here especially a month or so before, when the Courtauld Institute was being designed, as it were, and learned a great deal. Of course, things were much less developed here. They have developed enormously since. Harvard was always the pioneer. People don't realize that.

ROBERT BROWN: Under Paul Sachs.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Paul Sachs and Edward Forbes. He must never be forgotten in that connection, because his personality helped very much to establish the notion. He didn't say it—I don't think anyone would have bothered to say it. But I happen to know in fact it did. And, of course, it was helped by the fact the Edward belonged to a family with great prestige. Therefore, the study of the arts was eminently respectable. That's one of the things you have to get. [Laughs.] Therefore, to have teaching in a first-rate university is important. You see, there's no—not Oxford nor Cambridge until quite recently, had any kind of systematic teaching of the history of art. [00:48:06] But then, the explanation is very simple. Certainly in Cambridge in my time, so many works of art were accessible, in a kind of dumb way, but the very buildings say to you, led you on. I don't know if you know Cambridge.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

W.G. CONSTABLE: But the backs, if you happen to walk along them almost every day, the colleges and the lawns, the trees and God knows what, they do form a remarkable work of art. The same way, the High Street at Oxford if you had occasion to go up and down that frequently. So, in a sense, the Fitzwilliam Museum and the Ashmolean at Oxford were less necessary there than elsewhere because, now, you see, London—you had to tell me. Now I was just talking about—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: March 12, 1973.

W.G. CONSTABLE: As I've already said in brief form, I'd already had quite a close connection with the National Gallery of Canada and I knew its directors well. They used to call upon me for advice or help. [00:50:00] Then, at

one stage a new director was appointed and I was asked to be official advisor to him. So I was given a formal appointment to that effect. Well, it worked out reasonably well, but I can say it here, he wasn't good enough. He was an amiable man who knew something about the arts. But he'd never had any museum training and my addressing him as an advisor was a very difficult matter and it ultimately ended in his virtual dismissal. Then things tidied themselves up and a woman was appointed as director, and she is the present director And she's been a great success because she had had training as a young woman. She'd been in a museum. She knew a good deal about them, all through Canada and, in particular, the National Gallery of Ottawa. So things have settled down. But it was wild. While she was learning her job as curator at Toronto, I was asked to organize an exhibition of Canaletto in Canada. That became the standard exhibition of that particular artist and the one to which even all the Italians refer to as the one of Canaletto in the series of 18th-century Venetian painting. [00:52:04]

ROBERT BROWN: These were all things you did when you were on leave from your regular museum?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. By arrangement with the director and ultimately with the trustees. I'd take a certain amount of time off. By the side of that there were other things. One particularly interesting one was that for years I was a trustee of the Watts Museum in England. Now that was a curious and interesting museum because it entirely consisted of the paintings of the English painter G. F. Watts, very well known in England and not so well-known outside. But his wife, who had money, established this museum, which was entirely filled with his paintings and there was a director who lived on the premises and a group of trustees, of whom I was one. And it still goes on. It still is in Surrey, in England, and people go to see it and it's very amusing in the sense that it is entirely one man's work. And out of that an amusing incident arose. A very eminent German authority of the 19th century went down to this museum. Came back and said it was interesting but it had at least five hands represented there. [00:54:00] He gave the pictures and he divided them into five hands. In fact every one of them was done by G. F. Watts. It came out of his studio. So we cherish our collection, and German scholarship in the arts.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: —very difficult problem because it is really a justification of museum activity more or less throughout the civilized world. And it is one of the most remarkable phenomenon that almost everywhere, the minute a city or small town even, gets to any size it opens a museum. The United States, of course, has set the example, but it is also, to a large extent, true of Europe. A small town feels that it's got to get the imprint of respectability by having a museum and hence this immense amount of museum activity. I think that's one of the things that's been at work. Then the question, of course, immediately came up of what do you put in the museum. There, of course, the range is enormous. I have only been concerned with art museums. But, of course, natural history museums, I think, are even more popular because that's especially from a children's point of view. But, I think, it does affect, as I seem to have indicated, though I don't remember doing so, that a place like Oxford to Cambridge hasn't got this passion for instituting museums, though it has them and of very high quality, both the Ashmolean at Oxford and the Fitzwilliam at Cambridge, both got splendid collections. [00:56:30] Yet all over the town there are virtually a series of museum. Tate, for example, I know it better than Oxford, illuminated manuscripts. The Fitzwilliam at Cambridge has a splendid collection, one way and another, but each individual college will have ten, fifteen, twenty manuscripts of superb quality. Now my own college has a number of paintings of a very unusual kind. One whole room, bigger than this room, is given up to the works of Samuel Butler, who was actually educated at my college, St. Johns. In due course, every college at Oxford and Cambridge has accumulated portraits of alumni and those are often of very considerable, not only interest, but importance artistically. [00:58:00] The consequence is, if you're going to see the art collections of Oxford and Cambridge, and its beginning with minor universities, you'll find quite important and splendid collections hidden behind walls other than museum walls. Now, you see, the United States didn't have that advantage, except in certain places, and even there didn't think. I don't think Puritans never thought in terms of a museum. It is a 19th-century phenomenon when really the United States began to collect. When they did it, they did it, of course, on a superb scale and they had private collectors who were in the money, who in turn collected and it's still going on. One can see—I mean, collections like the Getty collection. It's entirely a collection of our day, though covering an enormously wide range. And so the total mass of works of art, and I am thinking entirely in terms of art museums in the United States, mounted up tremendously, quickly, and even in small cities. So you find a local, call him a local patron. [01:00:00] He'll form a collection, a collection is the thing you have. And there's the basis of your art museum. And so, even small cities, such as the cities of New Hampshire, they all have their museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you had to do with any modern American collectors?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. All the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Are there any you can—

