Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Edward M. M. Warburg, 1971 May 13

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edward Warburg on May 13, 1971. The interview was conducted in his office by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me just say its May 13, 1971 – Paul Cummings talking to Edward M. M. Warburg in his office. Could we talk about the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art and kind of develop how it came about.

EDWARD WARBURG: Let me do it in a kind of personal way and start way back. My father had a very fine collection of early German woodcuts – Rembrandt and Durer. These were housed up at 1109 Fifth Avenue where I grew up, which has subsequently become the Jewish museum. My father used to do a sort of tour of taking quests who came and asked to see the etching. I used to stand aside and listen to what he said about it. And pretty soon it wasn't very hard to be able to ape it. Sometimes father couldn't show and he would say, "You show them the things." So I think that was really a beginning of trying to find out what one said about pictures, what one's reactions were. Father's great rival in the etching and woodcut field, and who was also a friend of William Ivins of the Metropolitan Museum, was Paul Sachs. Sachs was a former partner of Goldman Sachs who was down at Kuhn, Loeb Company. They knew each other socially and they knew each other as friendly competitors in the auction room or this field. Paul decided to go straight and get out of the field of banking. He went to Harvard where he, along with Edward Forbes, became the moving force behind the Fogg Art Museum. And "moving force" meant fund-raiser as much as anything. This was the great moment when the Harvard Business School and Harvard College built a big expansion movement. My father was one of the big patrons; and now they've very kindly named one of the halls after him – Warburg Hall. Father had an ambition that one of his children, of the four brothers, would take advantage of the thing that he'd help build up. And guess what? – It was me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that because you had a greater interest?

EDWARD WARBURG: Yes. I don't know at that stage – at the age of seventeen-and-a-half what kind of interest you have. I used to astound my parents by doing charcoal sketches of plaster casts and things like that. They were the most wretched things you could possibly imagine. And I had no standards at all, this is the point I'm trying to lead up to. In 1926 I came into the freshman class at Harvard, The Class of 1930. I ran into Lincoln Kirstein whose parents had said, "Look up the Warburg boy." And I had been told to look up the Kirstein boy because his father was Louis Kirstein of Filene's and my brother-in-law was Walter Rothschild of Abraham & Straus and they both together were the Federated Department Store Group. I had, oh, known Lincoln's father as sort of – Uncle Louie he was known as generally. But I had never met Lincoln. Lincoln was an absolute firebrand. I don't know – if anybody were to write his biography I think they'd have to come to the conclusion that he reached his peak almost as an undergraduate. He was way ahead of anybody of his own age level. By the time he had already won all kinds of prizes as a practicing artist, as a painter. He was in close touch with E. E. Cummings and with all the writers – T. S. Eliot. Upon arriving at college he started immediately the periodical Hound and Horn, which was a quality way beyond undergraduate standards and had everybody, internationally even, submitting stuff to it. As a matter of fact, John Walker was in that with him and others who had a literary interest. We used to have bull sessions in the freshman dorms discussing art. I had on my walls various etchings and woodcuts and things like that. Quite bad ones mixed in with the Dr. Faustus that my father had given me; not one of the great states, but a very good copy of it. And I remember Jim Rorimer came in; Jimmy Rorimer who later became director of the Metropolitan Museum, Jim Rorimer was quite a snob – P.S. And he was terribly anxious to get me to belong to this Cercle, or whatever the word is, Italienne. I don't know – I think they had a deficit, too. In any case he came down to my room and said that he liked that one. I said, "I'm not sure that I don't like this one just as much." This shocked him terribly because this was – I don't know – Meryon [Ed. - ?] or one of the perfectly standard artists. Well, I began to be fascinated. I remember one of the things that hit me particularly was that they were all raving about Titian's The Rape of Europa from the Gardner Collection, and what a glorious picture it was! Well, I went to see this because obviously it was a wonderful picture. And to me it was one of the most uncomfortable pictures I'd ever seen. Poor Europa about to fall off the bull. I couldn't understand what made this picture so wonderful. So then I went into taking courses. And, as is typical of almost all college goings-on in the art field, I know because I ended up teaching myself, they do everything but talk about the creative aspect of painting. They'll talk about its history and they'll talk about the composition. And the adjectives they use to praise one is used to damn the next depending upon whether they liked it or didn't like it. So out of this, out of the restlessness and irritation at this sort of – "How do you tell what's good" – a very primitive question – Lincoln and John Walker and I who got on well together had these discussions. Lincoln would always have the latest news about everything. He had been following Diaghilev and so on. And he said that

