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Oral history interview with Kenneth Warnock Evett, 1964 Oct. 10

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 Kenneth Warnock Evette on October 10, 1964. The interview took place at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and 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: This is an interview with Mr. Kenneth Evett, a noted American painter, that is taking place in his studio at Cornell University, October 10, 1964.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

I know, Mr. Evett, that your time is rather limited today and that you're anxious to get off to a football game, and so we'll try and do this as quickly as we can. Before we get to the main topic, I wonder if you would be good enough to tell us something of your background, your place of origin, and where you were educated?

KENNETH EVETT: I'm a westerner. I was born in Colorado, 50 years ago. I studied at the Colorado State College in Greeley, Colorado, and lived most of my life—the early part of my life, in a town called Loveland in the wintertime and then in summertime went to Estes Park where my father was involved in catering to tourists, trying to lure them to ride the horses. I was involved, therefore, with people from other parts of the country and I think one of the lucky strokes of my life that, although there were things about riding horses and guiding people over mountain trails that was nerve-wracking—I couldn't conceivably even get on a horse now—the fact was that I made contact with people from the East and other parts of the country and had a somewhat wider horizon opened up than I would have otherwise.

It's an interesting fact of my family that there were three boys in this family. My younger brother is the literary and art editor of *The New Republic* and is a composer in his own right, and my older brother is a college professor in Michigan. We came from a lower-middle-class family and we were faced with the Depression after adolescence, and sometimes I feel that we've come off fairly well.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Tell us where you were educated, and also something of your art training.

KENNETH EVETT: Oh, yes. I mentioned that I studied at the Colorado State College and while I was there, a teacher came—a woman named Estelle Stinchfield [ph] who had studied with somebody in Denver who in turn was a disciple of Cézanne. And she had some contact with the discipline of Cézanne's painting. [Recorder stops, restarts.] After I left Colorado State College, I then won a scholarship at the Fine Art Center in Colorado Springs. The director at that time was Boardman Robinson and at that time he had commissions to do the murals for the Justice Department.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Could you tell us the date of it?

KENNETH EVETT: This would be 1936.

JOSEPH TROVATO: '36.

KENNETH EVETT: The Fine Arts Center had just been completed the year before I went down there. And Robison had invited a number of young western painters to come there to work and to be his assistants in doing these murals. This is my first contact with the big world of art and it was very exhilarating, and my colleagues and assistants, the other young painters who were there engaged in this activity with a real sense of purpose. You may remember what it was like

in the Depression.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I—

KENNETH EVETT: The kind of excitement—

JOSEPH TROVATO: —I surely do. [Kenneth Evett laughs.]

KENNETH EVETT: Those projects that had to do with the Treasury Department where competitions were held, were engaged and by us as students and Robinson encouraged us to go out on our own. I can remember we entered practically every available competition that came along, and in no time at all even though God knows we weren't really ready for it, we were painting murals.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well now, so that you—you only came on the Project through Boardman Robinson as his assistant. And then later did you do independent work of your own?

KENNETH EVETT: Well you remember there were, there were two government agencies in those days. The Treasury Department—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right.

KENNETH EVETT: —conducted those—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yeah.

KENNETH EVETT: —those competitions which opened to anybody who wanted to apply, and then the WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right.

KENNETH EVETT: Well, I was involved in both of them.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Well, let's have—let's have the—the government-sponsored projects first if that would be—

KENNETH EVETT: You mean the competitions?

JOSEPH TROVATO: The competitions.

KENNETH EVETT: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

KENNETH EVETT: These have to do, as you remember with, with—

JOSEPH TROVATO: I think you said the Treasury Department—

[00:05:01]

KENNETH EVETT: Treasury Department—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, that's right.

KENNETH EVETT: —assigned this certain percentage of the cost of a building for mural decoration, and we would compete with one another and other people for the region. I can't remember, but all of us one—won—we didn't win the competitions. You remember there were large-scale—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, that's right.