W.G. CONSTABLE: I advised. That's really one of the curator's, or ought to be, one of his chief jobs is helping collectors, advising them as to the quality and character of what they collect. Of course, you come across very interesting figures. I may have mentioned Mr. Woodward. He's one.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in Cambridge, wasn't it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. He was a member of a famous Boston family, and he got quite a fair collection of pictures, some of which he collected himself, some inherited. And incidentally, all of them that we wished to have, came to the museum. But he was a very interesting figure because he was a devoted son of Harvard. He was really a collector of books rather than pictures, and his books, his library, all went to Harvard. [01:02:03] But he was unusual in this way, that not only had he been at Harvard himself, but when he finished at Harvard he went to Oxford, but not as one of these extraordinary birds with special—he went just as an ordinary, everyday fellow and stayed his four years at Oxford. He went to one of the great colleges there, Balliol, when he was there. He earned a mastership at that college of Jowett. To have met a man here in Boston who could have been at Balliol and had known Jowett, was a very rare event. And particularly so because Jowett had many, this is all much more museum than you'd think, Jowett had an extraordinarily wide range of friendships among the great Victorian figures. He'd ask them to lunch or to stay with him. Lunch on Sunday was the great time. He'd then ask two or three undergraduates and this particular man, a Bostonian, was among those who were regularly invited. He had sat next to Tennyson on two or three occasions and could tell you stories about Tennyson, some of them, by no means, all of them evaluations of Tennyson. Some of them would not please people nowadays when reference to that great Victorian character is diminished. [01:04:05] He could tell you about, though that was a remarkable incident in my museum career, the—heavens, his name will come when I'm not thinking. I know him so well.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it Spaulding?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It wasn't. No, I think it's best left—if I had got a really elderly Bostonian here, they'd say Mr. So-and-So at once. He was that degree of Tydean or if I'd got an Adams here. As an Adams he'd have known who it was. He may not know him. You know how all Bostonians know each other, or know of, particularly in the younger generation they would know of him. It will come. My wife will have it.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he an unusually urbane man for an American collector or a knowledgeable man?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. He was a typical Bostonian. If you think of them as they are, an urbane race, he certainly was. But he wasn't a collector on a large scale. He'd got about perhaps twenty pictures in his house. I picked out the ones we wanted at the museum and they were left in his will to the museum. Now that is one of the things that every curator of paintings or director of a smaller museum has got to keep his eyes constantly open to people who have things that he wants. [01:06:01] He's got to cultivate their friendship and arrange, as far as he can, that those things should come to his museum. Now that's one of the methods of collecting that's often forgotten but it's very important. You see, the Boston Museum was benefitted by a superb collection of modern pictures. We'd always sort of held off Impressionists and Post-Impressionists because we knew that this collection, about 200 paintings, was coming to the museum. so, though people who didn't know would say, "Why doesn't' the museum buy this, that, or the other?" You couldn't say. You have to be tactful because Mr. X, and here again my mind simply won't pursue this name, would certainly not have liked it. He might have decided to leave the things away from the museum, if you spread it about that he was going to leave them. So you had to be careful and cautious. But knowing what he did, and he left not only a great, a large number of modern 19th century paintings, mostly French, but also a superb group of Far Eastern prints and paintings. He was a collector on a large scale and a very quiet scale, and there are far more of those about than people imagine. I had an interesting experience [01:08:00]—oh, it shows what my mind is, at just this moment today—the place that teaches technique and everything. What's the big building that's just over the other side of the river from Harvard? You go over the bridge.

ROBERT BROWN: Boston University?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It isn't a university. I'll remember it in a minute. Anyhow, it's a huge place of the highest standing. They thought they'd like to have an exhibition of works of art owned by their alumni and so they gave me the names they'd drawn up of the alumni, and with that information there was, and I had the interesting job of going around the houses of these people, mainly connected with science and business, and seeing, in some cases, as many as twenty pictures, mainly modern, but which they'd bought and collected. We had a very good exhibition. In fact, that opens up the whole business. That's one of the most important sides of a museum man's work, the organizing of exhibitions. You've always got to keep your mind open as to a possible exhibition, how it can be organized and where you can get the things and whether it will be of interest. Some of them turn out to be queer. I was asked, when I was curator, to get up an exhibition of sporting pictures. [01:10:05] at first sight that would seem to be a very rich vein to cultivate. Actually, it was very difficult. One of the reasons was—Yale had a great many. You'd never guessed where they hanged them—in the gymnasium. But you can't go into the

gymnasium and look at them because the person who was in charge of those pictures was a woman and she could only go into the gymnasium at stated hours. Therefore you've got to wait until she's able to go into the gymnasium to show you what they've got. That's the kind of trial which you have. But the exhibition was a reasonable success. But you are always having to think up the subject and where you can get the material.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were at the Boston Museum, did you do very much in the way of acquisition or exhibition of American paintings?

W.G. CONSTABLE: A good deal.

ROBERT BROWN: There was the Copley catalog produced in 1938. Was there a Copley—the museum had many of those, too. Could you describe some of those American painting acquisitions and exhibitions?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Many of these were simply bought direct—you are referring to the Karolik group?

ROBERT BROWN: I was thinking of the Copley as well.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, no. That was due, almost entirely, to Mrs. Parker. [01:12:00] One of the things that I emphasized is that in a department, like the paintings department, that the various people should specialize. Now, my particular field was European painting, and was bound to be, and that's where I concentrated. For acquisition purposes I watched European sales. I watched all the dealers in New York. That was in fact one of the biggest chores one had. I had to go to see the dealers regularly, and the same here, and see what they'd got. But Mrs. Parker knows her American painting extremely well and so we bought a good many. For example, I found, in fact I rather concentrated on buying or enriching our American collection because we had practically nothing. The Boston Museum hadn't got any. So I went out to try and get a first-rate Whistler, which we did manage to, and one or two of the greater American painters. So that painting is, on the whole, American painting, is well-represented. The Karolik Collection, which is exclusively American, helped. That was American of the earlier part of the 19th century. These were looked down upon and despised and it is due to Karolik that they have now attained the rank and the consideration which they deserve. That again was pretty hard work. It meant visiting collectors, not collectors so much as dealers, and very often small dealers, though highly reputable dealers, who had, call it a practice, where they were selling these looked-down-upon American paintings. [01:14:16] They knew where they were and the people who had them and who could find them. Karolik was himself a tremendous figure in digging them out, and then I'd go and see them or they'd be brought to see me and this way they built up this collection, about 200 American paintings. You collect where you can, and how you can, and according to your might [ph]—I looked at the collection here and saw that its great weakness was the 17th century. This is among the great figures. So among the things I set myself to try and get, and it wasn't easy, for by this time, of course, they were much sought after. But we managed to get two or three examples of Rubens. He wasn't represented in the museum at all, very much strengthened our group of Rembrandts. And so on. We enriched the 17th century. In fact, I can say that by now the 17th century in the museum is very well represented indeed. But it wasn't easy. You had to watch the sales, particularly at Christie's and Sotheby's and also you had to know what was in private collections. Then you had to approach the owner. [01:16:01] You didn't wait until he sold. You went to him and said to him, "Would you ever think of selling?" In most cases, they were very glad, particularly if you choose your moment rightly. After I left the museum, that was boggled. They didn't realize that if you watch the financial position of certain collectors, particularly in Europe. If you realize that you can go and talk to a man and you say, "Now, you have to pay X dollars or pounds or francs or God knows what, in taxes. What about selling?" Some of our best buys were done in that way. There was a famous collection of works by Canaletto that was held by a group of trustees. I knew they'd have to pay taxes. So I went to the senior trustee and said we'd buy it. We bought our beautiful Canaletto direct from them. In that way you got some of the finest things. We bought a magnificent Poussin. I'm just giving you these examples as to how one went about collecting. It's a far more strenuous thing than people imagine.

