Oral history interview with Charles Wyrick, March 1, 2013

Wyrick, Charles
Arts administrator, Former Delaware Art Museum Director (1973-1979)

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at the Delaware Art Museum and I will be interviewing former Executive Director, Charles Wyrick, over the phone. It’s March 1, 2013. Hi, this is Margaret Winslow calling from the Delaware Art Museum for Pete. Hi, Pete, how are you doing? Nice to talk to you. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to put you on speaker, so I can record our conversation. Are you okay with that? Okay, hold on just one moment. Can you hear me well?

PETE: Yes, I can.

MARGARET: Perfect, perfect. Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me this afternoon. As you probably read…I know you read in my email, I am interested in looking at the, as I said, in the 1970s and ‘80s, particularly in the contemporary art scene in the city of Wilmington and I thought that maybe we could start by talking about your experiences just prior to coming to the Delaware Art Museum and about your appointment as Executive Director in 1983.


PETE: Well, I’ll do my best, but as you can see by that date, I just realized today, it’s 40 years. That takes me back a little ways, but anyway, I’m happy to try to ply my memory and see what I
can come up with. As far as the prelude to my appointment there, I had actually entered the art museum studios in the late 1960s. As a matter of fact, 1966, when I went to work at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond and I spent several years at the Virginia Museum and I also later became curator of a private collection, which was eventually split between the Virginia museum, the [inaudible] Museum and some went to the Metropolitan in New York.

[Inaudible] businesspeople in Richmond formed the Lord’s private collection in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Contemporary, paint, sculpture and graphic arts and [inaudible] and art deco furniture and glass and so it was kind of initially [inaudible] to me, making sure some [inaudible] to private collectors, but anyway, it was a very valuable experience. Then I received word that there was an opening at the Delaware Art Museum. As a matter of fact, I found that later someone noted my interest in maybe applying for that job.

It was Tom Armstrong, who at the time was the director of the Pennsylvania Academy, and then went on to then head the [inaudible] Museum. Tom and I had become acquainted and had actually worked together on a couple of exhibitions in [inaudible] and Tom was the curator of the [inaudible] Rockefeller [inaudible] Collection at [inaudible] museums. So I had retained a friendship and professional contact with Tom over the years. It seems that he had somehow dropped my name at [inaudible] Philadelphia Museum.

One thing led to another and I actually did get a [inaudible]. A person on the board at that time was a man named James Jennings and Mr. Jennings invited me to actually come and visit the Museum if I had any interest, which then kind of quickly led to another [inaudible] in 1973 and my wife went to [inaudible], stayed there for a couple days and [inaudible]. I did decide to [inaudible] fall. So I actually started, I guess, right at the end of 1973. I think my appointment was…it’s a little fuzzy, but I think it was effective the 31st, something like that. That was sort of my prelude to coming to Delaware.

I actually spent 20 years as a [inaudible] because when I left the Delaware Art Museum at the end of 1979 to come to Charleston to become the head of the head of the Gibbes Museum of Art, I held that job for about seven years at which time I resigned to form the [inaudible] Company. So that [inaudible] from 1966-1986. In the art museum field, [inaudible] private collection.

MARGARET: So tell me, on arriving here in fall 1973, tell me about some of your primary concerns for the Museum at that time.

PETE: Well, it’s interesting. I started digging in to see if I had kept any notes from those days and by chance, I found the actual text of a talk that I made to the membership on October 9, 1973. If you have an interest, I could actually send you a copy of that.

MARGARET: I would love to see that, yeah. Thank you.

PETE: What happened was I was due to report in for the job in a couple months, but I suddenly got word that I was to be the speaker at the annual meeting [inaudible] back in October. So I knew very little about the Museum and its collection and its activities and its [inaudible]. So I
had to put together a talk that, in some sense, sort of [inaudible], but I hoped that it were some objectives that would help the Museum, building the [inaudible] strength of the collection and expanding their interest in education of the community and [inaudible] local artists.

Anyway, as I went back over my notes, I could see I was kind of winging it, but I had no choice at that point, but to speculate and also to just present some general objectives that I would have as Director in terms of doing those things and encouraging gifts from donors and collectors. I’ll send you this and you can just do with it what you would.

MARGARET: Oh, no, that’s wonderful. Now tell me, kind of thinking outside just the Museum, what were your thoughts on the contemporary arts scene in Wilmington from the early 1970s until you left in ’79, especially given your familiarity with contemporary art through the Sydney and Frances Lewis collection you had worked with previously?

