

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Carolyn Carr, Class of 1961

Interviewed by
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 21, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Carolyn Carr discusses her work within the Art department (including spending a summer studying art in Italy), how it affected her later career, her experiences taking a class with Sylvia Plath, and her transition to Smith from a small town in Virginia. Carr also describes issues of race and the Civil Rights Movement on campus, and her reaction to the Newton Arvin pornography scandal.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Alyssa Christian at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Carr, Carolyn. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carolyn Carr, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Carr, Carolyn. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carolyn Carr, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 21, 2011, with:

CAROLYN CARR

by: BETHY WILLIAMS
filmed by: KATE GEIS

WILLIAMS: OK. Bethy Williams, here with Carolyn Carr, for the Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for being here today.

CARR: My pleasure.

WILLIAMS: So, how would you describe the typical Smithie during your time here?

CARR: Oh, I don't think I could generalize about the typical Smithie. I certainly found many good friends that were here. I think they were lively; I think they were fun, imaginative, self-possessed, and that turns out to be true some 50 years later.

WILLIAMS: So what was your major when you were here?

CARR: I didn't declare a major until the end of my sophomore year. When I came, I thought I would be either a Psychology major—I think many people, as teenagers, think this is wonderful—and I think it was Statistics that persuaded me that perhaps this would not be the best field for me. I had a wonderful History teacher freshman year, and—but it was sophomore year, when I took the Art 1-1 course, that I realized that this was the area that most suited me. I loved that course. I worked extremely hard on it. It was great, because it gave you the vocabulary to deal with any art from any period. So I then went on to take an increasing number of Art History courses, and then sort of filling them in with History courses.

WILLIAMS: And what have you done with art since that course?

CARR: Well I was very fortunate. First of all, when I was here at Smith—I want to recount one particular tale, then I'll answer your question. I had Ruth Wedgwood Kennedy as one of my teachers for Renaissance Art. And in the summer between my junior and senior year, I and three other women from Smith were in Europe together, and we were in Florence for a week. And I was standing, asking in Italian, with my one word of Italian (inaudible) where was the Uffizzi? And along came Mrs. Kennedy and said, "It's right around the corner. Come with me and I

will go through the museum with you.” And she did, and of course it was amazing to see all these objects that we had studied, blown-up, you know, to fit the screen and there they were: small, Northern Renaissance pieces. And then she invited me back to lunch. She had a class of Smith women there for the summer looking at the works, and so we went to the Pantheon, and it had a wonderful view of the rooftops of Florence. And I have never forgotten her kindness to me. And it dawned on me, as I spent the week in Florence, why she had us know—learn for the slide quizzes not only the name of the artist, the name of the work, the date, but where it was located, because obviously everything is all over the city of Florence, or all over the city of Rome, or, by chance, taken to Paris even if it was made in Italy. So she was a great professor. I went back and I looked at what she had written, and she was not a great, recognized Renaissance scholar, but she was a fabulous teacher. And I think that’s a quality that was here. I also took a medieval course from a man named Robert Harris, and one of the things that I can do, even in my sleep today, is trace the development of capitals from the Romanesque to the High Gothic. And I went on, incidentally, when I was teaching at Kent State—whoops—to teach Medieval Art, and my Ph.D., despite everything else I have done, was also in Medieval Art. And I think it all goes back to Robert Harris’ class.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. So it sounds like those people were very influential.

CARR: Very influential. And the respect that the Art department had—I was married the summer I graduated. I was living in Oberlin, Ohio that summer and I—my husband was studying for the Bar exam, and he would be gone all day and I ended up taking a class taught by Ellen Johnson, who is a well—was a well-respected teacher of Impressionism and then of Contemporary Art. And she said to me, “Oh, why don’t you get your Master’s degree?” And I thought, “Oh, I’m really good at going to school.” What else was I going to do the next six months? So it was really the culmination of the bases here at Smith, her intercession that sort of set me on my future path. Because, like so many of the graduates of the class of ’61, when I left here, I had no professional aspirations. Totally different today.

WILLIAMS: But you sort of fell into this professional career.