“What we ought to do is get some good stuff up here.” Obviously with the Fogg it’s all reactionary, it’s all old stuff, they don’t dare do political – I mean this was our form of militancy. My God! It seems tame now! But at that time it was militant. So we took two rooms above the Harvard co-op. We were the staff, just the three of us. There wasn’t anybody else. I think I was brought along to help make up the deficit. I knew nothing about it but I learned a tremendous amount from it. From an educational standpoint it was tremendously meaningful. We used to sit there as guards whenever the thing was open. And waiting there we did our homework. We got very irritated when people asked us questions and interrupted our homework. Usually the visitor would say, “Young man, tell us what that picture is about. What is that meant to mean?” It would be an abstraction of Miro’s or something like that. And to shut them up we labeled the paintings with nice names like “The Absence of Mary Smith” and a few things of that kind. We’d shut them up so we could do our homework. But we had the first shows of really quite extraordinary people. Buckminster Fuller came up there. Lincoln always spluttered with energy and with confusion. One day he said, “You’ve got to get your car and come right down to the Back Bay station because Bucky Fuller is arriving and he’s got twenty-seven pieces of sculpture and I can’t put them all in my car.” So we went zooming off down to the Back Bay Station and stood there waiting and suddenly the goofy-faced Bucky Fuller came out with three rolls of wire around his shoulder and suitcase. We said, “Where’s the sculpture?” He said, “I’ll make it tonight.” He got up into our room, took off his clothes, and put on his pajama bottoms. Using his toe as a vise, he bent this wire around. He had little wooden plaques with a hole for the wire to be stuck in which was the base. He had the catalogues all printed. He’d do this piece and that piece, you see, and bend these things around talking to us all the while. He had a pair of pliers with which he clipped it off at the end. He was absolutely delightful. [NOTE: Mr. Warburg misspoke himself just above. He is talking about Alexander Calder, not Buckminster Fuller. He makes this correction later.] In addition to which he saw a picture of my father on my desk. My father always had a white carnation in his buttonhole. So just as a bonus he did a portrait of my father in wire with a wire going down the lapel line and doing a loop around there where you’d put a test tube and into which he put a white carnation. And he put the six-pointed star for the Zionist interest. Also he sat on the john in our bathroom and looking up at the wall saw cracks on the wall which by adding very few strokes became much more interesting than all of Pompeii. In fact we charged admission as everybody filed by. Also at that time he did the whole Circus thing, you know, that famous Circus where he handed out peanuts to all the elephants. And he had these little springboards that tossed these dolls up and they caught the trapeze sometimes. And wonderful wire animals. And cows with dangling udders. Really just as imaginative as could be. That was before the days of the mobile. These were way early. Did I say Bucky Fuller?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. It’s Calder though.

EDWARD WARBURG: Yes, that’s Sandy Calder. We did have Bucky Fuller, too. Bucky Fuller was just the opposite type. Bucky Fuller was a terribly serious person who lived in my rooms down there at – I’ve forgotten the name of the hall – but in any case he was at that time Dymaxion House. He did demonstrations in connection with that. The fact that I misused the names doesn’t make much difference; these were two people who were unknown at that time who – much later of course – come into their own. Now what we did was to go around to dealers, we went around to relatives – Sam Lewisohn was a relative of mine. Everybody was terribly anxious to encourage us. They were very nice. We tried to raise money from them but that wasn’t so easy. So the thing died simply because of lack of support. But collectors, dealers and artists couldn’t have been more helpful and cooperative. Then comes the question which of course is the key one. I’ve never been quite sure how true this story is because Lincoln and John Walker were right there and I think we all have different versions of this. But I remember Mrs. Rockefeller and Mrs. Bliss coming up there and seeing this and saying in the gallery, “Why don’t we do this en gros in New York City?” and going to see Paul Sachs, who not only created all the museums in the country – the demand for directors from his museum course – if you visited every curator and director throughout the country you’d come across nothing but Harvard guys. He had a complete monopoly set up. Sachs suggested that they use Jerry Abbott, who was teaching at that time at Smith College, and Alfred Barr. Alfred was teaching at Wellesley and actually was one of our advisors; he was a great friend of ours and we saw a great deal of him. And Alfred very astutely invited us to go on the Advisory Committee of the Museum of Modern Art. And with Lincoln – well, you know, there are the signers of the Declaration of Independence? – well, Lincoln is a re-signer; he likes to resign from things. So as soon as he got put on the board he resigned. That gave him a great sense of something. Meanwhile, the Junior Advisory Committee which we were on ran – did do some – the mural show which Lincoln initiated compromised poor Nelson Rockefeller by putting up the Ben Shahn murals of the Sacco-Vanzetti case which showed old John D. Rockefeller and Mr. Morgan standing by the coffins of Sacco and Vanzetti, which took a lot of apologizing by Nelson down at Morgan & Company as well as at home. Nelson still remembers this one. But it was a very alive period up there at Harvard and around the Fogg Art Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had very good attendance at most of these shows, didn’t you? – from what I’ve read in press clippings and things.

