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Oral history interview with Morris Davidson, 1971 July 21

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Transcript

Interview

RB: Robert Brown
MD: Morris Davidson

RB: This is an interview with Morris Davidson, Robert Brown the interviewer, Provincetown, Massachusetts, July 21, 1971. First, I would like to ask you to talk a bit about your childhood and upbringing, perhaps emphasize things that led you to a career in art, if you would, Mr. Davidson.

MD: I grew up in the city of Baltimore, and in my early grade school years I was generally regarded as some sort of prodigy in drawing, and from then on it was inevitable that I was pushed into a career of artist. I went to the Maryland Institute of Design in Baltimore while going to school, so that when I graduated from high school that very same year I was graduated from the Maryland Institute of Design Art School, having gone through the usual four year course of fast drawing and life drawing. After that I decided I would go to a major art school and selected the Art Institute of Chicago. I was there for two years in the painting classes and advanced quite rapidly and decided that I would take some time off and experiment with painting on my own until the summer of 1920 when I came to Provincetown to study with George Elmer Brown. I selected Mr. Brown, though Charles Hawthorn was the famous teacher here, because I had Mr. Hawthorn at the Art Institute and felt that I was more interested in the art of composition than in the techniques which he advocated and practiced. So I came here and after a few weeks Mr. Brown asked me if I would care to be his assistant, since his class was large and he could not handle all his students. I undertook to help him in exchange for my tuition. Mr. Brown became very friendly to me and gave me a kind of special attention, urging me to paint along his style--and it would inevitably get me into the National Academy. The next year he arranged an interview for me with the Director of the Minneapolis School of Art and I was engaged as an instructor in drawing and painting at that school. I was then just about 22 years old. I spent the year at Minneapolis meeting several painters who were very excited about what was being done in Paris at the time–quite different from the kind of art I had been trained in–and urged me to leave my job and go to Paris and discover a new world of art. So, I went to Paris and I must say I was shocked at what I saw. But gradually I became more and more involved in discussions with painters from all European countries, sitting at the Café Dome and exchanging ideas about painting and going with them to museums and getting an entirely new aspect and knowledge of what painting is about. At that time Paris was a mecca of painters from all over the world, possibly because as an aftermath of the first World War. This was in the early twenties and the exploration of new ideas, new concepts in painting were revealing the possibilities of what imagination could achieve rather than mere craft or training. One exhibition I saw left an indelible impression on me, and that was the show of the Independents held in a car barn. And in it I think was displayed aspects of painting that were to survive for the next, I would say, thirty years or more. In 1925 I returned to American and came again to Provincetown and took a studio at the West End here and became interested in the paintings shown at the Art Association. The Art Association in Provincetown at that time was a small group of men, all of whom were distinguished American painters: Max Bohm, Charles Hawthorn, George Elmer Brown, John Noble, [?] Webster, the two Dickinsons, Preston Dickinson and Edwin, Blanche Lavelle and others. And the organization was of such high esthetic standards that critics used to come to every opening from the New York papers and some of the art magazines to review the shows. In 1925, that summer, Carl Schnaps was instrumental in persuading this group of distinguished academians to devote one wall to the display of modern works and Schnaps came to my studio and took three of my paintings. That was my first exhibition of any consequence in America. Now the move towards modern art didn't. . .[it] was stymied in a sense by the advent of the Depression. The Depression was a tragic thing, not only to Americans in general, but in a curious way to artists. There was not possibility of selling paintings or getting the support of anybody. In New York painters of course flocked to the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. And the curious thing was that while the Whitney Museum [of American Art] was delegated as the representative of the WPA, and the Whitney Museum whose collection was entirely of American paintings, was very generous in taking on a number of painters who were to the left and then a cleavage appeared, those who were quite patriotic about the American scene and called themselves American Scene Painters–that, of course, included such later stars as [Thomas Hart] Benton, [John Steuart] Curry and [Grant] Wood–and on the other side, a much larger group who were embracing or who were sympathetic to the Communism were painting what they called "Social Significance." Now, the conflict between these two groups was very sharp and organizations were formed, the Artists' Union was entirely leftist, of course. The museums, the Whitney particularly, were far more interested in those groups who painted the traditional scenes of American Colonial life and the landscapes of Kansas and the West. The two groups, however, met in an enormous exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, which one of the bottling companies sponsored and there the best of both factions was displayed. Suddenly this was its last stand. Both movements seemed to be coming to an end with the advent of a small group of abstract painters who were reviving the ideas that had been current in Paris in the twenties. A group known as the Abstract Artists was formed and the Artists' Congress which was largely made up of the leftist painters, though later of the most distinguished American artists, many of them joined the Congress. The Congress ended in a political factionalism that became so acrimonious that it was