ROBERT BROWN: You had an exceptionally wide knowledge of where things were, didn't you?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I had, yes. But then I specialized on that, up to a point, in my life. I had always taken every opportunity to visit a collection, a private collection and also to visit public collections. [01:18:15] Now and then, very rarely, but now and then, there were possibilities of exchange. I always set my face against buying things from public collections. And I always shout that it's very wrong. The thing has gone into a public collection, unless it's gone in there to be sold, which is always possible. But the Metropolitan, for example, sold things that we know the history of. Mr. Cunningham, who knows that history even better than I do, exposed it in the *New York Times* that the Metropolitan behaved in a way, I think, they should not behave. But at the same time quite often it's completely legitimate. I know pictures given, actually, to the Boston Museum to be sold. I think they've all gone now. But the donor actually gave them, specifying that they could to raise money for something else. So that altogether you have a kind of shop, if you are at all active in collecting. Well then, of course, the thing has only begun. What nine-tenths of the people don't realize is that cataloging—some people have no more notion of how to catalog than they have of what it looks like to be at the North Pole. [01:20:03]

ROBERT BROWN: This is something you first perfected in the 1920s, hadn't you, with the Royal Academy exhibitions?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, that. I did a lot of that. But I learnt my trade in the National Gallery. Of course, probably the best picture cataloger, certainly Old Master cataloger, in existence is the present director of the National Gallery, London, Mr. Davis. He, in fact, was employed by Worcester and made their collection a very good catalog. Of course, Davis is a first-rate man at his job. He sat down here for six months and worked on it. So gradually the whole thing is getting much better organized as a museum activity. Then, of course, private collectors are now asking outside men, outside their own collections, to catalog their collection and I've written one or two. Mr. Woodward's in England is perhaps the most elaborate that I did. Some people made a regular profession of cataloging. In fact, they became a damned nuisance, that's the only word, and they'd go around soliciting cataloging jobs from collectors. Very often they had perfect—they were able to do the job. But it always went a little against the grain with me—[01:22:00] that Renoir [ph] maneuvered himself into dining with somebody and then asking whether he couldn't catalogue his collection. I know of cases where that happens. So it's all got its—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned the Boston people as being quite urbane. Had you many dealings with the people in New York? You mentioned dealers. What about the people at the Metropolitan? Did you have a sister institution?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I had known them personally.

ROBERT BROWN: But there was never any—

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. This never came up. No. Never came up and I should have hesitated very much indeed if they'd offered to trade unless it was a very clear case. I'd want to know the donor who had given the thing. I knew the whole staff at the Metropolitan, but I haven't been—I used to go in regularly but I haven't been in there for years now because I've given up going to New York regularly and there's a new staff. I don't know the present director. I had known every director of the Metropolitan up to him. So I really am out of touch. I'm like the person who has retreated from the main center of work and is watching, like in Gray's painting *The Little Victims,* perfect.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you did have a time when you worked with the United States government, didn't you, expertizing foreign art?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That was a whole episode in my life. I'm glad to say that I managed to shift that job onto Ted [E.P. —Ed.] Richardson. [01:24:02] Of course, he could do that splendidly. That was very interesting because what I had to do there—when the lawyer, or it might have been a collector, but nearly always a lawyer, would ask for exemption from tax for something that he was giving to a museum, you had to judge whether this was a real thing or a fake thing and you had to give your—roughly—your opinion, of the work of art. It wasn't as difficult as it may sound because it was only once in a blue moon anyone tried a real swindle. The great thing was to prevent their over-evaluating it. Though there again, they were perfectly reasonable. Very often the lawyer concerned would have the sense to go to—we did quite a lot of that at the museum, in confidence. Somebody would say that—the lawyer would come along and say, "Mr. X, we've got his collection and we are giving this, this, and this and so on. Can you approximately tell us how much we ought to claim for deduction?" I'd quite forgotten that side of life, but it was nearly all done on the telephone. [01:26:02] I got very friendly with the tax people. You know, they are a much misrepresented group of people, both those who tax—and I've got my own particular sort of poison.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find the tax people were quite fair-minded?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Very fair-minded. And one had the opportunity of seeing that because here you were helping them in assessing taxes and they were quite ready if occasionally I'd say, "The fellow who has assessed that just doesn't know his job. It isn't worth one quarter he's put on it." They were very interested in that, not in cutting down. They'd say, "But can't you but put the telescope down and pass that?" [They laugh.] They wanted to allow the bigger figure, which is interesting, as the tax people were concerned, who on the whole, in my opinion, as a museum man and as a paintings expert, my relations with the taxation authorities are wholly to their advantage. [01:28:00] Of course, I don't know whether they were so in other cities. But certainly here and, to a certain extent, in New York, because sometimes queries would come about things in New York. They were a good, a very good lot.

[Audio Break.]

W.G. CONSTABLE: The lecture will indicate the kind of thing they want. Though in lectures like the Lowell lectures, there you choose your own because they want you to get to something in which you are really a definite expert. Most places want that, if you indicate that you do better on such and such a scene.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were lecturing, did you think about your audience or did you simply construct a very scholarly presentation?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh no. I'd always consider what the audience would be likely to swallow. For example, if you were in a small town in New Hampshire, you mustn't underestimate the audience. That's one thing. Somebody comes along and lectures as though they were talking to an infants' school. It's a very bad mistake. [01:30:00] But you mustn't carry them into concepts with which they are unfamiliar. Otherwise they will gape or lose interest. So one always had to think. Also, their immediate surroundings are the kinds of things they'd been in touch with and would differ and so always I would take this into account. Also, successful lecturing is not quite the easy thing because you don't just stand up and talk. Anything but. You have to think what your audience wants and how you can give it to them and in what form. Sometimes an audience wants you to be quite casual and easy. Sometimes they prefer something that's much more formal and definitely made. Now the Lowell lectures, to take an example, they wanted those to be somewhat formal and very carefully organized so that you covered everything and everyone. I lectured just two minutes short of the hour. Now that kind of thing. The Lowell lectures audience didn't want to sit there and hear you rambling on. Now, on the other hand, you've got to think that certain small towns in the Middle West, [01:32:00] what they paid for, and remember many of these lectures they pay for, they paid to hear you meander. They wanted you to go on talking at large. That was so in the small towns of Canada. That was part of the show. Well, you have to find all that out, and the experienced lecturer, he finds that out by asking and then he adapts his lecture to that and introduces any comic material that he may have and so on if that's indicated.

