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WALKER HANCOCK (1901-1998) INTERVIEW AT CAPE ANN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

- Speaker:** Walker Hancock; interviewed by Marion Harding
- Date:** April 5, 1989
- Runtime:** 37:50
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- Language:** English
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Description

An audio recording of Walker Hancock being interviewed on April 5, 1989. The interview was conducted by Marion Harding (1936-2020) who at the time of the conversation was the Assistant Curator at the Cape Ann Museum. Marion Harding lived in Rockport Massachusetts. She worked at CAM from many years; in 1989 when CAM did a show of Walker's work, Marion assembled the checklist at the back of the catalogue. Marion's husband had posed for Walker in his youth.

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Transcript

MH: Martha wanted me to first maybe talk about the boxers, whether separately or individually or whatever.

WH: Well it had to be separately because there is a very different story about each one. What would you like to know about them?

MH: I remembered you telling me a little bit about this one. Just sort of things that interest you or why they are important to you in the development of things.

WH: I don't think they are very important. Both of them were really fun? particularly the one I did in Rome Because that he was the middleweight champion of Italy (Domenico Ceccarelli 1905-1985)) at the time I saw him box, we used to go to boxing matches from the Academy. Such a moving experience. Italian boxing matches are so different from ours and I saw he had this amazing dome of a back... grew up...

MH: All the muscles

WH: ...Well if I could only, Of course a possibility, a real possibility. But the day after I went to Ostia on my bicycle for a swim, that's what you do in those days. Ostia was a pleasant, not too crowded beach, and went to a restaurant after my swim, and there at a table was Ceccarelli, the champion and three of his friends. Very hardy specimens they were too. I thought now if you don't get up and make some proposition to this man, you just won't be able to live with yourself. To be bravely encouraged, I went over to him, stood by him, I congratulated him on his steadyposal [?] victory the night before. I said I was a sculptor at the Academy and I would like to do a little figure of him if he would agree to pose. There was no response at all. Just looked at the man opposite and the other two proceeded each other off the table. No change in expression what so ever. I stood there and got more and more uncomfortable and then almost frightened and was about ready to run, when he turned and said very quietly, tomorrow afternoon at 3 o'clock, I will meet you at the tram that goes up to the ... I will charge 10 lire an hour and I will require a cast, a plaster of the figure. I heartily agreed to meet him the next day at 3 o'clock and then we went up to ... he became my good friend, he was after all a very affable person. Very insistent about certain things, and I wanted to try various poses before we started and he said it will be like this, and I said oh Mr. Ceccarelli I'd like to try some other positions because almost anything can happen in boxing and he said not when I box. So he stood like that and it was just really what I wanted to show. So that was the way it came out. The other boxer I simply did was

MH: The fallen boxer

WH: The fallen boxer, it was an exercise, really, a simplification. I wanted to make a composition that was realistic of all views and at the same time try to simplify the form so you wouldn't get carried away looking at the muscles. That was all I was trying to do

MH: What about the Amateur:

WH: That was a student of mine who came to work with me that summer. It was a very fine...

MH: He was a sculptor himself?

WH: He wanted to watch me do it. He was a student instructor. It turned out that he came a painter and jeweler ... in the war... unable to carry on, changed his profession

MH: that's interesting. Okay let's see. How about we talk about Silenus? Since it is right here

WH: that was a full-size model from which the model was carved for a fountain at the Federal Reserve Board building.¹ Was done in the 30's when they were putting up those handsome buildings in Washington. Paul Philippe Cret, the architect, was a French Beaux Arts architect. Very famous architectural critic. Came to me and said he wanted this fountainhead he specified a kind of Silenus. We made, I found out, nine different models which we chose one to enlarge.

MH: Oh really

WH: I just received photographs from the Federal Reserve Board other studies the curator showing the other studies that I made for it that I had forgotten entirely. This is a timely result. Over it there is a Perseus. And then of course he spouts water into a basin.

MH: And let's see. How about we talk about Toivo which is right here.

