



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Morris
Kantor, 1965 Jan. 16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Morris Kanto on January 16, 1965. The interview took place at Hamilton College in Clinton, 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 interview is taking place at the Root Arts Center of Hamilton College on January 16, 1965. Mr. Kantor, I was so pleased that we were able to finish the jurying of the regional exhibition at the institute at Utica, so that we are now able to take advantage of your being here so that we can have some of your comments in relation to your experiences of the 1930s particularly in connection with the WPA, with which Project I understand that you were connected.

But before we get into the matter of the WPA, I'd like to ask you a few questions about yourself, in relation to your background. And you might tell us, first of all, where you were born, Mr. Kantor, and where you studied?

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, I happened to be born in bed. [They laugh.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: That's a good beginning.

MORRIS KANTOR: In a far-away place, something like Minsk. USSR, I guess—I mean, it's called now. In the old days, it's called something else again. And I studied here in New York City. I studied in a place called the Independent School of Art. It doesn't exist anymore, and it has been, at that time, a continuation of the old Henri School.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, yes. The Chase [ph] School, was it?

MORRIS KANTOR: No, no.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Oh, the Henri School.

MORRIS KANTOR: The Henri School. You see, Henri wasn't there anymore, but Mr. Boss, who was one of Henri's assistants at that time, after Henri left, became the—the—

JOSEPH TROVATO: The instructor?

MORRIS KANTOR: —instructor.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Is that Homer Boss?

MORRIS KANTOR: Homer Boss, yes, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I know his name.

MORRIS KANTOR: So, that's where I started, you know?

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Now, when was this? When did you—

MORRIS KANTOR: In 19—let's see, I can't remember, I think in 1918. Yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, I see. Now then, after that, I know that you had been on the American scene a very long time. Now, I don't want to make you as ancient as Methuselah, of course, but I do know that you were connected with the Rehn Galleries, and were on the American exhibiting scene as early as, about 1930, would you say?

MORRIS KANTOR: Yes, I would say yes, with the Rehn Galleries, I was connected since 19—first show I had over there was 1929, 1930—I mean, it happened to be in December, and it went over January 1930, yes.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, here at the Root Art Center, in this present exhibition that is called *Learning About Pictures from Mr. Root*, there is a picture of yours, which we have just looked at, called *Ode to the Antique*. And that is dated 1929. Was that one of the pictures that you exhibited at the Rehn Galleries in 1929?

MORRIS KANTOR: I can't remember exactly.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, I see.

MORRIS KANTOR: But probably, if it has not been exhibited at the Rehn Gallery, it must have been exhibited a year previously at the Brummer Gallery.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see.

MORRIS KANTOR: You see?

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. This particular picture, this *Ode to the Antique*, in the note of Mr. Root that is—that appears in the catalog of the exhibition, Mr. Root refers to this picture, and I quote, "This picture combines the later cubism of superimposed planes with the surrealistic association of incongruous objects."

[00:05:00]

Now, I know that your present work—I say present work, or work of the past, what, 10, 15 years, as I have known it, is of a—well, what I would call a lyrical nature. Would you? Now, I know this is most general, Mr. Kantor.

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, you see, painting is—pardon me—is a strange sort of a thing, you know? Painting is not made of one thing. It isn't cut and dry. And since it is sort of human—sort of an individual sort of manifestation, it depends an awful lot on the character of the person, his involvements, and it is not only one thing. There is many things. And if the onlooker looks at those things, I mean, naturally, he reads in what he thinks it is. Sometimes they are very confused, and sometimes they say the right thing. As far as Mr. Root's analysis of it, he's almost right, you see.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Wonderful.

MORRIS KANTOR: And the reason for it, it is, I had the background of a Cubist background before. I had been working in the Cubist ideas before. But my Cubism, really, basically, was never really Cubism, but Cubism as we understand, I'd used to say, because Cubism is basically a structure of a certain type of a thing, and the motivations was abstract, you see. My structure was a Cubist structure, and my motivations took me in other areas, you see. That's the way it happened.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, of your paintings, Mr. Kantor, there are two in the Root bequest to Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute. It is the *Ode to the Antique* that we mentioned a moment ago, and there is another, called something like—I do not remember the exact title, but *The Nocturne Marblehead*. It's a seacoast scene.

I remember another picture that Mr. Root had—another picture of yours, and I do not recall the title, but I remember some of the elements in the painting. It was a beach scene with a person's foot in the sand and the beach in the distance, with a little figure. And it was a very intriguing picture, but I don't know what has happened to it.

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, I—really, I wouldn't know what happened to it, because it's a old time—it's years away. And if I would try to, in any sense—try to analyze that and give you a clear idea of it, I wouldn't know how to evaluate it, honestly, you know.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, it simply—it sort of intrigued me, because there was sort of an element of—well, I don't know what you might call it—of the unreal. It was definitely an idea kind of painting. I don't know that I should use the word surrealistic, but it had some overtones of that type.

