

Interview with artist Marie Griffin
Chatham, MA
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Description: This interview takes place in Marie Griffin's studio in Chatham. Marie was a former teacher and artist. She had a studio and often taught classes for various residents of Chatham. She discusses how she came to be an artist and how she ended up moving to Chatham. Marie and the interviewer also discuss the house that she and her husband bought near Morris Island Road.

Interviewer: So you get to-

Marie: If you're too hot, let me know.

Interviewer: No, I'm fine now. I had worn my heavy wool sweater because it was chilly down the house and I thought, "If you take it, then you have it, and if you don't have it, you don't have it." Now tell me all about you. Where did you grow up?

Marie: Well I grew up in Lawrence, Massachusetts and that's where I met my husband. And then my father was transferred to Newark, New Jersey. And so from Lawrence we went to Newark. And I went to a Catholic boarding school. I went to Mount St. Mary up in Hooksett, New Hampshire. Which - it's now a college. But anyway, I went there when I was 13 years old and that's where I started my artwork. And I had two years of just charcoal drawing before they let me take a paint brush in hand. And then the last two years I worked in oils. And then I had a year of finishing school there. My family thought I was too young to go on, so I stayed for the fifth year. Which meant I really had five years of artwork at Mount St. Mary. And then when we moved to Newark, I went to Newark School of Fine and Applied Arts and I graduated from there. That was a three year course. And right then was the height of the Depression, and of

course, I could've gotten a position teaching in a private school two days a week in Long Island, but that didn't seem worthwhile. So I went on to teacher's college then. And I graduated from teacher's college and taught school. But I always kept up with my artwork. When I first graduated from art school, I continued a course in portrait painting at night, which was really too much for me because it was three hours a night. Andy, this is a tape recording, what do you want?

Interviewer: Hi!

Marie: You're interrupting us.

Interviewer: Oh, it doesn't matter a bit! Doesn't bother anything.

Andy: I just wanted to declare that our house used to be where the tennis courts –

Interviewer: Long, long ago.

Andy: Yes, and then they moved it over here and they turned it around. You knew all that.

Interviewer: Well we certainly have it down now for all of posterity!

Andy: I'll leave you.

Interviewer: You don't have to go as far as I'm concerned... Enjoy. When did you study portrait painting?

Marie: I studied with an old German teacher by the name of Mattsell (sp?), and he was really wonderful. And I just loved it and as I look back, that's the thing I regret, that I didn't stay with portrait painting all through the years, because I really liked it at that point, but it just was too much going – you know, teacher's college in the daytime and trying to do this at night, so I gave that up. But then as I say, I taught school in Maplewood, New Jersey for five years. Then my husband went in the service and he was up in the Aleutians, so after we were married I went

back to New Jersey and again had a position in the same school, or another school in the same school system. So I taught again while Andy was overseas and after that we ended up after the war in Waltham, Mass. And while I was in Waltham I picked up my artwork again. They had a church in Waltham that had sponsored art classes. It was there that I studied with Robert Douglas Hunter and Agnes R. Ripley and – oh, there were several marvelous teachers. And we used to go once a week and work with him. And Lauren Colewin (sp?), he's in Sudbury now. He's a water colorist and an oil painter too. And I believe he's been in the Sudbury school system for quite a while. So it was really there that I got back into my artwork. And since then, of course, when we retired down here nine years ago, and I have done more work down here than I have ever done in my life because of the environment and the leisure time. But I did have classes while I lived in Wellesley. We had moved to Wellesley after we had lived in Waltham for a while. And I had started classes in Wellesley. And I used to have classes in my recreation room downstairs. So it was a natural when I came down here and somebody said to me, "Oh Marie, you could teach us." Well I hesitated because I thought, "I'm not really that wonderful," but I finally got back into it. So here I am with three classes going and, of course, I can only have five in the studio at a time because of the size of it. Also because of the zoning, I wouldn't want more.

Interviewer: Yeah, you are in a residential area.

Marie: But, on the other hand, it makes the classes very intimate. And I think people get more out of it, having a small class. And we've all gotten to know each other. We really have some marvelous groups.

Interviewer: What is your system of teaching?

