Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Louisa Dresser, 1972 October 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Louisa Dresser Campbell on October 19, 1972. The interview was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution.

Interview

[Note: Louisa Dresser Campbell agreed to lift the restriction on this interview on the condition that it be made clear to all users that "what I said in this interview may not be completely in accord with what I really thought in 1972, or as I might have changed it later." – January 22, 1988 –Ed.]

[00:00:02.84]

LOUISA DRESSER: All right here, good.

[00:00:06.09]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

[00:00:12.15]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Yes. Well, you mean about other things, so that you can pick it up, or anything?

[00:00:18.19]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, anything.

[00:00:23.81]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes.

[00:00:23.96]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:00:24.11]

LOUISA DRESSER: I was born here, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and I have family on my mother's side that have been here for many, many years, back into the 18th century. So I had a very natural family background in things of that sort. My father's family lived in Southbridge and Charlton, Massachusetts, not very far to the south. So also there, I had a background that went back to the early 19th century, anyway, perhaps earlier. And by that, I mean with family portraits, and furniture, and things of that sort, dating from those periods, but I wasn't the least bit interested, that I know of. I can't remember one thing from another of that sort in my childhood.

[00:01:15.57]

I grew up here in Worcester, went to the Bancroft School, which is a private day school here, and had the very interesting and worthwhile experience of going abroad for what was my junior high school year, with my family. And it was a very simple affair. We traveled in England, Scotland, France, and Italy, and spent the winter on the Riviera, studying French with a woman from Tours. I speak of that because, actually, without any special planning, that was a marvelous background for a career in the arts. And we very religiously saw the museums and the architectural monuments, and enjoyed them thoroughly.

[00:02:11.88]

ROBERT F. BROWN: A latter-day grand tour, would you call it?

[00:02:14.31]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, yes, it was, for children. [Laughs.] I was only 15 or 16, but it made a good impression. But it didn't make me feel that I was going into the art field at all—museum field. My father was a Trustee of this Museum, and my great aunt also, Ms. Frances Lincoln, and so I heard a good deal about the Museum as a child. My Aunt Frances caused quite a ripple in the family talking about the silver piece that she was going to buy for the Museum, and there was a great deal of talk about it. And finally, the family saw it, and they had imagined a great big tanker, you see. Instead, it was a very small pepper box. It was by Paul Revere, Senior, so it was a very nice pepper box. And I think the museum was very glad to have it, but that was sort of a family joke rather than anything else. [They laugh.]

[00:03:18.40]

And my father used to take my sister and me, on Sundays, over to the museum, for entertainment for us, supposedly, and we'd walk over. It was about a 20-minute walk from our house, and I can remember mainly that we would walk by way of the higher curbstones, you see, beside the sidewalk. So the walk was fun. When we got to the museum, one would think it might be quite a privilege to go with our father, the Trustee— not at all. He got into conversation with the Director, and went off about various business, and we sat like little, scared rabbits, one of the staff told me later on, when I joined the staff, waiting for him to come back, you see, just sitting side-by-side, scared had to speak.

But then when I was a little older and in high school, I used to enjoy coming to our free public concerts, which began in 1919, and that was my closest individual association with the museum. Except that when I was in school—that's right, when I was in the eighth grade—about the only training I ever had in practical—the practical aspect of art, was a course in design that was given in our children's department, here.

[00:04:38.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Here at the museum.

[00:04:39.15]

LOUISA DRESSER: Here at the museum, and we came as a class from our private school, and it was a very, very nice course.

[00:04:44.49]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And how was that taught? What was the substance of it?

[00:04:46.95]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, it was very interesting. It differs tremendously from the way that children are taught today. We were given—it really was designed as a study of relationships of color, pattern, and whatnot. And the woman who taught it, who became Curator of Decorative Arts here later, Ms. Simons, later Mrs. Siple, who married a man who became Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum. And she went out there and helped him in his work there. Well, she based her teaching primarily on the Decorative Arts in the museum, many of which she'd acquired, and a great big collection of mounted textiles of various periods, but largely, as I remember it, 16th, 17th, 18th century.

And we carefully studied, first copying, and then designing textiles of our own, to get the sense of the design, and so forth. Then, I remember very well that we studied stained glass windows, based on those here in the museum, and I remember designing a stained-glass window. And we went on to our own painting, but there was none of this very, very free approach. That came about 1927, here in the Museum, with the Director of the Museum then, Mr. Eggers, was much interested.

And he had as a teacher here Ms. Cruikshank, who was a pioneer in teaching children's classes along those lines. And many people in New England followed in her footsteps. Some of the people—for instance, a person who was her assistant here, went to Hartford to teach their classes, and it spread. And actually I see relatively little difference in the way that the children are taught today from the way they were taught—

[00:06:57.58]

ROBERT F. BROWN: By Ms. Cruikshank.

[00:06:58.42]

LOUISA DRESSER: —by Ms. Cruikshank, yes.

[00:07:00.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whereas, the way you were taught was much more of a copying and—

[00:07:03.82]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes.

[00:07:04.21]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —understanding technique?

[00:07:05.74]

LOUISA DRESSER: That's right, and understanding color. We made our color charts, and things of that sort. And I found the way I was instructed very useful indeed for a person who was not going to be a creative artist, and I might have found it useful if I'd been going to be a creative artist. But it was a really good course, which I could have taken much later, at an older age, and probably gotten no more out of.

[00:07:32.40]

Before that, in the earlier days, before—well, I'm not quite sure how the changes took place. But as I remember, the children's room, when I was a little girl, and used to look into it, they were making puzzles. They were putting together puzzles of great paintings, you see, and they were copying, very literally, and using erasers. And one of the first things that was done by Mr. Gentner, our—no, Mr. Wire, I guess, and this woman. Anyway, they threw away the erasers when they were found. [Laughs.] That was considered remarkable, no more erasers. You had to think. But oh, I guess let's say, that was when Ms. Cruickshank actually took over. They threw away any such prop. I used to use an eraser. [They laugh.] I couldn't have gotten on without one.

[00:08:35.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because the aim was to create a very finished—

[00:08:37.69]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, very finished. As finished as I could. Yes, sure, absolutely, as though I were a craftsmen approaching it.

[00:08:45.22]

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

[00:08:47.20]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, the only other instruction in practical arts I ever had was when I went to children's camp, The Pines, in New Hampshire, on Lake Squam. And that summer, I studied painting and drawing in pastel—landscapes, and I enjoyed that tremendously. But from that time on, I have never [laughs] done anything of the sort, and I've often thought that it's wrong. I think that a person who is a curatorial worker should have much more training in the practical knowledge of the creation of works of art, and I think they do today. I don't think you can take any course in college in the Fine Arts without having to do a good deal of applied art. But I had none, and I've always comforted myself by saying that, if I were meant to create a work of art, I'd be doing it. [Laughs.] I wouldn't just be sitting doing something else. Well, I guess those are the various associations of my childhood.

[00:09:56.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your education, after the Bancroft School, then, did not concern itself—

[00:10:02.08]

LOUISA DRESSER: No

[00:10:02.68]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —at Vassar with the arts—

[00:10:04.21]

LOUISA DRESSER: No. No. That was entirely, well, history and languages. French and Italian were what I was studying, and in history by that time, I was primarily taking 19th, 20th century history. And I gave up the opportunity, which was right before me, to take some wonderful courses in Renaissance and Reformation history, and ancient history, and so forth. I wasn't the least bit interested in the past at that time, and I had an idea that it would be interesting to go into the Foreign Service. So I thought languages, modern history— But in college, the thing that I learned which has stood me in the very best stead was evaluating your sources of information, and that of course, a history major would force on you. And that, I think, has helped me more in my practical work, in art history, than anything I can think of.

[00:11:16.43]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was the rigorous discipline, was it, that taught you history?

[00:11:19.33]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, the thing was that you just had to see whether what you were reading was propaganda or fact, and whether it was based on primary materials and, if possible, get back to the primary materials and so forth, the primary sources. Well, during the time I was in college, I took no courses in history of art. I figured that I was planning to go to Europe for six months after college, just for the pleasure of travel, with one or two friends, and I figured that I could get all I needed of works of art by looking at them. So that's exactly what I did, and there again, just as I had before, I really went at it rather thoroughly, and did look hard, and again, that trip has been a tremendous help as a background.

[00:12:19.97]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you interested—did you mainly to go to museums, or to—

[00:12:23.42]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, we went to great—to the main museums. Yes, I went to a great many and churches to see pictures and, well, follow Baedeker around.

