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**Oral history interview with Harry N. Abrams,
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Transcript

Interview

**Interview with Harry Abrams
Conducted by Paul Cummings
At the Artist's office in New York
March 14, 1972**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Harry Abrams on March 14, 1972. The interview was conducted at Harry Abrams' office at 110 East 59th Street, New York City by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. It's March 14, 1972 — Paul Cummings talking to Harry N. Abrams in his fantastic office here. It doesn't look like an office, it's like a huge bookstore and art gallery.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Actually, we keep my office as a kind of living room, without any desk. All files and books are in the adjacent secretarial office.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It's a marvelous, relaxed atmosphere. Could we just start with some kind of biographical information about, you know—

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were born in London and you were eight years old when you came here.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much of London do you remember?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Very little. My father came to New York from London a year before the entire family arrived in New York and he opened a shoe store in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn; at Howard Avenue and Park Place. When the family came—mother and four children—we lived in the rear of the store.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to—what? —Manual Training High School?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Manual Training High School for one year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For one year?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I left because my father opened up another shoe store and he needed someone to take care of the second store. I was fourteen years old and I seemed to be a fairly good shoe salesman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You left school for economic reasons.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: My father couldn't afford to pay anyone so he asked me whether I would take care of the new shoe store which was also in Brownsville.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you enjoy that?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: As a youngster, yes, very much. I smoked expensive Philip Morris cigarettes which were then packaged in handsome paper boxes and felt very grown-up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the flat boxes.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. And I considered myself quite important at the time; I believe it was because our customers were amazed that a youngster could seem so grown up and handle the management of our shoe store, and they didn't hesitate to tell me so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you pick that high school for any reason, or was it just the neighborhood school? Were you interested in crafts or anything?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: No. I think it just sounded masculine to go to Manual Training High School. Most importantly, they had a great football team.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Were you interested in sports and athletics?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. In public school I was interested in basketball and track.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you happen to go to the Art Students League? And when was that exactly?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: The very first art school I went to was the National Academy of Art and not Art Students League. I went there because my mother felt I should not remain in the shoe business and thought I could become an artist. I used to make pencil copies of small reproductions of paintings and was impressed by what my mother thought—it was because of that, I decided to go to art school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you made drawings of paintings for a long time?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. Someone suggested that I show my pencil drawings to people at an advertising agency. I had no idea what an advertising agency was. I went to several prominent advertising agencies, asking for work in their art department—for that is what I had been told to do. The art directors looked at me peculiarly for bringing my pencil copies as samples, but I didn't understand. After a while I realized something was wrong. It was then that I decided to go to art school and was accepted at the National Academy of Art. After about two years I became restless in spite of the fact that some of my drawings were hung in the corridors of the school. They were very labored and academic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whom did you study with there?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I don't remember, but I do remember that when I later went to the Art Students League I studied with John Steuart Curry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? That was great. How old were you when you went to the National Academy then?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I guess I was about eighteen. My father had gone bankrupt when I was sixteen and when we lost our shoe stores, I decided to get a job as a shoe salesman instead of going back to school. In spite of my doing well as a shoe salesman, I felt that I had better get into some field connected with art where my mother still believed that I belonged. That's when I went to art school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you start drawing? Was it just through looking at things?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I first began to draw in public school. I had a certain amount of facility and my teacher thought I was pretty good. My hand was steady and I could draw a likeness of people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was your family interested in art or music or culture?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Not really! Except that all of us would enjoy listening to the recordings of Mischa Elman, Paderewski, Caruso, and others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was really something you picked up and carried on?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I suppose so; well, yes, quite accidentally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the Art Students League as compared with the National Academy?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I didn't think there was much comparison and I preferred the Art Students League because of the freedom that one had there. At a certain point I realized there were so many young people in the school who were so much more talented than I was that I decided to leave, and since art was what I liked, I planned on getting into some kind of situation that dealt with art. I then decided to get a job with an art service where I could learn to do commercial illustration and lettering, for I knew I would never measure up to being a fine artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't take any commercial classes at the League then?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: No, I studied with John Steuart Curry and—if my memory is correct—I took a life class. Incidentally, I've been happy to hear that the Art Students League lists me as one of their prominent students, but I wish I had measured up at the League as a talented student, which I wasn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was Curry as an instructor? How did you like him?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I liked him very much as a human being. He seemed bored by the whole procedure of teaching. He would come in and look at the work of some of the students and not say very much at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he interested in having his students work in a similar vein to his own. Or did he let you kind of—