inevitable that the Congress would break up. And it did. And twelve of us who had been active in it formed a Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, and this included a great many abstract painters. Now the interesting thing to me is that while I was in Paris I was so awakened by the intellectual current in painting–especially the effects of Cubism and other isms, Futurism and Dadaism and so on, had on the development of painting. And with the abstract artists there entering a new phase of painting which rejected all theory and concepts and believed the essential things was the expression of the individual consciousness of painters detached from theory, and I think Existentialism, which was current at the time, had a great deal to do with the rejection of tradition and theory. So that the world then saw the advent of American art that expanded all over Europe and even in Japan there was the Abstract Expressionist movement. Curiously it has come to an end too and it no longer enjoys the esteem that it had ten or twenty years ago, and what seems to have happened is that with the rejection of theory came an acceptance of anything which would amuse or excite the spectator without troubling him with concepts, theories or ideas. So we have Pop Art, which is sort of a titillation of the optic nerve and then we got Pop Art, which is taking comic strip ideas and any vulgar or humorous aspects that the comic artist would think up and express it in large paintings. Then, with that came what some museum people have considered a great boon to American culture, and that is to make the average person conscious of the homely, simple, trivial things around him. So we have the can of soup art and the electric bulb and the simplest objects of daily life painted very realistically, photographically, the idea being that this will awaken the consciousness of the spectator to the esthetic import of homely things. I consider this simply a phase of pragmatism in a sad way. Now, with all this a curious thing has come about. Another dead end and the rise of technological innovation so that young painters work with sheet aluminum, with wire, horseshoe nails and shadow boxes, all sorts, and kinetic art, especially electronics. Any idea that seems to be related to the drive behind the American system, technology, is welcomed by the young painters, who would achieve little attention if it were not for the support and the publicity given to it by museums, notably in New York City: the Whitney Museum, the Guggenheim, less so, and occasionally the Museum of Modern Art. With the rise of this technological art, there seems to be a spirit of painting in the sense in which painting is related to a long tradition of centuries with a constant evolution according to the environmental conditions but always maintaining roots in the past. An example: I was asked to judge a show in a southern state of the work of all of the colleges, college art departments for the state, and 400 works were entered–and a great many of them fell along technological lines–were impressive, very competent, fine craftsmanship, and of course there was the usual amount of Op Art, Pop Art, and other devices. But it was technological art which dominated most of the exhibition. In a section that had in it actual paintings, that is paintings done with brushes, pigments and canvas, the work was of a very inferior and amateurish order, and I could only conclude that this was because college art departments no longer engage painters of long background and tradition but prefer to have the celebrities pushed into the limelight by museums on their staffs. Now, what the future holds I am certainly not competent to say. But I can only recall the statement I read in the twenties in [Oswald] Spengler's book The Decline of the West, when he mentions that painters should throw away their brushes. . .painting no longer had relevance to a changing world, and that painters should join the Navy.

RB: Mr. Davidson, could you say something about the influence of the museum?

MD: Well, I should make it clear that I have no quarrel with any of them, in fact, I am all in favor of museums, such as the Metropolitan, that maintain some connection with the cultures of the past. They have a humanitarian interest as well as an esthetic one–an anthropological interest, a scholarly interest, or cultural interest–and they even give living painters many fresh notions repeatedly when they look at the work of the old masters, even though their own bears little resemblance to it. My quarrel is with those museums that are not repositories of past cultures, but which undertake to shape and mold the esthetic tastes of the nation. This is where I think the three New York City museums have done a great deal of harm to the development of painting in this country.

RB: Do you feel that it is possible to change this direction?

MD: Well, this is my hope. I think that if enough painters survive, I might add in the past year eight of my colleagues, among them very distinguished painters, have died–and parenthetically I might say something among the abstract painters, the best of them have been those who have had very rigid discipline in academic art before becoming abstract painters, so there are some subtle, mysterious connections between the academic discipline and the freedom which seems to reject everything that the disciplines have created. The hope to me is that young painters, tired of gimmicks of every kind, will, in the spirit of rebellion similar to their antagonism to general–the system generally or the institutional set-up–will decide really to learn how to paint. There is a great element of craft involved in it. There is also a great deal of philosophical speculation about the development of painting generally and the phenominomolgy that's involved, the study of consciousness, of perception itself, which is something that the technologist knows about and cares nothing about. Perception is a very vital attribute of the serious painter because his perception is something that has evolved over long disciplined training, and frees the imagination by permitting the perceptive person to see aspects in the world about him, hidden from the average person. I have known of painters who could make drawings of a simple telephone, which is a collection of a few geometrical forms and make of it the most beautiful thing, no one really resembling the next.

RB: In your own training, you had disciplined training, in Baltimore and then in Chicago, and then in Paris. Could you say in a little more detail what you did?

MD: In Paris I did attend sketch classes at the Grand Chauiere and that is an interesting thing too. A sketch class at art school is usually made up of students with an instructor walking around and criticizing the work. In Paris some of the most famous artists would come with students, they and the students sit side by side. The was never an instructor, no one looked at the others' work, and it was simply the use of the model. But the American students who would walk around the room looking at the works with their eyes and education in imaginative perception. That was really thrilling. Aside from that, my studies were largely accompanying European painters to museums where discussions that would take place about a work of art were something I shall never forget.