[00:12:34.40]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

[00:12:35.00]

LOUISA DRESSER: You know. And I was particularly interested in architecture. Well, in England, we went all through in a car. I was with two friends, and they said, "Well, how did we happen to get here?" And then they remembered that I wanted to see all the cathedrals I could, and to see the sea as often as I could, and that would get us to some pretty strange places. Otherwise, they didn't really care where they went.

[00:13:01.94]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you were very intent on seeing—

[00:13:03.50]

LOUISA DRESSER: I was very intent.

[00:13:04.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —ruins— Whitby, and places such as that?

[00:13:06.95]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, yes, very. I'm sure that I have an innate enjoyment of art, and of course, I was tremendously interested in the historical background. Well, I think that it was a great lack in my study, and I tell it to every person who ever asked my advice about going into the museum field. Of all things, they should study German, that there are so many books written in German that one should consult. But I feel not readily knowing German, only knowing very little, I feel as though half my—I was blind in one eye, really, [laughs] as far as a background for the study of European and other arts.

[00:14:02.63]

Well, I—let's see. Oh, after this trip was over, and we came back to this country, it was on the boat coming back that we first got the warning of the Depression coming along. There was a blue eagle, the symbol of those days that I remember seeing on something or other in the boat coming back. But when I got back, my thought had been, of course, that after this trip, I would sail into some exciting job and go on to bigger and better things. But it was obvious you were lucky to get any job at all, and so I thought the best thing to do was to take a secretarial course.

And I started off doing that, and got halfway through it, when a friend of my mother's told us of a tutoring job which was open at St. David's, Pennsylvania, on the Main Line there, of a young girl, 17 years old, who had been ill, and needed a tutor. And well, it sounded very good, the pay that was offered and so forth. So I went down and did it for 18 months. And it was a very, very restricted life, to put it mildly. But I had had such a pleasant trip abroad, I didn't mind that.

[00:15:36.00]

And in the middle of it, I came back to Worcester. And my mother was giving a party for Francis Tailor, who had recently come to be Director of the Worcester Art Museum. And he was a very young man. He never let on how young he was. The trustees said, "Now, you mustn't let anyone know you're only 29," or something of the sort. So he was sort of pretending to be 40, and they were pretending he was 40. But he was younger than a great many of the trustees, and his wife certainly was. So she thought she'd wait till they came home, and then she'd ask some young people—until I came home, and then she'd ask some young people to meet them. So here was a nice party, and we had a pleasant time. That was the end of that.

[00:16:23.44]

And the next morning, I was talking with my mother about the future, that I wasn't going to stay forever tutoring down on the Main Line, and that I'd really like to come back to Worcester to live, and I wondered what in Worcester there might be to offer. And I thought maybe Clark University might just have some job I could get into. And mother then spoke up and said that a cousin of hers, who was a trustee of the Art Museum, had suggested to her that—My father incidentally had died when I was 16, after we came back from Europe, so that my mother was trying to bring up four children, which I was the oldest. And so her cousin had made a suggestion that perhaps I might get a job at the Art Museum. So I called him up, and he said, "Well, you know, I have nothing to do with the hiring at the museum. You call Francis Taylor."

[00:17:14.37]

So I called Francis, whom I'd just met the night before, and he said, "Yes, come on over." So I went over, and with the exuberance that is characteristic of him, he offered me the job of Curator here. And I was naïve enough not to even perhaps know what the word "curator" meant [laughs], and he had found out rapidly, of course, how little I probably knew. But what he really wanted was somebody who knew Worcester, and it was obvious that I did.

[00:17:51.54]

And, you see, the idea was that this new building hadn't yet been built, and it was in process of building. And it was going to be a year before it would open, the 1933 building, and that I would continue my work tutoring. Meanwhile, I would read a course in art history, which he would—he sat right down his desk and wrote off this list of titles, and gave it to me. And I followed it carefully, and I was able to borrow the books from the Philosophical Library in Philadelphia. And I lost that list, and it's always depressed me, because I don't remember just what the books were. I remember some of them. But if I only had Francis Taylor's little list of things you want to read, wouldn't it be good?

[00:18:45.49]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

[00:18:45.85]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, in the middle of all this year, I heard not a word from Francis, and I thought, I'd better write him. So around April, I wrote him a letter wondering how things were coming and when he could count on my going to work, and I think he'd forgotten all about me. I know from recent experience that—later experiences, that was what he'd do. He'd get carried away and talk to people. So then he had to scurry around and think, and so he suggested, when I came home, that I could come in and talk with him, when I came home that spring.

So I did, and by that time, he'd had the good sense to decide to get a curator who knew something. And he got Perry Cott, who later became Chief Curator at the National Gallery, and who knew a great deal. Francis had sat in front of him at Princeton, in classes in Princeton, and had known Perry knew all the answers. But he said, "I can give you a job. Let's see now, we'll call you Associate in Decorative Arts, because nobody knows what that means." So that's what I became, and he said, "Well, you've got to find out something about the Decorative Arts. [They laugh.] Now, I want you to go this summer," said he, "to the Fogg, and take some courses."

[00:20:05.36]

So luckily, there was a course in the Decorative Arts being given by Roger Gilman. I don't know if they've ever had any such courses since, and it was a marvelous, compressed course. I learned the difference between the so-called Sheraton and Hepplewhite styles. I never knew more than I knew then, and I took a course with Paul Sachs in French painting, which was wonderful, actually. It couldn't have been a better introduction to seeing works of art. And I listened in on another course, a general history of art. So that was the equipment I had when I came to work at the museum, which was in '32. And uh—

[00:20:46.52]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Gilman's course based on—was he a private collector, or what was his experience in Decorative Arts?

[00:20:53.21]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, frankly, I don't know, exactly. He was on the staff of—he was a professor, but he may have had other lines that he was interested in. What he based his course primarily on, what we could see at the Gardner and the Museum of Fine Arts, and we were supposed to go and look and study their rooms. And I remember how utterly confusing the Gardner Museum was to me. You see, I was ignorant as anything, and to have this arrangement of things making no sense. And it was such a relief to go over to the MFA and find things according to the way they appeared in the chapters of the book. Now, I'm sorry, I can't really tell you about Roger Gilman. It was quite a factual course. Then, so I'd come back to the Museum, and what was I going to do? Well, the big front gallery was going to open—is this what you want, to have me continue along this way?

[00:22:02.39]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

[00:22:02.75]

LOUISA DRESSER: The big front gallery was going to open at the something like the sixth of January, 1933. And I became, 40 years ago it was, on the first of October, I came here to work with Perry. And we had to do various things to get ready for that opening and work hard. And what Francis had given me to do was to select from Worcester houses, a collection of 18th century furniture to make an American wing out of three of the front galleries for this thing. We had a good number of portraits and silver in the museum, but we didn't have much furniture. So that was my job, and was it a scary one.

Because that was the first time, when I came back to—when I came to work here, that I began to look in my own house at the furniture, and vaguely distinguished what was old, and what was new. We were living, actually—my mother, with her father. So we were in the old family house, the house which is now down at the gate of Sturbridge Village. It has been called the "Lincoln House," and that was Elm Street, here in Worcester.

[00:23:23.90]

Well—so, I went around and called on all these people that I knew. I had a guide, in that in 1929, Mrs. Siple had had an exhibition of 18th century arts in Worcester. So I could look back at that and follow up some of those things. That was a tremendous help. But then, of course, people would show me other things, and it was a terrible thing to decide whether something was really good, or whether it wasn't. Or whether it was a reproduction or—I don't know how I got on.

[00:23:58.57]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very little to go on at that time.

[00:23:59.78]

LOUISA DRESSER: Very little to go on, and I think I played it safe by just trying to take the things that people had inherited, you know, and not antiques they bought. Though, probably, I missed out in a good many. Well, then there came the fateful day when these things were all going to be brought in. This was wonderful training. I had to write the letters to get the people to lend, and I had to be in charge of insurance, in charge of—and Francis had a way of just putting you in the midst of things and letting you sink or swim, wonderful training.

And so the day when we were going to bring all these things in, I had to go out with the truck to all these places and back. And I would come back from one trip just absolutely done-for, with such a terrible pain in my midriff. I just couldn't bear it, and I'd lie down while the men were bringing the things into the museum and just rest. Then, I'd pull myself together and go out and get something else. Well, the minute they were all safely in the museum, I recovered completely. I wasn't having appendicitis or anything. I was just scared to death.

[00:25:12.23]

And they went into one house to take a great, big, lovely secretary that belonged to one of our trustees, and they were very casual about the whole thing. It was a beautiful 18th century secretary, and his wife used it as a desk. It was full of stuff she had to dump out. And when they lifted it up, the leg fell off. [Laughs.] And you know, it was just one of these dry, dry houses. Oh, that didn't worry her at all. We could put it on at the museum. So, off we went with the leg separate.

