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Oral history interview with Lydia Winston,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lydia Winston Malbin on April 14, 1976. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's Paul Cummings talking to Mrs. Lydia Winston Malbin in her apartment in New York City. This is recorded seven-and-a-half IPS, and there'll be 20 seconds after this before the interview starts.

[Audio Break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could you tell me how you first became interested in the Detroit Artists Market and approximately when?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: I'm trying to remember. I mean, it was back—I believe before the last World War, and that—before that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was in the 1930s, late '30s.

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Yeah, probably in the 1930s, and I must confess, it's all predicated on memory because I don't have notes. And a lot of people were involved who helped to make art history for Detroit at that time, so if I don't mention certain names or—please, uh, forgive, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: And now, the people—as I recall, I was invited to go on this so-called board for the Detroit—it was called then The Young Artists Market for artists—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: —to have a place to show their works—artists under 30 years of age.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This was in the Detroit area?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: This was in the Detroit area, and I—it was a fine idea—it gave the artists—the young ones—encouragement and an opportunity to be shown. The idea was that of Mildred Simpson who—who created the Artists Market, and she decided—she thought up a very good plan. [00:02:01] I—at the time, perhaps it was very original because she not only had a—a board of people to work with her, but she created two juries: one, a so-called amateur jury and another, a so-called professional jury, which was made up of teachers and so on—and artists in the area.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was—who was on the amateur jury?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Now, the, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, what—what kinds of people?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: —amateur jury. That is a little difficult for me to remember, the amateur jury. But perhaps many of the members of the board whom I might mention because they were not professionals. And so, on the amateur jury, in the very beginning, would've been Isabella Finney, now deceased—most these people, alas, are not living today—Mildred Simpson, Robert Tannahill, Mrs. William Rea, Mrs. George Kamperman, Florence Davies, David Hamilton, um, Agatha Angell, Mrs. Richard Webber, Mrs.—my sister, Ruth Rothman, and myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Now, we were on—as I recall, we were all on the original board. We also—were on the jury in addition to other people. I'm sure I've left out numerous names, and I believe that Mrs. Margaret Stern

came later on to the board. Likewise, Mrs. Er— Morrison—Eres Morrison [ph], and there were many others who followed on the board and on the jury.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What exactly did the jury do? On—what was its function then?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: The amateur jury reviewed works brought—sent in by artists. [00:04:03] This was a nonprofit institution. The works were sold for a very low commission, just enough to help support—keep the—the lights going and the heat going in the quarters of the Artists Market. The—they padded the—they were exposed—these people were mostly not too well-acquainted with modern art, but they learned. And that was the marvelous part of this jury because the amateurs began to develop an eye. They trained their eyes. There was an incentive to collect. They followed the artists' work with great interest, and it was a great way to build an audience for the artists themselves. Um, they saw good and bad. And it—it was very excellent eye-training. If their work—if they rejected certain works, those went for another chance to the professional jury. And that was made up of artists at the—as I have said before, artists and teachers in the arts, such as Sarkis [Sarkisian and John Pappas, I remember—I—it's hard to recall. Jay Buersmeyer, I believe, is one of those, and so on, and they only saw the works which were rejected. Well, I remember, later on, I was asked to go on to the professional jury, and I very often purchased the rejects and—because I felt they had fresh ideas. They were not going along in the general way, and—and all—actually, the professional jury was very charitable in looking into these works and, perhaps, returning them to the amateur jury for reconsideration. [00:06:00] So it was a fine process of education for the public of Detroit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, when—what—was this an annual exhibition?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: The Artists Market was a gallery—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: —for the purpose of artists to show their works, and they had exhibitions of—from the works of—I mean, exhibiting various artists who were connected with the gallery. Usually, they were painters and sculptors. That's the way it started, and then, I think, later, they branched to ceramics and—and other media.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did the function of the jury change much over the years, or was it pretty consistent?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: I believe that the function continued. I became less active as time went on because I became involved in other aspects of the arts, among them, doing my own work in ceramics and working at Cranbrook Academy, and also I started to collect art, and actually, I've always felt that the Artists Market had a great influence on me in stimulating my appetite to want to have original works of art. But I went on from there out into the world and started to collect works nationally and internationally. When I started to collect internationally, I became interested in abstract art, and Detroit, at that time had little interest in abstract—nothing was ever done in—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that interest develop on your part?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Well, it came through my exposure to modern art and art of the 20th century, and as I traveled around and saw exhibitions outside of the city of Detroit. [00:08:01] Um, there were very few means of communication about what was going on outside of Detroit in 20th-century art because, at that time, the journals were mostly interested in classical art. Detroit was living in a world of classical art, and actually, working with the Artists Market stimulated my appetite for 20th-century art of our time because the artists were creating art of their time.