HARRY N. ABRAMS: No, not that I remember. As I said, he talked very little and seemed to try to guide students in the right direction for them, which is difficult, indeed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. When did you go to N.Y.U.? Was that after or concurrently?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I went afterwards. It was just that I had heard that N.Y.U. had opened its doors to people who wanted to take special courses and I went there for about two

years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the subjects?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I took a course in philosophy along with one other course. I believe it was creative writing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you get interested in book design and production?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: When I left the Art Students League I got a job with an art service (Rice Studios) where Albert Dome worked. He was the man who later organized Famous Artists Schools. He was about three or five years older than I and was a top illustrator in his early twenties. I was running the errands there, and working in an art service made me more aware of the advertising agency. I felt I could never learn to become as good a commercial illustrator as Albert Dome — and so I left and got a job with an advertising agency.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year was that?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I believe it was about 1928 or 1929. I was about twenty—three or twenty—four at the time. This agency prepared advertising for book publishers. It was the first year of the Depression and they had to fire a good part of their staff. I started with them at no salary at all, which for me was not a hardship because I earned enough money working as an “extra” in a shoe store on Saturdays and Sundays. After about a year or two when the advertising agency did start to pay me, I was running errands, handling production, doing layouts and helping Bob Beatty—the boss—with space buying. When he became too busy to see people he’d send them in to see me and I’d give Bob Beatty a written report of our conversation. So all of a sudden I found myself doing comparatively important work with a good and reputable advertising agency at the age of twenty—four, when, only a year before I had hardly known what an advertising agency was or how an advertising agency functioned. Some of our publishing accounts were Doubleday and Simon & Schuster. In addition to my other duties, I also handled the Simon & Schuster advertising. I think that I along with Richard Simon and Max Schuster was responsible for their advertising which was admired at the time. My function was to care for the layout and typography. Both Mr. Simon and Schuster wrote the copy and contributed the ideas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That’s fantastic. So that really began the whole basic—

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. When I joined the agency the name was Sackheim & Scherman; and not much later the name was changed to Sackheim, Schwab and Beatty. Mr. Sackheim, who was then president of the advertising agency, had later left to join the Brown Fence and Wire Company of Cleveland in early 1928, and Harry Scherman decided to develop the Book-of-the-Month Club. About a year later, the name of the agency was changed to Schwab & Beatty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Actually Harry Scherman had started the Book-of-the-Month Club with Maxwell Sackheim and Robert Mass. I began running errands for the agency when Harry Scherman had already moved his office to the Book-of-the-Month Club office.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. What other things were you involved with besides the book business in advertising?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: The mail order business. Our agency did mail order publication advertising and

