



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lee Brown
Coye, 1964 May 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lee Brown Coye on May 26, 1964. The interview was conducted by Joseph S. Trovato 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 2022 the Archives created a more 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

JOSEPH TROVATO: The following is an interview with Mr. Lee Brown Coye of Hamilton, New York, May 26, 1964. I'm going to just leave a little—Lee, I have known you as a central New York artist ever since the 1940s, and we have shown some of your paintings in our *Early Artists of Central New York* exhibitions at Munson Williams Proctor Institute in Utica. I also recall your painting that was included in the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, *American Painting Today*, it was called, of 1950. Now, as I remember, it was an abstraction, and I wonder whether you're working in that style today?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, no, I'm not. My painting today has gone back to the type of painting that I started as a result of this WPA Project. There was a definite trend at that time, in the middle '30s, and the first painting I did was more or less of a realistic one, you might call it, of the American school. I was very much concerned with social conditions, and I developed into thinking in terms of architecture and putting bits in the paintings that would suggest the kind of people that lived in the architecture.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

LEE BROWN COYE: And, as we progressed, I got interested in the abstract painting, and for a number of years, I did quite a bit of it. I was fairly successful at it. Perhaps I should have carried on with it. I don't know. But today, I've gone back to my old approach to it. I'm still interested in people and their activities and the places they live in and things of that nature.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

LEE BROWN COYE: It's more a realistic approach.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Do I understand correctly that you are represented in the Metropolitan Museum by a work of yours?

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes, yes, I have a painting in the Metropolitan, in their permanent collection. It's a watercolor of an old house. As I recall, it's in the moonlight. It's a night scene. And that picture was purchased from an exhibit—well, it was the Whitney Annual, is that what they call it?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

LEE BROWN COYE: The Whitney Annual?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, and when was it bought? When was this?

LEE BROWN COYE: It was bought, I don't know, in 1938 or '39.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, as far back as that?

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That was still in the WPA period.

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, I wasn't on the WPA then—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, I understand.

LEE BROWN COYE: —but it was in that period, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I understand.

LEE BROWN COYE: I exhibited in the Whitney for, oh, many years in their annual show.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEE BROWN COYE: Until they went completely abstract, and then, of course, I was out.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Some years ago, you did some murals for a store in Utica. It was a store located on lower Genesee Street, and I even remember the subject of the mural. It was early Utica, showing lower Genesee Street. It was somewhat like the view in the well-known Bartlett print. Your mural was done in tones of brown, I think.

LEE BROWN COYE: It was more or less monochrome, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Was this mural done after the WPA experience?

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes, it was. Quite a number of years after. Probably ten, twelve years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Sometime in the '40s, would you say?

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes, it was during the war. I recall that.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, what was the mural that you painted on the WPA? Now, was it the one mural, or did you do more than one?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, the original contract, or whatever you might call it, was for one mural in the auditorium in the school in Cazenovia, the Cazenovia Central School.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

LEE BROWN COYE: It was a large thing. It was, as I recall, about seven feet wide or eight feet wide and 17 feet high. It was a tremendous project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I should—[Cross talk.]

[00:05:04]

LEE BROWN COYE: I wouldn't dare tackle it today, but in those days, [they laugh] when you were younger, you didn't mind so much.

JOSEPH TROVATO: [Laughs.] How true that is. What was the subject of the mural? Were you given a subject to carry out, or how did you determine the subject?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, I was given a very general subject. It was instigated by some people in Cazenovia who were concerned with the history of Cazenovia, the early days of Cazenovia, although they didn't restrict me in any way. They merely suggested that that be the subject, and being somewhat of an amateur historian, I always have been interested in it, I got quite interested in the history of Cazenovia, and the first sketch I made was of that, which was approved, and we painted the thing. And then, the WPA Project ended, and the people of Cazenovia contributed money to complete five more.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Five more murals?

LEE BROWN COYE: Five more murals. And, see, there were six panels in all, and the one the WPA paid for was just one of them, off to one side in the corner.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I understand.

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, they wanted the whole room done, and they didn't pay a great deal of money, but they were very generous about it. I wanted to do the work, and I was very happy to get it. It was quite a chore.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

LEE BROWN COYE: And in the meantime, after that was completed, I moved to Syracuse and took a job, and I got to thinking about those murals, and I thought I could improve them. So, I repainted the whole mess [laughs] of them on my own.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEE BROWN COYE: It was a challenge and—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that must have been quite an undertaking.

