



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Margaret T.
Bruce, 1963 October 11

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Margaret T. Bruce on October 11, 1963. The interview took place in Washington, D.C. and was conducted by Harlan B. Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. The sound quality for the interview is poor throughout, leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections. 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

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Why don't you begin by telling us something about your husband's background?

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, he was born to a family named—his father was James Bruce, and they were an old New York family. They had a piece of property that had been in the family down there on Water and Pearl Street for seven generations, and his bringing up was a conventional New York bringing up. His father was a graduate from Columbia, and then he went to Columbia. And he took law. He worked very, very hard. I remember him telling me once that it was 4th of July before he saw green grass. [Both laugh.] Well, this law firm where he connected himself with sent him out to the Philippines, to be a lawyer for the Philippines Railroad. And he had been courting me off and on for about six years, and in 1909 I took a trip out to the Orient and went with these friends down to the Philippines. And we decided to get married. I won't go into the sentimental details, [laughs] but I went back and got my mother and sister and niece and went out, and we were married in Japan and we lived in the Philippines. And it was a small place and there were only two law firms, and they were always in each other's hair because there were so few customers.

Well, anyway, after a few years he gave up being a lawyer and became a merchant in foreign trade between the Philippines, China, South America. He imported hides from South America, Chinese things, and took Chinese goods from China to the States and the things that the States wanted, the Chinese wanted from us. I'm very much ashamed to say that a great deal of it was material for the war in Manchuria, but that's so long ago we won't fret about that.

Well, finally we came home and we had an apartment in New York. And all these fancy directors wanted to take a trip to the Orient, and they persuaded my husband to take them out. We got out to Peking, and the Chinese government, which was the new government [ph] [inaudible] after they pushed out the Manchus, needed some money. So, these fancy directors and my husband thought it would be a swell idea to lend them some money. [Laughs.] I can remember the dirty looks I got when I said, What are you going to do when they don't pay you back? Well, it seems—now, this you can't put in. It seems that Tom Lamont was out there, from Morgan and Company, and Tom Lamont wanted that loan, and Tom Lamont promised to take it over when everybody got back in the fall. And when we got back into the States, there was a depression, which nobody remembers except people who were in foreign trade. The sugar that we bought in Philippines at 25¢ a pound, by the time it got to New York it was worth five cents. The devaluation came so quickly.

[00:05:00]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, it wasn't convenient to Tom Lamont to take over the loan, so he just left this whole company of my husband's high and dry, and it broke its back. And it failed, and my husband went through three years of padding around New York, trying to keep it alive, and then finally wound up, and he said to me, I never, never, never again will ask anybody to ever put any money in anything. I'm through. I'm going to go and paint pictures. His grandfather had done that to the grandmother. The grandfather on his mother's

side was Edward Bright from Wales, and Edward Bright was brought over at the age of seven and lived up in Troy, New York, and had a very pleasant publishing business. And he had a wife and three children, three young lady daughters, and when they were, oh, 16, 17, he said to his wife, I'm finished. I'm going to go and become a minister. So, they came down to New York so he could study to be a minister. Well, he got bored being a minister, and he went back and published a Baptist newspaper, which was very, very popular. This was in the '70s.

Well, so that was that. Ned Bruce became a painter and we went and lived in Italy, and we went to join Maurice Sterne [ph] in this little peasant town. And it was very curious, because we were surrounded by poverty. When I married, Ned said to me, Now, don't worry about the poverty in the Philippines. The Filipinos can reach up and get a banana or a coconut will fall on the ground they can eat a coconut. [They laugh.] And, you know, you believe what you want to believe. Ah, they look skinny. He said, Yes, they are skinny because they're filled with hookworm and all the parasites. And then when we got to China, he said, Now, don't worry about the Chinese, because we pay them. We pay our cook, we pay our houseboys four times what a Chinaman would pay. You give your rickshaw man, when he pulls you in, twice or three times what the Chinaman would. Now, don't worry. Well, so I put my nose in the air [laughs] and didn't worry until one day we were in Hong Kong, and Ned went off with a Scotsman to play golf, and they left me with this little boy. He was so cold, and his nose was so snotty, [laughs] and he shivered so he couldn't get the clubs out. Well, [inaudible] when they got back to town we [inaudible] drinking tea in the clubhouse, and [inaudible] serious about the poverty in China.