[00:25:44.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you were nearly prostrate.

[00:25:45.09]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, of course. And in one case, I remember there was a very big man trucker, who came in holding in his great, big hands, a tiny little—two pieces of a cup, which had come apart. And that was the only thing that actually broke in shipment, and we found out, thank heaven, it was an old break. So that was all right, but that was quite an undertaking. So—well, then the next—what?

[00:26:17.84]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This training then was not exactly as structured as we know it today, but rather—

[00:26:22.74]

LOUISA DRESSER: On-the-job.

[00:26:23.40]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —very on-the-job.

[00:26:23.91]

LOUISA DRESSER: On-the-job training, completely. And those are the days, you see, when there were a tremendous number of museums opening up, due to many collectors founding their museums. And they needed directors, and it was when Paul Sachs was running his museum—beginning his museum course and trying to make museum directors out of people who hadn't had special study in—as undergraduates in the field. And so there were these marvelous jobs open, and with no training. But luckily, you see, in this museum, we had Perry Cott who had had first-class training at Princeton and was well on his way to his Ph.D. in the Fine Arts. He was a great help.

[00:27:09.87]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he'd had training in museums?

[00:27:11.79]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, he hadn't been in museum—he hadn't been in a museum, no. No, the actual business— Francis had. Francis had been at the Philadelphia Art Museum, you see, and he'd put on a wonderful show, installed their medieval things. And so he had that confident background, and then here at the Museum, they'd been doing shows and installing works of art for years. So that the workers here at the Museum knew a great deal about it.

[00:27:45.49]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were a great aid.

[00:27:46.31]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, they certainly were. I'm trying to think if there was anyone of a curatorial nature. I think not, because it had been a small staff, in any case, just the Director, and perhaps one person within. It was a new thing to have a real curator. So, well—

[00:28:12.08]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you then seek, about this time, some other formal training?

[00:28:15.92]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I had to get some training, but no museum training. I never had any other museum training, except here. [Cross talk.] But Francis Taylor was dead-set on my getting a degree. And he hopefully looked into the thought I could get a degree in the Fine Arts at Wellesley. Well, Wellesley soon found out I hadn't had one course in the Fine Arts in college, so I would have had to spend untold years getting a degree there. So then he thought maybe a degree in history, here at Clark University. So I did do that. I mean, I did try that. I took every course they had that was earlier than the 19th century, that would do me any good. I thought it was worthwhile.

[00:29:00.89]

And as a matter of fact, yesterday, at the American Antiquarian Society annual meeting, I heard Mr. Ray Billington speak, coming from California, from the Huntington Library. And he had been the professor there that I'd taken a couple of courses with way back. So it was rather interesting, after 40 years, to see him again. Well, that was helpful as a background in a—but I never got to the degree-getting.

But then I had two trips to Europe. This is where this museum is remarkable, though, they were paying me very little. I was being paid less than I had been being paid down in St. David's for the tutoring. When I came here, my beginning salary was $1,500 a year. But the first two years that I was here, the first two summers, they paid my way to Europe. I paid my way myself after I was there, but my trip across was paid. And the first year I traveled around by car in, well, in France, Switzerland, particularly in Southern France. I was very interested in seeing Romanesque architecture. I was still interested in architecture. That was my main field. And there was no special objective there.

[00:30:28.07]

I tried for an Institute—what is it called? Oh, I can't think—a scholarship that Francis knew about in Paris, but I wasn't able to get that. But he said—suggested I go to Europe anyway, so I went and took this trip. And the second time I went to England on a similar scholarship, at the Courtauld Institute, for a course in English Art, which was superb, because it was given by the top men in the field. And they came over from the Victoria and Albert, the British Museum, or what have you, and gave these lectures. And we had opportunities, of course, to read in the library of the Courtauld, but mainly, I decided that most of the books there, we had in our library at home. The best thing to do was to get out and into the museum. So I'd hear these courses and then go out into the museums.

[00:31:30.86]

And at that time—this was in 1934—I was particularly—I was still interested in the Decorative Arts, and I thought I was going to make a career in ceramics. So I was studying English ceramics, and in the course of it, the Courtauld—And by the way, the director of the Courtauld at that moment was—oh, now—W.G. Constable. Yeah. And he, I remember him as such—And I always do think of him as such a wonderful man. He was so kind in arranging for me to visit the factories in Staffordshire, and I had a most interesting time. And so I came back from that trip. That accounts for all my advanced study, Clark University, the Courtauld, and the Fogg. That sounds great, but it's only a few weeks, in any case, months.

[00:32:27.70]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And seeing the process, such as going to the ceramic factory—

[00:32:31.08]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Oh, well, that of course, I think is so valuable. And so I came back, in the fall of 1934, and Francis Taylor said his plans hadn't been going too well with getting the catalog of the "17th century Painting in New England" show done. The show had been held during the summer of 1934. It had been selected by a committee of various experts, and as I remember it, I had virtually nothing to do with it. I may have done some legwork in connection with the exhibition, but any plans and discussion, and any decision about asking certain pictures—that was not—I wasn't involved at all. It was all this marvelous committee work.

[00:33:21.12]

And these gentlemen had thought it would be splendid—and it was, of course, interesting—to bring together any pictures that had ever been thought to be 17th century New England paintings, and sort them out. And they included some things which they believed firmly to be fakes. And in some cases, these fakes were owned by places like the Boston Athenaeum, and the librarian was on the committee. So the librarian had a perfect right to throw this fake to the wolves, so to speak. But they also asked for pictures owned by private collectors and asked for them in what seemed good faith, you see, and they lent them. And the idea was that this was to be a study exhibition. That was understood, but I don't think the unmasking of their pictures as fakes was at all clear to them. I know it wasn't.

[00:34:23.12]

Well, so Francis said that I was to do the catalog. In the meantime, somebody had written color notes, and somebody else had looked up some records in the probate records, and those were on hand to work on. But the pictures had been dispersed, you see, and I really had to go around and see most of them again. I couldn't see all of them again, but I tried to, afterwards, and added a couple.

[00:34:55.10]

But then the thing that happened was that Harry Wehle, at the Metropolitan, who was to have written the introduction, was ill and couldn't do so. So virtually, this whole business of doing the catalog and the introduction, fell to me, and of course, that was a tremendous opportunity. And Francis had the good sense to say that I should devote myself to it, and of course, I didn't entirely do that. But I did retire to the American Antiquarian Society with my typewriter, and worked right there, surrounded by the books. And it's extraordinary to me to see how few notes I evidently had to take, because I would write my entries directly with the books around me, you see. I didn't have to write down what was in the book. I could—I had it right there.

[00:35:43.58]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And these books were earlier books of listings and inventories?

[00:35:47.56]

LOUISA DRESSER: Of everything you could imagine, yes; everything you could imagine. Say the proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, where a number of these things were mentioned way back in the mid 19th century. And the vital records of the various communities, particularly Boston, others. And of course, genealogies, where there was a lot about them. And the main—there were various things to be done, but among them we particularly wanted to trace the provenance of these pictures. And that meant in family histories. And in those days, the American Antiquarian Society had city directories, social registers, and things like that coming right down into the 20th century. Now, to save space, they've disposed of some of those, which is a shame, because they were a great help in tying up the later history of these pictures.

[00:36:44.06]

So gradually—and you know, it was only gradually—the full extent of the thinking that was fully accepted in early American painting became clear to me. I'd looked at a few books, and seen these pictures represented and took them at face value, as I had been doing my work in the museum to date. And the catalog of 100 colonial portraits—I think that the MFA got out in honor of the 300th anniversary—they are about half full of fakes, and yet you didn't realize it. Everything was published by the most authoritative people.

[00:37:37.61]

But you see, this committee, it consisted of—John Hill Morgan was a member of it, who had bought some of these pictures and was free to try and ferret out the truth. And Mr. Charles Knowles Bolton, who'd been so interested he wrote *Portraits of the Founders*, and he was very much interested in clearing things up. The Boston Athenaeum had been seriously done-in.

[00:38:08.15]

And we also had on our committee Henry Wilder Foote. And Henry Wilder Foote was in a difficult position, because he was convinced about Jeremiah Dummer as a painter, and the self-portrait—so-called Jeremiah Dummer, aren't fake—and his wife, were in the exhibition. And there was all this business of playing ball with each of these committee members, and working the thing out. And then, when I had—you see, Mr. Morgan had done a wonderful job. He had—he chose to pay for the investigations, and he had clerks to do it. And he would search the records, to try and locate individuals who were supposed to have owned these pictures in later days, you see.

[00:39:00.38]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. It was that flagrant then?

[00:39:01.43]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, very flagrant.

[00:39:02.24]

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were nonexistent individuals?