CARR: I did. I did. And then my husband was with a firm in Akron, Ohio. I was fortunate—Kent State, which was about 45 minutes away, had lost a faculty member mid-semester and there I was, without even my Master’s degree, but at least a speaking knowledge of Art History, and was drafted to teach their essentially 101 courses. And so I started teaching at Kent State and did that until my son was born in ’65, and then I taught part-time, and then when my daughter was born in ’69, the commute was too much and I resigned. And I think also of the

difference. Nobody resigns an appointment today, but I never thought that there would be any issue about going back to teach. And then, of course, when my daughter was about three-and-half and could go to all-day nursery school, I then embarked on my Ph.D., with the thought of going back to teaching. But then fate intervened again. In '78, when I finished my Ph.D. in Medieval, I was asked if I wouldn't become the Chief Curator at the Akron Art Museum. We had a new Director there named John [Coplans], and nothing would do but that I come and work for him, which I did and I thought, "Well, if I don't like museum work, I can always go back to teaching." But it turns out that it, too, fitted me like a glove. So I was there until late '83 and then took my, essentially—a variant of my current position in Washington at the National Portrait Gallery in '84.

WILLIAMS: Wow. That's great.

CARR: So (makes zooming sound)—but all by accident. I tell people, "I didn't start out with a plan," which is probably what everybody today would do.

WILLIAMS: That's quite an honor. Those positions are pretty high up.

CARR: Well, I've enjoyed it. I really have. I have to say, I never go to work without learning something.

WILLIAMS: Right.

CARR: And so it's always a challenge, always interesting, lots of fun, wonderful people in the field.

WILLIAMS: And you think Smith was very influential in getting you there?

CARR: Absolutely. Absolutely. If it hadn't been for the quality of the art department, my fascination with the teaching, and that's when I—probably one little secret, which I can say on tape, is that I never had a course in American art. And of course, for the last 25-plus years, that's what I've been dealing with. And interestingly enough, in 1961, taking a course in American art as opposed to European subject matter was seen as the course the dilettantes took. That's not true at all today. American art is far more mainstream. Ditto, there was no course in the history of photography when I was in school. And, ironically, because of this—John Coplans, my husband and I sort of went on to form sort of our own collection of major American photography. So I think how things have changed and even when I tell anyone today that, if I was writing a paper, I took note cards. No, you just take your computer, you type, you download, you cut and paste. It's a whole other world. And, even within the last decade, the nature of research has changed with the Internet, and made my life a lot simpler, in terms of doing exhibitions.

WILLIAMS: Right. And you're very involved with the Smith Alumnae Association, and (inaudible) do you think that's sort of tied in with your love of the Art department at the school?

CARR: I think it is, and being asked to work on plan giving seemed an easy thing, seemed an appropriate thing for me to do. But I've always been fond of the women that I've known from here.

WILLIAMS: Wow. And another thing I wanted to talk about, and maybe we can go back to art later: you had Sylvia Plath as a professor when you were here.

CARR: I did, indeed, and I have very vivid memories of the class. I would say that—I was in the 11 o'clock class, and I think in *The Bell Jar*, she talks about the 11 o'clock class being her worst class.

WILLIAMS: And what year was this?

CARR: This is 19—the fall of 1957.

WILLIAMS: And do you remember what section or anything you were in then?

CARR: Well, she had—I think she had three sections. I she may have had a 9, 11, and say a 1 or 2, and she taught like Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. But I do know that it was the 11 o'clock section. And I do remember the first two things she had us read. One of them was William James' *Variety of Religious Experiences*. I don't think I totally became engrossed in the book. It just did not sort of fit my world. The next thing she had us read was Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. And I—there's this—from my point of view, these are unusual things to read for a freshman class. And I think she was—I know she was disappointed in our class. She would ask a question, we would sit there, and there was one young woman who sat in the back, who was from Chicago, who knew the answers to her questions. And of course she would try and distribute the responses among the rest of the class and we just were not there.

WILLIAMS: So you felt like she was constantly disappointed?

CARR: I think she was disappointed. I think she was startled that she could come back to Smith, which had been so important in her life and where she had flourished and where she was clearly a very sophisticated person in terms of literature, to find a class that was not at her level. I think it was a disappointment. I remember very vividly her reading to us from some of the selections, always with a sort of tense and tight voice. I do not think she was relaxed as a teacher. I think probably my most proud moment in that class was sometime during the spring, when

we were working on the poetry of Marianne Moore. And I wrote a paper. I still have it somewhere in my attic, and she graded it “very good,” and, you know, the teachers would write on the side—so I think she felt—maybe she was getting through to this less-than-talented class.