LEE BROWN COYE: It was an undertaking, doing it part-time. I remember I used to go out and sleep in the—on weekends, I would go up there and sleep on the stage of the auditorium. They gave me a cot, [Joseph Trovato laughs] and I had my stuff out there, and I worked for, oh, months and months and months on it part-time.

JOSEPH TROVATO: From the photograph, if this is one of the sketches of the Cazenovia mural, is that what this is that we're looking at right now?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, yes. Those are the two end panels. They flank the stage. You see the doorway was in here, and there was a ventilator up here, which didn't help much—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

LEE COYE BROWN: —but I tried to design around it.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, but I think that you certainly incorporated—or that you filled your space in a very good relationship with your—I mean, with the doorways and the ventilators up above. I notice that there is a, perhaps if I might call it an influence in the murals that perhaps Thomas Benton might enter in here as a sort of an inspiration. Would you say this? Were you conscious of what I'm suggesting?

LEE BROWN COYE: I was very conscious of it. I am conscious, and I was at that time. I think Benton fitted in with my philosophy pretty well. I'm not comparing myself with Benton. I think he's one of our greatest painters. But we're all influenced by people. You can't help but be.

JOSEPH TROVATO: By all means.

LEE BROWN COYE: I wasn't copying Benton. I was influenced by him.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

LEE BROWN COYE: Which is a natural thing.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Will you tell us, Lee, where exactly did you paint the Cazenovia mural? Did you do it on location, or did you have a place elsewhere where you actually carried out the work?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, it was actually painted in two places. I was living in Cortland, New York at the time that I received the commission, and the thing, as I said, was about seven or eight feet by 17 feet, which is quite a big thing. And the minister of the Universalist Church in Cortland, Gus Ulrich [ph]—God rest his soul, one of my very dear friends—allowed me to set this thing up in there. A room big enough to put a 17 foot mural is hard to come by.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right, right.

LEE BROWN COYE: And every Sunday, [laughs] I took it down Sunday morning and get some help and lug the thing out so they could have their service, and then we carried it back. And when we got a bad day—[Laughs.]

[00:10:00]

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mean a rainstorm or snow?

LEE BROWN COYE: In a rainstorm, we used to set it against the church with the face down and hope we didn't get too much water on it. [Joseph Trovato laughs.] And when it was practically—well, maybe three-quarters completed, we went to Cazenovia. That was when

the Project was beginning to run out and—as I recall—and the people of Cazenovia had raised this money to carry the project further. We took it to Cazenovia, and I moved to Cazenovia.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Well, that must have been quite an ordeal and quite an experience.

LEE BROWN COYE: Oh, it was a tremendous experience. It was probably one of the biggest experiences of my life. That's why the WPA was so important.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Many artists were given the opportunity to learn mural techniques on the WPA. Were you one of these? Or, how did you acquire your skill, Lee?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, as far as acquiring skill is concerned, that means that if I have any, it is a result of a good many years of application. But you see, we need some sort of inspiration, or what should I say, moral support?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Incentive?

LEE BROWN COYE: Some incentive. Tackling these projects is not something you can do, especially during the Depression, when nobody's got anything. Now, I had a little sign shop in Cortland. And, well, if I had a week where I made five dollars, it was a big week. I had a small family. Of course, I'm not complaining. I was in the same spot as everybody else.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right, everyone was in the same boat in those days.

LEE BROWN COYE: Everybody was in the same boat. And I don't recall exactly where I read about this WPA. I think it was in *the Post Standard* or a Syracuse paper, and Anna Olmsted of the Syracuse Museum—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, she was the director of the Syracuse Museum.

LEE BROWN COYE: And she was also the regional director, I believe, of this Project.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, well, that, I'm interested in knowing.

LEE BROWN COYE: And as I recall, it said in the paper that if you were interested in this, to write to her. There was a little article about it. And I wrote to her and told her I was available. I was between engagements, so to speak, and was interested in what I could do. And she wrote me back about the project in Cazenovia. And I had met her once or twice, but we didn't know each other at all.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

LEE BROWN COYE: She didn't know me. I didn't—I knew who she was. That's about the size of it. And she wrote me back a very nice letter and told me about the project, told me the sizes, and would I make a sketch? Well, I did, and I also—I remember I wrote her a letter, and the sketch was approved. That was where she told me about what the people of Cazenovia wanted, something on the historical basis.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I understand.

