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**Oral history interview with Ilse Bischoff, 1982
January 27**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ilse Bischoff on January 27, 1982. The interview was conducted at Hartland, VT by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Ilse Bischoff in Hartland, Vermont, January 27, 1982, Robert Brown interviewing, and I'd like to begin with your -- perhaps trying to remember from your girlhood --

ILSE BISCHOFF: From my girlhood.

MR. BROWN: Yes. When -- what do you see happened in your childhood or what -- that might have led you eventually to your interest as -- in --

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, I had a mother who was very, very much interested in music and painting, and she steered me in that direction, and it wasn't very hard to steer me, because I loved it.

MR. BROWN: And your mother was --

MS. BISCHOFF: My mother was German-American. Her father was from Hanover, from a line of Lutheran priests, and her mother was from Vienna, but she was born here.

MR. BROWN: But she was very interested, then, in the arts.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. She singled me out as the artistic child in the family.

MR. BROWN: How many children were there?

MS. BISCHOFF: Two girls and one boy, a boy much younger.

MR. BROWN: And did you begin, then, at a pretty early age --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- training?

MS. BISCHOFF: I fooled around with paper dolls. My sister saved some, and I said throw them away, for goodness sake, there's no talent in them at all. That didn't show until I was about 16, and then I had -- I think that teaching is so important, because I didn't do very well in school, but I did in the art class, because I loved the teacher, and she really did know how to draw whatever I had out.

MR. BROWN: Was this in --

MS. BISCHOFF: In Horace Mann School [New York, NY].

MR. BROWN: Do you remember the name of the teacher?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes, Ms. Boas. Her father was a professor at Columbia. I think he was an anthropologist, I'm not sure.

MR. BROWN: Well, there was a very famous one of that name, Franz Boas.

MS. BISCHOFF: That was he.

MR. BROWN: And she was your art teacher?

MS. BISCHOFF: She was wonderful. I met her years later when I was -- oh, in the '30s, at an opening of the Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY], and she told me she'd followed my career as much as she could in the newspapers, the children's books I had illustrated and written. She was darling. I think it's frightfully important for children to have teachers they love and teachers who understand them.

MR. BROWN: How did she -- what was her approach to teaching? Can you remember, roughly?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, she praised when it was necessary, and she criticized very nicely. She wasn't harsh.

MR. BROWN: And what -- were you taught drawing?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes, I was taught drawing from the time I could hold a pencil, practically.

MR. BROWN: Do you believe that's quite important to --

MS. BISCHOFF: I think that it's frightfully important. I think that you can -- you can do anything you want to in art after you have a foundation.

It's like building a house. You have to have a foundation to make it stand, and I think that [Pablo] Picasso was so great because he had a foundation, and all those people did, who really contributed something. It's the copyists who start at the top.

MR. BROWN: You, then, in the Horace Mann School, had several years of -- of art instruction, I suppose.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I remember that quite early, yes.

MR. BROWN: Was this --

MS. BISCHOFF: I went -- I went there from kindergarten through graduation. I never went to another school.

MR. BROWN: Was it a fairly small school?

MS. BISCHOFF: No. It was part of Columbia University [New York, NY]. It was a very free school.

MR. BROWN: By that, you mean -- could you begin --

MS. BISCHOFF: They were liberal in teaching. It was part of Columbia, because Teachers College was the real patron of the school, I think.

MR. BROWN: And was it a school where, if you were interested in the arts, that was encouraged?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes, very much so, but they could have encouraged me in more things than they did if they'd only had a teacher who liked me. You see, we were in a very difficult position then, because that was during the first World War.

My father was German, my mother was German, and we only spoke German in the house, and English was my second language, because my family wanted me to be bilingual, and I'm very grateful to them now, but it was very hard in the beginning, because children don't like to be different from other children, and nobody else was German-American in the school, and of course, when we went to war, that was a very difficult position for young people who had parents they loved who were on the enemy's side.

MR. BROWN: And your parents were somewhat sympathetic to Germany?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes, before we went in, it was natural.

MR. BROWN: Sure.

[Phone rings.]