handled the Charles Atlas account, along with the Pelman Institute of America, Sherwin Cody School of English and others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've seen those, yes.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: The mail order business was fascinating because all ads had coupons and the coupon response gave one an insight as to why people responded in greater or lesser number to different advertising appeals.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a fairly new business at that time, too, wasn't it?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, fairly new.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you really had an extraordinary set of opportunities.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, but as I look back, most opportunities came to me quite through accident. For instance, in 1932, Harry Scherman called Mr. Beatty at our agency and asked for "the Art Director" to come to see him. By that time the agency could afford to have an art director, but he was busy preparing a set of layouts that both Mr. Schwab and Mr. Beatty were presenting at lunch to a potential new account, and so the art director couldn't be spared. Mr. Beatty then asked me to pinch hit and see if I could help Mr. Scherman. At that time I was doing some layouts, as well as production, some space buying, and also running errands. So Beatty said to me, "Why don't you go up and tell him you're the art director?" and I said, "But I've been running errands to this man." Beatty then said, "Well, he may not remember you. Just go in there and feel like an art director." And indeed, that is what I did I remember Harry Scherman sliding his glasses down on his nose and looking at me but not quite knowing for certain that he hadn't seen me before and that I was the person who ran errands to the Club. He asked me to measure type and do a simple layout for him. He must have been pleased because when he called again for "the art director" Bob Beatty sent the real art director. Harry Scherman asked him to leave and phoned Mr. Beatty. He was annoyed that Mr. Beatty had not sent "the real Art Director", and from that point on I handled the Book-of-the-Month Club advertising account, as well as Simon & Schuster. It was in July of 1936, that I became employed by the Book-of-the-Month Club.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. That's terrific. Well, how did you like the Book-of-the-Month Club? That was a very much more specialized and specific activity.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: When I left the agency, I became Harry Scherman's personal assistant. Harry Scherman was a man who was pretty special. I think about the Book-of-the-Month Club as the best thing that ever happened to me, and, of course, to have been able to work as closely with Harry Scherman as I did was a rare opportunity. I had helped Harry Scherman with all the things that—because of pressure of time—he wasn't able to get to, and through necessity had to shift my way. When I came there it was to handle the advertising, but I was doing a great many other things as well. I later became a member of The Board of Directors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went with the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1936?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, in July 1936.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that was the Depression period?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Just about after it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. So there was not a lot of money around still?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Not too much. But on the other hand I do remember that a few months before I came, Robert K. Haas had left because he felt the Book-of-the-Month Club had little future. And the Book-of-the-Month Club indeed had a tremendous future, which apparently only Harry Scherman was able to clearly see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: An incredible future. It still does. Well, you were there for—what? About eleven years?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I was there for nearly fourteen years—from July 1936 until January 1950. I left in January 1950 to form my own business.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you started collecting art at that point?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: In the early 1930s, yes. At the agency, I began buying the paintings of some of my very talented friends whom I had met at art school, and also when I was art director at the Book-of-the-Month Club there were people I knew who, in addition to doing commercial illustration and retouching, also painted in their spare time. Their paintings looked pretty good to me so I bought them. The cost was never very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I still have one or two of the first paintings I bought.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. As a serious collector, the first painting, really important painting, I bought was one by David Burliuk. I later met David Burliuk and bought a number of his paintings, which I still own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very interesting. While you were at the Book-of-the-Month Club, it grew enormously from 1936 to 1950 which was through the war and a period of great economic change.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: When I came there in 1936 the Club had somewhere between 40,000 to 50,000 members. At the time I left—in 1950—we were hoping to reach a million. We didn't quite reach it; I think we were up to 950,000. In the 1940's the percentage of acceptance for the monthly selection was much greater—almost twice the amount it is today. So when membership went up to nearly a million, the Club produced about 400,000 copies of the selection every month. In addition we needed to produce a book-dividend every two months because we shipped a free book-dividend with every two selections that were bought by our members. We were producing a lot of books, and it was my responsibility—in addition to helping Harry Scherman with the advertising, publicity and promotion—to see that everything we needed was produced well, and on time. As I said, I did a lot of work at the Book-of-the-Month Club and was responsible for some important innovations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that set the pattern for all the other book clubs.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I suppose to a certain extent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know Publishers Weekly just this week had an article on the Club.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: On Harry Scherman?

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's mentioned all over.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I've got to see it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened that you decided to set up your own company at that point? Was it that you had other ideas? Or different interests?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. Harry was a wonderful person. He had all he needed financially and the Book-of-the-Month Club was very successful—and here I was, comparatively young—with lots of energy—wanting to branch out further with other clubs and other book projects. Harry Scherman always said to me—“when I have time, we'll test your ideas.” But he hardly ever had time! And I was very frustrated because I hoped that one day he would say to me, “here's some money with which you can run your own operation for Book-of-the-Month Club.” But he never did. Even to the very last days I don't think he ever would depend on anyone to start a new project going unless he personally became involved. I believe he was constitutionally unable to give anyone responsibility in an area where he felt he knew so much, which indeed, he did!

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did something with Grosset & Dunlap at one point?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, I created and designed the Illustrated Junior Library. That was a series of books which I produced for them in 1945. Previous to that, about 1943, I created the Illustrated Modern Library for Bennett Cerf of Random House. The books were illustrated by artists like Thomas Benton, George Grosz, Salvador Dali, William Sharp, Warren Chappel and many other great book illustrators and fine artists. We also involved some of our finest typographers and book designers men like Bruce Rogers and Warren Chappel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everybody.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Everybody who was important at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't remember seeing the Illustrated Modern Library books ever. They were not large printings, were they?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Not too large, but then again not too small!

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything was...