Well, we survived it. But when we went to live in peasant village in Italy, the peasants—the fact that Ned was a painter, these peasants all became our friends. The maidservants would serve you, and then if you had a party and the artists came in, they'd come in and sit around and dance with the artists. —It was all absolutely democratic. [Inaudible]. It got so on our nerves, we finally had to move away. We moved up to Tuscany, outside of Florence, where they weren't quite so close to us. Because you would open your kitchen door and there would be a little girl smiling, but she'd have a horrible-smelling kind of half-risen cornbread with a little smear of oil on it, and that was left for her all day long. The babies died. And the doctor didn't have any medicine, and they didn't have any money to buy medicine. They used to come and I used to treat their burns.

[00:10:02]

I didn't have anything but boracic acid with me. [They laugh]. And Unguentine. One time they came, the woman—her legs were so badly scalded, she'd dropped boiling soup. Well, you know what they did? They went and got water out of the manure pile.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET BRUCE: The doctors said that ammonia [inaudible]. I know I washed it off and put the salve on it, and by Jove, she didn't get infected. The doctors said that if I didn't stop it, they'd run me out of town.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] You were in competition with the locals.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, we came back. We always—when we were in Italy, we'd go up in the spring to France, and we spent the summer of '29 in France. And we came back with three years of paintings to sell. And Paul Reinhart [ph] was his agent, and my husband always played the market a little bit, so we were able—we came home on a fancy boat. We came home on the *Paris*. They had black boards showing the stock market on those boats. [Inaudible] gambling. And we stayed in the house of some friends, the president of a very big New York bank, and he was in Europe, arranging some German loans, and the wife said, Well, last night or two nights ago I had a dinner party, and there was a crisis. It was very badly served, and I said to the butler, 'Eric, why was dinner so bad the other night?'

'Oh, madam, there was a crisis in the kitchen.' 'Crisis? What do you mean?' 'Well, the brokers sent word to the cook if she didn't come down with more securities they would sell her out.' [They laugh]. So that woman took her own money and went down and backed those three servants. Well, Reinhart [ph]—Ned said to Reinhart [ph], Don't you want to put it off? And Reinhart [ph] said, No, we might as well go on, which was very smart of him because everybody thought it would be over by March.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGARET BRUCE: And we did very well. Then we went up to California, and we were in California, and he was very busy. And then one day he said to me, Do you realize I may never sell another picture? He said, I've got to do something. So, he decided to go back to law. And we've always kept up our friendship with these Filipino—our friends from the Philippines. And we went down, and they said, Yes, we want to send a lobbyist to Washington to put through bills of Philippine independence. We're sick of not knowing where we stand, and we'll hire you to go there and put it through and get us good quota, over a period of years, for our sugar as possible to get. So, we came here when [inaudible] Hoover was still here, and it took three years, and he passed it over Hoover's veto. And it was some bill. Well, that's how we happened to be here, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: And waiting for these things to be tied in, and word came out that everybody would [ph] get relief. Is that on?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, it is.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, you better turn it off then. [HARLAN PHILLIPS laughs.] Hopkins [ph], I think, was jealous of my husband.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Really [ph]?

MARGARET BRUCE: I think that lots of—Roosevelt did that. He played people against each other. Well, all right. I've said that. Hopkins also was a little suspicious of Ned. Here was this lobbyist. Now, lobbyists never made any bones about it. He never lobbied anything else. That was the one thing that he did. Neither of us had any sense of shame about it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:15:20]

MARGARET BRUCE: So, he got in touch with some of Hopkins' men, and there was a man up in New York named Billy Barr [ph], who was a famous old, half-Chinese, half-German collector. And Ned was very fond of him, and a few years ago I said to him, Billy, why do you think my husband's health was broken so?