MR. BROWN: Your father was a --

MS. BISCHOFF: He was a chemist, yes, sir, and he studied in Carr School [phonetic], Göttingen [phonetic], and what was the other one.

[Interruption.]

MR. BROWN: And was he in manufacturing then?

MS. BISCHOFF: He had a pharmaceutical factory.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: And --

MR. BROWN: As a young girl, did you -- did the family periodically go back or go to Germany, to Europe?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, we went twice before I was 20, and that was before the war, when we were real children, and after that, I went, if not every year, every other year, until 3 years ago, and through World War II.

MR. BROWN: So, you were almost as much at home in Germany as you were in New York.

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, in Europe.

MR. BROWN: In Europe.

MS. BISCHOFF: I was just as at home in France and England and Italy. I think it was very wrong in some ways to bring us up as half and half, because -- I'm grateful for it, because I learned an awful lot, and I do know two cultures or three cultures, but it's hard emotionally.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, I mean that you don't take the interest in the United States that a child who is born of both American-bred parents and grandparents does. They may like Europe and go there very often, but it wasn't their way of living as it was mine.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: I think it enriched me enormously, but I think it might have been easier if I hadn't had that kind of a background.

MR. BROWN: Do you have any early memories of New York as a city? Did you particularly like the city?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I loved New York. I loved New York till the day I left. I adored it. Absolute New Yorker.

MR. BROWN: And Europe, too, I suppose.

MS. BISCHOFF: I loved Munich [Germany], and I loved Paris [France]. Those are the only two places I would have settled down if I had to leave New York.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

Was your father quite encouraging of your interest in art?

MS. BISCHOFF: Not at all. He was un-musical, and he was not artistic. It was my mother.

MR. BROWN: But he didn't oppose --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, no. He was a darling man, but he really didn't know how to be a father. He was my mother's husband, and he was nice to us, and good and kind and provided and every -- but he didn't know how to unbend to be interested in children's interests.

MR. BROWN: When you finished at Horace Mann, then, did you -- what was your plan at that time?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well --

MR. BROWN: What did you do?

MS. BISCHOFF: There was no question about what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a painter.

So, I went to the New York School of Applied Design and Art [New York School of Applied Design for Women, New York, NY], I think it was, on 30th Street and Lexington, and I wanted to learn, so to speak, a trade, to go into art as something that I could earn my money by, though it wasn't necessary.

My mother wanted me to have a profession. Of course, after one year, I knew very well that wasn't what I wanted to do, so then I went to the Parsons School [New York, NY] and studied costume design and stage settings, which I wanted to go into, and then I went to the Art Students League [of New York, New York, NY], where I learned to draw, and then I was all up with all the applied arts.

MR. BROWN: But the first school you went to was not very interesting to you.

MS. BISCHOFF: No, it wasn't interesting at all.

MR. BROWN: You painted there or --

MS. BISCHOFF: Drew.

MR. BROWN: Drew.

MS. BISCHOFF: Very good.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: Very good training.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: I think I learned my love of flowers in that school, to draw them anyway, because we had to do meticulous drawings of every flower that was in the florist's window.

MR. BROWN: Were there any teachers that you remember, or fellow students?

MS. BISCHOFF: In the --

MR. BROWN: At that first school?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, none at all. I made no friends. At least, if I did, I don't remember them.

MR. BROWN: But at Parsons, you were more interested.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. I loved Parsons, and I went to Europe -- in my second year, I went to Europe, to Paris, and we went to Florence [Italy] and toured France, the chateaus, and I went to Belgium and London [England] that first time. Then I came back, and I --

MR. BROWN: When you were on that -- you were studying costume, particularly?

MS. BISCHOFF: I was studying costume design, not painting.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: And I think I have an advantage over a lot of painters, not that I'm unusual, but it is an advantage when you must spot a costume in a painting and put it right into the period it should be. I found it of great help to me.

MR. BROWN: When you came back, you went to the Art Students League.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: With whom did you study there?

MS. BISCHOFF: I studied under Frank DuMond and Joseph Pennell.

MR. BROWN: What were they like as teachers?

MS. BISCHOFF: Awfully nice. Awfully nice. They both -- I think their heyday was in the [18]90s or

end of the [18]'80s. They'd both been in Dusseldorf [Germany] and in London and Paris and Munich.

