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Oral history interview with Barbara
Neville Parker, 1974 January 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Neville Parker on January 21, 1974. The interview took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2024 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.

Interview

[00:00:16.96]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [In progress] —anything in a conversational tone.

[00:00:20.29]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, you wouldn't want me to talk?

[00:00:21.94]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Just anything.

[00:00:22.54]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Anything. Well, I'm so pleased you have two children.

[00:00:27.15]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. [Recorder stops; restarts.] This is an interview with Barbara Neville Parker in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And this is January 21, 1974. Perhaps to begin, if you would like to say anything about your childhood, particularly as it might have led toward a later career or—

[00:00:52.33]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, most people's careers come by accident. I was an English major at Vassar, and I wanted to get into a publishing house when I returned to Boston. But I could not seem to find a job in a publishing house, so I took a secretarial course, very briefly, learned how to type, and do a modicum of shorthand. And then, quite by accident, my father's friend, Lacey Caskey, who was a classical director—a classical curator at the museum, said, "I think there's a job for Barbara in the art museum, if she wants to have it."

[00:01:36.50]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your father in classics at all in some way?

[00:01:38.39]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No, he was a businessman. But he lived near Mr. Caskey, and they were great friends. So I applied for this job, which was a secretary to the secretary, Alice Jenks, who was, in turn, the secretary to the Directors, Edward Jackson Holmes, and Charles Henry Hawes, the Associates. I was accepted. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes both interviewed me because they had a feeling that they liked to know that the girls they were hiring were proper people to be in the museum. I passed that test, and became, in the administration office, the subsecretary.

[00:02:26.59]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What sort of things did you do there as subsecretary?

[00:02:28.96]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Mostly writing letters, typing letters for Mr. Hawes, who was the one who was the most active. Mr. Holmes wasn't as active—and filing. And the one big advantage, which is where my career came in, was that I knew what was going on in the museum because I was in the administration office. So when I gathered that Philip Hendy was going to be appointed Curator of Paintings, I figured out to myself that he would need a secretary who knew Boston, he being an Englishman. And I asked Mr. Hawes if I could apply to be his secretary. Mr. Hawes said, "Well, we'd have to ask Mr. Hendy. You will have to interview him." And I did. And the next thing that happened was that we were installed on the Fenway side, Mr. Hendy, myself, and a wonderful utility man they gave us, whose name was George McQuade. And the three of us ran the department for the next three years.

[00:03:47.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had there been a department before that?

[00:03:49.34]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No, there had not been a department.

[00:03:51.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who had been in charge of all that?

[00:03:54.35]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Old Mr. Potter was called "Fellow" for—I don't remember what his title is. It's in the Whitehill book. But there had been no office for paintings. Often the utility—head utility man would hang the pictures. Nobody— [They laugh.] So when Mr. Hendy came along, of course, he reorganized the thing and weeded out the impossible pictures, and hung the pictures in one line, which hadn't been done before. They were in the old-fashioned way of spotted all over the high walls.

[00:04:32.53]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you compare Mr. Hendy with the administrative men—Hawes and Holmes?

[00:04:38.31]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, of course, Phil was quite young at that time. I don't remember what age he was. But he was a professional person in paintings. And it was the first, I think, real professional they'd had as a Curator of Paintings. There hadn't been one before.

[00:05:04.91]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, how was that man—as an Englishman, was he happy to be in Boston?

[00:05:09.48]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. He had a very nice wife, and one little girl named Pippa. And they liked living in Boston. I think they lived outside of Boston. But they fitted in very well. Pippa used to be brought in Saturday mornings because we worked Saturday mornings then. And me, as the secretary, would take over Pippa. [They laugh.]

[00:05:39.68]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, he mainly spent his time, when he first arrived, going through the collection of paintings?

[00:05:46.76]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Right.

[00:05:48.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were they then?

[00:05:51.05]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: There were, of course, a great many good paintings. Also on the walls would be paintings that Boston families had parked there for the summer when they went away. And there had been no discrimination as to what was hung.

[00:06:10.35]

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

[00:06:10.92]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: And Philip, naturally, weeded those out and put them into storage, which annoyed the Boston families, often.

[00:06:22.84]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you involved in some of this decision-making?

[00:06:26.96]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, no. I didn't know anything about paintings then. But I was involved in—Philip would tell me what was happening. And it was a very fascinating three years that I had with him. [Laughs.]