I mentioned the other day about the Metropolitan Museum here importing or borrowing the Mona Lisa from the Louvre and how the line formed up and down Fifth Avenue, and how in roped off columns crowds of people waited their turn to get one quick glance at the Mona Lisa, and it occurred to me in the countless times I have walked past this painting in the Louvre, I have never seen another painter stop to look at it, only tourists. Now I think this is a very important commentary on the difference between the interests of painters over there and the cultural acceptance of certain holy images that we are, we accept.

RB: You seem to detect the same strain today.

MD: Well what has happened today largely is that ten times as many people paint as ever before, at least that many, maybe a hundred times as many, and the art materials industry has boomed and boomed because there are so many amateurs. Everybody paints, but very few are painters, painter-artists or artist-painters as the French call them. They simply dog these things and play at the role of being painter, sometimes for therapeutic reasons, sometimes for status among their friends, sometimes because of boredom with the general pattern of life. But the more that we have, the more the culture is spread widely, the less artmanship. This is my conviction.

RB: You feel art must be kept among those who are totally working in it?

MD: Art is for artists, and this is not just people who have gone through training, because I have had many classmates of mine in various trades who have gone through the same training that I have, who have abandoned painting to go into some other activity because they would gladly, or not gladly, but they would openly admit they simply didn't have it. What is the "it"? The "it" is something very special and I think that I recall what [John] Steinbeck wrote when the said, "The only creative species is man, and when man creates something it is out of his consciousness, and no two people can collaborate in a work of art. This is something that comes form the individual creative mind." Now, he expressed it much better. This is a paraphrase of course, but what I feel is what is expressed is that there are such people as "artists." If you were to go into a reason for their becoming artists that would be a psychological study I really wouldn't want to into. It is so complex and I have had psychiatrists come here to the house and ask if they could hypnotize me and watch me working so that they could get some clue as to how my consciousness and mind and hand functions. I had one ask if he could give me a drug that would make me unaware of his presence so that he could observe me painting. And I also received questionnaires from doctor-psychiatrists that I met at the colleges. And the questionnaire covered two pages, asking me such questions as "When you paint are you thinking about your wife, your mother or your children?" and other asinine questions. And many of them were so absurd and only indicated to me that a psychiatrist has no notion of what a painter was involved in when a painter paints. He is totally oblivious to everything. Everything in him is bent upon discovery. If he is a sincere and really creative painter he is merely intent on discovery. He does not know what processes determine that he put such a color in such a place in such a shape in this manner. It is as natural to him as any physical action. In reaching for something he extends an arm. In the same way when he makes a decision on the canvas, it is an unconscious natural reflex thing based upon long experience generally. It starts out, of course, with years of fumbling but after that, when he is really a painter it becomes a totally unconscious process, and has nothing that can be put into words. And here again I take exception to so much art criticism which is explained in words. The critics fail to grasp that painting is an art which has nothing to do with verbal expression. It is a language of its own. And it can thrill people just as poetry may thrill people, without being subject to analysis or logical explanation.

RB: In what way does it communicate?

MD: It communicates in this way. There is something deeply rooted in human beings who are not artists, that are in tune to the artist just as a radio will receive waves broadcast. And I will give you an example. I recall being asked once to come to the house of a collector who had many of my paintings. And one of the canvases got loose on its chassis and he asked if I would come over and fix it, and I made a date to go over there the following morning. And I came to his apartment, rang the bell and a colored maid came to the door. She said, "What is it you want?" and I said, "I am here to repair one of the paintings." And she said, "Who are you?" and I said, "I am the artist who painted the picture." And she said, "Well, well," she said, "I am so happy to meet you. The only

reason I hold this job is because of your paintings." And only this past winter I was having a show in a museum and there was a big social event, an opening, and all sorts of people, cultured people, were there who seemed more interested in conversations with each other than in looking at pictures, and I observed two black visitors standing in front of a painting for the longest time. Then they moved to another one. They spent more time in that gallery [than] any other spectators, in my observations, because the paintings said something to them on a plane that could not be called intellectual. Now, I have had many experiences, I have sold many paintings in my life. I have people come here and buy a painting off the wall. But what has interested me is that young people generally love my paintings. They are not trained in art courses in college, in art appreciation courses to care about paintings, but the paintings sometimes stirs them. Only last winter I had the secretary to one of the television stations in New York to see my paintings. She came to my studio and spent an hour and a half or two hours just fascinated and she had saved up enough money to buy a painting and she wanted one of my paintings. I didn't know this person. She had just seen a painting of mine. And she parted with $750 for a small paintings, and I knew it was a sacrifice for her. But it meant that much to her. Since then I received a note from her telling me what joy this painting has brought her. There are areas of consciousness that are detached from publicity, from theory, from intellectualization, form analysis. It is something that touches a person that must be present in a painting or else it is just a work of craft to me.