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, I guess the best thing— what you said is right. Well, I think what you said is probably the right analysis of it. It probably had surrealistic connotations in it, and I— but whether I would put it in the category of being a surrealist—well, after all, it's a word for an awful lot of things, which is, I suppose it's legitimately, you know.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Very good, Mr. Kantor. Now, at this point, I thought we may as well go into our main subject, which is your connection with the WPA. Now, as I understand it, you were supervisor of the WPA easel painting project of Rockland County. Is that right, Mr. Kantor?

[00:10:06]

MORRIS KANTOR: Yes, just for about six months. I had that job of organizing the WPA project for easel paintings in Rockland County. And the project was, at that time, as I remember— of course, being so long ago—to donate and to place Rockland County artists, as much as we had at that time in that area, so, to get those paintings—pardon me—into—

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

JOSEPH TROVATO: Do you recall, Mr. Kantor, how many artists worked under your supervision at that time? Just in general.

MORRIS KANTOR: I would say about 16 artists at that time. I was only on the Project, I would say, six months.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And was part of your job to do with the placing of works in public places, or what? Or did you actually approve, say, whether or not works were finished? What was the nature of this supervisory job?

MORRIS KANTOR: I used to go—I used to go around visiting the artists and see what they did, and how much they had done. You see, one person, a fellow by the name Charlie Ellis, worked on murals at the Nyack High School. They wanted some murals, and so he did some murals for them. John Costigan also worked on an easel project, about there that time, and I don't know actually really what happened to them after that.

JOSEPH TROVATO: Well, as a matter of fact, this seems to be the problem, or the question that so many of the artists that I have interviewed have raised. It is: what has happened to the works, to the easel paintings that were placed here and there? Nobody seems to have kept track of their whereabouts. And so, I think this is pretty standard.

I'd like to ask you, Mr. Kantor, how did you get on the WPA Project? Were you without a job at that time, as most artists were?

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, in my case, it wasn't so. I mean, it wasn't the matter of a job. I didn't make much, but I was, at that time you know, comfortable. I was asked to be on the Project for the sake of trying to organize the Rockland County artists, because most of them needed it badly, you see. And so, I did for about six months, and then I gave it over to Mr. Ellis.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, I see. Do you think, Mr. Kantor, that the WPA Project was a good thing? Do you think it was a good thing for the artists? Of course, we all know that it helped them through the rough times because of the situation that we were all in at that time. But do you think that it was of value in relation to American art and American artists?

MORRIS KANTOR: It's not a matter of value or otherwise. It was a necessity. And from the point of view of great events, I mean—nothing happened. I mean, I don't think any very important happened. It's a historical sort of a—now, we look at it historically, and it happened, and it was good for that particular period. Otherwise—I mean, I can't evaluate it otherwise, you know?

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see, I see. Well, Mr. Kantor, as I said earlier, you have been on the American scene for a very long time. Have you devoted yourself entirely to painting, as I think you have, and how about your teaching? I know that you have taught at the Art Students League now for quite some time.

[00:15:17]

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, I fell into teaching just by an accident, and I liked it. And somehow, I

—it's either you like to teach or you don't like to teach, and I've always seemed to have sort of had a feeling for it. So I thought, after all, teaching is—some people, no matter what, can teach, and some people cannot teach. And some people like to teach, and some don't. I mean, in the past, I know an awful lot of very important artists taught, you know, and some of them didn't. It's a—you know—and sometimes you need the few dollars that comes in because of certain circumstances. And it seemed to be, as far as I'm concerned, I still like to teach.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. I think it was something like four years ago—four or five years ago, that I saw your show. It was your last show that I have seen, and this was at the Rehn Galleries. And I have a very—quite a vivid recollection of the work. Now, before that, I remember that we did a show at the institute of artists who were represented in the Root Collection, and you were represented in this show, and this was about 1957. And I'd be interested to know whether you were planning an exhibition around—well, either in the near future or not.

MORRIS KANTOR: Yes, I'm going to have a show this spring at the Schaefer [ph] Gallery, and it will be my show for the last three or four years—I can't remember exactly—because I have been away and teaching in different areas, and I couldn't do so much painting, so I have neglected my exhibitions recently.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Did I understand you to say that, also—that you were going to have a one-man show out in some town in the Middle West, I think, didn't you mention a show that you were going to have?

MORRIS KANTOR: Oh, yes, I was going to have a show out there at the Davenport Municipal Gallery in Davenport, Iowa. Yes. Next July, I guess. June.

JOSEPH TROVATO: June. Is this a Ford Foundation sponsored exhibition?

MORRIS KANTOR: Yes, it is one of the Ford sponsored ideas.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Going back to the WPA, Mr. Kantor, you have already mentioned, of course, your supervisory work. Now, did you yourself do any work on the Project—any easel paintings on the WPA Project?

MORRIS KANTOR: Well, yes, I did two, I think. Two paintings about—it was asked of me to do some of the most interesting buildings in that area. That is to say, portraits of buildings, and I did two of them. I think I did two.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. And do you know where they are?

MORRIS KANTOR: No, I don't. I really don't know.

JOSEPH TROVATO: I see. Well, Mr. Kantor, unless you can think of anything else that we might add to this tape, I want to thank you for giving us so much of your time for this interview, which I know will be of value to the Archives of American Arts' record of the New Deal and the arts. Thank you very much, Mr. Kantor.

MORRIS KANTOR: You're welcome very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]