EDWARD WARBURG: Yes. Well, two rooms were not very large. Yes, people just came in. I think it was more out of Harvard than Harvard itself. I think the undergraduates were rather startled by it. I mean it’s hard to remember what college was like at that time and to keep it accurate. At college at that time if you were an

intellectual you were – everybody respected you and would have nothing to do with you. You were the loneliest person in the world. The only time when brains were allowed was in humor. The boys at the Harvard Lampoon were still passable. There was a hard-drinking element up there. The grinds were unknown. It's a very interesting thing that at the 25th reunion of my class I ran the symposium which was to show off the boys of our class who had done well. And all of us met for the first time, and with great interest, a man who had been our classmate. It happened to be Ed [Landerpole, Lampola ?]. None of us had known him as an undergraduate. He was only there a year and a half but just the same it is interesting that he was unknown to any of us. So in this milieu, the idea of starting an art gallery – Oh, my! Very strange! Well, in this connection I was amused that in my family's house when I brought home Picasso's The Blue Boy which I had bought – well, since we're doing this for the Archives of American Art I might as well give you a few facts on this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. And talk about your own collecting too.

EDWARD WARBURG: In 1926 I was in Germany. I went to various dealers in Berlin. One of them, Curt Valentin, was a salesman in Thannhauser's – no, it wasn't Thannhauser's, it was Fleshstein's Gallery. Curt showed me what they had. I said, "Curt, look, we might as well be honest. There's nothing very exciting here." He said "You're right. It just happens to be a fallow period. But I have one painting that will knock your teeth out. It's here somewhat on loan. It's stored downstairs. I'll bring it up." And he brought up The Blue Boy. And I just swooned and said, "My God! Is that for sale!?!" He said, "No, I don't think so." I said if that lady ever needs dollars, let me know. It's just a question of how many." He had told me that it was owned by the Countess Vichnowsky who was the wife of the former German Ambassador to the Court of St. James. So two nights later he called me up and said, "Are those dollars in an American bank?" I said, "Why that's were they live." Then he said, "Well, it's just a question of how much." Well, without very much dickering she came down a little bit on the price because you always try to get things a little bit cheaper than the asked price – whether that's legitimate or not I don't know. But I paid $6,000 for The Blue Boy of Picasso. I have the bill still today. And I was so ashamed of myself for having spent that much! I had never spent that amount of money for anything. My family had brought me up thinking a thousand dollars a year spent on art collecting was already an extravagance that you kept under the table. When I brought the picture back to America I remember my father and my brothers met me at the dock. The customs official said, "I see you've declared a picture, an original work of art, for $3,000" - I was embarrassed at declaring it at $6,000. He said, "Where is it?" I said, "It's this big packing case." He said, "Let's open it up. I want to see it." So he opened it up and looking at it he said, "Great God!! You Paid $3,000 for that!! Sonny, I'm going down to the end of the dock and when I come back I want to see that declared at $2,500" - I don't quite know the difference between $2,500 and $3,000. My brother turned to the customs official and said, "How right you are! You know, we let him do this because it's cheaper than keeping him at that insane asylum up in Whit Plains" – or Bloomingdales' now New York Medical Center or whatever it is. But this picture I was not allowed to hang below the fifth floor in our house because it was considered obscene. Now what was the obscenity? It's a perfectly straightforward rendering of a young boy standing and wearing a blue jacket. The obscenity was that it was done in a slap and dash brush stroke. At certain points that was obscene. You did things meticulously. I suppose it was the Messonier training that my father had gone through. The other thing about it which is interesting – it may be vulgar to talk about the price of things – but I wish to gosh I had the prices on some of the things my father had in his collection but he tore up those bill and the prices don't exist. Many of them have changed in value I'm afraid the other way. But on that trip to Europe I went to the Bauhaus. I went to pay a call on Paul Klee. I had a letter from Sachs to Klee. When I came up to the door Klee was playing the violin. I waited until he'd finished playing, then rang the doorbell. He received me – he was wearing a white blouse like the waiters in Russian tea rooms wear. The place was full of dangling little bits of glass – mobiles, you know, clinky things. All very white and clean. And cats running all over the place. We spoke German to each other. He asked me what I wanted to see. I said, "Could I see some drawings?" We went through a stack of drawings. Well, you know, you run out of adjectives – "How interesting!" or "How beautiful!" and the like. In the middle of this a cat started to cross one of these drawings. I tried to quietly ease it aside. Klee said, "Oh, don't do that." I said, "Well, it'll make footprints all over the drawing." He said, "I know. But one of you art historians will end up saying 'How did he get that effect.'" But, in any case, as a result of that visit I bought two paintings from him – Departure of the Ships and Romantic Park. I paid $400 apiece for them. Three years ago I had my pictures, for insurance purposes, re-evaluated. Parke-Bernet came in – the young Ginsberg boy – and said, "Well, you'll have to evaluate each of them at $30,000." I said, "What? – Are you people in cahoots with the insurance company? I mean for God's sakes the premium in more than…" He said, "Well, listen, call our bluff. Send this picture or the one you like the least over to our auction at Sotheby's in London which is to be in June and put a refusal price of thirty grand on it. If it doesn't get the thirty grand you can get your picture back free for nothing; if it does, I take it you can use thirty grand." So I did this. My wife was about ready to kill me; the idea of selling anything we had! But all right. We did it. And I received a cable the day after the auction, "Congratulations! Your picture got $62,000." Well, I've had great fun with this thing because my brothers handle all my investments down on Wall Street and they can't show me: a) Any stock that has that large capitol gains, and b) much more importantly, the stocks that they have got aren't half as good looking as the paintings that I've got framed on my walls. I've enjoyed my collection and collecting. I still try and limit myself to – oh – if I spend $2,000 on an object I have a good guilt for a few months. But it's been wonderful

fun. Now I've gotten out of the field of the modern because it's too expensive. I have gone into antiquities and things like that which you still can get for very small amounts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you had an early interest in antiquities, didn't you?