Oh, he said, he killed himself. He said, He came up to New York and called me up and said, 'Billy, you have to have dinner with me.' And I said, 'Well, I can't. I have an engagement.' Ned said, 'This is terribly important. I'm about to be given \$2 million to help the artists, and I need your help.' So, the man broke his—and they talked all night long, and then he flew back to Washington, and went right on working. And he pushed himself. But of course, they had to get the thing started.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: Then later, there was so much that was such bad art that there was a division between Ned Bruce and Hopkins on the ideology. Hopkins didn't care whether the man was a bad artist or not. What he cared was to get into work, get food for himself and his family, and my husband thought that it was terrible for him to drag all these poor young artists that were so mediocre along. It would have been better to have let them do something else. And that's how there was a division. And Roosevelt asked him to take over the whole program that Hopkins was going to run, and he was fighting that out at the time he had his stroke.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had your husband had prior relation with Roosevelt?

MARGARET BRUCE: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He had not?

MARGARET BRUCE: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And Hopkins, in New York, at all?

MARGARET BRUCE: No. No. It was all out of the blue.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. And then your husband went to see people like Rex Tugwell, Jerome Frank—

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, they were living down here.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

MARGARET BRUCE: They were living down here, and they were also New Dealers. And the New Dealers all knew each other.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. But the idea with respect to support for design and the adornment of public buildings was broached in this kind of casual way. It could have been over in the backyard, seated in the backyard, something like that.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So that ideas were in the air, [inaudible].

MARGARET BRUCE: Now, you can turn that off.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

MARGARET BRUCE: Tom Lee was a painter and since then has become a writer. He came from Texas, and he did a very handsome mural for the post office building on the ground floor. And they wanted to put a door there. They just chopped it out.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Terrible.

MARGARET BRUCE: And some years ago, there was a very handsome exhibition of Indian—American Indian paintings at the National Gallery, and I went over with some ladies, and I said to them, Oh, well, now look at these. I want you to come over and see the beautiful ones when you're in the interior.

[00:20:02]

And there was three Indians who did a buffalo hunt all in pale blues and greys up on the fourth or fifth floor of the interior. And it was a little place where they had a coffee machine where you could—the young secretaries could take their sandwiches and sit up there, enjoy the murals, and have a cup of coffee and eat their sandwiches. I led, with great pleasure, the ladies up—they have moved in a lot of books and shelves and [inaudible] and whatnot. I don't know. And they pasted memorandums all over these murals. The kind of thing that a restaurant in New York would have paid hundreds and hundreds of dollars for. The ones—the two big handsome Indian murals in the interior that they can't spoil are too high up, and they're down in the cafeteria.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

MARGARET BRUCE: But the one up there on the fifth floor was really so delicately done. It's funny, I don't think my husband would have been as bitter about it as I was. He'd say, Well, we gave the man a chance. He got his money. He got the satisfaction of doing the job, and perhaps he's doing others.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How did your husband—did he just turn to painting cold? Had he had prior experience in painting?

MARGARET BRUCE: I don't think so. He dabbled around with a man named Murphy [ph] one summer in college. I mean, when he was in college, he went over one summer. But the reason that he became a painter was that the whole time we were in China we collected Chinese paintings, and we had a very, very beautiful collection, which was taken over and given by a man named Galen Stone to the museum up there in Harvard.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

MARGARET BRUCE: Fogg was its name.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, Fogg, yes.

MARGARET BRUCE: So, if you ever go up and you see anything marked Stone, you'll know it came from his collection. And for every Chinese painting you buy, you know, you have to look at hundreds before you select—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. Sure. But this sparked his interest.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. And then as a consequence of that particular business experience, he concluded that he was going to paint thereafter.