HARRY N. ABRAMS: When you got Bruce Rogers to design a new edition of the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Benton to do the illustrations—you knew that something pretty wonderful would result.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that was an early opportunity to work with artists and do this kind of fine book?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, I do. I believe that producing the Illustrated Modern Library, as well as the Illustrated Junior Library and producing special illustrated book-dividends for Book-of-the-Month Club members got me into the whole swing of producing fine books.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's intriguing that all these things seemed to be done by chance almost.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Certainly a good series of accidents for me! By 1946 I had been with Book-of-the-Month for ten years and I was getting restless. I was earning a lot of money and I was doing a lot of things with Harry Scherman, running the book club promotion and involved in an enormous amount of production. But I wanted to leave and “do my own thing”, if only to take a sabbatical and try something on my own for a year or so. I had an idea for a line of greeting cards that I wanted to develop.

Harry Scherman wouldn't hear of my leaving. Instead, he gave me permission to organize and run my own card company while I continued with Book-of-the-Month. That seemed like an ideal arrangement, as the cards were something I thought I could take care of on weekends at home, and my primary concern would still be Book-of-the-Month Club. Indeed I didn't let anything interfere with my Club work, and the creative work on the cards was handled at home in my spare time.

We did a line of cards—all new ideas, new packaging—for which I still have the 1947 personalization sample book, and in all immodesty I must tell you that I haven't seen anything better in 1972. If this be arrogance, make the most of it.

There were, however, some problems that we hadn't counted on, in case you think this successful venture was all smooth sailing. At one point, just when our line of cards had come off the press, the firm that processed our cards unexpectedly went bankrupt—on a late summer weekend! We had to rush around and round up ten trucks to get our cards out of their shop and into a warehouse where they could be assembled and processed in time for our Christmas orders.

Fortunately, an old friend in the printing business, Ralph Duenewald, who had printed our cards knew of a company that specialized in processing greeting cards and had just lost a client. Consequently they had an empty shop and could handle our job right away. That put us in business for the first Holiday season, but I was exhausted from the ordeal.

Then when our cards got into the stores there was a whispering campaign mounted against this newcomer to the card business. “Don't buy those cards,” our customers were told. “Harry Abrams is just a front for Book-of-the-Month Club—Harry Abrams is really Harry Scherman, and Book-of-the-Month Club will sell these cards at half price. Don't buy them.” Some of our competitors even talked the stores into keeping our sample books under the counter.

Notwithstanding these trials and tribulations we came through 1947 with flying colors, but it was too much for me, and I decided to sell the card business to Hallmark and just concentrate on Book-of-the-Month Club problems.

My wife and I took a month's vacation in Europe, and that's when I started to buy French paintings.

It wasn't until 1949 that I finally left the Club and went into my own business completely. I had some misgivings about leaving Harry Scherman and the financial security of a very good position. But when I voiced these doubts to my wife, and told her that my concern was chiefly for our two young sons who were in private schools and had years of expensive education ahead, Nina answered me very bravely and wisely. She said, “Harry, you must do whatever you feel is best for you. If it's good for you it will be good for the boys and me. But if it's bad for you it's bound to be bad for all of us.”

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you began your own firm did you have a particular plan in mind? Or how specific was it?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: No, not really. I don't believe I had a real plan. I was in a favorable financial situation because I was getting large royalty income from Grosset's Illustrated Junior Library—and since I was always restless because I wanted to establish my own business—I felt this was the right time to start. I had friends who were associated with the book business in one way or another, and some became investors in our company. With \$100,000 I organized our art book publishing business in late 1949 and later, after getting an additional \$50,000 we published our first books in the fall of 1950. The money we had was used up the first year. We still had \$150,000 but it was in our inventory in the form of books. Then our problem was: how to run a business without cash and with books that were not selling as fast as you'd like, and money not coming in as fast as you'd like. That was our first real problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of organization did you have the first year?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: "Organization" is a pretty fancy word for the two-man team that made up my infant company. I was just marvelously lucky to have as my first employee a very wonderful and talented man named Milton Fox. He had had museum background, he was steeped in art history, he wrote, he could talk about art with the best of the scholars, he himself painted—I remember some beautiful and poetic portraits he had done of his wife and children. God looked after me when he sent me Milton Fox. Milton became my friend and close associate as well as my editor-in-chief, and if our texts are good at all—and they are very good—it is because of his devotion and dedication.