LEE BROWN COYE: And I went to the library, and got what information I could about early Cazenovia, and I made the sketch. I don't think it was a terribly good sketch. I was pretty young then, but it was a sketch, and they approved it. And right away—I wanted to paint, and I was willing to do most anything. And we were paid well, for those days. I think I received \$37.50 a week. I was a big shot. I was a wheel [ph].

JOSEPH TROVATO: That was something. [Lee Brown Coye laughs.] Did others work with you on this Cazenovia project, or did you do that entirely on your own?

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, as far as the painting is concerned, it was all done by myself. They hired a very fine paper hanger. That was his profession. But—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, but this was for the installation of it?

LEE BROWN COYE: For the installation of the—that's a huge piece of canvas.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

LEE BROWN COYE: And when you get the lead and varnish on it to stick it, it becomes pretty heavy.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yeah, I can imagine.

LEE BROWN COYE: And the only trouble with this guy, I remember this [laughs], just a little anecdote about him, he was a big, strong-type guy. He'd get up on a ladder, a scaffold, and he could handle that big thing. All I did was sort of guide it for him. But he loved to drink, and you never knew quite what day he was going to show up. That, I remember about him. [Laughs.] As far as his technical ability was concerned, he was a fine guy.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Lee, I think I forgot to ask you to tell us when you worked on the, on the Cazenovia mural? I mean, the year, I mean. What was the time when you were on that project?

[00:15:11]

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, that was in the spring of 1934.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, gee, that was just about the beginning of the WPA Project.

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes, it was.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You got in right at the very head. Well, I think that. What else can you tell us about your experience on the WPA? This, of course, we all know, meant a great deal to many artists. It was a way of tiding them over the Depression, and of course, many artists were able to improve their own work because they were able to—not only to earn—well, to earn their bread, but they were able to continue to paint on these various projects, whether it was a mural or easel painting and so on.

LEE BROWN COYE: Well, I think, Joe, that this WPA was the greatest incentive to American painting that ever was done. It was not only a question of earning your daily bread, so to speak, but it was a question of doing—of enabling you to be an artist. There are very few artists even today in this country who are making any kind of what you would call a good living at painting, even the big-time. I know there are some people who will get tremendous figures for their work, but generally speaking, it's not easy to make a good living at this type of thing and be a creative person.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, of course, we all know that many artists have to, even today, when we are enjoying such great activity in the arts, and we certainly have a great public appreciation of art, but despite all this, we know that many artists have to do other things in order to make a living, to teach, in other words.

LEE BROWN COYE: Yes, many people teach. They work in advertising agencies, and even paint signs. I paint a lot of signs. I like to letter signs. But the point I would like to make, here, is that the incentive that the WPA gave was a tremendous thing, and I wish there could be some sort of such a subsidy now. Not for me, but for the young people. I think it would have something to do—and I may be sticking my neck way out, here—but I think it would have something to do with getting off of this pitch where people have to fight their way for recognition. And I think a great deal of this so-called modern art, the sculpture and this stuff, which it seems to me has very little to do with sculpture and creative work, is merely an attempt to express themselves, to make themselves heard, rather than to express themselves through their creative ability. Does this make any sense to you?

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, I think so, yes.

LEE BROWN COYE: The competition is keen, and in the days of the WPA, it was a very honest approach for most of the artists, in spite of the charlatanism that went on. It was a chance without any pressure. You could make a living, and you could do creative work, and your work was shown.

JOSEPH TROVATO: In other words, you were able to devote your full energies—to put all your energies into your art without having to bother with the promotional end of it. Is that what you have in mind?

LEE BROWN COYE: That's right, that's right. I was accepted as an artist. Whether I'm a good one or not is beside the point. I was accepted as an artist. And I was very proud to say that I was on the WPA.

[00:20:06]

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LEE BROWN COYE: It was a chance to do the thing I wanted to do more than anything else in this life, and I was doing it. It was a wonderful thing.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, Lee, I think that we have covered things pretty well. We appreciate very much your giving us all of this time, and I know that what we have put on the tape will be of real value. Thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]