MARRGARET BRUCE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARALN PHILLIPS: And then happily, I guess in terms of artists that are more or less individualistic, it was good from his point of view, in the sense of power, that he had the legal background when he got to Washington.

MARGARET BRUCE: It was Maurice Sterne, who was a very well-known painter, said that he never had a pupil as well-disciplined as Ned. Well, he would be. You don't graduate from Columbia law school, and you're not on the law journal unless you, you know, a disciplined person.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. Sure. This made it easier for him to be seized by an idea and to convert it into something practical.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: As it would not have been for, let us say, a George Biddle or Thomas Benton or some of the others who were interested in the development of a program for mural painting but didn't know the means that had to be employed in order to reach and convince specific people, like Mr. Roberts in the Treasury Department, and more particularly the architect under Mr. Roberts, Mr. Simons.

[00:25:00]

MARGARET BRUCE: Larry Simons [ph] was very fond of my husband, but when they had the design made, which was a competition, the design for the modern museum, which was going to be opposite the Mellon, and it would be like the Tate Gallery in London. Larry said to Ned, I'm sorry, but don't you think your secretary can wheel you up to see me, because I just can't come down to see you and pass that thing. It offends me so. Well, there you are. He thought in terms of arches and columns. There is an awful lot of modern art that offends me. I just don't go and look at it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

MARGARET BRUCE: I do think that if you look hard enough and hard enough, keep going, you will finally—something comes through, especially if it's nice color. The thing that irritates me so is that men's technique is so bad today.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: You take these beautiful Rothkos down there at the Duncan Phillips, and they're peeling off. They don't care about them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. Well, it's a form of—for me, it's a form of exhibitionism. Sort of physicalism in painting.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And while it's, you know, it's perfectly all right to have a free lunch counter and for those who like it, I'm glad they have it to look at, but I don't—my tastes don't go that way. Did your husband have a capacity for outrage?

MARGARET BRUCE: Outrage?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, I don't think he ever lost his temper. You mean that way? He never lost his temper except after he was ill.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, I see.

MARGARET BRUCE: Then, I mean, a man—he always said to me that I couldn't possibly imagine how awful it is to have one side of your body in a vise, hanging down, dragging down on you. And he was running on three cylinders, and when things didn't go the way he wanted them to go, he couldn't help but—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. I would imagine, you know, I don't—

MARGARET BRUCE: I think most people who are paralyzed do suffer that way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But isn't it also true that even on a clear day, when you're hale and hearty and you have to deal with something as amorphous and slow and grinding as government, even back in those early days, there's an endless series of diary notes I've seen where Roberts, for example, who was in charge of this or okaying it, preferred to protect his whole periphery before he got wet, and would not agree or would ask for delay or, you know, when you're charged and the batteries are ready to roll, yeah, somebody says, See me in two weeks.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs]. You know, that's when you want to tear down the universe. And I imagine, with your husband, it was a happy circumstance where he had the law degree, where he could understand what the process was involved in getting something accepted, and to work with it, exert that measure of pressure which was necessary, sell an idea, argue on behalf of it, and see to it that it came out with the kind of standards in which he could believe as a topic.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, I think they worked awfully fast, and they bypassed a great deal. It was very, very stuffy.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

[00:30:00]

MARGARET BRUCE: They had to.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: They were given, at one time, some money to put some decorations, watercolors, in the leper colony down there in Louisiana. And they had very distinguished jury that came in. There were 10,000 sent in [inaudible] and the artists were going to be paid \$30 apiece.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Wow.