MR. BROWN: Would they talk with you quite a bit?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. The classes were large but not so large that they couldn't talk to you, but I don't think that anybody took any particular personal interest in me there. I mean, they were nice to all of us.

MR. BROWN: So, about when were you --

MS. BISCHOFF: Pennell was very nice. When I went to study in Munich, he gave me a letter of introduction to a man who had classes. So, that was very nice of him.

MR. BROWN: And what had you studied with Pennell? Print-making or drawing or --

MS. BISCHOFF: Etching.

MR. BROWN: Etching.

MS. BISCHOFF: Etching and lithography.

MR. BROWN: He was a notable --

MS. BISCHOFF: -- etcher.

MR. BROWN: -- etcher.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. He was a very good teacher, nice man.

MR. BROWN: What sort of things would you etch?

MS. BISCHOFF: I think the students all etched what he liked to etch.

MR. BROWN: The city and things like that?

MS. BISCHOFF: The city scenes.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: But I like people very much, and I did a lot of people then. I went into still art very much later, because I did mostly people until about 1950.

MR. BROWN: You enjoy drawing the figure.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, very much. I love it.

MR. BROWN: At the League, did you make some friends there?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes, friends I have kept all my life.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MS. BISCHOFF: Paul Cadmus, Jerry French, Margaret French. Who else? I can't remember.

MR. BROWN: These were fellow students --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- that --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- you thought a lot the same, you think, or you had a lot in common, you felt?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, we were in the same classes.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh. Did you talk a lot about art or what -- was it just a general social life you had?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, it wasn't social, and it wasn't deeply artistic either. I regret very much that I don't know more artists than I do. I should have cultivated them long ago. But we were all interested in drawing well. That was the goal we all wanted to reach.

None of us was interested in making money. Whether we needed it or not, it wasn't, "How am I going to make money?"

MR. BROWN: It was to perfect your abilities.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. The pleasure of drawing. There's so much pleasure in drawing. That's why I don't understand some of these abstractions. Why, if they look at an apple, for instance, why do they want to abstract the truth from that object?

Why shouldn't it be -- you're drawn to the apple in the first place because of its shape, its color, and the whole feeling. But why not make your version of that instead of abstraction. Nobody knows what it is.

Cézanne certainly was marvelous. He did his own fruit the way -- in his own way, but he didn't abstract the truth.

MR. BROWN: Were you aware in the '20s of abstraction?

MS. BISCHOFF: No. No, and I wasn't when I was in Munich for a year-and-a-half.

MR. BROWN: You weren't aware of it then.

MS. BISCHOFF: No, because there was an American man, a boy, I guess he was, called me up and said he was studying with somebody called Hans Hofmann.

Well, Hans Hofmann meant nothing to me, so I didn't think he could draw, which was very benighted on my part, but I would have been in a much more modern movement if I had gone to these places, different kind of -- but no, I wanted to draw the figure as [Albrecht] Dürer, Michelangelo, the French, wonderful 18th century painters.

MR. BROWN: Who did you particularly study with in Munich?

MS. BISCHOFF: A man called Buchner[probably Gustav-Johannes Buchner] It was private.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh. And was he a fairly conservative artist?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. He was academic.

MR. BROWN: Was he -- he was known to you to be a good teacher.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. Yes. He did take something away from me, which I -- was it he? No, it wasn't he. He gave it to me. He gave me the power to get a likeness. Then when I got back to the Art Students League, we learned to set the head up as an egg, and drop in the features.

Well, I lost all my ability for a likeness, completely.

MR. BROWN: Whereas under Bruckner, you had --

MS. BISCHOFF: -- I was developing --

MR. BROWN: -- developing that.

Was this -- in Munich -- you were in Munich in, what, the mid-'20s or so?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. Toward the end.

MR. BROWN: Were you aware at all of the social and political life --

MS. BISCHOFF: Not at all. I never heard of Hitler once during that period, and I had a lot of young friends there at the university, and there was no talk of politics.

Now, there must have been among the German students, but certainly not among the Americans.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh. Well, there were a number of other Americans --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: -- studying there at that time.