ROBERT BROWN: What work are you doing now at the museum? You go in there occasionally?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I'm acting as stopgap, you may call it almost, curator of paintings. They haven't got one. The previous director, the one who has been cleared out, he acted as curator of paintings. He didn't know enough about it. Fortunately he'd got two young women in that department who are splendid at keeping all the material tidy and carrying on according to much earlier methods and what really was needed was a professional. Somebody who really knew what to do to help them and help to give them meaning to some of the things they were doing, and doing very well. The museum was very lucky in having this pair of people. [01:34:01] So what I've been doing is telling them certain things. You see, they couldn't—they had no professional training. Therefore they couldn't initiate anything at all and the job of curator is to initiate, as well as to see that the routine is carried on. You could leave the routine to them. So what I've been doing is talking to them about possible developments, not that they can do—you see, I believe that in a department of that kind every independent member should have a book in mind and need to write it, but they should be collecting material, perhaps drafting it and so on. It gives them another point of view and also gives them a reason for looking at things outside the narrow range of a museum. There's only one kind of thing but of course that needs some help and training and so on. I was very successful in that way at the Boston Museum because there I found our people either wanted to write a book or wanted to write a catalog and so on. That's better than just sitting from 10:00 until 6:00.

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ROBERT BROWN: You were talking about a new curator.

W.G. CONSTABLE: It's rather interesting. I don't quite know where, but quite recently the museum selected two curators who have been reasonably successful in their departments and gave a luncheon on their honor and each made a short speech. But both were thoroughly hardened, dyed-in-the-grain museum men who really knew their job. I can mention one of them. He was Dows Dunham, the curator of Egyptian things. In fact, you can say the Boston Museum has been very fortunate in having a man of his status. In the classical department they have been fortunate. When I came there first there was Caskey, who had a European reputation. And his successor in the classical department is the present acting director, who again has a European reputation. And Dunham worked for years in Egypt and knows his material magnificently. You learn an enormous amount from your colleagues. This was interesting, in this particular lunch, where they were old, hardened, the two of them. You could see how each was, in his way—experience mattered. [00:02:01] I told you the story, I think, about the little girl in front of the Renoir. Well, I told them that. Of course they had never heard it before. He didn't tell them that the thing that I was able to tell them about his own collection. They have a famous red bust in the Egyptian department. You've seen it, have you?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Do you know the story about it?

ROBERT BROWN: You told me about the guard and what he said.

W.G. CONSTABLE: [Laughs.] He didn't know about that.

ROBERT BROWN: So you would say that the experience that you and Mr. Dunham represent is, perhaps, in the end, the most valuable asset a curator can have?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That, and learning. I am very, very emphatic on that. A person who is going to be a curator, that is, in any important sense, has got to know his stuff. One doesn't have to mention her name, but probably the best woman classical scholar in the whole of this area, and that's saying a good deal, said of a man who had been pitchforked into a position in the museum, and I mentioned to her that this was not altogether desirable. But, as she said, "Well, he's one of the few men who reads a book." And that's the key to it. She only said it in a perfectly casual way. But that is the key to it. A good curator is a person who is always learning, always looking at things or reading things. [00:04:06] And that's the importance of this constant visiting other museums, that you see what's there. Find out the horrors and the fine things. But I think Sherlock Holmes winds up one of his stories, you know, the Scotland Yard detective says, "What's the good of that?" He said, "Experience. It's all experience." It does emphasize that Dunham and myself were the experienced men. Now, you've got some other things—

ROBERT BROWN: That's pretty much touched it.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is June 8, 1973. [00:06:18] Today you wanted to say something about your writing for various journals, particularly in England.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned first your weekly reviews in the *Saturday Review*.

W.G. CONSTABLE: The *Saturday Review*, which is well-known—

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe what this entailed?

W.G. CONSTABLE: This would mean keeping my eye open for any current exhibitions or changes or events in the museum world. For example, there might be a re-hang in the National Gallery. That would call for comment in a weekly pointing out what it was, what it entailed. Of course, if there were changes in personnel, that might entail a comment. All that is material for a weekly, rather than learned journal.

ROBERT BROWN: This was news, really.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. It was news.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you give a good deal of comment on it? Did you give criticism of current exhibitions?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. I did criticize. Very much. That was part of the job. Once I was in the National Gallery I couldn't do that anymore, because there I was in the position where I knew, in a way, too much. I was on the inside, so current journalism wasn't possible. [08:07:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a side audience for the *Saturday Review* articles?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. It's a pity. It was one of the best-known and the most widespread of those weekly journals. Of course, there were several of them.

ROBERT BROWN: You had also written for the political journals, hadn't you? Was that a bit earlier? There was *The New Statesman*.

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was much earlier, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You are speaking now of the 20s and 30s?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. When I was really full on in the museum and art world and then I could limit it myself and besides I wasn't in touch really, with the political world then. It was another world which I'd describe or occasionally criticize.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you keeping in touch with in the English art world so that you could write this weekly criticism?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Anything.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know many dealers then and many painters?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. I might see dealers through current exhibitions which, of course, are always going on. Artists quite frequently. I knew, I myself having been trained as a painter and still, at that time, keeping up, would go and see, either men or women that I knew, or if I heard one of them was having an exhibition of his own or her own, I could go along and see it and find out if there was any interior thing of interest, as there sometimes was. But, more often, of course, in that way, what was wanted was criticism, [00:10:04] as to whether this Mr. X was really producing the goods, or had invented the news and more, especially what he was producing. Of course, sometimes you could get entertaining things about artists which would work in, some particular men or women, but men mostly would have freakish interests of their own. I don't think I ever brought it into a published article. Sickert had—he used to have 30 or 40 canvases on a big shelf in his studio and a dealer would come in and see what he had. He'd say, "Well, you can have the lot, 30 or 40 or 50, and you have to pay X pounds for each." Some of them might be blank canvases. Others might be highly completed and the dealer had to take his chance. They rather liked it because they might get a dozen top notch things and then a dozen completely blank. That was one of Sickert's jokes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Sickert a rather whimsical man?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. Very. In fact, a good many of these stories weren't picked up. [00:12:00] I only meet Degas once, but he, of course, was a holy terror. I never lived it down. The first time I met—I was introduced to him. I was taken along to some—he was having some kind of a show at his studio and the moment I was introduced, he said, "I speak English. Please adjust your dress before leaving." That amused him immensely. That's what was put up in all the men's conveniences [laughs] elsewhere and in England. This was a kind of Anglo-Saxon prudery that amused him immensely. And on another occasion, he was being pressed to go to an exhibition, a one-man exhibition of [Jean-Louis] Forain. He didn't want to. He didn't very much admire Forain. But, finally, he unexpectedly, he went. I wasn't there. I was only told about it that the whisper ran around that the Master was present. When he had come into the exhibition, this was Degas, and he'd seen a picture and looked at it and said, "I was, was told this was an exhibition of Forain. What is the filthy, reprehensible imitation of Rembrandt doing in such an exhibition?" [00:14:00] Then he, a little later, came back, looked at the same picture and turned around and looked and said, "I was quite wrong. This is a magnificent Forain." And then went away. That was Degas. But every artist had his freakish—

ROBERT BROWN: Were there a good many French artists that were being exhibited in London then?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not very many. If they did it would be through dealers. They had plenty of opportunities in Paris. the dealer would very often would know of a—Marchand, for example, had, towards the end, an exhibition in my town and that was because that particular dealer, Percy Moore turner, had a great interest in Marchand's work. So Marchand put up his show in London.