[00:06:42.35]

ROBERT F. BROWN: How about acquisitions? Were there—

[00:06:44.63]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: He was very good on that. He would go abroad every summer, the three summers he was there. And there was a Ladies' Committee, who raised some money for him to buy pictures on his own, small pictures. Otherwise, you'd have to go through the trustees. But there was a fund. And he picked up some very good buys. I remember, he picked up that early Matisse that we have, which is a nude sitting on a chair or a table. We never could have acquired that unless he picked it up immediately, and he got it for a song. And now I don't know what it's worth.

[00:07:28.37]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was a good—and this was the Depression, wasn't it?

[00:07:31.64]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes.

[00:07:32.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that it was the time when—

[00:07:32.63]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: The time when it was a good—

[00:07:33.80]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —prices were good.

[00:07:34.37]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Exactly.

[00:07:35.75]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, were you learning all the while, [cross talk] or informally studying?

[00:07:42.47]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: The thing was that Philip Hendy didn't know anything about American paintings. Nobody else did much at that point, except I got interested, because visitors would bring in American pictures, and somebody had to look at them. And Phil didn't know much about it. And I think it was Phil who suggested that I take a course that Alan Burroughs gave at the Fogg on American paintings, so that I would be more able to cope with that side of the thing, which didn't interest him much. So that's how I got started in American paintings.

[00:08:20.79]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you worked with Alan Burroughs too, you said earlier.

[00:08:23.57]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. I can't remember just how it went. But Alan was one of the few people in the country at that period who was entirely interested in American painting, especially 18th century paintings.

[00:08:43.43]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was a time when there were—there was a good deal of research into authenticity of early American painting.

[00:08:49.67]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, very much so.

[00:08:51.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that at all involve you at the museum?

[00:08:57.06]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: People would bring in pictures, and the museum always had a policy of looking at objects, and giving people their opinion. We never gave—of course, we never do give financial opinions. But—that would have to be a dealer who would do that. But we—

[00:09:19.10]

[Telephone rings.]

Can you shut this for me?

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:09:25.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you were talking about the early American paintings at that time and how the museum answered queries, or when people brought them in. And Mr. Hendy then gave you increasingly—this was your responsibility. Would you then—you mentioned dealer. Would you call them in, if necessary?

[00:09:45.14]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No. We just give a dealer, like Charlie Childs, who is an American person—we would say, "If you want to get an appraisal of this, go to Charles Childs," and later on the Voses, also.

[00:10:00.02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you put on exhibitions at that time, or did the new painting department do that?

[00:10:06.83]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I don't think we did at that period. Later on, of course, we did. When Mr. Constable came in, we put on various shows. But at that period, it was so busy just clearing out what we had, and straightening things out.

[00:10:32.30]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Mr. Hendy see that there was—was there eventually a specialized group that hung the paintings, and were there conservators at that time?

[00:10:41.72]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, no. There was just Mr. Hendy and our utility man.

[00:10:46.07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mr. McQuade.

[00:10:46.97]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Mr. McQuade.

[00:10:47.84]

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was it at that point?

[00:10:48.59]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Of course, George McQuade would get other utility men to help him. But George was—and he has only just retired about four or five years ago. He's been with the paintings department. He's the most important person, I should say, the paintings department ever had, because he knew where every picture was, had the most marvelous disposition. Nothing ever flustered him. And so I wish to give a little plug for George McQuade. [Laughs.]

[00:11:16.74]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Thank you. [Laughs.] Was a conservation department set up at all?

[00:11:22.92]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. There was a conservation department. And Alfred Lowe and John Finlayson were—Alfred Lowe would do the—what shall I call it? The inpainting, and that sort of thing. And John Finlayson at that point would do the re-backing and the more mechanical side of things.

[00:11:50.71]

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

[00:11:52.03]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: And Philip Hendy really brought Mr. Lowe out, because Mr. Lowe was one of those people who hadn't had much educational training. But he'd had a—he'd worked for a restorer, a private restorer for many years. And he had just that talent for guessing or feeling where a picture had been repainted, and he was very careful about not taking off any of the original. And Philip Hendy was very much interested in this. Mr. Lowe had an office right next to us, where he worked. And Phil would spend many hours. Sometimes I would get cross, because there were so many other things for Phil to do. But he was very fascinated about this whole side of the thing.

[00:12:46.35]

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was interested in the transformations, I suppose.

[00:12:49.34]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Because so many of our pictures, of course, were all covered with brown varnish, and been touched. And he would look over Mr. Lowe's shoulder, and watch every little thing that Mr. Lowe was doing.