PETE: I had not a clue about the contemporary art scene in Wilmington, Delaware. My recollection, to be very candid, is there was not what you might say a real art scene other than two things. There was obviously a group of people that had gravitated in the early days more…in other words, the [inaudible] Wilmington illustrators’ parties and it built in that tradition. [inaudible]. There was still some other members in the community that would maintain that and then other than that, the only thing I could see [inaudible] was the artists at the University of Delaware. They were part of the department of their students in art and photography in particular.

So even during the six, seven years that I was the head of the Delaware Art Museum, I never had a sense that we had a real presence for a strong [inaudible] art scene. We embraced [inaudible] and craftsmen and [inaudible] and tried to be supportive, but it’s not as if there was some core [inaudible] to tap into.

MARGARET: That’s interesting. I’m thinking—and maybe more specifically—about some of the galleries that were in Wilmington at that time. The Wilmington Circulating Gallery of Paintings, which was in the old Wanamaker’s Building that was established by Grace McFarren actually in 1960, which is pretty incredible to think about. She showed her own work, but work by University of Delaware faculty like Dan Teis and she had that gallery going, my goodness, I think for close to 30 years.

I’m also thinking about the Fifth Street Gallery, which really is the motivation. Hearing about that gallery and that program that Rob Jones ran was the motivation for this project. So I’m wondering if you remember any of those specific spaces.

PETE: I do, indeed, and particularly I became a pretty active supporter of what Rob was trying to do and we actually showed his work at the Delaware Art Museum and then he sort of moved onto the New York scene for a while. I kept up with him for a few years and then we sort of lost contact. So I guess Rob has been kind of [inaudible] in terms of trying to promote and actively involve local artists.
During those days, too, the Delaware Art Museum had a downtown gallery in the bank building there and so we used that space often for small exhibitions of [inaudible] and tried to expand the range of art that we would show for traditional drawing to watercolor to photography to sculpture to craft if there were [inaudible] for it. So we used the downtown gallery as sort of an experimental space and we could also do a little faster turnover in terms of planning exhibitions for having being a year and a half out. [inaudible] three for four months in advance of planning there.

I think that became more and more of a venue for local artists along with what we hoped to sort of [inaudible] the Museum’s backing with the show there.

MARGARET: Right. Now in terms of the downtown, was there this idea that there was a need for the Museum’s presence physically in downtown Wilmington to cater that kind of downtown community? I’m asking because, as you know, Wilmington is a very small city, but there’s, of course, that still…and this is not uncommon in other cities with museums, but there is that interesting divide between the Museum up near Parkway and then the rest of downtown Wilmington. So was there that sense of need for that presence?

PETE: Yes, I think so and I’m not sure whether it was generated by the artists themselves because…it’s a little fuzzy, but when I came there [inaudible] had presence in the downtown [inaudible] whether they set it up after I came. It’s a little unclear on the timing of that, but yes, definitely there was a feeling that there was a need and there is a sense of distance there between [inaudible] Parkway and what you might consider one category of art patrons and interested people. A Plus, I think [inaudible] stayed there in Newark and we tried very hard to voyage the gaps in Wilmington. Let’s say the [inaudible] community and people that didn’t really [inaudible] Parkway and the same is true [inaudible] Delaware.

So it’s [inaudible] the six-year period when I was there was developing a stronger relationship with the universities in two ways. 1) It is through the Art History department. Dr. [inaudible] is in charge of that and he put together what turned out to be some very significant exhibitions using the academic wherewithal at the university in cooperation with our two curators, [inaudible] and Betsy Hawkes. We had one significant exhibition [inaudible] from 1910–1925. [inaudible] cover on the New York Times.

There were some things like that that were very gratifying and then with the studio art department, Victor Spenski, who was quite a presence in those days in terms of what he’s doing, made ceramics and [inaudible] photography there. We did a series of exhibitions of young American photographers at the Delaware Art Museum out of the [inaudible]. That was an opportunity for us to bridge several gaps among artists in the community. I would say the broader community.

MARGARET: Another a program, certainly probably bridging some of these gaps, are the programs that developed out of the CETA funding and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about those because there seems like there were a few programs that were funded by CETA. So I know about Art Reach, but I’m not totally clear on what some of those other programs were.
PETE: Well, I’ll try. Again, it’s a 40-year gap, but this is a time when, fortunately, there was an increase in federal funding, both in the [inaudible] of arts and [inaudible] humanities. So we got pretty aggressive in applying for funds and, fortunately, we got a $200,000 grant, which set up that whole program. We also applied for and received Hard Purchase funds, which allowed us to acquire lots of contemporary art in the era of 1970s. As a result, funds directly coming [inaudible] the arts, but the CETA program gave us a chance to expand our whole educational program, which primarily had been based in a small department adjacent to the Museum.