[00:39:03.62]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yeah, exactly. And these people—well, the Dummer, particularly, is a very good example of the thing being absolutely faked up, and the fakers were so clever. If they'd only put their minds onto other things of an honest nature, they could have I think made their fortune. But they would have these people live in Brooklyn, which was a good idea, because Brooklyn's records had disappeared in some way, or would never have been published. Or there was no way, really, of checking the Brooklyn records easily. Possibly, you could go over there and flounder among them, but they hadn't been published the way others had. But these people would not come up with handwritten and signed documents. They'd be typewritten copies of them, you know, and things of that sort.

[00:39:58.02]

And then of course, a particularly difficult point was that the, previously, very much respected dealer Frank Bayley, in Boston, was involved, and he had sold us some of our finest things. He sold to any museum. I don't doubt he sold to The Museum of Fine Arts. These people who had good portraits would turn to him to sell them. And it was only towards 1918 that he began receiving pictures from the de Forests, in New York, Augustus de Forest and his wife, who were the fakers, as I understand it. And they would supply him with a picture or two, and I think that, at first—this is just my thought on it—that at first, they came in normal course, as other good things had come to him, and were sold in good faith and so on. Possibly later, he closed his eyes and let things go through his hands. I doubt if he himself was a faker. I think that that was done elsewhere, but he did sell it.

[00:41:24.97]

But it's a curious thing about Mr. Bayley's records, that you never find things signed and dated the way you'd like to see them. There's typewritten sheets, but no date. And then if you go through that tremendous book—what is it, *Five Colonial Portrait Painters*, which has works by Badger, Blackburn and so forth—there are mingled in, among the most perfect examples, there are mingled in some of these fakes, and that is published without telling much about any of these pictures. Well, Mr. Brigham [Clarence Brigham, Director of the American Antiquarian Society –Ed.] thought very highly of Mr. Bayley. He was a good friend of all these men, and it was very hard for them to think that he'd done anything wrong. But anything that did go through his hands, after 1918, I think should be looked at with a certain amount of suspicion.

[00:42:30.85]

And a thing that I can't express strongly enough, is the fact that there is grave danger coming up of these pictures coming out into the market again, after many years. You see, they were sold to collectors in those days. Many pictures are sold to collectors, perhaps not very well-known ones. Those collectors retained them, maybe gave them to some school or other, and then that school may be now putting them out into the market. And I think that there is real danger, that—because they were pretty well published in the 1920s, that they may be rediscovered and become part and parcel of the web of American painting in the future.

[00:43:31.99]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your studies in the mid-'30s. Won't they appear, possibly, or they wouldn't mention that?

[00:43:36.96]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I would like to think that—There's one thing that was published—Lloyd Goodrich was editor, and I wrote an article in it—of a special issue of *Art in America*, which you may know. I think it was in '43; I'm not sure—'45—and that issue tries to tell of how one should study these pictures and of the dangers, you see. But of course, *Art in America* never published many copies, and these things are lost in the files. I really think that sometime an article should be published, possibly in the college art—in one of the college art publications, which would just hit every student, and would be readily available, which would quite frankly tell as much as could be told of the story. Um—

[00:44:38.78]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You're saying that without a clearly establishable provenance, American provenance, that you have to be somewhat suspicious?

[00:44:47.21]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well—

[00:44:47.27]

ROBERT F. BROWN: There must be a whole group without adequate provenance, which could well be—

[00:44:51.05]

LOUISA DRESSER: I think what's particularly suspicious in this—I would draw a line of difference, decidedly, between what's suspicious, and what is just a wishful mistake. I think nowadays, everyone would like to see any slightly awkward, attractive picture as an American picture, rather than a European picture, and that's a matter of critical opinion, maybe, more than anything else now. In the case of such a picture, the more you can know of its provenance—if you know that that picture has been in a house in which a family lived that went back into the past, there's a chance that it might be. There's a good chance that it might be. Whereas, if it's just turned up at auction somewhere, or it's been found in Europe, as some of these things are, I think the burden of proof to show that it's American has to rest very strongly on the person who's saying that it is.

[00:46:03.39]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Stylistically or technically, did you examine them in that fashion, as well, for differences between those? As I understand, when you say fake, you mean the provenance is fake. They were imported, for the most part, from probably England, I suppose.

[00:46:15.87]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yeah. The—

[00:46:16.98]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that a useful line of research?

[00:46:18.99]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, it would be. And I'll just finish. The ones that you would be suspicious of are the ones that make a claim to be a certain American sitter, and that have documents to prove it and possibly a signature that isn't right, and things like that.

Now, you say, did we make special studies? Yes, special studies were made. Alan Burroughs is very much in on this, and where desirable, he was taking X-rays like mad. And one of the frustrating things is that George Stout, then at the Fogg, examined the signatures on the back of the Dummer portraits, and after exhaustive study and analysis, came up with the word that they could be in the same—if I remember it right—in the same paint as the painting on the front of the canvas, you see. Well, when George was here as Director, I thought that he told me he sort of regretted that statement. That he was very young, and if he had been older, he might have realized more that that was not the strong proof, you might say.

[00:47:50.40]

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

[00:47:50.85]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I treasured that remark of George's, and when someone asked me—I've been asked a number of times—to permit just the reprinting of this book, and I—thinking whether I would want to do it, I wanted to find out what George would say about that report. And I find that he now would stick by it, that he doesn't want to say anything more about it. There it is. It was made at the time, and it was an honest report at that point, and it's better to leave it that way. So that does put one in a bit of a quandary.

[00:48:32.57]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Yes.

[00:48:35.25]

LOUISA DRESSER: I pursued a course of silence. I decided that we were—in fact, I was exhausted by the amount of time that one spent on fakes. And I thought the thing to do is to think not of the fakes, but of what the real pictures are, the positive pictures. So that in writing the introduction to the catalog, it's built on the things that we really thought were truly of the 17th century, and just passes by the others with virtually not a word. They're not debated, or treated as seriously. Now, in Alan Burroughs' report, they are. That's part of the book too.

[00:49:24.66]

And then I've gone on, and by and large, I've tried to only show things—if I thought a thing was really questionable, and I couldn't be frank about it, I wouldn't want to have it in an exhibition that I was organizing. I'd prefer just not to include it. And when, some years later, I tried to do a successor to the 17th century painting, and did "American Painting 1700 to 1775," just before the war, in 1943, I only asked the very purest and finest pictures with the idea that that was—to show what things really should be. Then, we had a seminar, which fakes could be brought in. But we didn't plan to publish those fakes, [inaudible]. The sad thing is that we never got 'round to publishing the catalog. Just the listing came out. That catalog, which was going to be—which I visualized as being a handbook of what painting really looked like, just hasn't been published. You see, the war came on, and I had the job of Acting Director here.

[00:50:35.07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In other words, each of the examples, you would say, is a definitive Badger or Greenwood—

[00:50:38.97]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes.

[00:50:39.84]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And from looking at this, one would have an idea of these rather limited ranges of style, of their characteristic—

[00:50:48.60]

LOUISA DRESSER: I would say that it was a remarkable group that you couldn't get together today, because people just won't lend some of them anymore. But Yale sent so many wonderful things, and we tried to get what we call the basic pictures in every case, the ones on which other attributions would be based, you see. And so that was a very satisfactory thing. But—and I think the seminar that accompanied it, for those who attended—and we had a fine attendance of people who were then in the field—but it doesn't come down—you know, present-day scholars don't—

[00:51:28.41]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Don't have the information?

[00:51:29.49]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Mr. William Sawtitzky, who was particularly eager to run down the faults—it was one of the last lectures he ever gave, the lecture at that seminar. Well, I think that—

[00:51:48.01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was a bit of interest then in doing in what had previously been touted as being genuine.

[00:51:55.54]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well—

[00:51:56.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were collectors very mad, when they were hearing of these things from at the time you were doing your book?

[00:52:02.80]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I tell you, I have the greatest admiration for the two men who were most involved in that way. There were two collectors. One was Paul—oh, dear, give me a minute—Mascarene Hamlin, and he had many fine family portraits of his own. But he had been sold the two Dummers. He's a descendant of them. And when I had written up the thing, I sent it to him and told him that this was what we were finding, and could we have his permission to publish it? And he wrote back, and he said all he wished was that we would just show the other side, and not have it quite so positive, a tearing-down. Well, I thought that was wonderful, because it wasn't chicken feed that he had paid for these two pictures. It was thousands of dollars, and he allowed us. I rewrote it and tried to—you know, it was milder, therefore not so conclusive as one would wish.