[00:13:06.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you say that under Mr. Hendy at that time, then, did the painting department become quite an important department within the whole museum?

[00:13:15.41]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I would think so. Yes. Because, you see, there hadn't been a department before. It had been all run from the administration office. That was where it all started. And of course, Phil—yes, Phil had to do the—what shall I call it? The pioneer work in organizing the department, having folders for each picture, putting the material in, all that angle, besides reorganizing all the hanging of the pictures, and supervising the cleaning of the ones he thought were more important.

[00:14:01.94]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, he left then in 1930—

[00:14:04.60]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: '33, I believe.

[00:14:07.95]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you continued.

[00:14:09.36]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I continued. And then, as I remember it, Charlie Cunningham was appointed an assistant. He wasn't called Curator. He came—Charlie came in, and he was, of course, excellent. He was a young person.

[00:14:26.35]

ROBERT F. BROWN: He worked with Paul Sachs, hadn't he?

[00:14:28.54]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. He—most of the people had studied at the Fogg. And about that point, as far as my career went, I had discovered that something that was very much needed was a catalog of John Singleton Copley's portraits. After talking with Alan Burroughs, and then my friend Anne Wheeler, who was a graduate student at the Fogg— and I conceived the idea of doing a catalog raisonne of John Singleton Copley. By this time Charlie Cunningham was at the museum, and I only worked there part-time because I was married and having children and things. And so I had an opportunity to do this catalog with Nan. Paul Sachs told us not to try to do anything fancy, just to try and see every picture that we were going to put in the catalog, and have it a useful tool for the future, not just writing in a wild way about the beauties of Copley.

[00:15:47.38]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You at that time—

[00:15:48.70]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: That was about 1933, I suppose. And the catalog came out in 1938, in conjunction with a big Copley show we had, which was the anniversary of his birth, of Copley's birth.

[00:16:07.42]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And in the catalog, you very carefully go over the—his birth date and other—

[00:16:13.63]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. That was another complication.

[00:16:15.30]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —I assume documentary evidence.

[00:16:16.03]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: That's right.

[00:16:16.75]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And then Paul Sachs had encouraged you to particularly research such things and also provenance, hadn't he?

[00:16:24.07]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. So Nan and I traveled around. Most of the pictures, of course, were still in New England, so we could. We drove here, there, and the other place and had a fine time together.

[00:16:41.15]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And would you have them—did you take photographs of them, or—?

[00:16:44.81]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No. Unfortunately, in those days— We would have, obviously, now. However, the Frick Reference Library was extremely useful to us. If we wanted a picture taken, a photograph taken, they would send up somebody and photograph it. That's how we got all those plates, I think. Sometimes the owner, of course, would have a good photograph.

[00:17:13.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you began the project, you already had, then, some knowledge of what had been written about Copley?

[00:17:19.83]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Of course, Bayley, and then before him, Perkins, back in 1873. But Bayley's book came out in 1915, I think. But here it was up in the 1930s, and nothing had been done. You see, Lawrence Park had done Stuart pretty thoroughly. But nobody had really scientifically gone around about doing Copley.

[00:17:50.49]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you think he was probably the most important early American painter?

[00:17:54.51]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, we thought so. Yes. A Mr. Foote, Henry Wilder Foote, had done a book on Robert Feke. But here was Copley, who was by far the most prolific of the colonial painters, and nobody had really done much of anything about him.

[00:18:14.92]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Think there was just too much to run down?

[00:18:17.17]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: It was a wonderful thing to work on because art students, so often, have to take material that's been gone over and over and over. And here was a practically perfect field for Nan and me.

[00:18:34.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Most of the original research consisted of genealogical research and such?

[00:18:40.42]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Nan Wheeler did the biographies. We did little biographies of the sitters. She did that at the Athenaeum. That was more her field. I, being more of the art person, being connected with the art museum, did—but we did it together. But Nan was responsible for all those wonderful biographies.

[00:19:02.98]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did the assessment, the—

[00:19:04.99]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Assessment more, yes.

[00:19:06.46]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Assessment of him as a painter and his style.

[00:19:09.07]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, more. But Nan was good, too, about it. But we did everything together. It was great fun.

[00:19:18.30]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You, in the book, think that the English period is a time when he loses his own style.

[00:19:27.76]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Not immediately. He didn't immediately. But of course, as he got—I think some of the early English pictures are fascinating, especially the famous family group.

[00:19:38.45]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

[00:19:39.04]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: And many other pictures. And I think Jules Prown, who did the English side of Copley, discovered many English portraits that were wonderful. It wasn't until about the 1890s—1790s, excuse me, that he began to lose his grip. And he went on painting until 1815, 'til he died.