KENNETH EVETT: —national affairs, and those would be won by more important people. But then the Treasury Department would assign, to small post offices, young students. And it meant—it meant that a kind of retrogressive thing, in fact because we hadn't had the vaguest idea about the real—the real direction of contemporary painting. We got trapped in, in studying—maybe I don't mean trapped, but we got involved in studying the Renaissance. And although painters like, for example, Frank Mechau, who was at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center in those days, came back from Paris with a quite sophisticated style. Caught up as we all were in that

regional fuss, [laughs] he abandoned that—that—the intricacies of modern space and went back to a kind of, as you know, quasi Piero deep renaissance space. And that's—we were all quite influenced by that and by Robinson's sense of volume and mass and drawing.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: And, in a sense, hooked on that. [They laugh.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

KENNETH EVETT: I remember those places vividly. The post offices were all alike, and the location of every mural I ever saw was always the same, over the postmaster's door. And they varied a little bit in size and proportion. Some had higher ceilings than others, but it was—usually the mural that had to either climb over the door or sit on top.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yeah.

KENNETH EVETT: The subject matter was not demanded, but I think the federal authorities were also involved in that whole regionalist phobia, and we were all painting the Pony Express and scenes of local history. Things—themes having to do with some kind of glorification of the American past.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: And I did that, the same kind of thing. I can remember, as I say, quite distinctly the towns One called Caldwell, Kansas where I painted a very romantic—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is it Cald—Caldw—

KENNETH EVETT: —Caldwell

JOSEPH TROVATO: —Caldwell.

KENNETH EVETT: Tiny little town.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: I painted the picture in—in tempera on canvas of some Leonardoesque horses galloping across the prairie with romantic cowboys and a river and a totally romantic concept of western light and space. I'd really like to see it again. I have a feeling it might be as bad in some ways as I think it was, but the rhythms were—were as, I say, partially Leonardo and a little bit of Rubens. I was intrigued at that time with the interlocking of Rubens and I really carried that [they laugh] through.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Can you tell us how many murals did you do?

KENNETH EVETT: I did four of those.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Four of those. And what were the towns?

KENNETH EVETT: Well, now—

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mentioned Caldwell—

KENNETH EVETT: —Caldwell, another one in Horton, Kansas—Horton, Nebraska. Good lord, I can't even think of the first town. I can see it, [they laugh] but I can't think. The first one I did was ugly and I don't blame them a bit for setting up a howl, and they yowled so much about it that I was then commissioned to do another one for the same building. And then I—and I believe that was the Pony Express, too. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: Anything that could get me with galloping horses and waving manes was what I went for. I think the best of those murals that I did was the last one for the Golden, Colorado post office. We were in Colorado 10 years ago and I took my family to see it and I didn't feel that it was bad. The color seemed suitable to this—to the environment and the scale of the figures seemed to work, and it was a kind of glorification of, in that case, road building in the era of the

'30s. A kind of hopeful-looking picture.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You were also connected with the WPA. With the Works Progress Administration. Now, was that—did this involve the field of mural painting or easel painting? What was the type of work that you did?

KENNETH EVETT: That was easel painting. I think that we were required to turn over to the government one painting a month. I never think about that without some feeling of wrongdoing. I got on the WPA through the intervention of a friend who was a friend in turn of the woman who ran that Project in Colorado. And it was—what is the word? Nepotism? I'm not sure.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well—

KENNETH EVETT: It involved influence. [They laugh.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

KENNETH EVETT: And when I now think about the amount of time we had and the fact that we were kept going, that is we were paid enough to survive, and the comparative laziness with which we met our obligation through the government—this may shock some of my colleagues, but I suspect that we held off the best paintings for ourselves and sometimes gave Uncle Sam not the best pictures.

[00:10:17]

I have a feeling in general that there is something—there was something not profoundly corrupt about that, but that we really didn't measure up to the opportunity. The fact that that Project kept a lot of arts alive and engaged in painting, I think, is probably the best thing that can be said about it. And the fact that the notion that original works would—should be put in public buildings is still something that seems to me should be encouraged. I do feel that somehow or another that that political nature of that made—made for a kind of corruption. People living off the government. I don't know what one can do to correct that. I have a feeling it's kind of an age-old problem, in any case, where there's a bureaucracy and people sort of living off the government.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And were there many artists doing easel work at Colorado at that time? How large a group? Did you [inaudible]—

KENNETH EVETT: In our town, I think there were about five.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

KENNETH EVETT: And some of them are—are, I think, quite good painters and of course, it helped them to continue to work.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Now, how long were you on the WPA?