RB: This is your main approach in your painting then, devoid of theory?

MD: Yes, but I teach painting in a very disciplined fashion. I don't believe in people being born artists in the sense that they don't need a very severe discipline. I had a young man come to me from a college in Illinois. His instructor considered him something of a genius, and asked if I would give a scholarship to him. And I said, well, if in your opinion you want it, I will certainly do it. He arrived here, with a lot of equipment and enormous, huge canvases, and not just studio-size tubes, but giant tubes, and an enormous palette, squeezed out tremendous gobs of paint and one morning practically covered an enormous canvas with red and blue. Then he sat down on a bent and sat with his head in his hands, and I thought he was ill, and I went over to him and said, "Are you feeling alright?" He said, "Yes," and I said, "Well what is the difficulty?" He said, "I'm stymied." I said, "What are you trying to do? I'm sorry I can't help you because I don't know what direction you are pursuing." He said, "Well, I don't know either." So, after a long period of doing nothing, I suggested that he put it aside, until he got some fresh inspiration, and take small canvases and come back to it later. So he did. He took a small canvas and I left. The following day I come in the studio and he was just smearing paint on a small canvas, one thing over another. And I said, "Do you mind telling me what exactly you are working towards?" And he said, "I am just pushing the paint around." And I said, "Is this what you do in your college art course under Mr. so-and-so?" And he said, "That's what we all do. We push the paint around." I said, "To what end?" And he looked at me and said, "That's a funny question." After a few days I called him aside and said, "Look, I want to have a serious talk with you. I think you are here under false pretenses. I don't think you're a painter. I don't think you have any conception of what you're doing or why you're doing it. You're just posing as a painter. And I'm sorry I can't keep you here and you will have to make other arrangements. Well, there is a postscript to this story. I had gotten him a job as a waiter to make some money at the Governor Prince in Truro and towards the end of the summer friends of ours from Wellfleet called us up and said they would like to take us to dinner at the Governor Prince. And who was my waiter but this boy from Illinois. And he came over to me and he said, "I'm glad to see you. I'll get you anything you want. Just tell me what you wand and I'll go back in the kitchen and get it." I thought he would be very angry and resentful. He said, "You know the talk you gave me has done me more good than any praise I ever received in class. I realized you were absolutely right. Now I am determined to start form the beginning and really learn what art is." Well, that is only an anecdote.

RB: Then, in your training you always had a request for discipline?

MD: Oh yes. You see at the Art Institute of Chicago, the system in effect there was at the end of the month your work would be put up and would be judged by an instructor and it was received either by an honorable mention or would be numbered one, two, three, four, five, down the scale to thirty. I used to strive for the honorable mention, and I always got them because I was working very hard to get them. I felt that if I would get in what the teachers though was important than I could move on to some other teacher and see how I would fare there and that was steering the values or ideas of each of the teachers. It was a very hard discipline. I never regretted it. There was a time in my young years when I was forced to earn money and I was able to do book illustration. I walked into Harper's one day when I was living in New York and was very poor. I went into Harper's with some drawings I had done and I immediately got a commission to illustrate a book. Now, had I not been trained so thoroughly I would couldn't have done that kind of work. I've also painted portraits of many distinguished people. In fact I taught portrait painting even though I paint abstractly. I've had a period in my life where I taught portrait painting, but discipline does no one any harm, who wishes to be a painter.

RB: You can disassociate the idea of discipline from the idea of being traditional or the idea of being conservative.

MD: Completely. In fact, if we take so talented a painter as Picasso–I have seen countless drawings of his that

are absolutely meticulous, exact, very academic, very severely academic, which he does periodically. He derived pleasure out of doing this kind of thing. And in teaching over the years, I've had so many students who will never be abstract painters or even never care to be abstract painters, if I weren't able to help them in their type of work they wouldn't stay here with me.

RB: When you came to Provincetown could you describe the situation, the kind of people?

MD: First of all it bore no resemblance to the town that is here today. There were cobblestones in the streets, wooden sidewalks and large elm trees lined commercial streets. There were horses and buggies tied up at the Post Office, which was a little store from across from what is now Adams Drug Store. The tow would be no mecca for tourists at all, except that the excursion boat would come from Boston and unload several hundred people who would spend two hours here and then go back to Boston on the steamer. Life was very simple and the picturesque aspects of this town is something I could not describe. I can only give you an indication of the physical details. The wharves, there were maybe sixteen wharves that went out into the water, and the big fishing schooners that would come into port here, the railroad went out to the wharves where the fish packing plant was and they would load the freight trains. There was an old railroad line that ran into what is now Bradford Street and Standish. There was a station there, a railway station. And this little railroad would clack along, stopping every mile or two at some little village and eventually ended up here. That's how I would come from Boston sometimes. And the population was different. The Portuguese were all herded down the West End. There were an inferior class of people to the Yankees who ran the town and occupied the rest of the whole settlement. The officials, of course, were the old families. That's all been changed. The officials today are all Portuguese, the wealthy people are Portuguese. A great deal of intermarriage and now there is no distinction whatever of course. One aspect is that if you look down Commercial Street you would see ladies sitting on camp stools with their easels there all the way up the East Bank painting little side streets, the houses to the waterfront. There were very few stores here. The New York Store was here, and the drug store, the barber shop, things like that, so that it was really an artists' colony. It is no longer that, I think, as you can see.