MARGARET BRUCE: It was terrible. And after that, if my husband asked anybody to lunch, he would always say, Now, bring your pocketbook along because you're going to buy a picture. They sold them, you know, that way, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: On order not to send the best ones. They finally got some extra money for one of the navy hospitals, and [inaudible] they didn't sell them all, they had to go back. Awful. Now, whether the artists were that hard up or whether they were just so happy to be part of this movement, I think that probably was the answer.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, certainly artists didn't have, by comparison, much better opportunity in the '20s, you know. Some were. Some were successful, but by and large, you know, the individual ones, the unique ones, the creative ones that had something special of

their own didn't fare very well in the '20s. So, the '30s was the land of opportunity, even at \$23.40 a week or whatever it was, or \$35 a week, it was like entering the Elysian field by comparison, and it was steady.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, those boys—there were a group of boys down there in the Virgin I—well, they came down Key West first. Julius Stone [ph] was Hopkins' man from Florida, and he liked Ned, and he came to Ned and said, What can I do? Here's Key West. There are 10,000 people in town. Eight thousand are ready for relief. And Ned said, Well, get some artists down there, and then people follow. They always follow artists. So they decided to send a group of artists down there, and they did. And these boys did so many watercolors a week for the government, and they just loved it. And then they went from there over to the Virgin Islands. See, the sponge fisheries had moved away. The tobacco people, the cigar people had moved away. The navy yard moved away. They literally—Hopkins literally had them raking leaves. The man in the five-and-ten said that the Christmas before had just been ghastly. People would come in—women would come in, you know, looking longingly at things and then, you know, drop them and go out. They hadn't taken the garbage out of town for two years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: In Key West. And the few people that could pay the taxes said, Well, why should we pay taxes? Nobody else is paying any taxes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Pretty bleak.

MARGARET BRUCE: It was bleak.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Pretty bleak. Well, it became a very exciting period, one of ideas—

MARGARET BRUCE: Oh, it was. Stars in people's eyes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: Of course, I presume the war put the other emphasis on recovery.

[00:35:04]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. I'm afraid we were ultimately bailed out by business in expendable goods for which there was no particular accountability.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But nonetheless, the kind of energy that went into overhauling the grim specter that loomed here and deepened by '32 and—well, if you were here, you remember the march on Washington.

MARGARET BRUCE: Indeed, I do. And I remember MacArthur, and I can remember Hoover, not going over there and seeing those people. They were both cowards.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, very black page.

MARGARET BRUCE: Very.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But also symptomatic of the severity.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So that, you know, the restlessness of America imagination that could come up with some new programs, some new ideas, and in the field of art, the tenacity—

MARGARET BRUCE: But doesn't it sound fantastic that there are people that have no appreciation of what Roosevelt did?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know why that is.

MARGARET BRUCE: That still hate him. I don't know. I suppose if you were principal owner in a bank, that was closed, and never opened you might feel a certain bitterness, but then it

would be more to the point if you looked into the business ethics of the bank to find out why it wasn't open.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. I don't know why there's this, well, continuing enmity toward [inaudible]—I really don't know.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, I told you the story the other night, about Pearl [ph].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: That's a terrible story.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But it does continue in deep [inaudible].

MARGARET BRUCE: I'm sure there's still people that hate her, but not as many as—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I suspect that she was more tolerated, by comparison. Good woman, you know. But I told you the justice's attitude was that Roosevelt couldn't do very many things, but he could be President of the United States. [MARGARET BRUCE laughs.] Well, he was.

MARGARET BRUCE: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And he had to have and use other legs. He had to have messenger boys. He had to—how can you run guerilla warfare in a political setup sitting? It's hard. It may account, in part, for the fact that he set one up against another and let them fight things out. Maybe, I don't know.

MARGARET BRUCE: Well, he had a lot of prima donnas. I think Ickes was probably one of the most difficult. Ickes had the good fortune to die, but certainly Rex Tugwell was never—well, his great day was the New Deal.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MARGARET BRUCE: I'm sure he did a good job out there in Chicago, but nothing very exciting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. You know, it's a strange study in the exploration of leadership as to what kind of man Roosevelt was, to enlist the support that he did enlist from so many different kinds—

[END OF TRACK AAA_bruce63_35_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]