Marie: Well, when I start somebody off as a beginner, I insist that they do still lifes for a while. So that they can learn to handle a painting. And I can see what they do. And I like to see them paint flowers while we have the flowers. And this fall I've started my classes outdoors. We've been down on the beach. But during the winter months, it's rather difficult. So what we do is, I suggest that if they have a picture that they've taken themselves, or one they like, they can work from it. But I object to them taking someone else's work and copying it. I don't mind them taking a newspaper clipping, because then they can interpret the way that they want to when coloring. But, and then we do - every so often we get a model and have somebody pose for us. If a group are interested in that type of thing. Which of course is fun too.

Interviewer: How about drawing? Do you find –

Marie: Well I find that most beginners, say people over 50 start this as a hobby, who do not have a good background, and I will help the person with the drawing. And I do take 15 minutes of a lesson, quite often, and give a lesson in perspective and drawing, if the class wants me to do that. Because I feel that most of them really need it.

Interviewer: I think that it's absolutely essential because you don't really know what you're doing, trying to express something and how do you do it? Because –

Marie: Well this is it. So I usually – as the classes get going – take time to teach a little drawing. But as I say, my main motive is to teach to paint. So if a person wants me to help them with drawing, I will help them. And then let them go ahead with the painting.

Interviewer: People want to fly before they can crawl.

Marie: This is it. But I find that people that have taken from me now, in a couple years will say, "I realize I started wrong, I should've taken basic drawing first." Because in the end it does show up, if you have your basic drawing.

Interviewer: Of course! The size of your house don't but up.

Marie: But it's a very rewarding thing. I just love to see the paintings grow. And see the different interpretations. Now these two girls went to the beach yesterday. See, they were doing the little shack down here, and you can see how different each one interprets it.

Interviewer: Mhm. It's a delightful little shack.

Marie: Yes, but then I've been active in the Women's Club too. I started their art program for them.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Marie: It's only the last few years that they decided to have a literature department, a music department, and an art department.

Interviewer: For goodness sakes!

Marie: So I was the one in charge of getting that going. So I was chairman of that group for two years.

Interviewer: Oh, tell me about it.

Marie: What really – they had done nothing up along those lines at that time. I started by having a "Hidden Corner" – a "Hidden Talent Corner." So every month when we had a meeting, we would call on someone from the whole Women's Club to bring something to have it displayed. And it was interesting the different peoples' talents. It was amazing to learn some of the things that some of the people do. It has really gotten to be quite a fascinating thing and

when women go to the meeting they always look to see what the exhibit is for that particular month. And then I was active when we had our bicentennial contest. We had, you know, selected a design from the high school students that was used as a medallion. And I was the one that was in charge of that contest, in cooperation with the high school. And the Hilbreth (sp?) boy won the award. That was a very interesting thing to do. So, I think that's about the extent of about my activities.

Interviewer: Oh heavens no.

Marie: Well, that's all I can think of at the minute, unless you can ask some questions.

Interviewer: Well, of course, I don't know an awful lot about you, which makes it rather difficult. But you can tell me more about your work.

Marie: Well for the last two summers, I've gone down to Wallace Bassford's in North Truro. Which was really a grind, but nevertheless it was a working vacation and most exciting. Another friend and I would go down and we'd leave here at 7:30 in the morning, and the session was from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon. But we didn't stay every day for that length of time, because standing on your feet is kind of weary. But what we had down there was a model, live model, in the morning, and then in the afternoons we worked with flowers – or we could do anything we wanted, we could do landscapes, but we worked with flowers. So that was for three weeks I was down there. And that's an exciting thing to do. Mr. Bassford teaches down in Florida in the winter. And he took over from Jerry Farnsworth's old studio.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Marie: Yeah, so that really was a fun, fun thing. And then I had one other exciting thing happen. A friend of mine came in one day and she said, "Marie, have you sent any paintings in to the