KENNETH EVETT: I think about—

JOSEPH TROVATO: On the easel project?

KENNETH EVETT: I think about three years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: About three years?

KENNETH EVETT: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: That would be from what? 1937 would it be then? Because you said that you were—

KENNETH EVETT: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: —doing the commission?

KENNETH EVETT: More like two years, I guess.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

KENNETH EVETT: Because I was married in 1939, and then went up to Denver to teach in a high school. So I guess it was about two years I was on the WPA.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Would you tell us the names of some of the artists who were associated with you at that time?

KENNETH EVETT: Yes, first of all, there were the teachers, Boardman Robinson, who at that time was a preeminent mural painter in the United States. One of the big, really, big men. Then George Biddle who was also a mural painter and who was largely responsible for the whole Project. Both the Treasury Department—

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's right.

KENNETH EVETT: —and WPA, and needling his old classmate and friend, FDR, into founding this. He was a teacher at the Fine Arts Center. Also Henry Varnum Poor came out there. And later Mangravite. Those, I guess, were the painters who figured what—Mangravite, I guess, came so much later that he hardly figured in that WPA aspect of the thing. Then my fellow artists, Manny Bromberg, who I think is painting in Woodstock, and Bernard Arnest, who is now head of the art department at the Fine Arts Center, was a colleague of mine as a student there. David Freidenthal passed through there as a sort of a meteor-like success. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: I can't at the moment—Otis Dozier was the Texas painter who was involved with our group, although he wasn't on the WPA, but he would come during the summer. I think of those summers at the art center just before the war as a wonderful time in life because that scenery out there is beautiful, and I think we were all living it up with a kind of intensity because we all sensed what was coming.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mr. Evett, I would like to ask you this question, and you have already given us some partial comments on this, but what do you think about the WPA as a—or I should say, do you think that the WPA contributed a great deal on the development of American art?

KENNETH EVETT: On the whole, I think not. I think it entrapped people in the subject matter painting, and the emphasis at that time on the social protest painting, all those aspects that have to do with literary values and that had to do with a kind of illusionistic use of masses and space, I think it probably threw us back, and in some ways had a bad effect. On the other hand, those of us who were involved in the mural project and who had to look at Italian frescos—reproductions of them—in order to even begin to cope with the problem of mural painting, I sometimes think, have a kind of grounding in tradition that is valuable. It has something to do with the whole idea of responsibility and probity about relationships and taking into account the serious problems of organizing forms.

[00:15:00]

I don't know of any painting on earth that is more completely responsible than Italian mural painting. The feeling I've had seeing them now in recent years in the flesh is that they assumed the full control of this—of their spaces and resolved them, without, in any way, losing vitality. And that kind of high seriousness that is in Renaissance painting is, in my opinion, not a bad kind of understanding, an awareness that that kind of painting exists. That there is a kind of level of responsibility of about form, that it represents. And in terms of what goes on in the modern art world, I think it's probably not a bad thing to have people around who adhere to some, probably by the younger generation considered, very stuffy ideas, but I still think it's our proper role. [Laughs.] And that—

JOSEPH TROVATO: And that they still hold.

KENNETH EVETT: To some extent. I'm not saying they're eternal or anything like that but they're relevant, I believe.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it goes without saying, Mr. Evett, that the WPA certainly was a fine thing from the point of view of the—what did you say? That it helped to tide artists over—

KENNETH EVETT: No doubt in my mind.

JOSEPH TROVATO: —sort of kept them going.

KENNETH EVETT: Absolutely, no question about that.

JOSEPH TROVATO: And that was good.

KENNETH EVETT: I think so.