EDWARD WARBURG: I went to Persia, you mean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

EDWARD WARBURG: I taught at Bryn Mawr. And one time I came back from Bryn Mawr furious and disgusted because all the dear little girls were always saying, "What must I know in order to be considered cultured?" And at every exam – "Question: What are the main trends in 19th century art?" The answer would be: "The main trends in the 19th century…" it would go right back at you. And it was so dull! Well, I was complaining about this to Arthur Upham Pope. He said, "Would you be interested in a change?" I said "Certainly. Who wouldn't be?" He said, "I'm going to Persia in the fall. How about coming with me?" Well, it so happened that I was free. I happened to be visiting in Los Angeles when I received a cable from him saying "I'm leaving London on such and such a date. Are you on?" And I thought when would I go to Persia again in all my life? It would be quite likely I wouldn't. So I signed on. I met him in London. I said, "What do I do to prepare myself for this trip? What do I need?" He said, "I'm counting on you to take movies. So get film, get Panchromatic film tropically packed and have it shipped off now so that it will meet us when we get there." And then he said, "You'll need about seven different vaccinations and inoculations. So you'd better get them out of the way." And then I got to wondering wouldn't there be use for binoculars because the inscriptions are up in the domes of the dome chambers. Well, I went and had all the medical things. I was inoculated against everything. They told me I would feel quite badly in about twelve hours. Well, twenty-four hours went by and I felt fine, so I decided that my ancestors had had these diseases and that I was immune to them. So I went out to buy the film. I got there and suddenly the thing hit me. I realized that I was going to be very sick. So I said, "Now look, have you got this straight? – This is the address, three thousand feet of Panchromatic film, tropically packed. Is that clear?" "Yes. Fine." Well, the film arrived in Persia. Several weeks later when we arrived; it was there on time. But the trouble was that me little hand camera, a little Bell & Howell, had only one reel inside it; and the reels they sent the film on were the great big ones. And there was no place in all of Persia where one could get another takeup spool. As a result I couldn't take a single inch of film. The other thing – I did have a pair of binoculars and they were fine, they would bring the inscriptions right down close when you were standing in the middle of the building, but if you can't read Kufic it's hard to get the message. But Pope did the big survey of Persian art. Besides being in many of the pictures simply to lend scale I did help Pope with extraordinary photographs that he took. We traveled all over the place making records, discovering some of these buildings. One of them was probably the prototype of the Taj Mahal, which was done by a Persian architect.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What led you to Bryn Mawr? Why did you teach there? Or why were you interested in teaching?

EDWARD WARBURG: I was the orator of my Harvard class; I was elected class orator. I've always thought there was a rather interesting side-light. I never could be allowed into a club at Harvard because I'm Jewish. But my classmates chose to elect me class orator. And also tree orator. Tree orator was the slightly off-color (with me it wasn't slightly, it was damn well off color) version of the class history which you gave in a drunken mood just because you went down to watch the baseball game on graduation day. I was the last one to make that speech; they didn't ever have it after mine; I finished it off. But the serious oration was given at Saunders Theatre. I think it's interesting that your classmates can elect you to these two honors; certainly they weren't anti-Semitic. The whole anti-Semitic thing came from the graduate pressure. The undergraduates were taught anti-Semitism by the graduates. I've always felt very strongly on this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How could they do that, though? In what way?

EDWARD WARBURG: Because it was written into the club rules that you couldn't be Jewish. It was so silly because I knew these people. I had the great chance of knowing people from all groups. We always got along very well. I wasn't too obnoxious. But, in any case, in that class oration I chose to attack the tutorial system and pointed out that most of the tutors were not dons in the English sense who made it their career and were interested in teaching and interested in being the bridge, but were young fellows who were working for their doctor's degree or assistant profs, or something like that, and were using this simply as a means of keeping their heads above water financially while they went on with their own studies; and that you never got a chance to talk to the top people, to the profs, and the ones that you did get a chance to – the tutors – couldn't have been less interested in you. In my speech I complained about all this. Well, it was so violent that it was re-printed in The Nation under the title "Fair Harvard only fair said Edward M. M. Warburg, class orator of the Class of 1930." Well, here was Paul Sachs, head of the art department, sitting with my father, his great patron, and here was junior making these cracks. Sachs was fit to be tied. He and I never got along very well, anyhow. I wouldn't kowtow to him as much as he'd like. But shortly afterwards I went to him and I said, "I realize it was destructive criticism

