

Williams College Oral History Project Interview with S. Lane Faison

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Interview Length: 76 pages

S. Lane Faison (1907 – 2006), Williams class of 1929, taught in the Art Department from 1936 through 1976, chairing the department from 1940 to 1970. He also served as the Director of the Williams College Museum of Art from 1948 to 1976.

In his interview with John Walsh, Faison discusses his childhood and his high school experience. He recounts the story of living in Europe for a year with his family, during which one of his high school teachers asked him to come to Paris for a few weeks. The teacher brought 16-year-old Lane to Chartres, and this he describes as his moment of enlightenment: it is what turned him into an art historian. By the time he came to Williams, he was “raring to go” and convinced Karl Weston to let him into his class a year early. From Williams, he went to Harvard for graduate work, but left after one year and finished at Princeton. After his oral exams, he worked at Yale for four years as an assistant in the graduate program. When he realized his position at Yale wouldn’t ever involve teaching undergraduates, he was delighted to accept an offer from Williams.

Faison discusses President Tyler Dennett at length, explaining how upset he was when the trustees accepted his resignation. He goes on to talk about the Art Department in his early years at Williams, and how President Phinney Baxter felt about art. He talks about his colleagues in the department, Whitney Stoddard and Bill Pierson, and discusses the interruption of World War II, when all three of them went into the Navy and Karl Weston came out of retirement to teach. After the war, the three art historians convinced Baxter to tenure them all, and he did so under the condition that no one would receive tenure in the department as long as they were all in it.

Faison then explains in great detail his assignment during the War. He was asked to join a team to look into the art the Nazis had collected during the war and to write the history of what had happened. He describes the salt mines where the art was stored, and the villa in which his unit interrogated people. The history was divided into three main parts, and Faison—apparently because he came to the group last—was assigned to write the part of the story about Hitler.

Faison also talks about the college’s change to coeducation and how he helped to eliminate the idea of a coordinate college with a well-timed joke at a faculty meeting. He discusses the Clark Museum; the Williams Art History Department and its graduate courses; his affection for Jack Sawyer and John Chandler; and the so called “holy trinity” of Williams art professors and the Williams Art Mafia.

The transcript of this interview and the accompanying audio file (if available) may be accessed only in the Archives/Chapin Reading Room.