RB: What was it that attracted, you think, artists such as yourself to Provincetown?

MD: Well, what attracted me there was the fact that Mr. Hawthorn came to the Art Institute of Chicago on a barnstorm trip and spent a few weeks there teaching. I was in his class. And then I began to see that some of his students went with him out here in the summer and they thought it was a wonderful place to be. And I heard about it. I learned that two graduates of the art school whom I admired, Ross Moffat and [Vatlav] Vytlacil had both come here. Vytlacil stayed only a couple of summers, but Ross Moffat settled here. He was a very dear friend. He became a very dear friend of mine. And Karl Knaths had been at the art school when I was there. Though he was considerably older than myself, I used to watch him paint in the art school. He wasn't very distinguished as an academic painter, but he became one of America's best semi-abstract painters. And I had contact with him for forty years or so. So what prompted me to come here was the fact that so many of my colleagues or classmates were coming here. When I got here I was always interested in composition and the only man who taught it a way that was intelligible to me was George Elmer Brown. There was another teacher of composition, but I wasn't ready for him. His name was Webster. And he had been a pupil of [Albert] Gleizes in Paris and I wasn't ready to become non-objective at that time. It is only a process of evolving from semi-abstract painting. Knaths and I had very much in common then. In fact I have clippings of several shows in New York where we would show at the same time and the reviewers would generally bracket us together. And then later I felt I was no longer interested in the world around me. I would rather paint what was inside my being. So I turned inward. Has this thing been going all this time? My goodness, I didn't know a tape could hold that much.

RB: Now, if you could say something about your positions, your attitudes and some of your roles during the thirties.

MD: Yes. First of all, when I was in Paris I received a cablegram from a publisher that they were publishing a manuscript I had left on painting. And this turned out to be a book called Understanding Modern Art. This came out in 1931. We came to New York, my wife and I, took a little apartment off Sixth Avenue off 13th Street and one day in the street I met a woman I had known in Paris who told me that she is opening a gallery on 8th Street and she would love to have me be one of her painters. So I went to the gallery. It was very nice, a block away from what was then the Whitney Museum of American Art. You will note that the word "American" has been deleted. Well. . .and I became very attached to this gallery, not only as a painter. But she was swamped with works by painters in the Village who wanted to be attached to her gallery, and I served in screening them until a very nice group was formed of competent painters. Well, one of them, for instance, I brought in was John Brennan--that the Museum of Modern Art gave such a tremendous show for after his death, not during his life. John Brennan, among others, there were many very fine painters that were assembled there, and I discovered that practically all of them were either members of the Communis Party, or sympathetic to it. At the same time the Whitney Museum became interested in me because of my book, and asked if I would lecture under their auspices. And at that time their collection consisted of American Scene painting--John Sloan and [George] Luks, [Charles] Burchfield, houses in Upstate New York, the usual very fine, competent but, I would say, provincial

painting. And I didn't care for that kind of display. Having spent a year in Paris, I felt this belongs to the previous century. So that when they asked me if I would lecture for them I said I would be very happy to, provided they gave me free scope to talk about contemporary movements in art. And they said, "Oh, no. We want you to take slides of our collection and show them to various parts of the country." And which point I said, "I'm sorry," and I declined, "I really don't like the collection that much." That didn't make me sit so well with the Whitney but Mrs. [Juliana] Force, who was then the director, was very nice to me, and I, for a short time, enjoyed the hospitality of the Whitney Museum, took part in a symposium there where form the left and from the right there were forces and factions that were present at this symposium. And I suppose I set the whole storm off, but it broke up in almost a riot with the critic who publicized Curry, Benton and Wood, the greatest American critic form that point of view, Mr. Thomas Craven, was in the audience when I spoke attacking them. Curry was there, Meyer Shapiro was there and he claimed that he had set Craven off to getting up and protesting. But, there I was, on the one hand, friendly with people who were all for the American scene because they had taken me up on account of my book, and the group that I showed with in my gallery, who were the nicest people, gentle, nice people, but who had felt that America had come to a dead end and we had to have complete change. And the movement was so large because the Artists' Union was formed to look after the interests of artists, so that it was natural for the painters to join the movement to protect its own interests. The center of all this was really around Eighth Street. And I had a great deal of contact with people of the various factions. And then from it grew the Artists' Congress at one of the earliest meetings. I met in the street one of the directors of the Whitney Museum, not the major director but of one of the departments, who was going to the meeting and I said that I'd go along. As soon as I got there they proposed me for the jury of a show and when the show came up I discovered that they didn't need jury because they would put in those persons that some little clique felt belonged. I became very aware of the political maneuvering that takes place in organizations. I must say I was very naive at the time, but I learned a great deal. Anyway, I was very happy when the American scene painting and the social significant painting, the poverty and oppression of the poor, when all this was superceded by painting that was more like pure painting, which excited me. And I survived that period, and fortunately, how I did survive was with the publication of my book. One of my friends suggested that I start a class for high school teachers of art with authorization from the Board of Education to give these courses. And I went to see the Superintendent of Art, a very fine gentleman, elderly gentleman, to ask him if he would be okay authorization for me to give these courses. When I told him my name he said, "Why, yes. I like your book very much and I've seen your paintings and you certainly have my support." That started me running my own school, which I conducted for 35 years. And even when the New York City Board of Education decided to abolish these courses, restricting them only to city institutions, and offering me a job at City College in New York, I refused that and with the help of chairman of departments who had been my pupils, they got together a folder of letters and sent them to Dr. Allen, James Allen, in Albany, and he authorized my courses over the new York City Board of Education. And then when I had the authorization I felt vindicated and decided I didn't want it anyway because at that time I had many talented or some talented students, not too young, but very well trained who were interested in my ideas that were different from their own. And I was glad to end my courses for teachers and concentrate on just teaching painters. That's my history of the thirties.