It was a community art program, which gave classes and also started elective type programs in the community. There were limited programs [inaudible] schools, very limited unfortunately, but we were dealing with the county situation and [inaudible] the school systems and traditional programs that brought busloads of students [inaudible] to the Museum. CETA allowed us to setup a [inaudible]. I think we were able to hire eight or ten very bright, young people to greatly expand the educational role of the Delaware Art Museum in the Wilmington community.

A man named Tom Sherman, we hired to head the program. As I recall, Tom was a graduate of [inaudible]. Anyway, he had a very strong academic [inaudible] and also a strong commitment to community involvement and [inaudible] involvement. So anything that we could do through the CETA program that we had not been doing before, he had proposed a letter to [inaudible] was to do some work among, what in those days was a more limited African-American community, but among other ethnic communities—Hispanic. We had a major exhibition from [inaudible] graffiti. We had Puerto Rican art in.

So CETA just enabled us to open the door to things that we would not have even normally contemplated, I guess. I think the CETA funds were for maybe three of the five years. Again, I’m not sure about that, as I recall.

MARGARET: Okay. It’s interesting, I talked to Steve Bruni, another former Executive Director and it’s interesting because these CETA programs were kind of mid to late ’70s and so many of those artists who were involved with those programs then went on to become involved with and assisted with the founding of the DCCA and so, really, that the Museum is providing the environment, I think, in some ways for these other developments to happen within the city. Of course, DCCA is a response to the Museum, but also the Museum providing, in some ways, a platform for some of these activities and collaborations to happen.

PETE: Well, as I’m sure [inaudible], but all those [inaudible] communities [inaudible] longstanding. Members of the Northern Park community [inaudible] and sometimes there’s real validity in that, but sometimes there’s spinoff and [inaudible], so we’ll do our thing. [inaudible], but [inaudible] CETA did lead to other things, but after I left, I was unable to keep track of any of that. So I don’t really know how far or how pervasive the [inaudible] could be.

MARGARET: Well, I think it really was, and then you see things obviously happening in the early ’90s that certainly halted or at slowed a lot of the activities that were happening. So I’m wondering also if you could talk a bit about the establishment of the art sales and rental gallery and how that program was, again, kind of another bridge in a way, especially with other
individuals who wanted [inaudible], but then…and I don’t know if corporations were kind of coming in when you were here.

PETE: Unfortunately, no. [inaudible] in those days. [inaudible], but there weren’t too much of a factor. By the way, I’d like to [inaudible]. I don’t know what this is costing you, but I’m on a telephone, which is on a charger. If it suddenly starts breaking or if you lose me, just recall me and I’ll pick up one of the other extensions here in my office, okay?

MARGARET: Okay, I’ll do that.

PETE: [inaudible]. Yeah, the [inaudible] gallery was [inaudible] we had somebody on a board involved with the Museum that suggested…I guess it’s not important where the basic concept came from, but the objective was twofold. 1) Yes, to give local artists a different way of having their work expressed in the community, but primary motivation was to encourage people to get comfortable with having art in their home and collecting them. But they have to have some confidence in collecting without a selfish interest as any museum would and then eventually having collectors and they donate to the Museum. So it works both ways. It gave us another venue for showing works by local artist, but also is a chance to get people collecting.

MARGARET: Right and it seems like over the years, Alice Hupfel’s support of local artists, my goodness, including getting involved with artists and students at the University of Delaware, it seemed like she did a lost to really support local artists and, my goodness, when I say ‘local,’ certainly local, but then from Washington all the way up to New York.

PETE: I think that’s true and [inaudible] a couple of weeks ago, but her artists, they’re [inaudible] and actually [inaudible].

MARGARET: Yeah, yeah, she had. Let’s see, I’m wondering if we can go back to Rob Jones because I have to admit that, while probably not surprisingly the exhibition file on the show that he had at the Museum in ’75 is, well, brief. I think there are two letters—one from Roland to Rob and one’s Rob’s response back to Roland. So, unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of images. I’m wondering if you can really just kind of talk about the exhibition, what you remember of it.

PETE: The thing that I remember of it was it was a bit of a shock to everybody and what I can’t remember is whether [inaudible] if what Rob was going to do or whether he eventually sprung it on us. Rob had an edge [inaudible] that, but that’s okay because [inaudible] some new work. It’s a different type of work, but then he did something involving plastics and synthetics and something that may have had…I wouldn’t call it a dangerous aspect to it, but it could have maybe caused some problems environmentally. [inaudible] expanded foam, which turned out to be totally non-objective, let’s say, [inaudible].