[00:20:06.10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, yes. To what could you attribute that, that decline in his—

[00:20:11.11]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, just old age, I suppose.

[00:20:14.66]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you still find him a fascinating figure?

[00:20:17.94]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. I think he holds up pretty well. Don't you?

[00:20:21.93]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

[00:20:22.40]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: [Laughs.]

[00:20:24.30]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, about this time—how long was Mr. Cunningham at the museum?

[00:20:28.74]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: He was there when Mr. Constable was made Curator. I think it was 1938. And he stayed on as Mr. Constable's assistant for quite a while, until he was made Director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. In the meantime, Charlie had to go off to—in the Navy, to the war.

[00:20:57.67]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When Mr. Constable came, did he—what did he think of your project on Copley? Did he very much encourage it?

[00:21:04.66]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. And then in the meantime, I had been coming in part-time to start working on a catalog of our—the museum's American paintings. And I came in by the hour because I then had two children, and I could only do it by the hour. I was paid by the hour, and I came in to do that. But of course, in a place like the museum, where you don't have much help, I was constantly called upon to be an assistant to Mr. Constable, also, so that I didn't have much time for cataloging.

[00:21:48.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this cataloging is what resulted in, then, the two-volume catalog of American painting, which came out two years ago.

[00:21:58.19]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Yes. Then when I retired from the museum in '57, when Mr. Constable retired, Perry Rathbone, as I remember it, was able to get a Ford Foundation grant to finish up the American painting catalog. And they got somebody in to just do that, and not be pulled off into the general administration of the department.

[00:22:24.62]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you describe working with Mr. Constable, when he comes in? What was it—

[00:22:31.02]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh it was a—

[00:22:31.92]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the routine any different? Was the—

[00:22:34.69]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, it was simply great. He's such an understanding person, and so well-organized. And Mr. Constable would give more of his time. I don't know how many students of art, especially connected with the Fogg, or something like that—he would give them any amount of his time, because his experience had been so great.

[00:23:01.23]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the same applied to you who worked with him?

[00:23:05.28]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, we had this tradition of giving people our time. It was part of the job of a public museum.

[00:23:14.76]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mr. Hendy didn't know anything about American painting. What about Mr. Constable? Did he?

[00:23:18.93]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, he's an extraordinary person. He pretends he doesn't know anything. He would always say, "Barbara, you tell me what to say." But actually, he acquired quite a knowledge of it.

[00:23:34.26]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this worked well for you, then, did it, that he—

[00:23:38.28]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. Then of course, when all that period when Mr. Karolik was making the 19th century American collection with Mr. Constable's advice, that wasn't so difficult from the point of view of wondering whether it was American or not— I mean, the material. But Mr. Karolik would always take W.G.'s advice. Mr. Karolik would go to New York, or wherever the dealers were, and pick out a picture that he thought was good for his collection of this 1815 to 1865. He would have it sent up to the Museum to have Mr. Constable look at it from the point of view of a painting, whether he thought it was a good picture. They worked together beautifully. And I came into this—when they made the collection, I helped with the catalog, which was quite a job.

[00:24:48.53]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was this in the late '30s?

[00:24:49.91]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No. This—well, it was in—late '30s. Yes, I suppose in early '40s, I would say because I think the Karolik Catalog of American Paintings came out in 1949. In the meantime, I had been away from the museum for a whole year because I went to Berlin with my husband, who was involved in military government there. And then Dick McClenathen was there at that time as an assistant. He did a lot of work on the Karolik catalog.

[00:25:29.80]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you work at all—in your research into American painting, did you work at all with the decorative arts department, with Mr. Hipkiss?

[00:25:38.62]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I never was involved in that except for—in that collection, you know, Mr. Karolik gave, oh, six or seven Copley paintings. And of course, I was involved in that. Oh, the famous time that Mr. Karolik called me up on Christmas morning. Of course, he was so intense about collecting, and not having any children himself, he called me up Christmas morning to tell me that he had been able to acquire that double portrait of Winslow and his wife. And I was thrilled, because it was a marvelous thing to get. And I hadn't realized it was on the market. So he went raving on the telephone here. He was so excited. And finally I said, "Mr. Karolik, you know, the children are waiting to open their stockings." [They laugh.]

[00:26:39.42]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he was by and large a very endearing man, wasn't he?

[00:26:41.37]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, he was. But he was so intense about his collecting that he'd take up a great deal of time.