and I'd like to make it constructive. I will gladly volunteer my services for a year to show you what a tutor could do in involving the people who are going to be the trustees of the museums and are going to be the patrons, if nothing else; that crowd I know and maybe I can be helpful." Sachs broke out in tears. Which always upsets me. I hate to see a man cry. But he was just so frustrated by it. He said, "Who the hell do you think you are! I mean after all, if you'd earned your spurs somewhere, or if you had done brilliantly as an undergraduate, or something like that, you might be considered. But go out and earn your spurs as a teacher and maybe some years later we'll consider you." So I went upstairs furious at this spectacle. I went to Agnes Mongan who was curator of drawings there and who watched the generations go by. She was an old Bryn Mawr girl. And I said, "Ag, I've got to go and earn my spurs as a teacher. Where the hell do I earn my spurs?" She said, "I don't know but I'll give you a letter to Georgianna Goddard King who is head of the art department at Bryn Mawr where I worked and maybe she can use you." I wrote to Georgianna Goddard King and was told to come down to Autley Beach, New Jersey. I don't know if it still exists; it may have been washed away. But on a Sunday I took this train ride miles out there and then took a bus and finally came to this house on the beach. And there she stood in a middy blouse with field glasses and gray hair but in a Dutch bob, and tweed skirt and flat shoes. She said, "Didn't I have the pleasure of teaching your cousin?" I said, "Yes." She said. "Well, Mr. Warburg, what did you come down here for anyway?" And rather confused by this abrupt counterattack, I used one of my father's old gaga and I said, "To meet one of America's few intelligent women." Well, the old girl blushed and I knew I was doing well but I didn't know what I was doing. Agnes had told me that she had a dog with runny red eyes that one had to be nice to, so I took the dog in my lap and patted it like made. I told her about myself not too glowingly. She said, "I'd like you to give a course at Bryn Mawr on the history of modern art. And then we'll have to have another course of some kind but I haven't thought about what that's going to be yet." But she said, "One thing I've got to tell you Mr. Warburg, is that there's no room in the budget for another instructor." I said, "I'm under no illusions at all as to my abilities because I don't know if I have any. But I'll be glad to do it for nothing for the first year." She said, "Mr. Warburg, obviously you don't understand Bryn Mawr's standards. No one is allowed to work for nothing there." So I said, "Well, for heaven's sakes, you won't let me volunteer my services, and there's no room in the budget. I guess the jig is up." And she said, "No, no, no. Don't jump to that conclusion. If I were to receive a check from some anonymous source for $1,000 that would go towards your salary." I said, "Do you want me to sign it now?" She said, "There's no hurry." So that was the beginning of my teaching career. She was very nice about coming up to me and saying, "You know I can't tell you how pleased I am the way your course is going. On all sides I hear…etc. etc." It got a little bit heavy. So I needed an exit line. She kept saying, "You know, after all, Woodrow Wilson started here, too." I said, "I have no presidential ambitions." This was around Christmas time. Finally in order to get out of the room I said, "Miss King, I tell you what I think I'll do after hearing what you have to say. I think I'm going to give myself a raise." Well, that went for half a year. Then at the end of the year she said, "I suppose that's that." I said, "I'm not going to play this silly game any more. If Bryn Mawr wants me they pay me, okay. If they don't want me I'll understand perfectly." She said, "How much do you want?" I said, "Anything that's all right with Bryn Mawr's conscience is all right. I couldn't care less." She told me that she thought $500 for a half course would be all right. I said, "Okay. If that's all right with Bryn Mawr it's all right with me." And then I went off to Persia on the trip I've just described for the first half-year. When I got back to Paris I found a letter saying, "Terribly sorry to inform you that despite my greatest efforts only able to raise $100." I thought hell, I'll teach it anyhow. I'll give half a course and then I'll quit. I asked her, "Who gave the $100?" she said, "I can't tell you but it was a lady who has a lovely garden." A wonderful comment. But I found out why she'd been able to raise only a $100. After all, this was 1931, rather shortly after the Crash. She wrote a letter to all my friends – Lessing Rosenwald and all those kinds of people, saying "You may have heard that Edward M. M. Warburg has been teaching at Bryn Mawr for the past year. We are most anxious to have him return. Won't you help save Mr. Warburg for Bryn Mawr?" Well, somehow this didn't come high on the priority list. It was the most unsuccessful fund-raising effort in which I've ever been involved. I enjoyed the teaching except that to a great extent these kids were not allowed to do creative thinking. They just wanted to take violent notes on everything and parrot it back at you. And if you gave them a chance to talk on something or have a theory this was considered almost a dirty trick. I wouldn't have given any of them a job as my secretary. Some of them I found terribly nice and very pleasant. Of course there was always that interesting thing that they were about three years younger that I was. And there was a great shocking thing about the fact that I had my conferences with them down in my Bryn Mawr apartment where – yes, there was a bedroom in there too, you know; I mean I slept in a bed. I've never been more on my honor, more put on the spot. I'd be a nut if I made one pass. Okay, here we are. But these kids used to come down there. It was extremely interesting: one time I got hot and lectured on the Bauhaus rather dramatically I guess. Two of the girls came and said they wanted to see me. They came down and said, "We want to leave college and go to the Bauhaus." And., oh, boy! I had to do some interesting scrambling then! There were personal things; I think I did as much character moulding and teaching as coach of the tennis team and helping with their dramatics and helping them with their newspaper because the formal classroom thing was so conventional you had an awfully hard time. Most of these kids had never seen a painting. We had black and white slides. I took them in my car to see the Widener Collection at the Pennsylvania Museum. They hadn't been to these museums. All this caused tremendous whisperings around the campus; an open roadster car! After the teaching phase I came back to the Museum of Modern Art and worked on the staff there mainly working with Iris Barry in connection with – she'd been the moving force in the Film Society of London and she was anxious to start the Film Library at the Modern. And Jock Whitney was connected