RB: How long did you continue to work with the teachers?

MD: Oh, about, I would say, about ten years.

RB: What was your approach there?

MD: It required that the teacher put in thirty hours of studio work and thirty hours of assignments that they would do on their own and bring in to me. And this just had to follow a regular pattern. I would have a series of problems in composition. And they would work in the studio from, often from still life set-ups or from projects I would assign them.

RB: Could you describe your teaching of artists?

MD: Then painting became something else again. I found myself getting students who came over from the Art Students League or persons who were very eager to make exhibitions and had been rejected and they wanted to know why and how they could overcome whatever failings they had. And it turns out that I seem to have some kind of knack for putting them on tracks that would enable them to get into exhibitions. It turned out this way. So that it's interesting that of the New York Association of Women Painters, at one of their exhibitions, I received a catalog, I counted twenty-six of my former students as members of the Association. So even to this day I will have painters in New York. I don't live in the city anymore. I live twenty miles up the Hudson in the winter, and I have painters who will occasionally call me and ask if I will come into New York. They are having a show, or would I go through their work and select it or correct it or something. I like to work with painters. I have painter friends. I have a very fine painter–on tape I won't mention his name, I don't think it would be fair–but a really distinguished painter who likes to have me come and look at his things before he shows them. And I may add that many years after I gave up these courses, I had collectors come to me to ask if I would assist them in making their collection, which I have done for several people. I have been sent to Europe to buy paintings for

collectors. So they trust my judgement apparently or they wouldn't part with the money.

RB: Do you feel that in your own growth as a painter that being a teacher has worked in well with it?

MD: Very much so. I love the contact with people who paint. Often I have been annoyed by superficial people. But among them I have always found some who were stimulating and interesting and I have a certain hang-up with people of the other world. It's very difficult for me to spend an evening in the company of businessmen or lawyers or somebody who feels that to make it big is the only essential activity worthwhile in this world. And somehow that has a way of setting me off so that for days afterwards I am almost unnerved by it.

RB: Could you discuss a bit your relations with dealers.

MD: Well, I have had many dealers, some of them very fine and some of them very sharp and tricky. I would rather not go into this because the variation in human beings is reflected in art dealers as well as in any other profession. I had a couple of who were not just nice people, but who were very warm and sympathetic to everything I do. And I had others who would try to exploit me to the upmost to see how much money they could make on my work. And every painter goes through this process. In recent years I have not wanted to have dealers because the whole art market has changed considerably in New York. First there came into being a number of galleries run by women as tax write-offs for their husbands. Then there are these sharp people who establish a gallery to rent space for vanity exhibitions. They get tremendous sums of money to put on a show for some incompetent person, where the friends will come and curiously enough will buy out the whole show, which makes additional money for the dealer. If they are wealthy enough, and the husband has the proper connections the woman painter can really sell out the show. What with that situation, and the fact that museums would bring into prominence certain people, and all those dealers who are looking for the quick kill, to assemble young artists who are in the vein of the thing the museums are publicizing at the moment, so that there is no integrity at all. I am moved to think about dealers in my young days, when a man would live from hand to mouth to run a gallery where he could show the artists he had confidence in until he put them over. There were such people.

RB: You mentioned the woman on Eighth Street who assembled the painters.