WILLIAMS: Right. And Marianne Moore was such a mentor for poets of her generation, right?

CARR: Yes.

WILLIAMS: So if you did it well, it must’ve been really good.

CARR: She was happy with whatever I wrote. I think she was glad. I remember Ted Hughes wandering around the campus, and to show you—this reflects on me, but I think it’s true of many young women at that time. I thought, “He doesn’t have a job.” You know, I was unaccustomed in my life experience to knowing any man who did not have a job, and there she was, also a poet but teaching, not realizing that writing poetry is the life of the mind and not a visible, you know, three classes, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And so I think it was the next year that then they go to Boston. And I think they found a broader community of people concerned about the same things that they were concerned about. But I have read everything. Obviously, her poetry is fantastic, amazing, and it was a great tragedy that her life—so, I think it’s interesting that there’s another biography that’s being done now.

WILLIAMS: Right. How were Hughes and Plath perceived as a couple? What did people think about their relationship?

CARR: I don’t have really any perceptions. At that time, I didn’t know them well enough. Because I wasn’t a star in the English department, I wasn’t close to them.

WILLIAMS: Right. And did you enjoy the class with Plath or was it just kind of stressful?

CARR: I think, by the end—you know, once I got into it. You have to remember that I grew up in a small Southern town of about 7,000. Before I went to the Baldwin School in my junior year, I had never written a paper. So that I was probably far behind the curve, in terms of stylistic analysis, writing—which is so ironic because, in my later life, I’ve published quite a few books, done a rather extensive amount of writing. But at that time, I was still on the beginning part of the bell curve, I think, in terms of reading. In fact, it was really Art History that made the sense of style, as opposed to narrative, sort of come alive to me, that you could have two Madonnas, but that they would be interpreted by the artist in a totally different way. So if I had gone back

and taken more English courses, I think I would've been better prepared for them.

WILLIAMS: Right.

CARR: But it was interesting. And she was interesting.

WILLIAMS: Right. How was that adjustment to Smith, culturally, academically, from the small town in Virginia?

CARR: Well, I think the transition really for me really happened in 11th grade, when I went to boarding school, so that I was accustomed to being away from home, to living with other women. It was, for me, really seamless. It was just more the same and lots of fun.

WILLIAMS: So sort of some time-specific questions—

CARR: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: —you graduated in 1961. Do you remember hearing about the early Civil Rights Movement, like Brown vs. Board of Education or the Montgomery Bus Boycott—those things—do you remember hearing about that—

CARR: Well certainly, Brown vs. Board of Education—I had reflected on this quite a bit, because it's 1954. And I leave, coincidentally, for boarding school that year, so I went to elementary school in a segregated Virginia school. There were no African-Americans at Baldwin, when I was there, between—what was it?—the fall of '54 and '57 when I graduate. When I came to Smith, there was one African-American in our house. I remember her first name: Dorothy. She would've been class of '60. I've been trying to figure out who she was. She was from Philadelphia. I know (inaudible) in the alumnae office hasn't been able to kind of put this together. And that was sort of first experience.

WILLIAMS: But you weren't really friends with her, or even—

CARR: She was very—I wasn't close friends with her. I was more or less friends with people in my class.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

CARR: And—but I do remember one spring day—well we were standing down the hall. She must've lived on this—I think it was on the 2nd floor. I can remember where her room was, and somebody said, "Let's go down to Paradise Pond and get a tan." And she said, "You know, I don't think I need one." I can remember—and I think everybody was startled,

because she was so accepted as a part of the group that was in that house.

WILLIAMS: So what was it like for you, coming from these segregated communities to Smith where there were, you know, very few women of color, but still some? Was that shocking, or—

CARR: No, no. I didn't think anything—I didn't think anything of it.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And another time-specific question: shortly after your graduation, the controversy over professor Newton Arvin, Edward Spofford, and Joel Dorius—do you remember that incident?

CARR: Only more or less in retrospect. I had Newton Arvin for my sophomore English teacher. After that, I would take no more English classes. I think—

WILLIAMS: I've heard he was a really bad instructor. Several people have said that.

CARR: And I think he may have been—this would've been 1958—this may've been the beginning of his problems with the FBI. And certainly in retrospect, the unfortunate of that whole attack on him—I mean, that's all I can say. Was I aware of it at the time? No.