Milton always got along well with people, and he knew the most brilliant scholars and critics in the art world — people like Meyer Schapiro, Frederick Hartt, William Seitz, H.W. Janson and many others whom he got to write our books. Milton was entirely sympathetic and understanding of the pressures that sometimes made me a difficult person to work with. I'm a hard taskmaster and those early years were sometimes very tough. But Milton stood by me for more than 20 years, until his death in 1971, and many of our finest books are a tribute to his efforts. A good book doesn't come about accidentally; it is the result of the dedication and devotion of people like Milton Fox who are involved in its creation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you pick the first titles—the Renoir, Van Gogh and El Greco?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Purely through intuition. There was much talk by the public and in art circles about Van Gogh—who was then being exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum—and much interest in Renoir. We also needed a classical painter to show the variety of books we were going to publish eventually in this series, so we decided to include El Greco. I suppose it could have been Leonardo, or Rembrandt, or any other great classical painter. I produced 25,000 of each title, which I thought was not too many copies, since I was accustomed to ordering hundreds of thousands of books for the Book-of-the-Month Club. Book people thought I was out of my mind, and they were nearly right. Fortunately we had done enough promotion so that we came through with a final sale of 14,000 of each titles in our first fall season. Based on what I know today, I can now tell you that 14,000 of each book was a phenomenal sale. And how we did it God only knows!

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there were so few art books being printed even in those days. You know, publishers would do occasional—

HARRY N. ABRAMS: In reality it doesn't always work that way. If you open a business where you are off by yourself, either physically or because of the type of product you're producing, people aren't likely to come to you very quickly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: And so applying that lesson to our art book publishing business we wished that other publishers would also publish art books, so that art book buying could become a “way of life” in bookstores. The year we published our first three books (1950) we were fortunate that Skira brought his new series of art books to the U.S.A. So between Skira and ourselves we were publicizing art books and creating lots of interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, Skira came the same year! It was most surprising to find ourself competing with Skira’s books. Our first three books as well as Skira’s new books were reviewed in the New York Times and the reviewer thought ours were better than Skira’s. I think the Skira books on the whole had more appeal than ours, although the first three books we published were pretty good. As time went on the public bought Skira books in greater quantities than they bought ours. Then our problem was: how do we get the kind of quality and packaging appeal that Skira books had—or perhaps even do better?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you start also at the same time doing the reproductions? Or did that come later?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: The reproductions of paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Much later. I guess about four or five years later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All that?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Oh, yes. In the early years we had no money to venture off into new projects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you develop your art book program? Because three titles is, you know, not very much.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: We found ourselves in a horrible situation. And I hope that anyone who starts a book publishing business is never as naive as we were. After we sold our first three books, which were considered successful, we had about 33,000 books on hand of three titles. Booksellers were returning unsold books at the end of the year because all publishers, even then, sold books on consignment. To keep going we needed a minimum staff that cost, in overhead, about \$100,000 a year and with nothing new to sell, we had very little money coming in. We were preparing two books which would not be ready before the following year, and we knew that if we went along for another year supporting our staff without selling books, it would be difficult for us to survive, and we’d be out of business pretty soon afterwards.

I knew I had to do something quickly, and decided that the three books that we sold at ten dollars each, would be put in paperback format, large size, with ten reproductions rather than fifty reproductions, to be sold for \$1.35 per volume. Our first three books were part of the series we began to publish in paperback along with the Degas which was the fourth book in our hard-bound series, and Great Masterpieces for which we got colorplates from our new hard-bound book on the Louvre Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the portfolios?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. We prepared to publish five titles which we called “Portfolio Editions.”

Everyone, including some of our investors, said, “How could you do it? You’ve still got more than 10,000 copies in stock of each of your expensive hard-bound books, and for next year you’re publishing another in the hard-bound series on Degas, as well as a book on the Louvre Museum.” Most people I talked to felt that this was surely a way of killing the sale of our first three hard-bound books as well as our newer hard-bound titles. But, it was clear to me that if I didn’t publish our hard-bound books in paperback I’d have to close shop. I also believed that the only good thing that could happen would be for the Portfolio Editions to be successful and still not hurt the sale of our hard-bound books, which is exactly what happened. We sold nearly 500,000 copies of the five paperbacks that year, and it didn’t seem to make any difference to the sale of the hard-bound, larger, more expensive books! We were extremely fortunate. We concluded that there were two entirely different markets: people who wanted the expensive hard-bound book and people who would pay only \$1.35 for the paperback. We then quickly began to produce more titles in our Portfolio Editions—for they could be more easily produced—and it kept our business going for a few more years!