[00:53:21.63]

Then, the other man was William Tudor Gardiner, I guess, and he owned the William Phipps picture. He also owned a picture which was said to be by Childs. And he also owned a Spencer Phipps picture, so-called, in each case, said to be by Smibert, which he bought, and he was the same way. He allowed it to be published, and I just thought that was wonderful. I don't know what we would have run into, if we'd had other types of people to cope with. And very possibly, these men who were on the committee knew enough, their point of—the others' point of view. So it wasn't such a risk as you might think. But you see, unfortunately, in that book, we can't be frank. We have to label the people "Jeremiah Dummer," you see. And I was amazed, when I was looking it over, with the idea of possible reprinting, how much one would have to clear the tracks in order not to have it confusing today.

[00:54:38.68]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. You retained those names, because you could not go in public.

[00:54:42.55]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, we didn't think we could, you know.

[00:54:45.55]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, yeah. What was proven, that they were English, in fact?

[00:54:48.73]

LOUISA DRESSER: That—yes, you asked me that question, to go back to that. Those pictures, the Dummer pictures, are believed to have been English, just coming as anonymous pictures into the English market. And fixed up with this fancy pedigree, which involved having a man married, and father of a child who, indeed, has never been proved to be married at all, you see. And the man who was supposedly the last owner of these pictures was the son of a woman who didn't exist—daughter of a man who, as far as we know, whether he was married or not, had no—His will left nothing to any children, or anything of that sort. And we got the will from Nottingham, and you know, it just didn't hold water, everything that had been said in the fancy pedigree. And so, yes, that was it. Then, I think that the Sir William Phipps, however, I believe that is an early 18th century American portrait of the so-called Pierpont Limner type, or perhaps some related type that they simply found, and gave this earlier identification to and said that it was by Childs. And there were fake reasons for all that too.

[00:56:24.61]

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was quite a marriage, wasn't there, to find a Duyckinck, and—

[00:56:28.15]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, yes.

[00:56:29.34]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and others of New Netherlands painters.

[00:56:31.36]

LOUISA DRESSER: And in that field, they have they have nothing to go by. You don't know what they're comparing anything with, you see. They simply have the records that those people painted, so they looked for them. Well, I just had a very interesting experience. Oh, before I go into that, another thing that they did, these fakers, was to make fakes. That was in the early days, before they discovered how easy it was to get them from England. [Cross talk.]

[00:57:00.22]

And one we have downstairs—we own one—it was a Bishop Berkeley by Smibert—said to be by Smibert, said to be Bishop Berkeley, which we bought from Bayley in 1918. And that was always very confusing to me, as all this concern grew, because I couldn't see that picture as being by the same hand that did the wonderful Berkeley at Yale. And yet it had this Smibert signature, which everybody admitted was part and parcel of the original paint. Well, here, George Stout came in very handy, because I told him my troubles on it. And he examined it very carefully, and then he said, the thing is, the original paint isn't more than 50 years old. So that was an absolute fake from the beginning.

[00:57:57.64]

And there's one other. I can't name it. I can't think of the sitter, but it was in a museum, which was probably done from the ground up. But they didn't do that more than they had to. And I believe that these—if possible, these fakes should be held by the people who now have of them, and so they can be talked about freely. I think Charles Childs has bought one or two, and maybe he has the Mrs. Dummer, or he has possibly the ones that are supposed to be the Coney's, so that he can talk about them. It's worth it, goodness. [Laughs.]

[00:58:40.90]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yes, certainly.

[00:58:42.04]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yeah.

[00:58:42.55]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, did you ever at any time have an opportunity to go around looking at provincial painters' counterparts to the American Colonial, in England, in the British Isles, or in Northern Europe?

[00:58:53.35]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, yes. I spent a while doing that. That was—rather I was thrown into it rather unexpectedly, because I did a lot with American painting, up until 1948, 1949. And then when Perry Cott left the curatorship here, I became Curator at the museum. And that meant having to take on a very wide collection, and having to inform myself about a great many things. And since I felt I knew our American collection pretty well, I didn't spend much time on that from then on, and worked very carefully on other things.

[00:59:41.42]

Well, that went on during Mr. Stout's directorship, until 1956, when Francis Taylor came back. Well, Francis Taylor, who launched me in this business of selling early American painting, he thought that was terrible, I mean that I should not be keeping up with it, you see. And he wanted me to write a book, which I've never felt equal to doing. I've never wanted to write a big, critical volume, because I don't think one knows enough about the detail yet to do it; at least I don't. But he thought that I should devote my life to this sort of thing. He wanted me to do it, and he said, "I want you to apply for a Guggenheim."

And so he brought in—he came in to my office with all these papers, put them down on my desk, and I said, "But Francis, the date for applying for this Guggenheim is past." "Oh," he said, "doesn't matter at all. Doesn't matter at all. They haven't got enough"—he was on the committee. "They haven't got enough eligible people who want to go, or can go, and I want you to apply." Well, in two days, I cooked up a program of study. You know, it just occurred to me, well, it would be rather nice to go over and look at the European background of early American art. And I got a lot of people to back me up, and sent the thing in. And I got it, strangely enough, because Francis—[laughs] Francis probably spoke for me.

[01:01:10.88]

And then I was plunged right into it, and I went and spent—But I knew very little by that time. I was very well behind in general knowledge, and I usually worked in the New England field. So I went to the Frick for a month. I spent a month in New York. And I studied the Frick records on the "out of New England" painters in New York and the South. And then I went down to the South and stopped to see key things along the way, and went to South Carolina, Charleston, came back.

[01:01:47.69]

And then in the spring, I went to England, and spent six months there and on the continent. And I think Francis thought that the first thing I saw somewhere was going to be a painting just like "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary," with an artist's name, which I think he thought it was going to be as simple as that. Well, it was a very tremendously interesting experience, tremendously hard work, and I don't think I was prepared for it at all, you see. Because I know now that, if you're going to go to Europe to study in that way, you really ought to have a tremendous correspondence laid down ahead of time, because you could waste so much time. And you also ought to have the entree all prepared to various places. I spent a great deal of time cooling my heels.

[01:02:39.80]

Well, I worked for two months there at the Witt Library, which was fascinating, but most of their pictures were pictures that were coming up for auction, so they disappeared into the blue, so to speak. And then I went on the tour of country houses with the National Trust, which was very worthwhile, because I got behind the scenes and saw pictures in the back corridors. And then I went on the continent twice. I went down to Spain, where I'd—I don't know what I thought I was going to do in Spain, but I'd never been to the Prado, and here was a chance. And I went to the—looked at the minor artists there, thinking in terms of Mexico, and whatnot, and spent a time in their photo archive.

[01:03:34.55]

And I remember turning over these pictures, pictures, pictures, and suddenly, I saw some pair of portraits that looked so like some of our American things. I was really very excited, and I looked at the label on the back, and saw that they were Mexican. And that just added to my feeling that you get the provincial touch, move somewhere away from the center, and you find these traits. And for my trip with the National Trust took me up to Scotland, which was wonderful, because there was a great deal in the Scottish work which had this provincial strength. It wasn't like our pictures. I saw nothing that I thought was by the same hand, but you would get a certain similar spirit, I think.

[01:04:32.99]

The things that loomed as most like our pictures—and I'm thinking now of this 1770 group, and whatnot—were the pictures of the Stuart period, the 1630s, things that had been done about a generation or so earlier. And I firmly believe, can't help believing, that those Boston portraits were done by somebody who had left England in the midst of that Stuart period, come to this country, and perhaps practiced decorative painting, and then painted portraits, when they were desired and painted according to the way he remembered them. It seemed so natural. And so that's my theory, but the only trouble is the one man that we know that did come over that way, Augustine Clement, died a month before the "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary" were probably painted, but still. [Laughs.]

[01:05:39.72]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that "Mrs. Freake" is the one you have in mind of this group?

[01:05:44.45]

LOUISA DRESSER: That's one I have in mind.

[01:05:45.64]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Particularly with the early Stuart type of portrait painting.

[01:05:48.09]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, you compare her with—let's see. I finally—Then I went to the continent and looked in Switzerland, in there, and Zurich, at their pictures. And there, you find this—I found a great many things that reminded me of our American things, and so I felt it was that provincial removed business, being removed from the court painting, and being independent. And I think the reason for the quality of our American painting, in many cases, really good things that remain simple, is that these really good artists—there was no great studio for them to go into. Therefore, they painted along their simple, provincial lines, and they didn't get—if they didn't have the studio for them to go into, they would have become—

[01:06:54.18]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fashionable.

[01:06:54.69]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, fashionable. They might become Reynolds or Gainsborough. And they'd have been good as it was, because they were removed. They remained simple, and there's all the difference in quality between the really good primitive American and the weak one. There just is the good artist and the poor artist. It'd be only the good artist who would go to the top, if he got into a good studio.