JOSEPH TROVATO: But I would gather from your remarks of a moment ago that perhaps there was too much emphasis on the—on the more literal approach. There was stress on regionalism, and that we lost sight of the more formal values which are important to the—for a continuing art.

KENNETH EVETT: Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is that—in other words, that's what I gathered from your—you know, from your remarks.

KENNETH EVETT: It's just this moment crosses my mind that maybe American painters are not in by nature interested in formal painting. Maybe, maybe our contribution comes from some other preoccupation. I don't really know about that. But I— I do know that the dissemination of understanding the Cubist revolution, was delayed—I think it was delayed unnecessarily by this—by that 30-ish preoccupation with anecdotal elements in our surroundings. Real—real looking at what's around. The kind of passionate observation of nature and light and form that Cézanne developed with such singleness of purpose, was not the kind of looking we gave throughout our surroundings. We took them at their surface-level of whatever symbolic meaning they had in terms of imagery that was current and accepted.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Well, you know you're right because it wasn't until after World War II that we began to develop something that I would call more genuine and much more forceful and certainly it just had a widespread influence throughout the world.

KENNETH EVETT: You're talking about Abstract Expressionism.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, yes. Yes, yes. Which—

KENNETH EVETT: No, no doubt about it. It is, it is worldwide—was, I think—[laughs]—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

KENNETH EVETT: —we can now refer to it as it, as—

JOSEPH TROVATO: —as it was, yes.

KENNETH EVETT: —as a passe force, although not completely spent, but I think most people have a general feeling that it's run its course as a movement. But I know people who maintain that the center of the art world has shifted to New York and I'm patriotic enough to have some feeling of pride and I, in some ways, believe that it's true. Certainly, the manipulated art market center is New York. But I'm also sort of skeptical about this because I think it's become so much a matter—almost like the old international cartels that we used to fear. A maneuvered and controlled and developed thing with all the resources of modern publicity usages, so that names can be developed and people cultivated and then, just like any artificially developed product, they're abandoned. The ruthless way in which Americans use their artists. Taking them up and casting them aside, I'd say about 10 years—

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right. [Laughs.]

KENNETH EVETT: —intervals.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Right, right. For a moment I should like to change our pace, in that I want to be sure that we put down on this tape your presence—something of your present position here at Cornell. I know that you have been here quite a number of years. What is your job here?

[00:20:15]

KENNETH EVETT: I teach in the College of Architecture. There is an art department with art majors who—and we are part of this larger group in which architecture and city planning are also taught. I'm now a full professor here. I'm somewhat dubious about the title, but that's one of the

strange things about modern American education that artists and creative people are somehow or other engaged in academic endeavor.

My colleagues here are people that I respect among the people of my generation. J. M. Hanson [ph] who died in England a year ago, is, I think, one of the really solid painters of the last 25 years. Professor Norman Dailey [ph], who is another very subtle and profoundly understanding artist. And John Hartel [ph], another colleague, very serious American painter. Then among the younger people here is quite a well-known sculptor, Victor Colby, and his colleague Jack Squier. So, I have a feeling that we've created here the department that is quite vigorous, and we're encouraged to paint. The university pays for our shipping costs and we have exhibitions and we're all provided with very well-lit and comfortable studios. Cornell has a tradition of freedom and it is certainly a fact of life here that we're encouraged to do what we need to do. Nobody would think of interfering, in any way, with our creative work.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Some years ago I visited at Lincoln, Nebraska, and I recall seeing your murals in the state capitol. Now, when did you do those? I was very much impressed by them, by the way, I want to tuck in right now.

KENNETH EVETT: I'm glad to hear that. I did them 10 years ago. There was a competition organized by Norman Geske, who's head of the museum in Lincoln. He went around the country and contacted artists, made a list, I now remember, of about 21, which was then boiled down to seven artists from all parts of the U.S., the West Coast, and the East, and the Midwest. We were then invited to submit sketches for the rotunda of the Nebraska capitol. These are big murals. They each were 24 feet wide, 15 feet high, and they were quite—about 60 feet off the ground in this vast space of the capitol.