[00:26:48.39]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] What was Mr. Hipkiss like?

[00:26:50.85]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Of course, my great friend Kathryn Buhler worked for him. And I only knew Mr. Hipkiss, really, through what Kathryn told me about him. He seemed nice enough. I never was involved in decorative arts.

[00:27:04.77]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You became—you told me earlier, in about 1940—became an Assistant in American Painting. Was that simply a formal designation of your status?

[00:27:14.58]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, I got worked up about the fact that I would have to write these letters. I always had to answer the American painting letters, and I had no title. I can't remember who I went to. Who was Director then?

[00:27:31.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mr. Edgell, wasn't it?

[00:27:32.37]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, Mr. Edgell. I felt that—I'm not a woman's lib person, but I felt that I should have a title. Otherwise, what authority did I have to say anything? As I remember it—I don't want to boast, but I felt also that Kathryn Buhler should have a title, and that Marjorie Childs, in the library, should have a title. And so, by pushing and shoving, I managed to get us all a title, all three of us, because it didn't make sense not to have something to put under your name that showed that you knew what you were talking about, supposedly.

[00:28:18.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this at all change the museum's attitude toward you?

[00:28:22.36]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, heavens no. Nobody knew about it, in particular.

[00:28:25.17]

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. It was an internal—

[00:28:25.84]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: It's a big place. Nobody—we just—it was simply—it didn't raise our salaries any, but it just gave us a little more authority.

[00:28:36.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mr. Constable said that, I suppose it'd be about this time, that you were, in some way, closely connected with the beginnings of the National Gallery in Washington.

[00:28:48.66]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. But it would be much later than that. It was in the '50s. When was the National Gallery set up?

[00:28:55.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, it was around 19—late '30s that the building was opened. And I think early '40s—

[00:29:02.79]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: The National Portrait Gallery, he means.

[00:29:04.92]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the National Portrait Gallery?

[00:29:06.01]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes.

[00:29:06.36]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Then that would have been much later.

[00:29:08.13]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: That would have been much later, because I was not connected at all with the National Gallery.

[00:29:12.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, let get to that, then, a little bit later. I'd like to ask about that. You did earlier say that in—I suppose you mean in the '40s, that it was a very exciting period, because of the surge of interest in American painting.

[00:29:25.71]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:29:26.10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And people, particularly interested for, I suppose, patriotic reasons during the Second World War. And I wonder if you could describe this. Was this quite different from what it was in the '30s, when you began working with American paintings? Was there much more interest?

[00:29:41.34]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, tremendous. It was like a great surge upwards. When we first—Nan and I first started doing the Copley catalog, I don't think— except for Alan Burroughs' course in American painting— I don't think much was done in the country about American painting. But it gradually surged on. And of course, our museum happened to have a very good collection of—well, Stuarts, Copleys, everything you can think of. And then, of course, with the Karolik Collection of 19th century painting, our holdings were terrific.

[00:30:28.95]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. What about 20th century American paintings?

[00:30:31.53]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: And then we—we only casually, it seems to me, had pictures from the 20th century at first. And if somebody gave us a picture by the person you were just talking about, Hawthorne, for instance—

[00:30:51.57]

ROBERT F. BROWN: There it would be.

[00:30:52.02]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: —it would be accepted by the trustees. But there wasn't much buying at that point. Then, of course, later on, and more recently, since I—I'm not—since

there has been a real policy about American.

[00:31:08.62]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Let's say in the late '30s, early '40s, was there any interest in the so-called American Regionalists, the people like Wood and Benton?

[00:31:17.11]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, W.G. Constable got very interested—among his many interests—in this. And I can remember going with him—was it Curry? No, you'll have to correct me on this—whose widow lived in Salem, is that right?

[00:31:42.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Newburyport.

[00:31:43.35]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Newburyport—and offered to give the museum one of his pictures. And I remember driving up with W.G. We went up together, and we picked out a picture. But that was a gift, of course. But he was very much for this. And of course, there's a fund at the museum that was given, the Charles Henry Hayden Fund, as I remember it, which is for the purchase. Am I right? For the purchase of American paintings. So we did have a chance on that. When a fund is allocated to one thing, you go ahead and use it. [They laugh.]

[00:32:25.90]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well then came, in the '40s, the New York group of artists. Was their interest in that, the so-called—now called Abstract Expressionist? Was their demand to acquire them or exhibit some of this?