[01:07:18.24]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In what way do you see that they're particularly good, in your experience?

[01:07:21.42]

LOUISA DRESSER: How do I feel the quality of it?

[01:07:23.61]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The best of our provincial artists.

[01:07:27.90]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I think, as you look at them, you're greatly pleased and excited by the pattern of color and form, the arrangement. In "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary," everything about it seems to be perfectly arranged. And you look at some others, and they're just—have no sense of that at all. And then you have color harmonies, which are so fine in some of them. They're most exciting. Others, they amount to nothing. But of course, the same artist can be sometimes very routine, and others very, very good. Because I think these early artists, they were making their daily bread, in many cases, and they would turn off a potboiler.

[01:08:23.73]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you will say that, such as in the case when the artist painted "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary," that he was inspired, perhaps, would you say?

[01:08:31.60]

LOUISA DRESSER: It might have been inspired. See, it's very—

[01:08:34.33]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's a workaday task, of course, with the [inaudible].

[01:08:36.73]

LOUISA DRESSER: One of the fascinating things about "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary," and "Mr. Freake," is that there they are, all dressed up, and I've often wondered about their clothing. And we had a very pleasant call here one time when I unfortunately was in the hospital. I couldn't see the lady, but I had very special reports on what she had to say. She was Stella Mary Pearce, who became Mrs. Eric Newton. And she is a student of costume, and much relied on by the people at the National Gallery, in London, for her advice on detail of costume. And I wanted to know what she thought of that costume, the little costumes they were wearing. And she said that, in November 1674, which is a probable date of painting, those were very up-to-date costumes. They were just the hottest thing off the griddle.

And to me, an exciting thing about Boston is that it was just as near the center of what was going on as a—and perhaps nearer—as a big city in England might have been. Because all they had to do was to get from the Port of Boston to the Port of London, you see, and back, so that they would be only at most two months behind the styles. And this man was very rich, John Freake. He had—and I think he had imported some fine costumes, the latest mode, for himself and his wife, child, or children. And they got dressed up, and the portrait painter came in, and I think the portrait painter probably was quite carried away.

[01:10:24.83]

But of course, I think it was probably the same painter who did our other little American portrait. Some people see three hands at work. It's hard for me to see as many as three, the little Gibbs portraits, and so on, which I think are exquisite in themselves. There was no—that little single figure of Henry Gibbs is just perfect, and fully, I think, up to the quality of "Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary;" just isn't so complex.

[01:10:56.59]

But—so that stumped me, as far as having Clement do Mrs. Freake. I thought that possibly another child—there were several other children—might have been painted rather than Baby Mary, might have been an earlier child, even though Baby Mary is the one through whom the portraits have descended. But the costume makes that impossible. If Mrs. Newton is correct, they couldn't have been painted much before 1674. So I think that's pretty well-dated.

[01:11:33.13]

Well, I thought I'd show you this little article, which you may know, which I wrote for the American Antiquarian Society proceedings. It says all I had to say, as a result of my Guggenheim. I really couldn't say much more. And this is the triple portrait which I saw in one of the houses, about 1630 or thereabouts, which reminded me so of the Freakes because it's so—well, it's this pattern there, flat as paper dolls.

[01:12:10.78]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:12:11.29]

LOUISA DRESSER: And the same sort of family affection expressed through the hands; the same courage in painting hands and all details. At the time that I was over there, there was —and I went again, in '62, and went back and saw some of these things a second time. In '62, there was some thought we might try and organize an exhibition, and bring some of these things from Europe. And that would have been one thing beyond anything. I would have loved to have brought that picture, but it would have been foolish.

[01:12:52.20]

And one of the things that would make it foolish is that, so often, as you go through houses and museums in England, you realize that very little is known about these pictures. And you might get them off the wall and look at them in the laboratory, they might turn out to be a very nice copy or something of that sort. You can't—the opportunities for study are not very good, and not much has been done.

[01:13:21.70]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Copying was done sometimes in dividing for an estate.

[01:13:24.66]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, there's no doubt about it, that it was the accepted thing in portrait, just the way we have several photographs made from a negative. And you see so much of it, and nobody worried about it. And the copy might be done by the same—the artist would do copies. We see it in the Salisbury family here in Stuart. Stuart did copies of several of the Salisbury portraits for the members of the family, a usual thing.

[01:13:58.40]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you look in Holland at all?

[01:14:01.31]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I tried to.

[01:14:03.26]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I thought of that because of the stay of the Massachusetts settlers there.

[01:14:05.84]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Yes. Well, I expected to find a lot in Holland. And there was one special museum where I'd been told that there were things that would be of interest. And I forget now just where it was. But our conservator, Edmund de Beaumont, happened to be in Amsterdam when I was there, and he offered to drive me up to see this museum. Well, we set off, but our timing was wrong. And we hit the little town where the museum was supposed to be, just about five [o'clock], or perhaps five minutes of five [o'clock], and we wanted to get to the museum.

[01:14:45.66]

And I remember so well approaching two or three citizens, and we asked where the museum was. And all three of them pointed in different directions. It was the funniest thing to see them do it. [They laugh.] And then seeing they'd pointed in different directions, they began to argue in Dutch with each other. And of course, by the time we finally got ourselves oriented, the museum had closed, and we just didn't see these things. And I don't know what they were, I'm sure, but what I was hoping for was to find something related to those Aetatis Suae paintings on the Hudson. And whether they were or not, I don't know. But I would like—Holland is a place one should go back to, and all these places one should go and live in and find out what's in the houses. And you can't do it just by going as a tourist for a few days.

[01:15:45.70]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Europeans themselves have not begun really to look at provincial work?

[01:15:47.83]

LOUISA DRESSER: They haven't begun, really. In England, you do find a few people, and I think it's growing.

[01:15:58.84]

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you were at the Courtauld, and you had been lectured by people like Ellis Waterhouse and so forth, who had—

[01:16:04.60]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, he didn't talk about—Ellis Waterhouse didn't lecture at the Courtauld, when I was there, at that time, though I've heard him since, and talked a lot with him. But of course, to Ellis Waterhouse, Smibert is one of the least of the least, and you've got to go way below Smibert before you find [laughs] what we're really looking for. But I did see one picture, which was in a small museum in the western part of England, of a farmer.

And it was striking—it was 1830, or thereabouts—because it was straightforward in the way some of our 1830 things are, and was a good character study. And I would have said, it would immediately qualify as being related to American things, but that was the only one I saw. And the funny thing is that so many scholars and students of American painting have been over, trying to do this same thing—a whole lot of them who have been, or were going when I was. And we've shared our finds and experiences a great deal, and all of us have seen that picture. [Laughs.] And it struck us all, but that's the only one.

[01:17:28.91]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you mostly come down on the side of parallel evolution, or rather, do you think there is some—

[01:17:33.53]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, I think it's parallel. I think it's parallel evolution. I would—now, there's some far more exciting mysteries, if one could come by them. I don't suppose—oh, you probably do know the marvelous portraits in the Roberts and Baker and Shrimpton portraits, in the Massachusetts Historical Society. Now those, we know those came from England, from London. Now, if one could only—presumably, one should be able to find paintings still in existence by the same hands that did the Baker and Roberts portraits. Where in heaven's name does one begin to look for them?

[01:18:20.33]

I think it's a matter of chance, really, and I think what's required is broad study of the field, specialized study of certain pictures. But the actual putting together and saying, this is this, and that is that, we're not yet able to. It would be only chance, but I can well-imagine finding —in some houses or some old museums, or somewhere in London—I can imagine finding the works by that painter, because he was good, and might stand out. That's more likely than trying to find—

[01:19:15.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The detective work required in this field has been one of the most sustaining things to you, has it?

[01:19:22.70]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I'm more of a documentarian than I am an art critic, or a connoisseur. I really do not like to make an attribution on the basis of, "Does this picture look like this picture? Can it be by the same hand?" That sort of thing I really don't like. I would like to leave that to other people who can see better than I can. And so that my study and interest has been primarily in seeing what one can find in the documents, or in the early published records. Because it's amazing how some of these pictures were published in early genealogies, and you can get back at their history pretty nicely.

[01:20:16.71]

Now, we have upstairs these two Badger portraits, which we bought recently, two children. And those are wonderful because the account book of their father tells when they were painted, and that Badger did it. And that really makes them Badgers, where probably—just about all the other pictures, except for their parents' pictures, are billed on simply being like them. And I—

[01:20:49.74]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think that this quality of paintings, the Badgers, Smiberts, or Feke—there are so apt to be a number of other artists whose results would've been very, very similar?

[01:20:59.85]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, I think that our American paintings—[cross talk].