MD: Yes. She was the one. But she didn't survive very long and with the changing of styles. Styles change, and they change so fast now that it is only these other types that manage to survive. But I can recall a times, this was in the thirties too, when there were dealers in New York like Daniels, Daniels Gallery--marvelous painters he had--and the man gave everything to his painters, and he had an unerring eye for painting. Another one was Hellman, a very distinguished man who used to give beautiful exhibitions. Valentine Galley, then there was Buchholz, who really was Valentin, not Valentine, that was someone else. But Curt Valentin who ran Buchholz Gallery, he brought most of his exhibitions from Europe. They were marvelous shows. But he also, when an American painter went in there, as I did, with works hoping he would show them, commented very favorably and put them in a closet and there they stayed. He never made an y effort to show them. He got rid of you politely and your paintings sat there for months. [Side Two] Well, you asked me about whether I still derive any stimulus from going to Paris. About ten years ago, I think it was, when perhaps the second largest dealer, a most influential dealer in Paris, Perret, came to New York to open a gallery and chose some of the finest works produced in the past two decades. And it got very little notice in the press. I went in to see him and got into conversation with him. I admired some of the paintings he chose like [Jacques] Villon and [Marcel] Gromaire and other French painters of note, and asked if he would sometime just walk one block over to my studio and take a look at my paintings. Well, of course a dealer of that importance would say I am a very busy man and so on. One day, sure enough, he came over. And he looked at my paintings and he suddenly went into French. Speaking in French he said, "Vous etes Français," and I said, "Mais non." I said I am an American painter. He said, "But you must be of French background." "No," I said, "I was born in this country." He said, "What are you doing here? Who is ever going to look at your work here? Americans don't care for this kind of painting. Take my advice: Don't try to paint like this if you want to stay in America, go to France and paint." Well, I had a friend, the very distinguished sculptor [Ossip] Zadkine. Zadkine was a man, I think, of world-wide reputation, and the Museum of Modern Art in Paris has given a whole room over to his sculpture. Well, during the War, he was in the United States and was teaching, for a short time, at the Art Students League, and had an exhibition and the exhibition was held together with my painting. His sculpture and my painting. So we got to know each other. And after Mr. Perret had told me that I ought to be in France, living there and painting, I though I would go over and see what the possibilities were. So I did. I went to France and I called on Zadkine and told him what I had in mind, what Perret had said, and he said, "For Heaven's sake, don't come here. The French painters are full of hostility to foreigners they would cut your throat everywhere possible, and don't come over. I beg you not to do it. You'll never regret it." Well, that seemed so conclusive to me that I would abandon that idea. But the reason that Perret said that I should go there, was of, of course, that his gallery wasn't doing well. That all the publicity was going to a type of painting which can be called "American" and that had very little relationship to the kind of painting that is successful. In Paris at the time, and the curious thing is that's where I acquired my ideas of painting, so it was inevitable that I would hear indirectly that this museum has scratched me off the list as not an American painter. I just thought that would be interesting. But the reason that I do find it stimulating to go

there even to this day, even with all the bad painting that one can find everywhere, I will come across marvelous painters here and there, which just revives my spirits. It thrills me and that's important.

RB: Do you find that painting is more extensively practiced by top-notch people in France than it is today here? You've mentioned op and pop and technology and getting away with, in other words, from painting.

MD: Some of that exists there. Not a great deal but the curious thing is it is not just French painters who are producing what's called "French" art. These artists come from South America, from many countries, from Central Europe, they come from everywhere. They make their contributions. The two outstanding painters to me of this time, pure painters, are [Nicolas]

de Staël, who committed suicide a few years ago, who is a Russian, who lived in Belgium and took the name de Staël from Madam de Staël, it's nothing like his name, and [Serge] Poliakoff, another Russian. And I am fascinated by their paintings. What passes as French painting is often not right not. Right now a painter of prominence is [Antonio] Saura, a Spaniard who lives in France. They all come to Paris but they are not just French people.

RB: Is there a similar international mix in New York?

MD: No, no. There are cliques in New York. You belong to this clique or that clique. There's a clique in East Hampton. There used to be a clique here. There used to be an enormous clique here. It's moved away. Well, that's because the Artists Association has become a different type of institution.

RB: Do you think cliques are inevitable in this country, do you think it is associated with the attitude toward art on the public's part?

MD: I think this is true all over the world, that the group is getting to be more important than the individual. Everything is groups. This is what makes it so problematic that creative artists can survive is because everything today is group activity. Where as in the earlier part of the century there were individuals and if they did forma group it was only because they were separated from the general level and somehow to distinguish themselves, let us say, the Impressionists, [Claude] Monet, [Auguste] Renoir, [Camille] Pissarro, each had a distinctive style, but they showed together--even [Edgar] Degas--they showed together because they were different from the kind of popular art that was official. But today, a group has a point of view and they all work together at it. It is almost a collaboration. It's quite different. What I am for, and it may be a useless hope, I don't know, is for restoration of the individual. I find that individual ceasing to exist. When I see the army of individualists, all in the same kind of variations on the same uniform, the same beards, the same red patch on the behind of the girl's pants, it's all an army. They aren't individuals really. Everything is in groups. A group of 500 sleeps out on the beach. An individual doesn't sleep out on a beach with 500. He goes off by himself. I think individualism has been practically smothered in this country, and perhaps everywhere, I don't know.