[00:32:41.30]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Of course, there is the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. And I think the feeling was that we shouldn't overload ourselves with something that they could take care of. However, I do remember, and I think you know about this, that whenever we acquired a contemporary American picture, where the artist was alive, W.G. would—we had a letter that we wrote, asking the artist to describe how he came to paint the picture.

And I remember several abstract paintings, which were fascinating, because the author, of course, adored writing a letter, two or three typewritten pages. And sometimes one would be absolutely amazed, because one hadn't gotten that feeling about the picture at all. But that's a detail. It was interesting. W.G. was so thorough about that kind of thing. I remember, oh, for instance—who was the man who painted the dead duck up in Maine?

[00:33:46.43]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hartley?

[00:33:46.74]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. His letter was very interesting. Maybe you've seen these letters. Have you?

[00:33:51.60]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I know of them.

[00:33:52.59]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. They haven't had a chance to—

[00:33:54.96]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Institute of Contemporary Art, did it have some fairly close relations with the museum?

[00:34:03.00]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Not that I know of. Of course, I wasn't in the administration at that point. No. I think they were so busy, and we were so busy that [laughs] I don't remember particularly. Now, W.G. may have. I don't remember particularly.

[00:34:20.76]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the 1950s, were there any changes, then, in what you were studying or what you were collecting? Mr. Edgell retired in '53 or '54. Was there—

[00:34:37.49]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, and then Perry Rathbone came. Yes. And one of the first shows we had after Perry got there, that we were involved in, was this John Singer Sargent show because it was in—I think that was '55, in honor of his birth or death. I never can remember. [Laughs.] You know, it's so funny about exhibitions, either it's in honor of their birth or their death. But that would be in honor of John Singer Sargent's birth in 1855. And that was a—

[00:35:12.69]

ROBERT F. BROWN: When there was an exhibition, were you often quite closely involved—with an American painting exhibition?

[00:35:17.77]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. Yes. Then we had lots of small shows. W.G. believed in small shows. Across the hall from us we had a show of Charles Hovey Pepper. And of course, I was all involved in that because we had to go out and choose the pictures that were going to be in it. There was a Iacovlev. Have you ever heard of him?

[00:35:41.61]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yes.

[00:35:42.16]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: We had a Iacovlev show. We had a Charles Woodbury show, which there was a wonderful woman who had been his assistant, named Mrs. Perkins. I can remember her vividly. In fact, she gave me a picture that's upstairs—Charles Woodbury had died by this time—in thanks for my work on that show. [Laughs.] Sometimes you get a present, you know.

[00:36:13.14]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would there be large openings for these shows?

[00:36:15.33]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Those would be just tea openings, you know, and not for the whole of the museum friends. It would be usually just—we had a thing called the visitors. Each department has a group of visitors. We'd have a small tea or something, invite the relatives of the people. I can't really remember all those kinds of small shows. Oh, yes, we had a Hopper show, Edward Hopper. That was bigger, of course. And I remember that Mrs. Hopper was furious because—apparently, we heard later— because we had it across the hall from—downstairs, across the hall from the paintings department. And she thought it should have been up in the main exhibition gallery.

[00:37:00.81]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Exhibition hall.

[00:37:01.26]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: But that was a detail I just happened to remember. [Laughs.]

[00:37:04.62]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Mr. Constable take care of any dealings with irate people that—

[00:37:10.20]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I suppose so. She didn't irate to us directly. I heard this from Lloyd Goodrich later on.

[00:37:18.45]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you've gotten to know Lloyd Goodrich and E.P. Richardson in the '40s, I gather.

[00:37:25.66]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. We had a secretary named Rozzie Ervin, W.G.'s secretary, who wanted to move to New York for some reason or other. And she became Lloyd Goodrich's secretary. She was a great friend of both—as well as W.G.'s secretary, she was a great friend of mine. And so from then on, of course, whenever I went to New York I stayed with her. And she was Lloyd's assistant. And so I got to know Lloyd very well.

And then, of course, John Bauer came to work at the Whitney. And Rozzie worked for him. And I got to know him. And then, of course, W.G. got John Bauer to write the introduction, wonderful introduction, to that—I just was reading it last night—to the Karolik American painting exhibition. It was a beautiful job he did. I'd forgotten how well he had written it, at least in my opinion.

[00:38:28.41]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You saw these people, Bauer and Goodrich, fairly regularly then?

[00:38:31.68]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, because I would go to New York, if there was an American painting that was being considered. And W.G. would encourage me to go to New York once every two or three months, to go to the galleries and see what was up—American galleries, particularly, of course—the Kennedy Gallery, and so on—so that I had an opportunity to go to New York quite often. And I could charge my fare. Of course, I stayed with friends—either Rozzie or my brother. I could charge my railroad fare to the museum on an expense account—very luxurious.