Miniature Show in Washington?" And I said, "No, in fact, I had never even heard of it." So she said, "Why don't you think about it." So she sent me all the forms. Well it was in September that this material had to be in, by Labor Day. And you know what it's like after then, you're just relaxed. But she took the trouble to send me these forms, the least I could do was cooperate. So I sent the three paintings to Washington, just three little 3x4 miniatures. A month later, in the car, in the mail, I received a penny postal card and it said, "Congratulations, you won first place for still life." Well I almost thought it was a joke, but it was followed up by an official letter. So I went down for the preview, which was in the end of October and it was at the Art Club of Washington. And I stayed with my neighbors, the Chapins.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Marie: So I had a delightful visit with them. And I went to the opening of the show and, of course, I walked in the door and I thought, "I would love to have my painting back, if it won a prize." So I walked in and I said to the woman in charge, "If my painting isn't sold, I'm interested in taking it back." And I could see the expression on her face change. And she said, "Oh no you can't take it back once it's put in the catalog for sale." Later on, I was told that the woman that had won a prize the year before, she wanted her painting back and they wouldn't let her have it because it was listed in the catalog. So she walked over and grabbed it off the wall and went out in a big huff. So I can imagine their reaction to me when I said to them, "I'd like my painting back." But, it was sold, of course. So this year, I haven't heard, but I sent three paintings of mine. And I don't expect to ever win a first prize again, but it's an honor to get in it because there are 1,275 paintings submitted from England and Canada and Mexico. And there were 255

accepted for the show. And every one of them is a little treasure. They really were delightful. They really were. So that was a big highlight in my life.

Interviewer: Well I would think so. A tremendous boost and pick me up. What sort of things do you like to do best?

Marie: Well I still love portrait work and this type of thing versus –

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Marie: I have a lot of the ones I did down in baskets or something.

(Distant speech)

Marie: But, I love everything really. I work in everything. A great many people like my watercolors better than my oils –

Interviewer: Do you teach watercolor too?

Marie: No, I don't teach watercolor.

Interviewer: Why?

Marie: Well, I suppose I could, but it's just the idea that I have been painting oils all of my life – and of course I did watercolors in art school – but I've never seriously worked in watercolors until I took a course with Dan MacAway (sp?). And he got me very interested in watercolors.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Marie: And he was a marvelous teacher. I really enjoyed working with him. And so it was with him that I got back into watercolors. And I find that I do watercolors spasmodically. But my husband likes my watercolors better than my oils. And a great many people say that, "We love your watercolors." And even Foster Nystrom (sp?) said to me, "Your colors are so clear, how do you get your colors so clear?" I think basically I am a colorist, no matter what I do it's color that

I love. And of course I've had composition bred into me so long, that I think this comes natural to me. I mean I would just – when I see a student's work that has something not good in composition, immediately I sense it. And I have to stop and explain, think to explain to a student why I want –

Interviewer: Where did you study composition?

Marie: In art school, this is all in my training. But I must have had some good teachers along the way because composition and color are my two strong points.

Interviewer: How did you ever happen to come to Chatham?

Marie: We used to come here and we used to rent the Cunningham's house, they're down on Seagull Lane down here. You know where the marina is, right? At the end of the marina is a little house, well that was the senior Cunninghams. And we knew the junior Cunninghams, who lived a few houses beyond and we rented their house every summer. And we were doing this for three or four years and we got to the point where we thought we really ought to start and look around for a house. So we were looking at properties over in Harding's Beach area and we were all over. And we even contemplated building a house. We went back, must have been in September, we went back to Wellesley and we got a phone call from a friend of ours whom we knew and she said, "Where've you been?" And we said, "We were down in Chatham." She said, "What were you doing down there?" "Well we were looking for a house." And she said, "Well you don't have to bother looking anymore." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Sally Tarvell's house is for sale." And this close friend of ours, it's her sister-in-law who is Sally Tarvell's roommate. They lived together, have always lived together. So she said, "You went by it every day." And it didn't register with us which house Sally Tarvell's house was. "You passed it

every day when you came up by Morris Island Road." So I think it's an inclination of everyone to look to the water and not to look at this way. So she said, "Why don't you go down and look at it. Sally and I are leaving for Florida in the morning, but we'll come over tonight and leave the key for you." So she gave us the price and of course we gulped. And said, "Oh we wouldn't spend that much money, you know." But she came over and brought the key. Of course, curiosity got the better of us. The next morning we came down here- Oh look at the sun on you.

Interviewer: Yeah I think the sun is beginning to get to me.