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Right. Nothing ventured, nothing lost.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes. The point is that if there was no way of surviving under ordinary conditions one might as well take the chance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That’s fantastic. Was there a point when you decided, or reached the point rather, where you could plan ahead as the economy developed and as your business grew?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: It took about seven or eight years before we found ourselves in the black. My personal problem was: how could the company sustain itself with small losses, for I knew it would be difficult to make money until we published more books and developed a larger back list. Pretty large royalties from the Grosset Illustrated Junior Library were still coming in, so I was able to keep myself going without taking any money from the business. Bennett Cerf had decided to drop the Illustrated Modern Library project (for whatever reason he thought he needed to drop it), in spite of the fact that the books were very beautiful and were selling very well. Fortunately, Grosset’s Illustrated Junior Library series kept on going. Later we produced small art paperbacks and sold a few million copies to Pocket Books, as well as about ten million copies abroad in many languages. That again sustained us and kept us going for another few years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start selling things abroad?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Very quickly, when my present associate, Fritz Landshoff, joined our company in 1953. Alfred Knopf had previously promised him a job, but later changed his mind, so Fritz Landshoff picked us as the next best publishing company with which he wanted to work. He is one of the publishers who left Germany during the Hitler period. Born in Berlin, Mr. Landshoff received his Ph.D. in literature at the University of Frankfurt. After several years of training in bookstores and publishing houses, he became manager of the Berlin literary publishing house, Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag. He emigrated to Holland in 1933 and with the Dutch publisher, Querido, founded the Querido Verlag, where he concentrated primarily on publishing exiled German authors such as Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, among others. After the German Occupation of Holland in 1941, he moved to New York and became a partner in the publishing firm of L.B. Fischer. When the war was over, he became co-founder and co-manager of Excerpta Medica, Amsterdam and New York, before joining Harry N. Abrams as an executive and associate.

He was the man who said to me, “I think you have good possibilities for the translation of your books abroad and I would like to handle your foreign business.” I hired him immediately, and Fritz

Landshoff has been with us to this very day. Without him, I really believe our business could not have survived.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the export of American art books to Europe. What kinds of things did you find you sold well there?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Most of our art books—except those books that dealt specifically with American Art or American Artists—were bought for translation by at least two or three European publishers. You may be interested to know that not long after Fritz Landshoff joined our company he arranged to have our first three books, Renoir, Van Gogh and El Greco translated into five European languages. I believe the languages were Spanish, Dutch, Italian, French and German, and since then most of the European publishers who had translated and published our first three books have continued to translate the new titles in the series, as we publish them. I believe we now have nearly 30 titles, and two or three are added every year. Most of the new titles get published in three or more languages. You may also be interested to know that the Library of Great Painters series are presently sold in two additional formats with editorial adjustments. One series we've mentioned previously called: "Portfolio Editions;" another hard-bound series with 16 color reproductions is called "Great Art of the Ages."

PAUL CUMMINGS: What have been your most successful titles over the years?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Again, lucky accidents played a part in several of our most successful titles. We had managed to struggle through the first seven or eight years, and our books were thought of very highly. At about that time Prentice-Hall asked if we could do some college textbooks for them in the art history field.

Dr. H.W. Janson, who had written our Story of Painting for Young People wanted to take a sabbatical from New York University to work on a History of Art. We agreed to pay him an advance that would support him for the two years, and Janson's History of Art has become our most successful book. In the text book and trade editions it has sold about 2,000,000 copies to date, and is still one of our best-selling titles—required reading in many important university art courses.

In the textbook field we have had a number of other strong titles in addition to the Janson History of Art among them History of Far Eastern Art by Sherman Lee, Varieties of Visual Experience by Edmund Burke Feldman, History of Italian Renaissance Art by Frederick Hartt, Art of the Ancient World by H.A. Groenewegen-Frankfort and Bernard Ashmole, 19th and 20th Century Art by George Heard Hamilton, 17th and 18th Century Art by Julius S. Held and Donald Posner, History of Renaissance Art Throughout Europe by Creighton Gilbert, all of them sold successfully by us in the trade and by Prentice-Hall to the college market.

