



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Dorothy Lake  
Gregory Moffett, 1972 Sept. 22

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dorothy Moffett on December 22, 1972. The interview took place in Provincetown, Massachusetts, 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: Say something in a conversational voice. I'll see how it picks it up.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, I came to Provincetown in 1914. That was when the war started.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Mrs. Ross Moffett, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, December 22, 1972, Robert Brown, the interviewer. And I'd like the—this morning, to ask you a bit of your own life and career, that of your late husband, Ross Moffett, and some of your recollections, particularly of Provincetown. Perhaps, to begin, you might want to say something of your childhood and think back on early influences or inclinations toward a career in art. You can just—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, I was always drawing as a child and even scribbled on my textbooks in school a great deal. [Laughs.] And then my father sent me to Pratt Institute, at the age of 17. And—

ROBERT BROWN: To study art?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah. Had a rather large art department. I suppose they still do. And from there I went over to the Art Students League.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At the same time, more or less, was—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I won a scholarship at Pratt.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I had to stay two years. I didn't want to.

ROBERT BROWN: At Pratt.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

DOROTHY MOFFETT: So I went there, at Students League, and it was much more interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was at Pratt? Was—why didn't you like it there so much?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, I think it's just because the others said that you weren't a real student unless you went to New York and studied. [00:02:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Was the curriculum at Pratt a fairly rigid one or—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yes, it was. A bell would ring, and we'd go to classes, you know, stop work like that. [Snaps.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see. What kind of things were you taught there, at Pratt?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, we had the watercolor class, still life. We had a life class and some design.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there teachers that you can remember from there, that—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I remember Ms. Quaint [ph], a watercolor teacher, that was good. Not very good at remember their name.

ROBERT BROWN: For a g—a girl at that time, was it very unusual to be going to Pratt—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —to study art?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: No!

ROBERT BROWN: No?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: More girls than boys, I think. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why do you suppose that was, then?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, probably young ladies' finishing idea. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Ah. But to go to the Art Students League, what was that—was that quite a different experience, in fact?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it like, then?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, you can take any class you wanted and get up and go or come or—nobody kept track of you. Very free. And—

ROBERT BROWN: And what did you do there, at the League?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, I was in a portrait class. I jumped around from every—in every class and got all confused. Because they all had different ideas. But it was good anyway. I learned.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there teachers there that you particularly stuck with?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, not really, no. Henrye [ph] was the one I remember the most, who was very—quite vicious in his criticisms, for most of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was that damaging, you think, to have been so vicious?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, I think it was to those who were very nervously inclined anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: What did he—how did he teach, as you recall, a certain method? [00:04:05]

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, we all had little boxes—or, rather, large boxes. And we had to make little hues and colors, colors of the rainbow, and then weight these things in our compositions and—and they were all—

ROBERT BROWN: You painted them out in the box? Or you just—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, no. They were little tiles—

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —tiny tiles. And they were always spilling. [They laugh.] Then there'd be a great scramble from everybody to pick up so-and-so's tiles and put them back in order. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: And he would have you rearrange them according to what color emphasis you might be doing—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, well, we knew we had to. He didn't say much about that.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this sounds like it's fairly rigid. Was it, then, to—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. Oh, he was very rigid, yeah. But in one sense, he wasn't. I mean, he was rigid about art but not about our personal comings and goings and all.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things were you painting then?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, he had a portrait class.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that what you thought you wanted to be, a portraitist?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Not necessarily. I just wanted to study.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. From there, then—was that your—the last of your formal instruction? Or did you then—where did you go from there? Did you come out here?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, I met someone there that had a little cottage here, a girl in the class. And she had been here—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —invited me out here to—said she could do the cooking. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: And how does—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh. That was 1914.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah. [00:05:58] And Ross was in the cla—I went in the Hawthorne class. And Ross was in the class at that time. I just barely met him, though, that year, very young. I only stayed a month—had to run home. So that next winter, I did all kinds of little drawings for the newspapers, one thing or another, pen-and-ink. And I saved enough money to come out here another session. I stayed much longer. And then I really met Ross. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: This next year. Yeah.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What are some of the—what is your first impressions of the Hawthorne class, of Provincetown generally?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: About the same as Ross has, and narrow streets, [laughs] a little frightening, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I guess I was rather timid anyway. But fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there a great many girl students out here, then?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yeah!

ROBERT BROWN: I see.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: We'd paint on the beaches, you know, and have sun umbrellas and great—loads of paraphernalia—sun, storm, and everything else.

ROBERT BROWN: Then the second year you met Ross Moffett. Were you—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —were you married then, around that time?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, no. That was four—let's see—at least four years afterwards, that I came out here in '19. We were married in the spring of the next year—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —in Brooklyn. And then we came out here. And I was doing illustration and lithographs. [00:08:00] My brother came out here, with a lithographing machine.

ROBERT BROWN: Hm.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: And so I started doing lithographs.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: John Gregory.

ROBERT BROWN: John Gre—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: You don't know? Lives in the oldest house here.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I don't know him, no.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: You ought to see the house.

ROBERT BROWN: And so by that time you were mainly in printmaking, or at that point?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a great deal of interest in prints? I know in Mr. Moffett's book he mentions—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, they weren't mine.