[00:39:16.18]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [Laughs.] Well, was Lloyd Goodrich quite helpful with advice?

[00:39:19.42]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes. He was very helpful. I remember once that Lloyd wrote to us to ask—they were going to have a—what was it? A Homer show or something, probably. We have a picture called "The Bridle Path." And I wrote back. I spelled it the wrong way. I never—though I'd never—you know, there are two ways of spelling "bridle." [They laugh.]

[00:39:50.64]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they're very different.

[00:39:51.69]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Very different. And he used to joke me about that. I claimed it was the secretary who typed the letter that did it. [They laugh.]

[00:40:03.18]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then your last—or did you publish other, smaller catalogs during these years?

[00:40:09.30]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I suppose we did. These small shows I was telling you about, there's a Iacovlev catalog. Do you have that, by the way?

[00:40:15.62]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I don't know.

[00:40:16.51]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: No. And the Pepper catalog, and these small catalogs—but the big American paintings catalog, it was such a terrific job, that it was good that Perry got Ford Foundation money to get people to do that who were just working on that, because W.G. and I were doing catalogs and everything else at the same time. It's pretty hard to do that. I think the Metropolitan has a separate department, almost, doesn't it, for cataloging.

[00:40:48.21]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you act sort of as a consultant on this at all, on the completion of the American painting catalog?

[00:40:57.46]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I didn't, really, because once I left the museum, departed, I think it's awkward to butt in. If anybody asked me, I would have. I can't remember whether Perry ever asked me. But I think he felt the same way, that somebody else was taking it over and—and anyway, I was pretty sick of cataloging by that time, I can assure you. [They laugh.]

[00:41:24.85]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you did one last substantial gathering together of paintings and the catalog, the New England miniatures exhibition—

[00:41:31.42]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, yes.

[00:41:31.98]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in 1957.

[00:41:32.23]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: That was just—yes, we did that. That was just as I was leaving. And I did that because I'd always been interested in miniatures. And I didn't know who else could do it. I did do that.

[00:41:45.32]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the introduction, you say that you've always been fascinated by things, very small things. And in it, you say many of us— our childhood comes up again when we see something again in miniature.

[00:41:58.20]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Yes. Just like your daughter's doll's house, and your son's soldiers.

[00:42:05.07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you—you mentioned it as a lost art. As far as you were concerned, it was, even though there are societies today, and then, of miniaturists.

[00:42:14.85]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: It seems to me it is—I've kept up with this a little bit—that art of

those tiny little brush strokes, and so on. There may be miniatures now, but they're more washed over. It's not the same technique at all. I don't think anybody—well, of course with the advent of the photograph, there wasn't the need for doing exact little portrait.

[00:42:39.75]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you, when you began the work for this exhibition, did you have—were there any surprises in terms of quality of them?

[00:42:47.58]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, we certainly—the Colonial Dames, you see, of New England, wrote to all their members and said there was going to be this exhibition. And we were absolutely amazed at the number of miniatures in private hands that turned up. Why, I think we saw—looked over hundreds of them.

[00:43:12.50]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

[00:43:12.80]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: So it was quite—and the Colonial Dames were most cooperative, I must say, about the whole thing, because it got much more busy than we thought it would. We had no idea of how strenuous it was going to be. And they gave every help possible.

[00:43:34.39]

[. . . -B.N.P.]

[00:44:09.83]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you mainly ground your choices on—well, you say—on people—well-known people, and also on aesthetic merit?

[00:44:19.40]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, and also on a—to give the history of miniature painting in America, from first, Copleys, right through to about 1840. So you had to decide which ones would show that chronology.

[00:44:42.56]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd now, by 1957, been there—

[00:44:46.58]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Off and on for about—

[00:44:47.93]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —twenty-some years. But did you see any difference in the—

[00:44:52.40]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Forty. '27 I went to the museum—'37, '47, '57—that'd be 30 years.

[00:44:59.06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Thirty years.

[00:44:59.57]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Okay.

[00:45:00.92]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you see any difference in the public's interest in American art?

[00:45:04.49]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, tremendous. Yeah. The whole thing moved forward because, in the beginning, it seemed to me they came in to see a pseudo-Rembrandt, you know. And they began to be more conscious of their own art. And of course, Mr. Karolik, with his collection, helped that out very much.

[00:45:25.22]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What particularly appeals to the public in his collection of paintings?