Marie: So, anyway, we got the key and the next morning, it was a dreary dull, dull day. And we came down and we opened that front door and, of course, Mr. Tarvell had put that fiber- dark brown, fiber door from the wall to the ceiling, and the dark green window shades to the floor, and we walked in the place, and oh, I was heartbroken. I thought, "Oh isn't this a dismal place?" Well that night we went home. And, of course, we kept talking about it. And Andy said, "You know I don't know if there's a chimney in that place. Because the fireplace was closed up. So he said, "Let's go back and look at it again." Well the next day we came back to look at it and it was a gorgeous sunny, clear day. And I just stood in that front door and I said, "I don't care what the house is like, this is it." So we called Sally and we got her at her brother's in Washington, she was on her way to Florida, and we made an offer and she accepted it. And it just seemed to be. It worked out just wonderfully. Of course, we have put a great deal of money into the house, more money than we ever paid for it. But we feel we really have a treasure. We wouldn't change it for all the tea in China. And we have one daughter and she and her husband just love it. And of course they have three children.

Interviewer: Good. Well it is an old house.

Marie: Yes, yes it is. There's no doubt about it. There are no studs or anything in it. It's the old barn board construction because we fixed the dining room, we could see the two wide boards this way, this way. And, of course, the plaster is in the back of that fiberboard – it was in such a condition. I guess that's one reason I put the fiberboard up. And then to insulate too.

Interviewer: The plaster's still there?

Marie: In some of it it was, because when we had to put a couple new plugs in they found that there was plaster.

Interviewer: What did Sally tell you about the house, if anything?

Marie: I don't know, she – one thing she told this was, of course, her father had turned the house around. And I think, she said, that it cost him \$600 to turn the house around. And, of course, she did leave a few treasures. She said that – it was supposed to be furnished, but it was sparsely furnished. Of course, she asked if she could take out the things we wanted, or she wanted. But, every once in a while we come across a new treasure. I found an old, brass, real old lantern down cellar. And it was black. And I polished and polished and finally it came through that it was brass.

Interviewer: No genie though?

Marie: No. And then I found a lovely little (?) vase.

Interviewer: Really?

Marie: That too was black. And I just got a glimpse of brass on the top of it. So when I cleaned it up I was amazed. And then, of course, there was a Tiffany lamp in the back bedroom. And there were a few things like that that had been interesting.

Interviewer: But you have made many changes on the house, really.

Marie: We did modernize the kitchen. And the bathroom. But other than that the upstairs is exactly the way, other than painting and getting rid of the dark walls, but the – basically the upstairs is exactly the same. Some time ago, Sally told us that the floor had deteriorated. So they had to put the new floor in downstairs. But the upstairs does have the wide floorboards.

Interviewer: Really? Still? And the house was across the street?

Marie: You know it was over where the tennis courts and then some storm- that storm, I guess they moved the lights back.

Interviewer: '77, 1877.

Marie: They moved this over here. And they said there was an old school on this property originally. Some folks had read that.

Interviewer: Yeah, there was.

Marie: And it was Mallowes that owned the house, they think.

Interviewer: Yeah. The school, was it in the house?

Marie: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Part of the house?

Marie: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Because they often did that in the old days.

Marie: I really don't know, I just read that they think that there was a school on this site before the house was moved here. So I think –

Interviewer: Oh before 1877.

Marie: That was the way I interpreted it. I'm not sure on that. But, of course, it's a wonderful house for us because we don't have to open the upstairs unless we have guests. And as far as

heating is concerned, we only heat the downstairs. I think the biggest disappointment was the fireplace though. Because when they turned the house around, they broke off the fireplace. And we had two men look at it to see what it would mean to put the fireplace back and it would really be quite a problem because you couldn't get in the bedrooms upstairs. I don't know how it was originally, but there just isn't that much room unless it was put on an angle or something.

Interviewer: Oh, it would've been angled for sure.

Marie: Yes, but I mean – right now it would be impossible to replace it where it is because the old mantel is still there. But that – the front of the fireplace was closed in with this brown fiberboard. So I painted – I don't know whether you noticed – I painted bricks and an iron kettle and a flame. It was strange, when we first had the house - we had pictures of it. And my husband was showing it to some men at work and they would look at one picture from one angle and another picture at another angle. And they would raise their eyebrows, being engineers, how'd this stay the same and he had to explain that I had made a picture representing the bricks in the fireplace and a kettle. But we've had a lot of fun fixing it. It's been hard work.

Interviewer: But as you say, you've got something rather special.