MS. BISCHOFF: Uh-huh.

MR. BROWN: What did you like to do in Munich?

MS. BISCHOFF: Aside from draw?

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I loved it. I loved the city, I loved the opera, and I loved the museums. They were marvelous. And it was a wonderful city, because you could walk everywhere.

MR. BROWN: You mean it was comparatively small.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, it was very -- well, when I was there, it had half-a-million people.

Now I think there are three million. So, it's grown.

It's a charming city now, too.

MR. BROWN: That charm is what attracts you to it or Paris, as opposed, say, to Berlin [Germany] --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I didn't want to go to Berlin. I had seen it once, with my father, and I had no -- it had no power to attract me the way Paris and Munich did. I wouldn't have wanted to stay in London either. Munich was so marvelous. It was so small for a city.

That wonderful opera, the plays. I had the advantage of speaking German fluently. That made a great difference.

MR. BROWN: When you -- you came back to New York and you went again to the Art Students League, after you -- when you came back from Munich --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah, I went back to the Art Students League. Then, in 1930, I got my own studio on 58 West 57th Street, the old Showalter Building, which was a wonderful building.

MR. BROWN: That was quite an old studio --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes -- a real *La Boheme* studio, big windows. It was marvelous. Dirty windows. Lovely.

MR. BROWN: And what did you do?

MS. BISCHOFF: What?

MR. BROWN: What did you do there?

MS. BISCHOFF: It was a wonderful building, because models walked up and down the aisle, knocked on the door, asked if you wanted a model. So, you were never -- never short of models -- black, Chinese, Japanese, white, everything.

It was wonderful.

MR. BROWN: So, did you mainly draw, or were you beginning to paint quite a bit, too?

MS. BISCHOFF: I was beginning to paint then. I had really never studied painting until I was alone. I learned the foundation of drawing a picture, and then I learned how to paint.

MR. BROWN: Did you begin with oils?

MS. BISCHOFF: Uh-huh.

MR. BROWN: Did you like them? Did you paint --

MS. BISCHOFF: I loved them. I couldn't possibly paint an oil painting now anymore. I think the last one I painted was in 1960.

MR. BROWN: You eventually lost your interest in that.

MS. BISCHOFF: I lost my ability to paint with it, because I was so interested in painting with casein, which is a very meticulous medium, and very tight, at least the way I use it. Other people use it differently.

So, I never could get back to the freedom of the painting.

Most painters, when they get older, loosen up. I did just the opposite. I was loose when I was young, and then when I got older, I tightened up.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose you did? Did you want to be more precise, do you think, as you got older?

MS. BISCHOFF: I was so crazy about Dürer and the way he drew and all those floral things that he did and the precision of it and the beauty of his drawings, I think that, not only subconsciously but consciously, I wanted to draw like that.

MR. BROWN: After you got back to New York and had your studio, were you caught up in going to openings of exhibitions, things of that sort?

MS. BISCHOFF: Uh-huh. All of them.

MR. BROWN: Do any of them stand out in the '30s as fairly memorable?

MS. BISCHOFF: I remember one. I don't know -- I can't remember the year it was in -- of [John Singer] Sargent's paintings, which I thought was simply beautiful. I knew he wasn't very fashionable anymore. He'd been too fashionable. But I thought his things were beautiful and lasting, great style.

MR. BROWN: What about the new Museum of Modern Art? Was that --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I was very interested in that, but I didn't want to paint that way. I guess maybe I wasn't very courageous. I liked the little niche I'd built for myself, and I went right on working in it.

MR. BROWN: Did you stay in New York through most of the '30s, or did you travel, still, to Europe?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, my mother died in 1931, my father in 1935, and then I was on my own completely, and I went to Europe, until the war began, and that year, in '38, I was there twice, because I knew what was coming.

MR. BROWN: Your sister had married in Europe, hadn't she?

MS. BISCHOFF: She was married to a German nobleman, and then she got a divorce early in the '30s and married H.G. Terwilliger, who had no foreign blood since the 17th century.

MR. BROWN: I notice you exhibited in -- at the Corcoran Gallery [of Art] in Washington [DC].