[Audio Break.]

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: But I did go out beyond the limits of Detroit and a great deal was happening. And it was not really coming into the city to any great degree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did that began, would you say, of your interest, moving out of the city?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Out of the city—well, about—in the '50s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the '50s.

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: Yes. Now—however—no, earlier than that. It would be during the war years. I had not been to New York, and I'd been aware of abstract art, so-called get—non-objective art, as it was called at that time. And so, in 1942, I did an exhibition for the Detroit Women's City Club, which was, um, for—to introduce their members to abstract art. Well, it was really a flop. I mean, no one had any interest, even though these great works were sent on by—Hilla Rebay of the Guggenheim Museum sent works such as Mondrian, Léger and

so on, and—but little attention was paid to this exhibition, even though I tried in every way to interest the members. We had—we had lectures. We had music related to the arts and so on, but still, there was no interest. [00:10:00] Well, in 1952, I was still active with the Detroit Artists Market. [Clears throat] pardon me, and I proposed that they have an abstract art show there because they were having a rather monotonous, uh, group of exhibitions. The same artists were being shown and, more or less, in the same way, and the—they were not fresh ideas. And so, I proposed that they have an abstract art show bringing in from various areas, such as Cranbrook, which was—at that point, had not done very much with the Artists Market, the University of Michigan, Cass Technical High, in addition to the arts and crafts, which had always been in evidence at the Artists Market. And I suggested they bring in not only painters and sculptors but architects, textile designers, photographers, ceramists, jewelers, and so on, and have an exhibition trying to show the elements of abstraction in—which went through all of these works and artists whose works we selected. And we called the exhibition *Abstract Art is Reality*. Our symbol for the exhibition was a blown-up drop of water done by the—one of the fine photographers for General Motors, and this caught the attention of the public and the press. [00:12:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that well-received then in terms of attendance, press reaction?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: It was very well-received. The installation—I—can you turn this off just a—

[Audio Break.]

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: The Cranbrook group did the installation. They—Ted Luderowski, the designer, headed the Cranbrook students, and they came down and installed, working for a couple of days. We showed the works of these designs of Eero Saarinen; the works of Marianne Strengell, her textiles; Bertioia's jewelry; and other artists' jewelry; Maija Grotell's ceramics; Kamrowski of the University of Michigan, his paintings. These are just a few names I might mention. And we also brought to light new talent, such as Malcolm Moran, who, recently, has been pictured with Betty Ford at the White House, and he's been very successful in California. And he really had a start with that exhibition. Now, you asked if the exhibition was a success. It was. We had an enormous attendance. They lined up at the noon hour—bankers, designers, professional men, people from the downtown stores, collectors, and so on, and there was much activity and involvement. And it was financially a success, and they—for the first time, I think, Detroit was aware of abstract art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well did you continue, uh, your involvement with them after this exhibition, or was that kind of a high point?

LYDIA WINSTON MALBIN: I continued my involvement with them. Yes, I acted on their—I have felt that they—they have branched out. They have gone much further, and I think, today, they're still doing a very fine piece of work. [00:14:02]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]