WH: I think she covered that very well in her

¹ A most satisfactory attempt at solicitation was with Walker Hancock, a sculptor upon whom Paul Cret relied from time to time. After presenting the exhibit on the Board building, I could only imagine what an artist like Hancock might have in his studio. After consulting with a curator who had recently organized an exhibit of his sculpture, I just picked up the phone and called the eighty-eight-year-old sculptor. Much to my surprise, he had in his studio the plaster model for the Greek mythological figure of Silenus that he had designed for the Board building. It had been in his studio since 1936, protected by the same musty sheet of plastic secured by a brown label inscribed "mask/Federal Reserve Building/Paul Cret, architect." That was how the twenty-eight-inch plaster arrived at the Board. It was the perfect accession, serving as a substitute for the marble head that was on the exterior of the West court and seldom seen. *Democracy's Medici: The Federal Reserve and the Art of Collecting*, Goley, Mary Anne, p. 122, Chapter 5.

MH: She did talk about it quite a bit.

WH: It was my first really finished study of a head. I worked on it for 7 months in order to see it through.

MH: It is really quite charming. It appeals to people.

WH: I think it did have a very appealing expression.

MH: What about the folk dancers?

WH: Those folk dancers were done while I was doing the Monument War Memorial for Loudon County, Leesburg Virginia ² And this boy, who was Portuguese, posed for it. He had such a fine build that as I watched him, I thought I'd like to do some life studies on the side, just as kind of a diversion, so I did these. And as a matter of fact, I think that the – in the back of my mind when I did these, there was a proposal for two figures, dancing figures, to be put at the foot of two staircases that had been designed for the new opera house – where is the opera house – it's the big theatre at Lincoln Center in New York. So I had in mind this kind of pose might be used for these figures. They wouldn't both been dancing figures but probably would have been... at any rate, that was in my mind. The idea was abandoned so they never carried any further than this. So they simply remained life studies. So many things that I do for pleasure, experience of doing a figure.

MH: And what can you tell me about the Bough Bender?

WH: That's a curious thing. Apparently, I started this thing before the War and was thinking certainly of only the pose and not any meaning. I didn't even know what he was bending. I did like and still do, like the composition. I left it, unfinished, in my studio. And George Demetrios³, after I went into the Army and knew nothing about this, made a mold of it and left it in the studio. And for years, many, many years, the mold was there, forgotten about and I really had no idea what I would find when I cast it, but one day I did cast it. And this is what came out.

MH: Of for heaven's sake.

WH: And I left it just as you see it, well as you see it, not quite finished, but perhaps actually more interesting in this state than it would be if I had carried it further.

² Bas relief panel: World War II and Korean War Memorial, 1957, Loudon County Courthouse, Leesburg, Virginia.

³ George Demetrios (1896-1974) Born in Pyrgoi, Macedonia, Greece, came to this country at the age of 15. Studied at the Boston Museum School, and later at the Pennsylvania Academy under sculptor Charles Grafly.

MH: That is interesting. I don't remember that particular story. I wanted to ask you about the Apostles too.

WH: Yes, that is the third-sized model for the Gethsemane group⁴, at Trinity Church Topsfield.

MH: Were they the ones that commissioned it?

WH: William Coolidge commissioned it. And of course, with that there is a figure of a praying Christ at a distance, in this direction, away from me, they go together.

MH: And what about Sacrifice? The woman and child?

WH: That's a fragment of the half-size, third-size, not quite sure now, scale model for the Soldier's Memorial in St. Louis. It was the last of the figures to be completed. There's a rather long story about that child ...

MH: I remember, I think you told me. Some of the others that Martha wanted me to ask you about are not here yet, but we can go up to the library and have a seat and be a little bit more comfortable.

MH: You may have some things you want to say about John Erkkila and Robert Frost?

WH: John Erkkila was my neighbor and was a great help in preparing the building of the studio and before I had a kitchen of my own, he wanted to feed me next door to the Erkkila's house and sat with them three meals a day. Mr. Erkkila didn't speak English very much and he wanted to teach me Finnish and I wanted to learn but I found it really quite difficult. I would be required to ask for whatever I wanted in Finnish. It was a good thing for a while but it didn't stay with me.

MH: Was he Barbara Erkkila's father – how was he related to her?

WH: Father-in-law. He was a great man and I admired him very much.

MH: How did they live in relation to your property?

WH: Just a short walk through the woods in the back.

MH: As you come to it or the other side?

⁴ The Garden of Gethsemane (1965-66) was created by Hancock for the Trinity Episcopal Church, in Topsfield, Massachusetts.

WH: ...on the left .

MH: And what about Frost?

WH: Frost came about simply because we were friends. Hyde Cox really instigated it and I think suggested it. Frost, first of all, was Hyde Cox's friend and as a result I was too. Basically cooked up the idea and moved ahead.