ROBERT BROWN: You were also saying that you wrote for the *Burlington* and other learned journals. Was some of this writing also in the nature of reviews, for the *Burlington* magazine and such? Were those reviews?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. That didn't deal with current stuff. These were all learned—

ROBERT BROWN: Scholarly articles.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That, of course, could come and did come directly out of my work wherever I was working. In fact, the work would give me opportunities of publishing and saying things which otherwise I wouldn't have had. [00:16:01] Also, you heard—I used to go off to the *Burlington* about once a week to the office. About once a week. It sounds very grand, but it was a smallish, a couple of small rooms in a back street. But it was the center of that kind of information.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe who the people you worked with there, at the *Burlington* magazine?

W.G. CONSTABLE: There was nothing much to describe. I mean, the editor at my time was a man called Tatlock, able but no great light illuminated from him. But, on the other hand, he was hard-working and energetic, who was very quick to pick up a suggestion or anything of that kind. He did, on the whole, a very good job. And Holmes, who was editor, not editor, who was director of the National Gallery when I was there, he had been editor of the *Burlington* as a younger man. In fact, the Burlington has been a kind of graduating place for quite a number of people in museums, because its standard of scholarship was high and young men had to learn to write and really to build something that was, I won't say new, but was original. [00:18:00]

ROBERT BROWN: When you came to this country, as Mrs. Constable was saying, you were art editor of the Beacon Press.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: Very recently. He did that years and years later. That was about in the early 60s, I suppose.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I adopted journalism naturally.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: He didn't write for them but he—

ROBERT BROWN: You were art editor. You screened material for possible publication?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. If they had articles, not only articles but books. You see, they very often would want someone to read them and to express an opinion upon them, which was remote from their current things.

ROBERT BROWN: I'd like to ask two general questions. One is, what do you think the proper role of art criticism should be?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That's a chancy question.

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: The American contemporary work or—

ROBERT BROWN: As you see this. When you were reviewing weekly you were reviewing contemporary work. You were also presumably reviewing older work?

W.G. CONSTABLE: I was. Well, I think it's a role that's fairly clear, if it's carefully and intelligently done, and that depends upon the man who does it, that it's entirely to the good if it keeps people's, if it attracts people's interest in the arts. It gives them a lead as to how may it look bad and how they should look at it. Altogether, as I saw it at the time, naturally, since I was doing it, I thought it was an important part of the setup which, on the whole, had been missing in this country—a systematic writing about the arts. [00:20:16]

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: What about Canaday and Rosenberg?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Canada?

ROBERT BROWN: Canaday. How would you characterize the criticism of John Canaday or Harold Rosenberg?

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: Very, very active critics. I mean there is a tremendous amount of criticism—

W.G. CONSTABLE: But you know, it wasn't, it hadn't quite got the—

OLIVIA CONSTABLE: It's current. It is going on now very hard, very, very active people.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. On the whole, but I don't think—

ROBERT BROWN: How would you characterize their—

W.G. CONSTABLE: I don't pay too much attention to them. It hasn't quite got the—I wouldn't call it solidity, but the thought and the experience behind it, which you could get and did get, I think, in the *Saturday Review*, and similar weeklies. But these people, see, Canaday and so on, have to turn out something every week and the more they can make it, the word is almost juicy, the more people will read it. It never strikes me as very responsible and how could it be?

ROBERT BROWN: You felt that English reviewing, when you were reviewing and others were reviewing in England, was more responsible—[00:22:03]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, I think the weekly. The daily wasn't any—the daily was just, let us say, not as good as Canaday. But the weekly, there was this steady current of weekly contributions.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think—I just asked you the proper role of critics. What do you think in the art world should be the proper function of the learned journals?

W.G. CONSTABLE: The learned journal is simply that of any learned journal, to throw light on what has happened in the past, what is likely to happen in the future and so on. It's just the same kind of function that you have in literature or in fact, that Harvard used its energies to produce. It's the same kind of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think that *Burlington* magazine has performed that function very well?

W.G. CONSTABLE: On the whole, very reasonably, oh yes, very reasonably. Well. It had a tough time. It got its start largely from Roger Fry.

ROBERT BROWN: What of the college, the *Art Bulletin*, in this country?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Some of them are very good indeed. But they are—in a way, they aren't current in quite the way that the Burlington is. They are very often preparatory to the production of a large book. In the *Art Bulletin* it is quite easy to see it runs in the profession that some of the articles there are preparatory to PhD theses, which

is not against them but it makes them very dull reading. [00:24:16]

ROBERT BROWN: You don't think they should be dull reading.

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I think being very stodgy and yet not particularly dull reading—no, they needn't be dull reading. But, in fact, preparations for a PhD thesis generally is. They've got to be expanded, to be long, now. Very often this is a first draft by a comparatively young person.

ROBERT BROWN: You said you wanted to say something about the years during which you were acting director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.

W.G. CONSTABLE: I hadn't very much to say. Like I told you rather all that I had to.

ROBERT BROWN: There were apparently some additional things, as you indicated, during World War II, for example.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. It was a very difficult period because the War was going on and, of course, for me it was a new experience to be working in a comparatively small museum and to have a staff which I had not chosen, but which I did not know anything about. On the whole, they were a very good lot. But the chief thing I learned was how to work with trustees. [00:26:00] They had their own trustees, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, and you had to learn what are the kinds of ways in which you could best approach them, to tell them some hideously indigestible event. But they were a very good lot. But you had to learn a certain—they didn't want to know and therefore it would be very unwise. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You had very much more frequent contact with them in Hartford than you—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Not so much. I went down once a month. There was a meeting of the trustees and I went through things at the Wadsworth Atheneum. It was mainly a question of, there, of just a person with experience giving a hand or a suggestion to the staff, who were a very good lot.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever consider becoming a director, full time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. This was strictly very much a part-time thing. I was approached on that basis. Of course, the director, who came back at the end of the war, Charles Cunningham, he'd been with me in Boston. I knew all about him. So, you see, I was, in a way, keeping the place warm for him and I knew the kind of things that would be helpful to him to have done or the things that would be helpful to him not to have done, and so on. [00:28:08] It was a temporary thing, and that was the thing you had to realize and, even with the trustees, who wanted to put things very often on a provisional basis so, when the director came back or they appointed a permanent director, his hands wouldn't be tied.