Another important publishing project that came to us by chance is the New Illustrated Medical Encyclopedia For Home Use by Dr. Robert E. Rothenberg. Dr. Rothenberg is an old friend, and one day he said he'd like to do a thorough and complete home medical guide. He knew we didn't publish that kind of book, but nevertheless asked whether I could give him some publishing advice. Naturally I said I would, and about a year later Dr. Rothenberg came to the office with the finished manuscript—in a great big valise! I looked at it and said, "Oh my God!" but then I became so fascinated with the material and the concept that I decided to publish it myself as a 4-volume medical encyclopedia. This indeed is what we did, under an entirely different imprint from our art books—The Abradale Press. I guess we've sold more than 1,000,000 copies of that four-volume set. And now Dr. Rothenberg has just finished writing and editing a new 20-volume Complete Home Medical Encyclopedia and Guide to Family Health that Abradale Press will publish early in 1973. We hope it

does as well as the earlier smaller set.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Abradale Press also publishes Bibles, doesn't it? How did that begin?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Right! Bibles have been another mainstay of our list. In spite of the fact that some of the world's greatest artists had painted Biblical subjects, there were no illustrated Bibles that did justice to these great paintings, and I remembered Harry Scherman would have liked such a Bible as a book-dividend for Book-of-the-Month Club. So eventually, under the Abradale Press imprint, we brought out some very beautiful Family Bibles—the Rembrandt Bible, the Michelangelo Bible, and the Masterpiece Bible, all available in the Protestant King James Version and the Catholic Confraternity-Douay Version. And indeed, Harry Scherman did want these Bibles, which were used success fully in his Club. And that's how we got into Bible publishing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing after another.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, that's right. I suppose I should also mention our publication of Norman Rockwell I had known and admired Norman for many years—in fact he had let me reproduce some of his Saturday Evening Post Christmas covers for my line of Christmas cards in 1946. When Bernard Danenberg gave him an exhibition in 1968, he arranged for me to come on a Sunday to the gallery when Norman was there. After an hour of looking at Norman's paintings I told him I'd decided to publish a book on his work. Norman was very happy about my decision, but he thought of himself as just an illustrator, and he was a little worried about being the subject of an art book. After I assured Norman Rock well that he didn't need to worry, Milton Fox and I talked with Thomas Buechner, then the director of the Brooklyn Museum, now the President of Steuben Glass, and asked him to write the text for Norman Rockwell: Artist and Illustrator, which became a record—breaking best seller for a \$60 book. We've sold more than 200,000 through the trade, the book clubs and by direct mail, and it is still selling very well. Last year we did a smaller Norman Rockwell: A Sixty Year Retrospective in paperback and hardcover. The paperback also served as a catalogue for a Rockwell exhibition that Bernard Danenberg travelled around the country. We've sold about 400,000 of that in both paper and hard-bound editions.

We have a Norman Rockwell Portfolio of fifteen reproductions of his most popular Saturday Evening Post covers, and next year we're publishing Norman Rockwell's America by Christopher Finch, a book whose emphasis will be on the nostalgic images of this country as Norman saw it.

It's hard to realize now, after the fact, but when the Rockwell book was first proposed, I ran into some flack about the wisdom of a "serious" art book publisher bringing out a volume on Rockwell. I'd like to think that as well as bringing pleasure to thousands of Rockwell's admirers, the book also accomplished one of Thomas Buechner's objectives: "that illustration should be considered an aspect of the fine arts."

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did the large books like the Christo over there start? Was that early?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: You're talking about the Contemporary Painters series?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: That started about ten or eleven years ago. That's where all of this contemporary art that you see in our offices started—that period in the early 1960s in which I was so very much interested. At that time the Sidney Janis Gallery organized the first major Pop Art exhibition in an empty Longchamps restaurant opposite our former office on 57th Street. I dropped

in to see it one day on my way to lunch and, I remember, my first reaction was derision and laughter. But two days later I went back and looked again, and I became more serious. On following days when I returned I had become deeply impressed—never had I changed my mind so quickly from a completely negative response to one of great enthusiasm, and it was at that point that I started to buy Pop Art.