MH: I take it he was fun?

WH: He was wonderful. He came every day, spent the day, and they bought their lunch to cut short the lunch hour. We talked the whole time.

MH: Did he?

WH: Oh yes. And it was a great thing to have friends there that kept him talking, asking him questions.

MH: So Hyde came along?

WH: Oh yes. He said a great many very wise, very lucid things. While he was posing, he was also composing the poem which he was to read within a few weeks at the Academy of Arts & Letters in New York. You could see him trying out ideas on us. And one of the things that amused us so much was that he said this was a political poem, and he said what the politicians promise to get votes. ...Votes, crooks, votes. Then that pleased him. Votes, crooks and votes. Said it over and over again. And when it was read, and I was there to hear him read it, at the Academy of Arts & Letters that phrase was still in it. Taken out of the poem later. But he used it then.

MH: What fun.

WH: The name of the poem was How Hard It is Not to be King, When It's in You and in the Situation

MH: I don't remember reading this. Okay, I think...

WH: That was the model that was submitted in competition that they had narrowed it down to two sculptors and they had asked us, commissioned us both to submit a model. And this is my submission.

MH: The winning one, I might add.

WH: Yes.

MH: And this is the one that is going to be in the park here in Gloucester?

WH: Yes. Yes, that is a scale model for the World's Fair in 1939. Made a big foot. ...

MH: That is of course the one that was destroyed. The big one. Okay, let's stop this for a minute. We did want to make sure we had you talk about the mood lighting of 1953.

WH: Yes. That I did as a demonstration in class in Philadelphia... It was limited in Philadelphia ... With my class unusual and I thought it would be good, in fact they asked me to set up a figure with them so that they could watch and compare and so I did. I spent the better part of a month I think it was setting up this figure with the other students all setting up theirs around me.

MH: That's not the one we have a picture of, is it with the woman in the middle, the model, in the middle, with the students surround?

WH: No. She was a much better model I think really, very heavy but the forms were large sculptural forms. She was a great favorite of the students, and so when this thing was done, instead of tearing it up as perhaps I should have, really because I thought she was such an interesting study to preserve, I cast it. But it is simply a life study. I think it should be thought only as that and it is not a work of art, though potentially you could make a work of art, simply a life study. I think on the label, put a study of life or something like that.

[21.27] **MH:** Okay, that's what we will do. Let's see, we need to talk about Air.

WH: Air was commissioned by the State of Pennsylvania for the Civic Center in Philadelphia. There is a charming little garden on one end of the convention hall. And, George Patton, the landscape architect, had in mind representing the elements of the landscape outside the City .

Interruption: This is probably pertinent to both of you. Anne Babson is on the telephone. She just saw something about the exhibition. She has a portrait that you did of her son, and she wants to know if you want it in the exhibition or if you have everything that you need. What should I tell her?

MH: I would think we are all set, but I don't know, it is up to you. I wouldn't think at this point...

WH: The catalogue has been made.

MH: The labels are pretty much there in process at the moment.

WH: And we have so many things, that

Someone Else: Excuse for me for interrupting,

MH: So we were talking about Air...

WH: So those elements were water, earth and air and I was assigned air. Essential one and higher than the others of course, appropriately and had to be seen from above as well as below because it is against or very near the balcony where people would come up during conventions. So it had to be composed to be seen from above as well as from below. The problem was how to put air in a box. And the first inclination is to think of something very light and wispy. But then a turn of thought you realize that air can be a tornado too. So it had to be a pretty strong figure. I finally got the suggestion, or the treatment of it, from a speech by Hamlet in which he says “this most excellent canopy, the air, mark you, is brave or hanging true and he goes on. But this is his description of air and I thought that was good to begin with. So I made the man look as much like a canopy as possible.

MH: At some point I guess we need to talk about the basketball players. I think obviously in general terms.

WH: The basketball players were the result of having the opportunity to observe the game in its amateur form, which to me is more interesting than the professional, from the point of view of action. Because there are many more accidents than in professional plays and then the happy circumstance, that two of the best players, or more, several of the best players of the high school team, used to come out to swim. They were interested in the idea of doing these and offered to not exactly pose, because that was impossible, but to come out and perform the same plays over and over again so that I could memorize enough to do them. And that was the way they were done. They were done just with the help of these boys repeating the actions so I could study and memorize. And, out of the whole lot, I think there was only one that was done with anybody posing. And that was the one of Carl Grimes, the set shot. He actually came to the studio and posed for that. ...