WILLIAMS: But what did you think about it, in retrospect?

CARR: I think it was a horrible thing to do, and I had a long conversation. A friend in my class, Helen [Delesandro Hecte?], who had married Tony Hecht, Anthony Hecht, the poet—I was at dinner in her house—She lives in Washington, as well—oh, maybe ten years ago, and we had a discussion about that. And so that brought it back to me in life, in terms of what it is, and I think I did a little more research on it. But I was pretty insulated from it. And I also think, going back to your early question about the sit-ins and the Civil Rights Movement—I was less politically conscious than I think young women are today. There was a woman from South Africa in our house, and she was intimately involved in what was going on, followed it religiously. I'm not sure she didn't participate in some sit-ins, and what I knew about it I actually knew what from what she would bring back to the dinner table.

WILLIAMS: Right. So there was sort of dialogue going on about them?

CARR: There was dialogue, but it was not the kind of consciousness of politically activity and political participation that I think there is among young women today.

WILLIAMS: Right. So can you talk a little bit more about your abroad experience? You said you went abroad, correct?

- CARR: No, I did not do junior year abroad.
- WILLIAMS: Oh, I thought you were—
- CARR: In retrospect—no, this was just the summer experience—
- WILLIAMS: Oh, OK. Summer.
- CARR: —when I was with—was in Florence for a week, with actually three other women here—
- WILLIAMS: I just assumed that was abroad.
- CARR: No, no, no, no. And I think—I ask myself very much, why I didn't take advantage of the year abroad, because I've done, young know, I'm a committed traveler. And I think again it comes from my prior experience. I had no foreign language, except Latin, until I went to Baldwin, so I was not fluent. When I was here, I was taking, you know, French 1 and French 2, not French 3 and French 4. So it just didn't really occur to me.
- WILLIAMS: OK.
- CARR: I also think that programs in which they take you for six months, rather than a year, are wonderful because it gives you—I don't think Smith does—I think they still do the year—it gives you a taste without having you totally disassociated from your class. I think many of those people who had that experience abroad, which was much less—which was much more independent kind of living. They came back and Smith was too parochial for them. They had broken many of their personal ties by going abroad in that year.
- WILLIAMS: Right. So if you had to sum it up, who would you say you've become since Smith?
- CARR: I've probably become much more self-assured, since I left here. But I think the foundation for that was probably built here. I can remember talking to Dean Russell one day about something and, you know, she said, "You're not here to learn facts, per se. You're here to learn how to find things out," and I think that's always—you know, the sense of curiosity about what's around the corner, was something that developed when I was here at Smith and has kind of continued over these 50 years.
- WILLIAMS: And, looking back, would you encourage one of your children to come here?

CARR: Absolutely. I would've loved for my daughter to have come to Smith. My husband graduated from Amherst. He would've loved for our son to go there. They both wanted a larger experience, so they both ended up at Brown. I didn't tell my son Providence really wasn't a big city. But—so they had a positive—my daughter was not interested in a single-sex school, which is too bad. But I've had wonderful interns from Smith—one of them, Dorothy Moss—that was her maiden name—had gone on to head the Smith program in Washington. She started out at the portrait gallery as an intern, then as an assistant, and then went back to Williams and the University of Delaware to get her Ph.D. So she's been a model of the Smith woman coming to Washington and then blossoming, taking the base from here and then blossoming somewhere else.

WILLIAMS: And is—wrapping up, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

CARR: Oh, I think they're getting wonderful advice here. I'm so interested in talking to them. I talked to a recent person who graduated a year ago, and I said, "What have you been doing?" And she said, "Well, you know, I came out and the job market was non-existent. I went home. I got a very ordinary kind of job. I lived with my parents. I saved my money so I could come to Washington and have at least nine months to find a job." And I thought, there was a woman with a plan. And she said to me—and I think it comes right out of career counseling—she said, "You know, I can't control the world, but I can control how I interact with it." And I thought, "Great, you know? You've got a plan. Someone will respond to your message, and something will happen accidentally, just as it kept happening for me."

WILLIAMS: Thank you very much.

CARR: Well, you're very welcome.

WILLIAMS: Thank you.

CARR: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Alyssa Christian, July 26, 2011.