[01:21:02.16]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's not like we're dealing with Rembrandt, is it?

[01:21:02.82]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Yes, you've hit upon something very good. The reason why I think that documentary evidence and provenance is so extremely important in American painting, is that it's so hard to distinguish American painting or paintings, things painted in America, from things painted in Europe, because we had plenty of weak painters here. You only have to go through the Frick files to be horrified at the amount of just plain, weak, dull pictures. Same is true with the Witt—weak, dull pictures. And they might as well have been painted on one side of the Atlantic as another, and it's true that artists kept going back and forth.

[01:21:42.33]

And the only way that you can feel confident is if you have some kind of provenance, and you still want to keep your mind open about it. That's one reason why we like the idea of these in the 17th century, group, there were so many pictures of children who weren't apt to be shooting abroad to be painted, you see, and they were pretty well identified as in the same family, and with their ages on them and so forth—very, very rewarding.

[01:22:16.14]

No, I do feel, as I've been involved in the purchasing of European paintings for the museum, that you can take a European painting by an artist who's skilled, and you can put it through the works and the laboratory, and see that it really is old, and presumably of its time. And you can come to some conclusion about that picture by comparing it with the basic works of the artist, and you don't have to worry too much about the provenance. But the American artist wasn't that skilled. He was a chameleon. He was changing with every new breeze. Now, that would be so of Copley. I think Copley is an artist that you really can pretty well judge. He had a maturely developed style.

[01:23:14.10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which even when he went to England, do you think he sustained it there, too?

[01:23:17.00]

LOUISA DRESSER: Before—well, he was a—well, I think that he did his very best to transform his style. I think he developed an English style, which is probably recognizable, though, I have studied very little in that line. But I think his English work differs a great deal from his American work, largely in the pose, and whatnot, but I think he remains a mature, recognizable artist. It's hard to say that of almost any other Colonial.

[01:24:01.16]

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you begin moving into the general administration of the Worcester Museum?

[01:24:07.01]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, of course, in my earlier days, when I worked here, Perry Cott and I divided things up. And I always said, well, he looked after the works of art, and I looked after the junk. [Laughs.] And it wasn't quite that, but I took care of loads and loads of minor things, and the Decorative Arts, if they weren't perfectly beautiful bits of Persian pottery or Oriental this or that. But for instance, American silver was definitely my field, and we have a great many things in the museum that have come to us by inheritance from the Paine and Salisbury families of Worcester. We have first-class material in that field, and it was up to me to study that. And I spent quite a lot of time on early American silver.

[01:25:02.40]

But as to administration, I would say that, probably—well, during those early days also, I was doing publicity for the museum, and I was doing our bulletin, so that I had a rather general introduction to the museum as a whole. And then I had a real plunge into administration during the war, because in 1943, I was Acting Director, through '46. And that meant just going about the whole museum.

[01:25:36.79]

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was it for a woman at that time, doing it?

[01:25:39.31]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, that was a wartime thing. It was accepted. Well, there was a lot of talk about being a woman director, but actually at that time, we had a lot of women directors. What was her name, out on the West Coast, who's now in India? I can't think of her name. She was the Curator of the San Francisco Museum of Art, I think. And Mrs. Breeskin and—

[01:26:06.52]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Katherine Coffey.

[01:26:07.57]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes, Katherine Coffey. And the Director of the Rochester Museum was a woman. So that they were really—in a sense, there were more women in top positions perhaps than there are today. But this was a—I was very—As far as running the museum went, we had a secretary who had been here during the years since the museum was founded, and who was administrator of the building, and able to run things that way, and it was not—And a great many of the things we were doing were war-connected, like the Arts and Skills Corps, out in Cushing General Hospital. And it was about that time that I became much involved in the crafts. I've done a lot with contemporary New England crafts and—

[01:27:09.23]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Through these wartime rehabilitation programs—

[01:27:10.70]

LOUISA DRESSER: Through that wartime business. And then after the war, when I ceased to be Acting Director, I thought it would be a great idea to get away for a while. So I went down, and for three months worked with the Society of Arts and Crafts with Mr. Emery, and had a most interesting experience there. It was very relaxing, after what I'd been doing here, though you wouldn't think so, because we put on a—was it 100th anniversary? Couldn't have been—50th anniversary, yeah, at Filene's, which really was an undertaking.

[01:27:44.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But there, your training in earlier work, in early New England crafts. stood you in good stead.

[01:27:50.67]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, it was a great help. Oh, yes, a great help. And I've always enjoyed the crafts, because I don't at all feel any diffidence about jurying crafts, for some reason or other. And maybe it was experience working with the Society jury. But I don't like to jury contemporary American painting. I just don't feel I have the basis for it, and at least, I won't do it alone. I'm perfectly willing to go along with other people who I can defer to, but in the crafts I thought I had some ideas, anyway.

[01:28:28.26]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So as Curator here, since 1949 or so—

[01:28:31.32]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Well, then after the war was over, and Mr. Cott went away to Washington, then I was appointed Curator, and that was, of course, administering that department. It's been a great, great pleasure. And—

[01:28:45.51]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What exactly has that involved?

[01:28:47.61]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, it involved different things, depending on what the different Directors wanted of their Curator. Now, Mr. Stout, who was the first one that I worked with, he really was interested in spending a good deal of time in the laboratory here, which he did. And he had a most astute eye in the buying of works of art, but was very hesitant about it, perhaps because he had such an astute eye condition. And I had a great deal to do at that time with helping him to convince himself that the objects were something we should buy. I did a good deal of research in paintings we were considering and other things. And also, he was not—he did a good deal of exhibitions, but he was far from interested in the exhibition program as a whole and working on it. And I did a great deal of that, and he was abroad a good deal. So that it was a very—probably during Mr. Stout's time, my job as Curator was more clearly defined as such than at any other time.

[01:30:09.11]

Then, as I told you, when Mr. Taylor came back, he immediately suggested that I re-plunge into the American field, which I did. And when Mr. Taylor died, of course, we had several interregnums, and during those times, usually with the administrator, I've met with the trustees and bridged the gap, for instance, between Taylor's death in '57, and Mr. Rich's coming, in the fall of '58. There was quite a long stretch there where we had to literally run the museum. And our President was a very nicely arranged thing, because our President would come in once a week and meet with the heads of the departments, and we'd decide things there and then go ahead. And I confess, I enjoy that sort of thing. I've thoroughly enjoyed the administrative end of things, but it's very absorbing. And you don't get done the things that you think you might do otherwise.

[01:31:20.41]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this task also took place during the years when you very often, not simply in the interregnum, have been able to work closely with Trustees?

[01:31:28.42]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, yes, very. And then, when Mr. Rich became Director, he came to work on the theory that he could have three months off each year to travel and do things. And of course, when he was away, and very often well out of the country, then the major responsibility of curatorial-connected matters would fall on me. Mr. Rich, however, was very interested in an elaborate exhibition program, and he himself devoted himself to a good deal of that. And I have done very little in the exhibition line since that time. And about that—in some things, but not very much.

[01:32:17.93]

And about that time, I began to get involved in working on a catalog of European paintings, which I'm still working on, which is done by outside scholars who came to Worcester to study the paintings, and then sent in their entries. And I've presumably been preparing those for the press. I have, and they're coming along very well. But that's been a long, absorbing, time-taking, interesting thing, and I've thoroughly enjoyed it.

[01:32:58.65]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's always considered a goal to make a catalog, eventually?

[01:33:02.90]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, yes.

[01:33:03.90]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Most American museums have not had catalogs.

[01:33:05.48]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. Well, I think—we had decided that we wanted a catalog. We wanted a catalog of our collections, and in 1962, I think it was, we decided we'd like a catalog of our Italian paintings, and—Oh, I know what happened. First of all, Mr. Rich and I decided that we'd try and get out a checklist, and we divided the paintings among ourselves and got started working on it. And we soon decided that, actually, in many fields, we really needed the eye of the expert, that we wanted a fresh eye and a knowing eye on these things, and that it was there were too many attributions that needed clearing up. And so we thought we'll get someone to do the Italian paintings, and we asked Martin Davies, who was then keeper of the National Gallery, to do it, and he very kindly did. He came to this country and studied the things, got going.

[01:34:06.49]

Well then, he had already, I think, almost completed his entries when the Ford Foundation came up with its idea of making match, giving matching funds towards catalogs. And so we applied for this Italian catalog, and then said that we would later on want to apply for money for others. And unfortunately, they said, no, we must apply for everything we want at once. And so we applied for money for both a European painting catalog, and American catalog, and we invited a lot of other scholars to work in the European catalog.