Then also he [inaudible], but I don’t know if there was some friction. There might have been in terms of Rob’s relationship [inaudible]. So we’d occasionally [inaudible], but not to the point where he would endanger the Museum and its collections or anything else. Yeah, I’m a little fuzzy about how that all evolved.
MARGARET: Did you frequent the Fifth Street Gallery?

PETE: Yes, I think I probably saw most of the exhibitions that went on there.

MARGARET: What kind of work was he typically showing? Again, the documentation is a little sparse. I know that Julio Acuna exhibited there. I know that he had some group photography exhibitions. I know that James Anderson exhibited there, but having a sense of your recollections would be wonderful as well.

PETE: Well, it’s a little fuzzy because I don’t think the guy was [inaudible]. I know that he exhibited some Philadelphia prints [inaudible].

MARGARET: It was short-lived. From what I can tell, it’s only ’73, ’74–’79.

PETE: [inaudible] remember was that long, to tell you the truth. I was thinking maybe two, three years before he officially went to New York, but I guess it could have been [inaudible], but this specific [inaudible] back now.

MARGARET: No, that’s fine. Did you happen to attend the Sleaze Convention in September of 1976? My goodness, from the reviews and such that I found and the interesting zine that accompanied it, it was quite an event. I know that Rob Jones was involved as was Tom Watkins, who was involved with Xanadu, which was the comic book shop in downtown Wilmington. This was a kind of fun, art—probably—event or happening, might be the best way to describe it. It was at Fifth Street and I know that John Waters attended, came up from Baltimore. Eddy the Egg Lady, from Pink Flamingo and I’m wondering if you attended and if you remember any of it.

PETE: No. I would have remembered because I knew John Waters and his crowd and his friends, but, no, I don’t. Maybe I just wasn’t there at the time. This was like a one or two-day event, but I don’t have a specific memory of actually being there.

MARGARET: Tell me, did you have any involvement—in addition to looking at, of course, the visual arts, I’m also researching music, dance and theatre as well because, of course, there were so many interesting collaborations at the time and so many other organizations were founded right around the same time as the DCCA—the Delaware Theatre Company, Delaware Opera, lots of other organizations founded. Did you have any involvement or any specific recollections about music, theatre or dance in the city?

PETE: [inaudible]. My wife would have [inaudible] Culbertson City. A little footnote to my [inaudible] was the fact that I actually got to conduct the Delaware Symphony one time. We had [inaudible] and we had an auction [inaudible] for one of the auctions and it was to conduct the Delaware Symphony. My wife put in a bid [inaudible], so I had to conduct the Delaware Symphony in the Star Spangled Banner at the opening of one of their concerts.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s lovely.
PETE: I’m sure the DCCA [inaudible]. They had some individual performers and small groups. I’m trying to see… [inaudible] about any sort of accommodations of an exhibition that had some [inaudible] music. Not necessarily a [inaudible], but an innovation of several different art forms, dance, for example, and music and art. I think so, but I’m just trying to remember the specifics on what it was, but anyway, it’ll come to me after we finish the conversation.

MARGARET: Okay. Well, this is wonderful and, again, thank you so much for talking with me. I hope you don’t mind if maybe I get in touch again as I continue my research.

PETE: Yeah, because getting specifics, then I can maybe respond better, but I’m simply trying to dig up things in my clouded memory right now. This is another very minor footnote, in those days, my position there was [inaudible]. They made a change in terminology later on.

MARGARET: Oh, that’s true and I did have that written down in my notes, so I misspoke.

PETE: No, I didn’t realize [inaudible] correlating to the local art scene, but I support it because after we had a minor role in encouraging that and [inaudible]. Another aspect of the [inaudible] operation, too, was [inaudible] in terms of how our relation to other [inaudible] had access to our books in our collection and things like…I’m looking at this [inaudible] exhibition in Washington. Yes, because we did things, in those days, [inaudible]. Anyway, I had a great time there and it was a real challenge and it was exciting for me.

MARGARET: Oh, well, that’s wonderful. Wonderful. Well, Pete, thank you again so much and I will warn you in advance that I will probably be in touch again as my research continues on this exhibition.

PETE: Okay, [inaudible]. Have fun with it [inaudible]. Don’t hesitate to contact me if I can be helpful.

MARGARET: Wonderful. Thank you so much. Have a good weekend.

PETE: Okay.

MARGARET: Bye-bye.

PETE: Bye.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 33 minutes