with Selznick. We began then to try to build up the film library. Philip Johnson was working around there as an architectural historian. He was not an architect then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a particular interest in films and photography?

EDWARD WARBURG: No. At Bryn Mawr I found out that the one – do you want to call it art form? – that these kids had some experience with was films. They had all sneaked off to go to the movies. And suddenly you could talk and use as terms of reference certain motion pictures. In that sense, in the old movies, the Lubitsch films and the early German expressionist things, you had some parallels that you could talk about. The film library was an organizational question more than anything else; how do you get films; the complications of how do you get people to give you films, that you are not going to be in competition with them as some of them turned out to be pretty hot properties later on where they could be reissued. We never were able to get Chaplin pictures. I did meet Chaplin in California. When we were on our honeymoon he took a great shine to my wife. And his pimp – well, I'd better not mention his name having so categorized him – said, "Well, it ought to be very easy for you to get the films. Charlie just called me to say how attractive he found you wife." So I said Mary, "Well, what are you willing to do for the Museum of Modern Art?" She wasn't willing. So we still haven't got the Chaplin films. But it was completely built around Alfred Barr. To a certain extent Alfred Barr was a man who you had to save from himself. He would spend hours trying to decide how the printing for the word "Men" should look on the door. For every little experience there was a right way to do it. He was always furious that somebody had done something wrong. He had to do things himself. He could not delegate worth a darn. He had various assistants; Jerry Abbott was pretty much an assistant although he was meant to be parallel with him. And then Dick Abbott – no relation – who was married to Iris Barry, was a business manager type; and there was Blackburn who was a sinister sort of political element in the whole thing. He was all mixed up with the Silversmiths and got Philip Johnson involved, too; which affected Phil's career very deeply. But Alfred finally found the perfect foil, a man who could work with him and be his manager and at the same time stay with him aesthetically. And that was Rene d'Harnoncourt. And they were just a great team. Rene had all the polish and all the ease and all the Middle European aristocrat type thing. If you'd ask Alfred to come up and see your pictures or something like that he'd insult you on every score. And he did this to each trustee. While he had a sense of wit, he had no light touch at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How could he maintain such strong support from these people then? – because he obviously did for a long time.

EDWARD WARBURG: Well, of course their idea originally in the days of Conger Goodyear and Stephen Clark and Sam Lewisohn, they all were in competition with each other and were delighted to have an exhibition which showed their pictures. This time one of them won. The next time the other one won. But it really was a pooling of the private collections of the trustees augmented a bit by loans. Well then, suddenly Alfred very astutely led them on and on. I mean, after all, even then very few of the Impressionists were even alive, they were all historical figures. Alfred began leading them into the contemporary rather than into the modern, into the contemporary aspects of this. And as he did he got out of the field of the collecting trustee and began to educate them. I don't know exactly how he did do it. I know that I used to have quite amusing conversations with Mrs. Rockefeller at the board table. I'd say, "Look, my interpretation of this is that it isn't our responsibility to have aesthetic judgments. Our job is to hire a director. If he isn't what we want let's fire him. But once he's here our job is to support him and make the museum viable financially and otherwise, give him a sounding board on which to make his statement." Well, Mrs. Rockefeller felt that that was almost Communist talk, "Why do you keep talking about 'we' and 'they'? After all, we're in this together." Well, it's a nice idealistic attitude. But I refuse to compete with Alfred and his knowledge. I've always had a feeling about Alfred's exhibitions. I don't think that Alfred enjoys pictures. I think he's a historian who sees "this is a terribly interesting example of a 1911 artist who never got anywhere."

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's like an educator almost?

EDWARD WARBURG: Yes; in the same way that I remember working up a lecture; you took a box of slides and you illustrate your point with slides – he illustrates his exhibitions; the catalogue was the important document; and he illustrated the outline of the catalogue not with slides but with original paintings. You know, one time Alfred Barr said to, I believe it was, Alfred Frankfurter, who was sort of the manager of Adele Levy's collection, and when Adele died he suggested wouldn't the Museum of Modern Art be interested in, I think it was one of the Degas's. And Alfred said, "Oh, no. That's too pretty a picture. It would seduce the public." Alfred isn't interested in the masterpieces that bring in the crowds. And if you look at the Museum of Modern Art Collection there are not the old favorites; the popular picture isn't there. Oh, well, of course there's The Demoiselles d'Avignon, there's The Three Musicians; there are the great benchmarks – Rousseau's The Sleeping Gypsy and one or two of that kind. It's a funny thing: the collection is the greatest collection of modern art anywhere but I don't think it's the greatest collection of popular pictures done by these artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's quite true with those few exceptions. Could we go back a little and talk about Harvard again. How did you decide on the exhibitions you were going to do? – because there's such a variety.