ROBERT BROWN: This made it rather difficult to plan?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. It wasn't, particularly. He wants to keep the institution going and going as lively as we could. In a certain sense, bearing in mind that the war conditions didn't help, and the other was to create possibilities for either the new director, or the director when he returned. There was a fair amount of that having to go on in this country, of keeping a thing alive, more than alive—

ROBERT BROWN: During wartime. You were then at the Boston Museum as curator of paintings. In that position in Boston, were there a great many administrative duties there, too?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. Because the system on which the museum was then organized, there was very much more of that than the British museums, the chief responsibility being in the hands of the curators. [00:30:04] And the curators had the responsibility and freedom and the initiative was very often much more in the curator's hands. I don't think it is now. They very often think up things that ought to be done and take all the necessary steps, that's partly because, again, conditions were not normal in the outside world, but also they had got then a center of excellent curators who could be relied upon to make the most of the very good collections. You see, you didn't have to go outside the museum to get hold of classical things.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the director's function then?

W.G. CONSTABLE: The director's responsibility would be to keep everybody going. You see, if there was to be an exhibition of some particular thing, you couldn't have five exhibitions going into one. The director had to settle what exhibitions there would be, where they should be and how long they should be and so on. All that had to be settled by somebody outside the curators concerned. He, of course, had to see, in general, about publicity or oversee. Of course, he had specialists, people who planned publicity. And education. In fact, all the activities of the museum that were more than departmental. So the director had plenty to do. [00:32:04]

ROBERT BROWN: But he merely coordinated the activities of the curators.

W.G. CONSTABLE: He was more than a coordinator. He was the initiator, in certain respects. Very much so.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this maintained when Mr. Rathbone came in? Did the curators continue in their departments?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. He didn't—Perry Rathbone didn't believe much in curators.

ROBERT BROWN: He believed in more centralized—

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. He liked everything to be more centralized. And if anything, the museum, I think, is reverting to greater independence on the part of [the curators]. I think the trustees think you get better results. It's a very big museum. People don't realize how big it is, how large its holdings. Now, one man can't possibly run all that. He may think he can, but he can't. And you approximating to—As I said, the British Museum is the kind of thing that people should always have in mind. I remember one of the well-known famous directors of that museum on some occasion down there, a party at the Athens [ph]I heard him say, he said, "God forbid I should ever tell my curators what to do," and I know he meant it. That there was the big, broad things which concern the whole museum and that's his job. But when it came to departments, you should leave it to the departments. That was Kenyon's attitude and had been the attitude here. It was very much Mr. Edgell's attitude. [00:34:10]

ROBERT BROWN: Did Mr. Edgell take any special interest in certain areas? He'd been trained originally as an architect, hadn't he?

W.G. CONSTABLE: He wasn't especially known as an architect. Mainly, you see, he'd been in the painting department and he taught at Harvard. I think, if anything, paintings are the thing he was chiefly interested in. He did, you see, write once some little books on painting. I think that was his—he was interested in the others but he wouldn't have dreamt of alleging that he was a Classical scholar or knew anything about the Egyptian.

ROBERT BROWN: His interest in painting must have been good for you, then, because he gave you a great deal of leeway.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh he did.

ROBERT BROWN: And at the same time he was very interested in your department. So it worked out very well, didn't it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It worked out very well indeed. I got along with him excellently. As a matter of fact, he'd take any suggestion I had. But he did have to separate—one curator wanted an exhibition where there wasn't room for it. There wasn't a place in the museum where it could be, at that time. There are kinds of things which, it occurred to me the possibility, on which I had been very unhappy, is outside work of a museum type—[00:36:10] though the amount of lecturing which I used to do, both in England and in this country, was very large—more and more, you know, the tendency has been for the establishment of lectureships, say for six or eight courses, both at—several well-known ones. I'm so bad, if you know these—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. The Lowell lectures.

W.G. CONSTABLE: In Boston. Yes. The Lowell lectures are a good example of this thing. Now, in Dublin—

ROBERT BROWN: In Dublin?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Ireland. There was a famous series there called the Hermione lectures, which meant your living in Dublin for about six or eight weeks or coming over there from England, which you could do, and giving this lecture once a week. Well, that was quite hard work in a way. And the standard of lectures is high. So, that was just one, and there were several other places where they'd have a series of lectures and they'd ask to give them. Of course, this country has done that much more than England. And, of course, the French never wanted anybody over to teach there. [00:38:00]

ROBERT BROWN: You never lectured in France?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you lecture ever in Germany?

W.G. CONSTABLE: In Germany I lectured, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: In Eastern Europe?

W.G. CONSTABLE: On occasion. I was not so interested in it.

ROBERT BROWN: Mainly to art historical institutes?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Art historical. You see, the Germans are chock-a-block with—every university had one.

ROBERT BROWN: Didn't you also do some lecturing in Russia or Eastern Europe?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. I did. In Russia.

ROBERT BROWN: When was this?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That was in the twenties. There was an institution organized really from the foreign office in England, but they used to send people in various subjects to other countries, paying, naturally, all their expenses and fees and all that kind of thing, and leaving the other country free to choose what they'd like to have. And this may, for all I know, may go on still. But I did a good deal of that. In several other museums people did—Campbell Dodgson, the great authority on prints. He was one of the first to go. His first assignment was in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. I was sent, you see, to Russia—

ROBERT BROWN: Could you describe that a bit?

W.G. CONSTABLE: —as a member of the British Institute. There, of course, I had a most extraordinary and exceptional time. [00:40:00] Of course, I gave my lectures, which were partly to be given in Leningrad and partly in Moscow. But I became very sick and had to be operated upon and I was operated upon by a Russian doctor and spent quite a long time in a Russian hospital. He said that at the time after he had operated he said he would send me to a nursing home which one of the big swells would go to. But, he said, "I'm head." Then he named himself, "I'm head of the Men's branch of the Moscow General Hospital. I'd much rather have you there in my own hospital." So there I was. And I saw a good deal of Russian life. And I must say that Russian nursing is far better than anything that either England or the United States produce. And it was nothing exceptional. It was what everybody had and got.

ROBERT BROWN: But it was very thorough.