Marie: Well it's the view and location. And this was an old – it must have been used almost as a barn. Because we found coal stored in the back of it, I wouldn't be surprised if it was an outhouse at one time in the back.

Interviewer: Really? Any signs of it at all?

Marie: Well, like a roller from toilet paper on the wall and that was it. We just wondered if it had been used as that. But I don't think they ever – I don't think they could get a car in here in for years, because it was too narrow.

Interviewer: Well I think they kept a car in here at one time. Like an old-fashioned car, like a Tin Lizzie or something that took up almost no space. Because I remember.

Marie: And when we were first down here, the old garage doors blew off. So that was when we replaced it and we cut the loft back halfway. Which was really wonderful to – the way it turned out, because when we decided to make a studio out of it, having the loft up there is a marvelous storage place. And I'm glad that we didn't take the whole loft out. And, of course, we don't want to insulate the roof because we are afraid it will lose its charm. But we have gas heat out here, so to say.

Interviewer Yeah.

Marie: These windows, some of these windows have the old, old panes. A lot of the panes were broken and I put in colored glass. That's another facet, I work in stained glass too, you know?

Interviewer: Oh you do? No, I didn't know.

Marie: I started that about 10 years before it became very popular. And I used to belong to the Artist and Craftsman Guild of the Outer Cape. They have their fair in Orleans once in July and once in August. And I was one of the – on the ground floor as far as stained-glass was concerned, making some medallions. And I really did quite an excellent business. But now I find that as time has gone on everyone has been doing it. And it's not as profitable as it was in the beginning. And, of course, truly it's a craft. And I can't say that – I'd much rather paint than to take my time to do something like this.

Interviewer: And how was such a thing done, roughly speaking? What is the edging?

Marie: Well actually, you cut the glass with a regular glasscutter. You know, you have a sheet of glass. You have a pattern, you cut your glass in the shape you want to. And this is lead.

Interviewer: Really, lead?

Marie: The head is called cane and it's pliable. And it has to be soldered together.

Interviewer: Really?

Marie: So you really have to learn to solder. And I used to create a great many of my own designs, like this little ballerina. Some woman asked me if I would do a ballerina. And a great many of the designs are original. And this little piece, this mobile. There are two ways of doing this. This is the copper foil method. And this is copper.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Marie: Copper foil that has solder put on it afterwards. And this is a different method than the cane.

Interviewer: That sounds rather intricate then, to do all that cutting.

Marie: You really – of course, the longer you work at it the better you become. And it probably is too bad because I'm stopping it – I was getting better at it, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, when you think of all those joints to solder and all those pieces to cut. It seems to me like a great deal of work.

Marie: I've had a few funny things happen to me. I've had people come in here and walk right over to that collection of pictures, pick one up and say, "How much is this?" Of course, this is my still life. Oh, and I did get into the Creative Arts Center.

Interviewer: Oh, that's right. We've got to talk about that too.

Marie: I was the chairman of the Jurying Committee this year for all the work. And before this, Roger and Nancy Harvey had really managed the festival. So this was the first year the Creative Arts Center, decided they would try to do it themselves with the help of Roger still guiding us. But anyway, I was made chairman of the Jurying Committee. So it was a matter of starting from scratch because I had never done it before and we didn't have too much to go on. We had a list of prospective applicants that we got from the Harveys. But we had a committee and I wrote up the letter and sent the letter out. Then we had to follow through. And we set up the jury and we had two different days of jurying. And we numbered everyone's work so there wouldn't be any partiality. And it really was an exciting experience to go through. And of course, there are always complaints. You can't please everyone. But we felt we did the best we could, really. And we felt that the jurors were very, very good. We divided this year – the art on one Saturday and two weeks later we judged all the craftwork. And it worked out better than trying to do it all in one day. Before that time they had done it all in one day. It was too much.

Interviewer: Now, is the Creative Arts Center the sponsor? The outfit behind the festival?

Marie: Yes they are. And they use the money from the festival to pay for their buildings. They have a building they're renting out. And the rent is expensive. And they're conducting classes there this year. It's really getting, you know, better known, and they're having more and more classes and it's really a wonderful thing for Chatham.

Interviewer: How many classes do they have?

Marie: Well they have – I don't know if I can remember them all – they have classes in portrait painting and still life, and they have watercolor classes, and drawing –

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