EDWARD WARBURG: It was availability. If you're talking about the Harvard Society of Contemporary Art that was almost entirely Lincoln's doing. And we were leg men for him in various forms. John Walker wrote the catalogues, or Lincoln and John together. I just tagged along for the ride and enjoyed it. I think at the end of it I was capable of pulling my own weight because I began to learn something. But certainly they were miles ahead of me. John Walker was a constant "A" student; he revolted me; he was bright and brilliant. Already at that time he was a student of Berenson's. Even before he had been in college he had been over and stayed I Tati and in Florence. And these were awfully high horsepower types, both these minds. Luckily – I don't know what it was – they enjoyed my company and I enjoyed theirs and I just picked their brains. That was the basis of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's very interesting that you did exhibitions on pottery and weaving and the Bucky Fuller House and even American cartoonists, which must be one of the early exhibitions of cartoons, wasn't it?

EDWARD WARBURG: Yes, I think it was. Again, this was a question of Lincoln – you see, Lincoln's family was an interesting one. His sister is Minna Curtis. She was teaching in the English department up at Smith College. She was one of the great teachers. She was an authoress as well in her own right. She had around her a whole group. It was very much like the Gertrude Stein coterie that she had around her. Everybody knew everybody; the Glenway Westcotts and George Antheil and so on. And if anybody was doing anything everybody who was "in" knew it. And undoubtedly somebody – I don't remember who – would say "Why don't you do something which has the work of so-and-so in it? Well, that's a good idea." It was done spontaneously. There was no planning at all. You didn't sit down the way you do now and plan what you're going to have two years from now; like at the Modern Museum, say, where you can't do things quickly. But there it was just a question of how will we get – when somebody knew somebody who knew somebody. But regarding the ideas for it: I think the thing you could say about Lincoln Kirstein is that he is like a highly sensitized film himself and was exposed to tremendous forces in the creative fields – literature, music and art – and just moving around in that world he picked up all kinds of ideas. I went on with Lincoln after that…Well, Lincoln came to me one time in the country and said, "Can I see you?" I said, "Yes, sure." So he came out to White Plains. I can tell you exactly where in White Plains we walked together. And he said, "Look, we've always been talking about patronage of the artists; how do you get the artists to have an income. If you're a composer, all right; the Boston Symphony plays your piece once and then you've had it. If you're a dancer you may have to go to Radio City. If you're a poet, God knows, maybe you have a book of poems but there's no sale. You can't keep alive." He continued, "The only thing I've ever felt – I saw ballet where in the Diaghilev fashion all these people found employment and got royalties off the performances of the work. And there's only one man who has any future and that's Balanchine. If we could only get him over here!" Well, later he came up to the country and said to me, "Guess what! Balanchine will be ready to come over with his business manager and all we have to do is guarantee two round-trip tickets. I'll guarantee one. Will you guarantee the other?" Well, that was the small point of the wedge. I said, "Yes." And the next thing we knew we were in for the damndest buggy ride I've ever gone through. Balanchine was easy but his business manager just put on a sit-down strike every two minutes in order to get more money out of us. And just when things were about to go he'd say, "Well, unless we were to receive a raise in salary I see no reason for us to go on." Our lawyers had worked up all the contracts for Lincoln and myself versus the Russians. But Lincoln, the dog, immediately fell madly for George Balanchine and went off into great aesthetic things and kept saying to me, "You take care of the business end of it with Dimitri." So I had this wretched man to deal with. He's retired in Florida I think, living happily on my grandfather's money. We started a school. Then how do you keep the school together? You have to have a performance. So on my birthday, June 5, of that year, out in the country my poor parents had to build a platform on the lawn and we put on the first performance of Serenade outdoors in the rain with the hungriest group of people I've ever seen. My poor mother put on a buffet and they ate up everything; there was nothing left. And Lincoln said, "We've got to do this tomorrow night." I said, "How do you think I'm going to get the food?" But all right we did. Then we finally got to the point where we were taken by Mr. Mirovich, who was the manager for the Don Cossack Choir and Chaliapin. That seemed awfully important to both of us. He got us as far as Scranton and declared himself insane and ran off with all the money and left us stranded. We were only responsible for the ballet company but of course all the musicians were stranded and we were the nearest things to assets within miles. And so we had to bail out everybody, bring them back home. And then I had sixty-eight lawsuits thrown at me by every manager across the country for the expenses they'd incurred. Lincoln said, "You've got to settle with them because if we ever want to tour again we'll need them." I said, "The hell I will." We ended up with a great evening of Stravinsky with Stravinsky conducting the New York Philharmonic in the Metropolitan Opera House with the three ballets done by Tchelitchew: the world premiere of one, the American premiere of the second, and the New York premiere of the third. For two evenings. The tickets were so expensive you knew there wasn't a brain in the house. It was a complete flop. Three pansies screamed, "Isn't it divine!" Stravinsky refused to go down and conduct because one of the things we said in the program was "Apollon Music by Igor Stravinsky." And he said, "That is not accurate! It is Apollon Ballet by Igor Stravinsky." So I said to the assistant conductor, "You go down and conduct." Well, he never made the door because Stravinsky knocked him down and got in there and conducted the damn thing. You realize that we were formed at a time when Olin Downs was the critic. Olin Downs was a music critic. To a music critic anybody who moves during the performance of music is considered to be performing a sacrilege. He hated ballet. And so he panned the bejesus out of us all the way along. The difficulty