I later went to the exhibition with Milton Fox, and I found that he, too, viewed these new images with enthusiasm. That backed up my personal reaction because I thought so very highly of Milton's opinions and taste.

Incidentally, you may be interested to know that we find that younger people are interested in books about contemporary artists and we sell as many books dealing with the work of contemporary artists as we sell of the old masters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, at least insofar as the trade is concerned—that is bookstores where people come in to buy art books. On the other hand when it comes to the book clubs, I don't think book club membership is as sophisticated about art as the bookstore customer is, and the clubs find greater membership acceptance of the old masters rather than the avant-garde contemporaries. Somehow I get the feeling that the situation is changing even for book clubs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they're very different markets. One depends on history and everything.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Right. The person who goes into the bookstore possibly gets around more and he knows what's new in art. And there are very few books around on Christo or any of the other contemporaries.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think the books affect an artist? For example, when a book like this one appears, what does it do for the artist?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I think it helps him greatly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way, do you think?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I think, generally, that when there's an important book on an artist people think about him quite differently.

PAUL CUMMINGS: lie becomes more real, yes.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Whatever the psychological reasons are, it boils down very simply to the fact that people think if a publisher has brought out a book on an artist he must be important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You still do the art reproductions, do you? And are you doing modern things in that line, too?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes we are.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It ties in with the books.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, it ties in with the books.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'd like to talk about your own art collection for a while.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Surely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How has it grown and shifted over the years?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: In the beginning I bought the work of friends, but very soon we began to look not just for the work of friends but of artists who were more creative. As I mentioned earlier, one of the first artists that we really collected seriously was David Burluk. Then we went on to people like Raphael Soyer, Milton Avery, Philip Evergood and others who were painting at that time. I was also aware of painters like Ben Shahn and Reginald Marsh, and others that I hadn't collected, but I couldn't buy them all because I had a limited amount of money. I liked collecting paintings, and I was becoming more and more involved. And so, as I earned more money I bought art at every opportunity. I didn't ever expect to have as large a collection as we have today. I had the bug and I couldn't seem to stop.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It goes on and on.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: It went on and on and what you find is that you're always short of cash because you're always buying. One never stops, in spite of one's good intentions to do so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, I've been looking at this painting which is—what?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: It's a Morris Louis.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Twelve feet or fourteen feet long?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, something like that—twelve feet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a long way from a Burluk which, you know, is quite small.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: I remember the time our collection was given an exhibition at the Jewish Museum. After Alan Solomon left, Sam Hunter came in as Director, and he asked if our collection could be shown at the Museum. The exhibition got a lot of newspaper space and a lot of publicity, and I remember distinctly overhearing one of the critics saying that Harry Abrams can't be so catholic in his tastes as to buy the social representational painters as well as Pop artists, Kinetic artists and non-representational painters like Morris Louis, Stella and Noland. The critic went on to say that Harry Abrams couldn't possibly care for all of them and that Abrams was "playing the field, hoping that some will come through."

We love pictures, we love art and we love to live with art all around us. This has been our life style. Art for us does not consist of any particular movement, but rather a variety of movements that depict the kind of world we live in, so that's why you see in our collection the variety of Pop Art, Optical Art, Abstract Art, Representational Painting, Hard-Edge Painting, Shaped Canvases, etc. I don't see how Andy Warhol, with his intense interest in the supermarket and movies could be expected to produce the same kind of image that a highly intellectual painter like Robert Motherwell would produce.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

HARRY N. ABRAMS: They're entirely different people, and not at all interested in the same things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Do you collect books? Are you interested in fine books or anything like that?

HARRY N. ABRAMS: Yes, but not to the same degree that I'm interested in collecting art. Naturally, our own publications are important to me, and I have them all. We've also collected for twenty or thirty years the books of the Limited Editions Club, and we've also bought some first editions. Being in the book business, I suppose I've always been interested in books. But I don't buy the kind of books that sell for high prices because they are a rare example or a very limited edition.

Personally, I don't particularly care to publish books in limited editions selling at very high prices. I'd much prefer to publish the same kind of beautiful book in a non-limited edition and reach out to as large an audience as possible at the lowest price possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay. Well, that's it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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