Well, I got a book about the state capitol. I heard about it for a long time and studied the floor plan and the elevations, anything that I could find out about the need—the architectural character of the place, and the need for a certain—a mural of a certain scale and color. And I did a fairly thorough and, I think, a successful job in that respect. Now, the content of the murals, I think, is kind of inane, and I—it's obviously risky to impose abstract subject matter on a painter, but I accepted the job, and I feel that the formal and abstract relationships of tonality and directions, proportion, scale, elements like that, are good and that these murals really do tie in with the architectural rhythms and, at the same time, create patterns and accents that enrich that space. That whole building, I think, it contains works that are individually kind of unimportant but the whole effect of it somehow or another is quite rich.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Last year, you may know this, James Penney, who teaches—who is associate professor of art at Hamilton College, completed three large murals also for the same building. You—I don't know whether you—

KENNETH EVETT: I heard this last night at a dinner. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh.

KENNETH EVETT: So people who were sitting near me had just bought a James Penney and they were talking about Penney and art and the dealer in New York, Antoinette Kraushaar, we have in common. And they mentioned that Penney had done these murals. I hadn't heard about it prior to then.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes, and he did a fine job, too. I saw them before they were shipped off to Nebraska.

KENNETH EVETT: I wish I—I wish I could have seen them.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mentioned earlier that you were planning to show at Kraushaar Galleries this fall. Now, you've been connected with the Kraushaar Galleries for quite some time, haven't you?

[00:25:01]

KENNETH EVETT: About 16 years. I think I—this will be either my fifth or sixth show there. I've sort of lost track.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

KENNETH EVETT: This one will consist of large-scale paintings on rice paper and Sumi ink. Not that they pretend to be real Sumi ink paintings, with the discipline that goes with it, but it's a kind of an American use of the traditional oriental materials. They are intrinsically beautiful to my eye. The marks that the brush makes, and the ink itself, and the paper, all the things that I'm using are have to do with elements that I find sensually very appealing.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I feel as though I may be getting a preview, because there are quite a number of the paintings here in the studio. And are these some of those that you will be including in the show?

KENNETH EVETT: Yes, that's a fact.

JOSEPH TROVATO: You mentioned that you spent some time in Italy recently. What do you think of the country, or—

KENNETH EVETT: Well—

JOSEPH TROVATO: —just of Italy in general? I myself am in love with it. [They laugh.]

KENNETH EVETT: I think some Americans love Italy, and some love France and England, but I'm a pro-Mediterranean country as many northerners are, I suppose. The—and oddly enough, there is something about the tonality of certain parts of Spain or Greece that is very reminiscent of Colorado. The air in Greece, for example, has the same brilliant clarity, in certain parts at any rate, as the Rocky Mountains. And certain parts of Spain are like New Mexico, which I've seen. Only it seems to be the colors and textures of Spain are somewhat more subtle. But the thing that is fundamental, my love of that part of the world, is the record of long human habitation, and there's something kind of comforting to me about being in a place where so many people have lived and where they've somehow left a record of having touched stones and things and made them into beautiful combinations. The—just the element of Italy seems to me to be intrinsically beautiful. It's no wonder they were good artists. They had beautiful rocks to pick up and put together, and the scale of the vegetation seems just right for a human being, and there's enough variety, and the mountains are not too forbidding, they're open spaces. I think it's an ideal country. Except, alas, for the people who live there. [Laughs.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, that is—that is very true. I know that the people in the southern part of Italy have a little harder time than those who live in the north.

KENNETH EVETT: It's wicked.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes.

KENNETH EVETT: It—and they can't enjoy the beauty of the countryside if they don't have enough to eat and the motivation to work. It's a—it's a great pity, the fact that modern Italy doesn't have the necessary resources. But I guess Italy has really improved a lot in the last 10 years.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Yes. Well, I think that we have just about covered the subject, and if there are no—and unless you have further things that you would like to add, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Evett, for giving us all of this time and giving us such a wonderful record of your recollections of the—of your experiences of the 1930s. So thank you very much.

KENNETH EVETT: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]