ROBERT BROWN: —information—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I don't know. I seemed to have quite a lot of luck selling the things. I did an Alice in Wonderland series. And I'm still—[laughs] I'm still selling the cards made from those things.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you sell around here, mainly in Provincetown, or from here would you then go to New York or out of a dealer in New York?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, no. I sent some to Boston. I did one of the *Little Women*. I went out to Concord and went in there to study the house, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: And—they put me out. Because they were—I wasn't allowed to either take photographs or sketch. So I'd go in, look around, then I'd go out onto the porch and draw. And I could walk in again, come out, and make another drawing. It was quite fun.

ROBERT BROWN: You had to work under rather trying conditions.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: But later they took quite a group of the cards and sold them there, that I had made of the *Little Women*, same place.

ROBERT BROWN: You began, then—after you were married, living here year-round in Provincetown?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We had one winter in Iowa, the first winter that we were married. [00:10:00] We went out there to his folks'—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —and spent about two months or more, I guess. We came back here.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, by this time, Ross had a very active career, did he?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. He was always working.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you quite involved with town things, the things in the town, generally?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, there wasn't so much to be involved with, in those days. Everything was very quiet.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the townspeople accept the artists? Did they welcome them?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Not in the early days, no—looked on as hippies, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] Were you?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Were we hippies?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: No, [laughs] far from it. We might have been poor but we weren't hippies.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the Art Association fit in with your life here? Was that a fairly important thing?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: It was just beginning, at the very first. We—I remember when it started, an exhibition. I think it was in the town hall. Does it tell—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. I think he mentions that, Masonic Hall—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —temporarily.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yeah. And then they got this nice building up there, in the East End.

ROBERT BROWN: Before that, did you know—did most artists know how much was going on here? Is this sort of a surprise, to see so many artists and what they were doing? Or were you so close-knit even before the association was started?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: More or less. There were just a handful of them anyway, to start with, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY MOFFETT: So we knew everybody.

ROBERT BROWN: According to the book, 1919 or so there are 200, almost 300 members. [00:12:03] Of course, I guess they weren't all artists. But even so, there must have been a considerable number of artists—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —even before 1920.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yes. Most were quite good too, very good.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a competitiveness among the artists then?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Not so much, because the style was a little more conservative, you might say. A few modernists came in. But they were just interesting, to the rest of us.

ROBERT BROWN: You don't recall any feuds or fights or anything among those—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, I don't, no. No.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you recall of Hawthorne, who I guess was your principal teacher t—any anecdotes or particular things you can recall of your time with him?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: No. He was supposed to be running after the girls, quite a bit. I know that.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Had a sort of a black eye with the students.

ROBERT BROWN: The students were pretty moralistic, then, were the—they didn't go for that?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, the ones I knew, anyway, were. [They laugh.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you learn a lot from him?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Hawthorne? I don't know. I think you learn more just from keeping at work than you do much from any teacher. Oh, teachers do give pretty good ideas, if they're good teachers. Well, how's it going?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, anything else [they laugh] you might say?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: So Provincetown has been where you roosted, though, permanently, after marriage.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yeah, except for five winters away—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:14:01]

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —in St. Augustine and St. Petersburg.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But did you always think this was a good place for an artist to be?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yes. We enjoyed living here. I think it would have been better for both of us, financially, to be in New York more but—I've often liked that—I used to go to New York, every once in a while, though.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, he—was he wanting to make sure that dealers knew of him? Was he—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —fairly active with all his—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —not really, no. He would send things to an occasional exhibition and—of course, he sent to the Rehn Gallery quite frequently. And then, when the Depression came, of course, he was on the WPA. I couldn't do any of that, because I had the two children. My father was with us. So I was pretty busy, otherwise.

ROBERT BROWN: On the WPA, what did he do, some painting?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: He painted more than he ever did anywhere else, I think. Yes. All sorts of little—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he given a subsidy to paint?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. Uh-huh [affirmative]. And that was fine for the painters here, because they didn't have any money, most of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he required to do certain things for the government and he—did he—murals?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Whatever he wanted. Well, yes, he did some murals too. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Then he al—or when did he develop this interest in Indian artifacts, with—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, I think he always had that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that involve you both quite a lot? Was there—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —a time you were tramping around and—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —everything arranged?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: I used—I used to go but I didn—and find things but I didn't take much interest in the actual science of it, not like he did, that's for sure. [00:16:06]

ROBERT BROWN: But you were involved in town politics, were you—Mr. Moffett? Were the artists, generally, ever selectmen or members of committees?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, Ross was something or other—let's see—on the Art Committee. And—of course, when they had the big fight over the park, whether they would have a park here or not, he was very active in that.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there strong opposition to having a park here?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. Yeah. They wanted to build it all up with motels back here—

ROBERT BROWN: I see.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —you know, the Narrow Lands, they call it.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose there have always been strong commercial pressures here, haven't there, it's been —

DOROTHY MOFFETT: What do you mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, it's a good place for people to try to do something for tourists, isn't it, to build—?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes, the tourism. Yes. Of course, that grew gradually, after Hawthorne came—was nothing before he came.

ROBERT BROWN: The tourists came because he was here? I mean, he would—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Well, he brought the artists.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: And then the artists brought the tourists. That's the way I imagine.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. People, even then, were gawking at artists or at least like—

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes. Where's the art colony, and so on?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it was possible to live there all these years without being too, and intruded upon by the tourism, was it? Was it possible to live your own life pretty well?

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: Yes. There weren't so many as all that—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

DOROTHY MOFFETT: —not like it is today. Well, what's going on now? [Laughs.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]