MH: I remember, I should remember.

WH: I did a head of him, of course, but he posed for one of the bodies. That’s how these things came about they start as live products and commissions. You’re doing it with a sense of, as a kind of relief from the confining considerations of the commissioned piece.

MH: I’m sure. You would need to break out a little bit.

WH: Exactly, breaking out is just the word.

MH: I guess we have talked about just about all of them. I didn't ask you when we talked about the mother and child downstairs⁵, I didn't really ask you about Pegasus. Is there something you wanted to say?

WH: Pegasus, so-called now is actually a sketch model for one of the four heroic groups for the Soldiers Memorial. It was the first one I carried out. So it involved a study of the horse ...

MH: And then I think the last one, oh no, there was another too, but I wanted to ask you about Spiral.

WH: Spiral is rather unusual in that I worked on it so long, one of the boys that was swimming, got on the end of the diving board, put up his hand ready to dive, somebody called him, and he turned around and suddenly made this very interesting spiraling pose, and I thought that's too good not to make a record of it. So I asked him if he'd pose for a figure and he started it and stopped and changed and came back. I wasn't satisfied with it, left it. I think he got married and went to California to live. Went on with it. The issue is posing, I had enough of the family to help me carry on. That's the way it ended. But I did certainly... get more out of it and make it better.

MH: That's interesting. I did want to make sure we talked about the Stone Mountain Tower too. And a bronze piece that we have... the study for the tower

WH: Oh yes, yes. It's rather a long story. Do you want me to tell you the whole story, it is really kind of long?

MH: Then maybe you could tell me just the parts that you think are interesting about it.

WH: Well to try and make it short. After having been brought back from Rome to take on this commission for a Confederate memorial which they specified in the competition there was to be a free-standing memorial in front of the unfinished column on the mountainside. Leaving that in its rather unfinished condition. When I got to Atlanta they announced that the people of Georgia would not be satisfied until the column was finished. So that meant revising the whole scheme and the landscape architects very cleverly devised a way of making the carving look important. Because although it's one of the largest relief carvings in the world it looks pretty... small, there on that huge surface of the mountain. So the idea was to frame it sort of like an upside-down proscenium, two towers of light on either side reaching up to two ziggurats. It was a wonderful scheme. And a really beautiful thing, so my work then, besides attending the carving and changing the models so it could be carried out was to design these towers, make them symbolic of everything the Confederacy stood for. That involved prolonged research into the matter of getting the right subjects, the right mutations that would be used with the tower, because with the flame shapes of the tower itself, which were to be 65 feet high, there was a

⁵ The earlier discussion is not included in this oral history.

great deal of sculpture to be used, symbolic sculpture, interlaced with the flame shapes, and so it was all approved step-by-step, the full size model was carried out, at 65 feet, in New York, ready to cast, and then...

Man's Voice: Excuse me. I didn't want to interrupt.
I don't whether. I was wondering about it afterwards.

MH: Alright.

WH: Just one quick question. Are you anywhere near 100 percent or were you hocus pocus....

Man's voice: No I'll be all right. In a week. ...you've just decided

Man's Voice: Now have you accepted the West Point commission...

WH: I have to go down there on the 19th jury

WH: So a full-size model was cast and I told them that they were ready to have them cast, then shortly after that, they told them couldn't be cast because they had used up their money on the warriors.

MH: On the warriors?

WH: Yes. They had a disagreement of some kind with the foundry in London that was to do the casting and had enlarged the foundry in order to make it possible, and then, this was trying to get the contract severed... politicians and they spent so much money doing that there was not enough left to do the casting, so they were never done. The landscape architects then were required to redesign the setting of the base to make a presentable approach to the carving. I had already finished the marble of two of the figures, 16 feet high, and they of course were cast and set...

MH: And much smaller kind of a scale

WH: They were to have been incidental figures on the tower, the main figures actually on each tower, not incidental, they were to have been the main figures for each tower. So they are there but that's all .

MH: Must have been so frustrating for you to have invested that kind of time and effort.

WH: A sculptor's profession is full of that kind of thing.

MH: I guess that's true.

MH: Well I think that's it. That covers most of the pieces we thought we ought to get some comment on unless there is something that I had forgotten to note, that you would like to comment on

MH: Okay. I'll stop this.

End of Interview