



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Polly Thayer

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Polly Thayer
Identifier:	AAA.thayer95
Date:	1995 May 12-1996 February 1
Creator:	Thayer, Polly, 1904-2006 (Interviewee) Brown, Robert F. (Interviewer)
Extent:	89 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Polly Thayer, 1995 May 12-1996 February 1, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Polly Thayer, 1995 May 12-1996 February 1, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Available Formats

Transcript available online.

Restrictions

Transcript available on the Archives of American Art website.

Biographical / Historical

Polly E. Thayer (1904-2006) was a painter from Boston, Massachusetts.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Polly Thayer (Starr) conducted 1995 May 12-1996 February 1, by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art.

Scope and Contents

Thayer talks about her childhood in an upper class Boston family, thriving on drawing in charcoal from casts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, under tutelage of Beatrice Van Ness; her social debut, 1921-1922; a trip in the summer of 1922 to the Orient with her mother and brother where she was caught in the Tokyo earthquake; Philip Hale's method of teaching drawing at the Museum School in Boston, 1923-1924, and, later, privately; Eugene Speicher's urging her to free herself from Hale's teaching; the difficulty of making the transition to painting; and winning of the Hallgarten Prize of National Academy of Design, 1929.

Scope and Contents

Studying with Charles W. Hawthorne in Provincetown, Massachusetts in the summer of 1923-1924, which countered the rigidity of her training at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston School; travels in Spain and Morocco in early 1929, at the time her large painting of a nude, "Circles," won the Hallgarten Prize; the importance to her of a letter in 1929 from the critic, Royal Cortissoz, urging her to not fall into the trap of the Boston School and become formulaic in her work; her first one-person show at Doll and Richards, Boston, which resulted in 18 portrait commissions; her ease with which she did self-portraits early in her career, but not so later; and her difficulty in holding the attention of portrait sitters.

Scope and Contents

Studying with Harry Wickey at the Art Students League, who taught her by boldly re-working her drawings for "plastic" values, which Starr quickly achieved; sketching medical operations and back-stage at theatres, which gave her the dramatic subject matter she sought in the early 1930s; her portraits; getting married in 1933 and the affect on her work; and her work at the Painter's Workshop in Boston with Gardner Cox and William Littlefield. She recalls May Sarton whose portrait she painted in 1936, Charles Hopkinson, and Hans Hofmann.

Scope and Contents

The distractions from painting brought about by marriage, children, acting, an active social life and much travel; her increased involvement in social concerns through her conversion to Quakerism; the simplification of her paintings beginning in the late 1930s and her steady execution of portrait commissions, which took less time; her exhibitions in Boston and New York through the 1940s and the rarity of them after that; being a board member of the Institute of Modern Art, Boston, and its co-founder, Nathaniel Saltonstall; her approach to painting which amounts to seeking the invisible in the visual world; and the onset of glaucoma which has ended her painting career.

General

Originally recorded on 3 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 6 digital wav files. Duration is 3 hr., 44 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Women artists
Women painters

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Cox, Gardner, 1906-1988
Hale, Philip Leslie, 1865-1931
Hawthorne, Charles Webster, 1872-1930
Hofmann, Hans, 1880-1966
Hopkinson, Charles, 1869-1962
Littlefield, William Horace, 1902-1969
Saltonstall, Nathaniel, 1903-1968
Sarton, May, 1912-
Van Ness, Beatrice Whitney, 1888-1981
Wickey, Harry

Occupations:

Painters -- Massachusetts -- Boston