[00:45:30.81]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I think the representational ones, of the "Picnic at the Camden, Maine," and that kind of thing.

[00:45:40.60]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now this is the time, I guess, the '50s, when Mr. Constable said you worked with the National Portrait Gallery in Washington.

[00:45:47.17]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. That's right.

[00:45:47.89]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you describe that?

[00:45:50.03]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Well, Charles Nagel, who was the first director of the National Portrait Gallery, happened to be a great friend of my sister in St. Louis. And also, therefore, I knew him quite well. And so naturally, when he started trying to collect material for the National Portrait Gallery, as he said, we founded it a hundred years too late, because so many of the important pictures are in museum collections.

[00:46:23.38]

I went down, just as an amateur—not an amateur, but I mean as a consultant, informal consultant, to try and steer him to pictures that he might be able to get hold of. I went down several times. And a very nice librarian there—I wonder if he's still there—and by this time, I'd retired from the museum. And I had an awful lot of pamphlets and things of my own that I had taken home from the museum, that had to do with American portraits. And I remember, I thought they had to start from scratch—the National Portrait Gallery. And they were going to have a librarian. And he came up, and I let him take quite a lot of pamphlets that weren't of any use to me anymore, but that he would not be able to get ahold of in any other way, because they were out of print, and so on.

[00:47:25.13]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you fairly optimistic about what they could do there?

[00:47:28.37]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Of course, the building is fascinating. I think they did a beautiful job, don't you, architecturally?

[00:47:33.95]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

[00:47:34.04]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: The way they refurbished that—what was it? Before that it had been the—

[00:47:38.71]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a patent office.

[00:47:39.59]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes, patent office. That's right. And so—

[00:47:45.53]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You left the museum fairly suddenly, or was it something you planned ahead for some time?

[00:47:50.30]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, planned ahead. Yes.

[00:47:52.01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You and Mr. Constable would be retiring—

[00:47:53.69]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: He would be retiring because it was his age time to retire. And I—that involves, of course, a pension, which is important to a man. In my case, my salary had been so small that it didn't matter. [Laughs.] My pension wouldn't—I don't think I ever joined the pension plan. [Laughs.] No, I was ready to retire. It's a chance to go travel when you want to. So it seemed a proper time for me to retire, when he was retiring.

[00:48:27.88]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, when—now that you look back, do you think it was time very well-spent?

[00:48:34.63]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Oh, it certainly was.

[00:48:38.25]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You came in the back door, as you said.

[00:48:40.24]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: I came in the back door, but what luck. I think I'm much better off than in a publishing house. [Laughs.] And I learned so much. That's the fascinating thing about having a hobby, so to speak, if you call it a hobby. Everywhere you go—I don't go to anybody's house now that I don't peer around at the pictures they have. [Laughs.] And it's been very rewarding.

[00:49:09.25]

And during the war, it was—this is just a personal side, but my husband was away. First he was in Washington, when the war started. And was a—as a lawyer, connected with one of the government things. Then he joined the Army, and went into military government, and was sent overseas. And he was gone, oh, for four or five years. And I had small children here. And I was fortunate enough to get a very good housekeeper, who in turn had a small baby, which made it—she wanted to have a place to live, because her husband was in the Army.

[00:49:52.20]

So during those years, the museum, from a personal point of view, was just an outlet. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had any life at all, except here with the children, because nobody was entertaining then. You know, nobody invited you out to dinner, because we had food rationing. So from that point of view, it was very rewarding all the way around.

[00:50:16.51]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are you pleased the direction the museum has taken in terms of American painting?

[00:50:22.00]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. Of course, I haven't kept up very well with—I don't get over there very often. I talk with Laura Luckey and Lucretia Giese. But I don't form any opinion about what they're doing now, because, actually, my period stops— my interest really stops before the abstract period. You see, I don't know much about it, and I'm not a very good judge of—so that I don't form any opinion when they buy something by Motherwell, or somebody like that. I'm not involved in that at all.

[00:51:08.36]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you and Mr. Constable were both very broad-minded, weren't you—you mentioned earlier, in considering, and being aware of things of that sort?

[00:51:19.10]

BARBARA NEVILLE PARKER: Yes. I think Mr. Constable more than I because I was more—so busy doing 18th, 19th, and early 20th century things that I didn't have much opinion about it, except for these local people, like Pepper, and so on, where I—

[Recorder stops; restarts.]

[00:51:36.47]

[. . . -B.N.P.]

[00:57:18.99]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]