MS. BISCHOFF: I had two pictures in there. That was only one time.

MR. BROWN: What sort of things were you --

MS. BISCHOFF: One was a still art and one was some scenic thing, both of which I destroyed.

MR. BROWN: You later thought better of them or --

MS. BISCHOFF: I thought worse of them, so I destroyed them.

MR. BROWN: Better of having done --

MS. BISCHOFF: I've had wonderful cleanings out of my studios when I've gone like a whirlwind

through things and torn them up, put them in the fire. I always feel cleansed afterward.

I think it's a great mistake -- unless you're Rembrandt [Harmenszoon van Rijn], [Diego] Velasquez, Michelangelo, Dürer -- to keep every drawing you ever made, because every gifted artist, not genius, does do something bad sometime, and I think that I would hate to leave a record of the truly bad things that I did.

MR. BROWN: And you didn't -- it wasn't too important to you to say that those two had been shown at the Corcoran.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, no, no, didn't mean anything to me. I never showed at the academy. I didn't do much showing anyway, because I was always afraid of Dürer's kicking in the mouth, and I thought, well, I don't care whether it's in it or not, so why bother going to the trouble of framing them and showing them?

MR. BROWN: Did you get much criticism or at least some encouragement.

MS. BISCHOFF: I got very encouraged -- I forgot to say that when I was in Germany, I learned wood engraving, and when I got back, I showed in all the good print shows and won prizes, and I won a prize at the Pepsi-Cola show ["Second Annual Portrait of America Exhibition" sponsored by the Pepsi-Cola Company, 1945]. I don't know when that was. In 1948.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: I don't -- I can't remember dates.

MR. BROWN: That was a national exhibition.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. I was in that twice, and once I won a prize. But I wasn't much on showing. The picture went around the country for a year, and when it came back, it had a hole in it, and we had to have that patched up and repainted.

MR. BROWN: What sort of painting was that?

MS. BISCHOFF: That was called *Harlem Loge* [c.1934]. It was a picture of the Alhambra Theater on 125th Street and Lexington Avenue -- no, 7th Avenue, I guess, and it was a box with red velvet on it, and all colored people in the box, laughing, with the light going up from under the chin over the face instead of from the top.

MR. BROWN: You had had -- part of your -- your family's home had been next to Harlem, hadn't it?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: So, you were pretty familiar --

MS. BISCHOFF: And then, when my mother died in 1931, my father and I moved downtown, and then when he died, I moved over to the east side.

MR. BROWN: You were at home in a number of places in Manhattan.

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, yes. I lived 33 years at my last apartment. That's a long time for New York.

MR. BROWN: In the '30s and '40s, were there -- did you continue to be particularly close to --

MS. BISCHOFF: Did I what?

MR. BROWN: Did you continue to be particularly close to several of your artist friends?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes, I was very close to Paul Cadmus, Jerry French, and Margaret French. Those are the only artists I knew. And Charles Locke.

MR. BROWN: Perhaps you could describe them. What were they like in the '30s? Say, Paul Cadmus.

MS. BISCHOFF: Paul Cadmus and Jerry French talked art all of the time, and they tell me that Jerry talked it to Margaret from breakfast through dinner into the night. I think he probably knew more about painting than any of us did, certainly more than I did.

MR. BROWN: And would they mainly be talking about technical matters, things of that sort?

MS. BISCHOFF: I think they were very interested in technical matters, and they had their own style, which they liked, and they were certainly not going to change it because it was fashionable to be abstract or not impressionist.

MR. BROWN: But they were pretty decided in what they --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, they knew what they wanted to -- right from the beginning, and Paul is now having -- after all that fuss, you know, they made about his picture, *The Fleet's In* [1934] and the Navy -- he got instant fame, and then he was sort of forgotten by the greater art public, because he didn't change his style to the current fashion, and now he's showing and having museum traveling shows and he's come into his own again, which is very nice. Most of it is drawings.

MR. BROWN: They made up probably the core of your circle of artist friends in New York.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. Most of my sociability was not with artists.

MR. BROWN: Oh, it wasn't?

MS. BISCHOFF: I didn't do any of the Beaux Arts or dances and things like that.