[01:34:52.33]

Well, that really was, in a sense, too bad, because it made a monumental undertaking out of something that was possible to do. And if we could have published that Italian catalog and gotten it out, just after he'd written it, and then turned our minds to the other European paintings and then to the American, I think the thing—well, we'd be halfway there, instead of sort of lumbering along. If I'd had any conception of it, how difficult it would be—because you just get to a point where you're going to complete something, and then one of these other people will come forward, wants to come and go over the paintings, or wants to do—has a completed thing that you have to read because you have to go to press. I find it—I think it was a poor plan then, of course. The money that you asked for back in those days isn't adequate today. So, well, it's coming along all right now, and we'll complete it, but the thing will be, in a sense, out of date, and that has to be faced, but any catalog is going to be.

[01:36:07.55]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it can be so structured that you can have appendages and appendices [inaudible]?

[01:36:11.84]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, yes, and we decided to bring it to a halt at Mr. Rich's resignation, and then we will make a checklist of the things that we've acquired since, in the European field. And then after that's all off my chest, then I'll start in on the American things and try and make them more expeditious. And at least I won't have to—I can talk frankly to myself and tell myself [laughs] not to do some of the things I don't think should be done, et cetera. So—but that's—And then with Mr.—you see, we've had a very interesting program here at the museum. It's really been wonderful. When I became Curator, in 1949—my goodness, I think we've got to be breaking soon.

[01:37:04.10]

Well, anyway, in 1949, because I was such a—I'd had no training in European art, you see, of any sort, except that very nice course with Mr. Sachs. And it was thought wise to have somebody in the building who was highly trained. Mr. Stout didn't want to designate himself as being so. He felt that his field was conservation, and so on, a very knowledgeable person, of course. Well, we then instituted the idea of having a trainee program, and we got the very best young man we could find who would like to come and be with us for a time.

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[00:00:04.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hello, hello.

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:00:09.06]

LOUISA DRESSER: Okay. Well, I was talking about our training program. And the first young man we found who'd like to come to us for either a year or two, was William P. Campbell, who had been in the Army. He was rather older than some of the young men we had later. The first two men had already had a good deal of fine arts training and had been in the military service. And he is now a Curator of American painting at the National Gallery in Washington. He went on to the National Gallery, I believe, directly after he left us. And he was remarkably fine. He served as an assistant to me, and because, during Mr. Stout's regime, I was doing a lot of very active of exhibition work, and so on. The training program consisted in having somebody just tag along [laughs] with me, and then go off on a tangent, and do this or that exhibition after it got started. And it seemed to work pretty well. And we had—as we have today, we had regular Curatorial Division meetings.

[00:01:30.99]

And Mr. Stout, more than Mr. Rich later, who didn't care so much about doing it—but Mr. Stout would use the Curatorial Division meeting as a place where he wanted to discuss his own points of view and decisions about what he was going to do in regard to accessions or exhibitions, so that Bill Campbell had this opportunity to see a director's mind at work, so to speak. And I think it worked out very well. Now, the fascinating thing to me is that as I've been going over our folders on European painting in connection with this catalog, I have found so much work that he did on those paintings, so many valuable bits of research, and follow-up of lines of thought, that I had no idea he was undertaking at the time he was here.

[00:02:29.50]

And it's been highly gratifying. Of course, each one of these young men through the years has taken a special interest in some special part of the collection and left a good deal, as a matter of fact. Then the next young man who came was Francis Newton, who is now Director of the Portland, Oregon, Art Museum. He went out there as Curator after he left here. And he was a very interesting assistant, very, very hard-working. And he had the most amazing capacity for being close friends with everybody in the museum, from the carpenters to the director, and so forth. And he had come. It was so interesting to see his reaction, because he'd done his graduate work at the University of Iowa. And he had seen very few original works of art. And he was just thrilled. It's the sort of thing that you always hope a trainee will benefit from. They're actually being in the midst of the real thing. And he also was very much interested in iconography. He was a devoted Roman Catholic, and very interested in all the elements of that, and added many interesting angles.

[00:04:02.56]

Then we had—I think our next young man was Paul Egger, who went from us. And he was very interested in the Decorative Arts. He was the first one that had that special interest. And he went from us to the Decorative Arts department at the museum—oh, he went into the service first, and then he went to the Decorative Arts department of the MFA. And he was killed in an automobile accident, one of these horrible things where the police is chasing a car which crashed into him, as he and his wife were driving home from the museum one night. He was a very, very promising young man, and I think would have gone extremely far in the museum field.

[00:04:48.55]

And then we had as a trainee—he [Paul Egger –Ed.] had been pulled into the service in the midst of a year. And Marvin Sadik came. And he was just out of Harvard, and had just begun graduate study. And for some reason or other, as sometimes happens, he was fed to the gills with study. And he just didn't really want to continue this graduate study at the moment. So he took time off to come to this training program. And he was here when Francis Taylor returned for his second program. And Marvin enjoyed Francis, had a wonderful time working with him. And I think made him his model of everything. And as you probably know, Marvin Sadik is now the Director of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. He went to Bowdoin from here.

[00:05:49.31]

And we had two young men. Well, he was a research man, Horst Vey, who came over and was not really a trainee. He was here at the same time Marvin was. But he somewhat was here about the same length of time and somehow counts in my mind, somewhat, with his—but he especially studied our collection of drawings. And he's now in charge—a curator in charge a museum in Cologne, in Germany.

[00:06:28.73]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he was brought in not for training, so much, as to inform the museum?

[00:06:32.90]

LOUISA DRESSER: Well, he was brought in as a Research Assistant to Francis Taylor. I think Francis Taylor wanted somebody to do investigation in one thing. Yes. Virtually that. Then we have had two Orientalists. We had Chris—Christian Jacobsen. And I wish I could tell you the name of the—he was a Danish man. And he's now in charge of a museum in Denmark. And he was a very well-informed person, both in the field of Oriental ceramics and Japanese prints.

[00:07:15.83]

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:07:17.81]

Yeah. I don't know that I can wind it up. We've had so many. But I might say that we began—and would you like me to mention the names of all of them since I started—

[00:07:30.53]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, we could recover them in some way.

[00:07:32.84]

LOUISA DRESSER: Yes. I could write it down for you.

[00:07:35.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this is a prominent part of your being Curator over the years.

[00:07:37.16]

LOUISA DRESSER: It's been a very great help to me as being Curator, because it's meant that there's been somebody who's brought in another field of knowledge. It's like having another Curator, an Assistant Curator. But you see, they knew they couldn't afford to get somebody to stay, and develop as a curator because I was just there. I couldn't be moved, you could say. [They laugh.] There was no future for the idea.

[00:08:07.80]

But the main thing I wanted to say is that, finally, the Ford Foundation took up this program of trainees, and that I think the very first person we had in that Ford Foundation program, was our present director, Richard Teitz, who, after being here for two years, went off to Wichita, and then came back here as Director. So that is very interesting, I think, as a cycle.

[00:08:37.25]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a particular thing in Worcester, isn't it? Worcester has initiated this sort of program.

[00:08:42.33]

LOUISA DRESSER: I think that when the Ford Foundation was working out their program, they were very much interested in what we've been doing here. Whether they got the idea of it from here or not, I don't know. Because their desire has been to inspire people interested in the arts, in staying in the museum profession, and not—entering the museum profession, and not always going into the academic. It's pretty hard because of various things—the limited free time, and the less—lower salaries, in general.

[00:09:21.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the smaller museums, such as this, one does have more flexibility than me, at least in terms of what he might study, or in—

[00:09:29.69]

LOUISA DRESSER: Oh, I think that our museum has been a very good place for such a program, because we really put these young men to work. Well, we need them. There's a place for them. They're not here just observing, as I think sometimes they feel they are in some bigger museums. The staff needs them, welcomes them. And usually, the Director takes a great interest in talking with them, and taking them on trips to the dealers and things of that sort. So I think it's worked out. We've only twice—two years—been without a person since it started. And once was when we already had somebody lined up. But then she decided—it was a woman—that she had an opportunity to do graduate work at the Fogg. And she wanted to—yeah. So, that—

[00:10:27.74]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, now, you will—when you retire shortly, be not retiring but rather moving into the completion of the European and the American painting catalogs.

[00:10:36.35]

LOUISA DRESSER: That's right. But I'll be doing that from the outside as a freelance. I'm no longer a member of the staff of the museum as of the first of November. But I've been very pleased and interested and gratified that the trustees have elected me a member of the board of trustees, which means that I'll more than ever be able to take an interest in the whole museum, you see, so that I won't be moving very far away. I'll get out of this office and stay away as much as I can from the curatorial offices while I'm doing my work. I'll work in the library, and look downstairs in the storage. But I can't be very far away from the museum. [Laughs.] I don't want to be.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]