RB: Could you describe your involvement with Abstract Expressionism?

MD: Well, I was never part of it. I refused to be part of it. So may of my friends are not only active in it, but became famous and wealthy, one or two enormously wealthy. But I would never be a part of it because I felt it would not give me satisfaction that I did not believe in, even if I became rich at it. And the proof of it is, that of the group that did become rich of it, several have committed suicide. And I knew them well, and I knew the were not happy people. They made piles of money, they received all the adulation that any human could wish for, but it brought very little satisfaction. And so we come down basically to the whole philosophy of living. The other day I was at a gathering, socially, a dinner, and my host, speaking to a judge sitting at the other end of the table, spoke of a mutual friend who had been a professor at Harvard, and had resigned his job to take over the vice-presidency of a large insurance company. He said what a tremendous upward step he had made. And I was startled by this remark so I said, "In what way do you think he made a step upwards?" He said, "Well, he was just a professor at Harvard and this is a two billion dollar concern." And so I said, "What does that make him? In what way do you consider that an advance?" And this started a general discussion that made it very clear to me that I didn't belong to this company. I would much rather be a professor at Harvard than be a vice-president of a two billion dollar insurance company.

RB: To get back to, I just want to ask one little thing about in the thirties which saw people on the left, and people on the right and then in the middle had something to do, I guess with painting and painters.

MD: Well, the middle group came into being when it became obvious that the two opposing factions were really doing the same thing. It was not art, it was just politicking.

RB: Did you subscribe, weren't there certain manifestoes, published in the Times, there were letters. . .

MD: I was all for the Abstract Expressionists, but curiously, as in every other movement, it attracted also people

with little competence, little to offer. And you have to actively sift through it to select those whose work was worth looking at from the others. And this is true in every art. I have seen conventional painting that will arrest me and hold me because of some spiritual force that is transmitted by the word. I don't like to catalog and catagorize the movements but unfortunately the group movements tend to grow its major volume from the least talented. In other words, as artist is an artists and you cannot make him a proponent or exponent of a program.

RB: It's generally said that Abstract Expressionism is the first American movement in art that puts the United States in sort of the position of world leadership. Could you comment on that?

MD: It's true. But it was only the mask of it, and the publicity behind it that put into tremendous leadership. Take for instance Franz Kline. He used to paint rather genre pictures, saloon interiors and things of that sort--ordinary painting--and then decided on this new style. Where does it come form? If you look at [Pierre] Soulages, who is a very fine non-objective painter, you can see the controlled paintings, where the uncontrolled Franz Kline resembled the Soulages, the form resembles it, the style resembles it, but the spirit is not there. None of these people invented anything. But by sticking together and having the weight of the museums behind them, they were able to dominate the world. I have seen works by Japanese artists, much more beautiful, that express some of the ideas of Abstract Expressionism, but in a more refined and beautiful way. Then there's the case of [Karel] Appel, who is a Dutch painter. He really went as wild as one could go, and if I spend five minutes with an Appel in front of me I could rip the canvas off the wall. It's the most disturbing nonsense and I hate to use rough language, but it seems not to come out of the best part of the anatomy.

RB: You think the museums had a need at that time too?

MD: Well, now we are touching on something called the structure of a museum and this is a subject I would rather not you tape down because I have very positive information and feelings about the whole structure of what the institution is. And I don't approve of it.

RB: Well, could you comment on your own outlook now and what do you intend to go on doing?

MD: Well, I've reached the age of 72 and I have this discussion with contemporaries of mine, what do we propose to do. It varies among my friends. I have a painter-friend who was at one time considered one of America's greatest painters. I have another friend who was at one time also considered America's greatest modern painter. Both of these men, being in their seventies, are very good friends. The first one told me, visiting me here, that he has been to visit an old friend of his who was in his eighties, a man who was noted for his representational word. When he entered his studio he was amazed to see non-objective painting. And he said to this man, "What in the world happened to you?" And his painter friend, a French painter said to him, "I am 85 years old and I have reached the point where I thought I would just have a good time. And I am just painting anything that I feel like without thought of my reputation, background or anything else. In other words, I am enjoying myself." He told me this story. The other man, called by the New York Times critics, "America's greatest painter, modern painter," is a neighbor of mine in the winter and so often seemed depressed because he was no longer invited to judge shows, no longer invited even to exhibit in shows. And goes to the museums regularly to see the things that are being publicized and is full of questions as to what has happened to art and what he is to do, and I feel sorry for him. I said to him, "We're all in the same boat. Why don't you just enjoy yourself? You've had a very rich life. Why don't you paint what you'd like to and pay no attention to what is being publicized." He said, "I can't do it." Well, in a roundabout way that answers my own feelings about it. I paint what I like and if by chance somebody comes along who is sufficiently moved by something I have done and wants to buy it I am happy. It doesn't have to be often and that is my attitude. Are we finished now? I think so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]