W.G. CONSTABLE: But it was done extremely well. Oh yes. They were ever so thorough. In fact, the whole scene made one—the Russians, you know, are far more easy and agreeable than people admit. Of course, men didn't, at that—it's a big hospital and that branch of it, several hundred men, had never seen an Englishman, what he looked like. I might have had ears and a tail, for all—anyhow, the great thing was to pay a visit to see me, and the great thing was to exhibit [00:42:00] your operation wound and then with bowing and scraping, or as much as you could bow and scrape from bed, and in this way—of course, I couldn't talk Russian, alas, but got on much better than you would expect because the doctor could speak in German and they had a system of small wards. does this interest you at all?

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. I'd like to hear about your Russian experience, generally.

W.G. CONSTABLE: A system of small wards. In my ward there were only two beds and the man in the other bed was an engineer. His wife used to come and see him every day and she could speak some French. So every day I could tell her what I wanted the nurses to know and we got on splendidly.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you lecturing on? In Russia?

W.G. CONSTABLE: English art. This was a thing which, you see, they didn't know anything about. That was the thing they chose and they wanted. It opened their experience and, of course, they had some very good people in museums there. Excellent. I mean, I went round, as a rule, the museums, of course, with the curators concerned, and it was quite evident, you see, that English art, generally, was the thing they knew least about and they wanted to know more about it, that was all.

ROBERT BROWN: Who came to your lectures, in Russia? Were there many art historians in Russia, then? [00:44:00]

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, yes. Oh yes. Writers, museum people and a fair number of educated general public. Of course, I asked and the—of course, more people knew English, and I lectured in English, than you would imagine. They were very appreciative of the lectures. They were much more faithful in attendance than I would have been myself in Russia. [Laughs.] The truth is, the Russians, it seemed to me, there's no question at all, the Russians were very interested, indeed, in the arts, both on the creative side, because I visited the studios of a number of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. People don't know much. They are incredibly ignorant about Russia. They think Russians are a kind of half-developed people who are still crawling about under the tables and so on. They are a very highly cultivated people. But their cultivation and their attitude is rather different from that of the Westerners, ordinarily. I think, for one thing, they are much more—they are much more gentle, in the ordinary way. The ordinary Russians you meet in a railway station, or—are much more gentle of a type person than you'd imagine. [00:46:00] They are also very unconventional in a really sensible way. I had to go by night from Leningrad to Moscow. I went on what they used to call "the Red Flash." There was precious little red flash about it, but still it was a good train. But you had to go by night and they had proper sleeping berths and everything. Each sleeping carriage had two people in it and on two occasions a woman shared one with me. They thought nothing of that. She simply wrapped herself in a blanket and got into one berth. I got into the other. And in that kind of way there was a directness and simplicity about the Russians which I liked. People simply don't realize it's there.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you see any of these qualities in their art, the paintings and all that you saw?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. Not especially. Their art, in a sense, is derivative. I think it will be time before it becomes thoroughly original. I think what's happened is they were heirs to an art of, oh, anything, 19th century—one of the migrating kinds of people and they were developing their stuff. But it will take time. They'll come along all right. They'll certainly produce. But at present there was nothing very original. [00:48:14] They were perfectly able. Thoroughly competent. But obviously somewhat derivative.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these artists given good facilities or accommodations?

W.G. CONSTABLE: When I was there they had, of course, you never know what they'd have next week, but they'd got their own studios and were very much, reasonably looked after.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you at all aware, when you were there, of the political system?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I was very careful to keep quite out of that. It's folly for a person who doesn't know the country and who can't speak the language to poke his clumsy finger into something which he can't really—I mean, when it—the kind of thing I did find out, not by asking but just by chance. When I left the hospital I said to the doctor in charge, "How much do I owe you? Here you've operated on me, and done it very well indeed, and at the same time I've been in hospital under your charge and had all this treatment and so on. I must pay you something." He said, "You can't." I said, "What do you mean?" [00:50:00] He said, "Do you pay to walk down the road in England?" I said, "No." He said, "You don't pay if you go to hospital in Russia. Medical attention and hospital attention is all free." "Well, then," I said, "Isn't there anything I can do?" "Yes," he said. He thought a little while. "I read this morning there had been a wonderful crop of oranges in the Crimea. And the men in this hospital, most of them, don't even know what an orange is, much less ever eaten one. Could you buy 200 oranges so that each man in the hospital could have one?" And I did that and that's how I paid my doctor's bill. That is very Russian. They are good people. And all that buck that people talk about Communism—I think, God knows, the people talk about—I don't think, I know. But they have not lived—I was actually living in the blessed system. True, I was living it in a hospital and then rather later for a little time in a hotel, and buying oranges.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were an honored guest, too.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. But I wasn't given that at the time. The food I got was the same as anyone else got. I was honored in the sense that I was shown around all the museums, that kind of thing. I was given every facility there, naturally. [00:52:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you see the lecturing you've done over the years as an opportunity for you to share your thinking? Do you get response from it that helps you in your thinking and scholarship?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Not especially. One does, inevitably, write to you or you meet people and they talk to you, which inevitably, the to-and-fro business. But you've to start with rather more than your audience. It's like teaching. Very much the same thing. It's very much more formalized now. Now take the Lowell lectures. It was a very elaborate set of lectures I gave and I think it penetrated because people would come and ask questions before the next lecture. It was obviously treated as a more formalized affair than I was used to. Because I was used to lecturing in another university in Cambridge. And there, nobody bothered about them at all. Gradually, however, you find they had bothered about them. [00:54:00] You'd get informal questions later, much later, and so on, which you could develop. It was another system. The Russians were, I think, much more like the Americans in that way, very formalized in the whole thing and then, after—in Ireland. I was there for—The Irish, I think, were pretty dead as regards the arts. Except for—it's a very small section.

ROBERT BROWN: Which group was this in Dublin, that you lectured to?

W.G. CONSTABLE: It was—they called it the Academic Group.

ROBERT BROWN: Trinity College.

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. People of that kind. And a limited number of really well-educated people, lawyers, doctors and things of that kind, coming along there. And here and there, part of my stay that interested me very much was not in Dublin only, but with the Bishop of Meath. Now the Bishop of Meath is about as uneducated as you can find. He's the equivalent of a Cardinal in this country. About that same level of education. He'd married a Guinness so he was very comfortably off. So staying with him was quite a pleasant experience. He'd got a beautiful house and everything in it was—the food and so on. [00:56:02] That was, after all, Guinness rather than the Bishop of Meath. He was more than amiable, but, as I imagine—I've never talked with an American Cardinal.

ROBERT BROWN: I'd assume the same. What did you lecture on, in Dublin?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Again, English art. This was just something that was their wish to have some—see, I happened to know very well indeed, and when I was in Dublin I stayed with Thomas Bodkins, who was director of the museum. He'd very much resent my saying that the Irish weren't cultured down to the street, because he was violently Irish-Irish.