was that you couldn't go out on a tryout. We never saw the costumes and the orchestra and the lights and the dancing before the performance. The dress rehearsal was only part of the thing. You see, you couldn't afford the union costs that were involved. So that on opening night you sat there in absolute panic wondering what in God's name was going to come off. And to me, frankly, the ballets that I found most interesting were the ones that resembled more the rehearsal hall where they danced in their leotards than all the costumes and the scenery and the schmaltz that was added. And an interesting thing has happened now. Of course I bowed out at that point. But Lincoln and Balanchine have gone on to tremendous success. About three years ago I went to the opening of Don Quixote – or two years ago after Lincoln had gotten many millions from the Ford Foundation. And during the intermission somebody said to me – and quite accurately as far as I was concerned – "My God, this is the stuff that Balanchine saved us from fifteen years ago." And we've gone the complete cycle. This was a spectacle and all that. But it was very interesting. Somebody would bring in a wonderfully worked out scenario, every part worked out. This was dead before it started. But a Tchelitchew would come in and say, "Eddie, you know in the second act at the end she stands up on a cliff and she lets her hair down." This was it. Tchelitchew, Balanchine and Stravinsky, those three together made music. I mean it really worked. That was a combination that was terribly interesting to see at work. Balanchine is essentially a musician. Igor Stravinsky would play eight or ten bars. Then there'd be silence. Balanchine would go, "Mmhm. Mmhm. Mmhm." to himself. And then suddenly he'd take two kids and start molding them in the pattern of that music, not literally but against that music. It really was a wonderful experience to see this. But, boy, it certainly was a shocker from the standpoint of what it needed financially and everything else. You work up towards a great moment and the leading lady goes and busts her ankle. You're not in that kind of depth where you have three people who can step into the role and have costumes to fit them, too. I saw the Stuttgart Ballet just now. What a glorious performance that is! It's extraordinary what they can do. Balanchine's big problem is that he is the Establishment now. And anything interesting will have to be in revolt against that. In the same way that the Museum of Modern Art is probably the Establishment in its field and the stuff that's going to be exciting is the stuff that a person like Karl Katz puts up at the Jewish Museum. He went bust doing it but…These are the things. And to me, sitting back now – and I'm not so old – but, my God, it is extraordinary to look back and see where we were on shoestrings trying to keep things together, trying to get patronage or to get things going; and now to have them become stolid, boring, and heavy. And now another bunch starts flickering away asking for support and they all come rushing in – I'm on certain foundations and it's very hard to spot the ones that are valid. You never know who's going to be successful. I think that's about it, isn't it? [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING] You see, I'm on the board of Regents. Well, I'll use two minutes on that. Since I'm on the Board of Regents I have to get off anything that gets its charter from the Board of Regents. And as the Museum of Modern Art does, they made me an Honorary Trustee. They'll still take my money but I'm not allowed to vote. I still keep connected with it. The museum is going through a very difficult phase. What do you do to find a successor to Barr? They've been scrambling around and each time it's a bit different. It's a question of whether the Board of Trustees wants what is different. How many of the Board of Trustees have Earthworks in their collection? They may respect it and be willing to let others show it but are they ready to put up the many hundreds of millions that go into a long run of those things? The Board of Regents – because I've seen a picture once in the Modern Museum, which is more than my colleagues seem to have – I am considered Joe Culture and so I've got all kinds of problems. I'm the chairman of the cultural committee at the museum. I handle the museum's educational fields and so I keep contact with them.

[END OF SIDE ONE – END OF INTERVIEW]

SUMMARY: In this tape-recorded interview with Paul Cummings, Edward Warburg discusses his life experiences in the arts. From his time as a student and founding member of the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, to his experiences with auction houses and the art market, his teaching experiences at Bryn Mawr University, his involvement with the Museum of Modern Art, his participation with contemporary dance and music, his Jewish heritage, and his position on The Board of Regents. Notable personalities he discusses include Lincoln Kirstein, Alexander Calder, Paul Klee, Arthur Upham Pope, Georgianna Goddard King, Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Barr, Igor Stravinsky, George Balanchine, and many others.

END OF INTERVIEW

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