ROBERT BROWN: In fact, you found that there wasn't much artistic activity in Ireland?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That's what I found. But only of limited interest, but some of the interest was very intense and good. But, after all, it is a remarkable country and it will get started, on, just as, after all, it turned out some of the best lawyers in the world. They'll get started. And the Hermione lectures were really helpful in that way because they are a great public. This, again, one is apt to forget. That in a city like Dublin or, again, in Moscow, this is a tremendous stimulus to the small group of people who are interested in the arts. [00:58:05] That's how one must look at it and their influence, what they got out of it, will spread.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this fill you with pleasure, to know that you were stimulating these people? Could you sense it?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Well, I didn't—oh, you could find out that you've got an appreciative audience. You could even find that—of course, people were enormously interested in hearing about what happened to you in the hospital in Russia. This was something nobody ever knew about. Nobody that I've ever heard of had been—

ROBERT BROWN: The Irish lectures were about the same time as the Russian, the late 20's, the early 30s?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you continue to make acquaintance with English artists through the 20s? Did you get to know any of the younger, since, very famous?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. They'd come to see me.

ROBERT BROWN: You knew people like Henry Moore?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. I knew Henry well.

ROBERT BROWN: From where? Could you describe how you got to know him?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Just from being in London and being in the National Gallery and mixed up with every kind of artistic activity. I knew most of that—I mean, I was on quite intimate terms.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Moore like, when you knew him?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Moore? Well, the simplest, most likeable, agreeable man that I've known. I've not seen him, alas, for years. And you'd find he'd come into this room and in 10 minutes you'd be talking about anything. [01:00:035]

ROBERT BROWN: You found that most English artists didn't despise the traditional institutions, such as the National Gallery?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, well, they'd criticism them. But you've got to remember England is England. Criticism is part of a citizen's right and if you don't criticize you're a very bad person. Everything you criticize. Everything in England you criticize. The first thing, I mean I haven't been back—I'd land at an English railway station and I'd find out twenty things which to tell the next man were damned bad. That's my right and privilege. Of course, that is England and it's the most amusing, the most stimulating side of England. It isn't bad temper. It's your job to criticize.

ROBERT BROWN: Henry Moore. Was his work being pretty widely known at that time?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it admired?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. Very much.

ROBERT BROWN: Among a wide circle of people?

W.G. CONSTABLE: That would be difficult to say. A wide circle of people admired him because they thought it was the thing to do, inevitably. Just as the same, a wide circle of people who demand here because it's the thing to do. Actually the people who understood Henry were very limited. But they were there and that's enough. I stayed with this, that and the other person who were his patrons and his personal friends. [01:02:04] That was a great thing, because it mean staying with him, which was a great pleasure, quite often. See, I'd worked for some years as a sculptor and so—people don't realize that Henry Moore is a tremendous, a great technician. He could handle all the sculpting materials superbly well. People think because he takes forms which they would regard as eccentric, so that this is a sign of incompetence. On the contrary, it's a sign of competency. He can do anything with sculptor's materials. In fact, it was great fun. I would sometimes work in his studio and he'd handle, when he was working on stone, he could treat it as though it was butter. That's what people often don't realize, that the best artists are the best technicians and that the good artist is the man who can handle stuff, that it will do what he wants it to do in it, what he wants it to do determines how good the result. That is always the problem.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you know others then? Did you know Ben Nicholson?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh yes. I knew him. Not well, but I knew Ben quite reasonably. There were very few I didn't meet or know at different times. Almost as a matter of course I knew a fair number of people. [01:04:00] I was living at the time near Chelsea and I'd quite often meet these people in their rooms and so on. And also those people would more or less come to see me. I was one of the boys, as it were. I was very much closely associated with that, by now, almost famous group, the Bloomsbury Group. I knew practically all those people. In fact I knew that very well indeed. I mean, Fry, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell, and so on. They were rather an obstacle, not Fry, but some of them, to getting to know the artists because the artists were rather shy. The Bloomsbury people knew too much from one angle and not enough from another.

ROBERT BROWN: What did they know too much?

W.G. CONSTABLE: They knew too much about the history of things and so on. They were generally too cultivated. The average artist you've got, you know, isn't a very highly-educated person in the narrow sense that he can be but he not necessarily is, at all. He's really rather frightened when some really remarkable woman who obviously, that isn't to say Virginia Woolf, but somebody comes along and begins talking in a very Virginia Woolf way. A lot of the artists would get terrified. [01:06:03]

ROBERT BROWN: She came on very powerfully, did she?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Yes. That's what I meant by saying that you might be fairly well in the group and they'd frighten some of the artists away. I don't think, for example, Moore ever—It wasn't his cup of tea, I don't think.

ROBERT BROWN: But they could get along with you?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Oh, they could get along with me because, you see, I'd been though the mill of a—after all I'd been to a great art school. I'd also been in a sculptor's studio. See, I was, in that way, one of the boys. I knew what the smell of paint was like and what you could do with it. Thank goodness the excitement of the smell still stays with me, though I haven't touched a brush for ages.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say that, say, in the criticism of Roger Fry, Clive Bell, there's a weakness because they weren't men who had been artists? People like Roger Fry and Clive Bell?

W.G. CONSTABLE: Fry was a quite reasonably good painter. Have you read his letters, by the way?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

W.G. CONSTABLE: You should get hold of them. The editor of *Apollo* edited them. They are well worth reading. He was a very good letter-writer. You skip through them, actually, but you've got a kind of array of all the people, painters and critics and so on, at that time. [01:08:03] Though Bell was never really a painter, they hadn't got a familiarity with the material and that, I think, made them a little frightened of painters or sculptors and was a little inclined to look down on them, which was unfortunate, because it wasn't always—see, a man

who wrote history and criticism and so on, had had a luck to go through the mill. I think that's one of the things that was missing. See, I couldn't say it was missing in Russia or the simple reason I didn't see enough of the Russians. I only saw, after all, just a few here and there. It was missing in Ireland that the painter—that's why I think the Irish—that the most flourishing art in Dublin was the art of the theater. There, you see, a person can acquire the art of writing and he doesn't have to have a very special kind of technical training to shape, the make his fingers do certain things. So, it's much—that was the interesting thing to me in Dublin—[01:10:00] the number of people who really who knew this, I think, about the theater.

ROBERT BROWN: When you came to Boston, did you find there was a similar group of critics such as you had in London, who were involved in visual arts, with painting and sculpture?

W.G. CONSTABLE: No. I didn't. Chiefly, it was the actual painters and sculptors themselves—

ROBERT BROWN: That you got to know.

W.G. CONSTABLE: —that I got to know. Of course, some of them were quite remarkable. Of course, Charlie Hopkinson was a great friend of mine. You knew him?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

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