MR. BROWN: It was other school friends and other acquaintances?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, with people I met socially.

MR. BROWN: You weren't ever a joiner, say, of artist --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, no.

MR. BROWN: -- artist groups.

MS. BISCHOFF: When I was asked to join the Cosmopolitan Club [New York, NY], I said to Ms. Helen Appleton Read, who was a very well-known art critic and a wonderful woman -- I said I don't want to belong to a woman's club where they play bridge and things like that.

She said, well, don't you think you ought to look at it first, because it's a club that was founded by people -- for professional people. So, I went up there, and I was passed by the board, and I loved it, and I used to think the lame and the old belonged to it when I was young.

Now I'm lame and old. I've joined.

MR. BROWN: But in the end you liked it?

MS. BISCHOFF: It's a very nice club. You're saying about joining. Even in the club, I didn't join. I didn't go to the lectures or things like that.

I only remember one lecture that I went to, when General Clay lectured about Berlin after the air lift, and it was a very moving evening, and then I was invited to a dinner there for some unknown reason, and the man I took as an escort was dead drunk. You could just breathe his alcohol at the next chair. I was so ashamed, I was never invited again.

MR. BROWN: Was World War II a very important time for you, or did that change --

MS. BISCHOFF: No. I had a very difficult time, because I was -- not after we were in the war -- I was very friendly to Germany, because I had all that background with Germany and many good friends there, and I was totally anti-Nazi, and it was very hard to separate the two. People didn't understand that you could.

MR. BROWN: Did you have some strains with your German friends over that, as well?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, I didn't have any correspondence with the German friends until 1949.

MR. BROWN: Afterwards.

MS. BISCHOFF: I sent care packages to them as soon as they could go through, but I didn't have any correspondence.

MR. BROWN: I mean, were there strains, say, in the late -- as war was approaching --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes. Yes, because I remember one man that I was very fond of who was a very nice man, talking about the Jews and saying, "What we ought to do is to line 5,000 against the wall and shoot them all.", and I was finished, but that's the kind of thing you ran into then, and that was very hard on people who were fond of Germany and Germans.

MR. BROWN: We've talked now about -- mainly about your --

MS. BISCHOFF: -- art.

MR. BROWN: -- art and being an artist, but you also became a notable collector.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, that was Meissen and Nymphenburg [Porcelain].

MR. BROWN: And did that begin when you were fairly young?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, that didn't begin until 1940, when, on 3rd Avenue, the refugees from Germany, the rich ones who had beautiful collections, brought their porcelains over, and you saw these beautiful things.

I knew what they were, but you wondered how on earth they suddenly got there, and it was -- one German refugee from Frankfurt who had a beautiful collection, was a darling man, couldn't speak a word of English, and when he opened his shop on 3rd Avenue, I went in and I noticed he couldn't speak English, anybody would, and so, I spoke German to him, and when he opened his collection, it

was put on sale, I was the first one who had a choice, and unfortunately, I didn't have enough money then to buy the whole collection in one fell swoop. Of course, now it's in all the museums.

So, that's how I got started, and then I learned -- you learn by collecting, and you train a very sharp eye, so from a bus window you can see if there's a piece that looks old.

MR. BROWN: What do you suppose it was -- what was it in Meissen and Nymphenburg?

MS. BISCHOFF: The perfection; again, the precision. There are awfully good other central European factories, but I just liked Meissen and Nymphenburg best. I thought they were the most beautiful.

MR. BROWN: Third Avenue was a place of less expensive antique shops.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. It was where you could find the wonderful things.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh. The unexpected.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. You know, this Otto Beckoff, the man from Frankfurt, started some of the great collections in this country, because people found their way there, and they were so cheap, when I think of what they were later on, but if you don't know, you don't buy.

I -- I could tell if it was a good piece, but I had to look it up each time to verify it. But in the end, I had a very good -- a small collection, only about -- when I'd weed it out -- at one time, it was 150 pieces. In the end, it was about 80 pieces, and then it got to be such a burden taking it from New York to Hartland, that I gave up the thing and sold the collection.

MR. BROWN: Did you specialize in any particular form?

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, I liked dishes better than figures. The figures had to be -- probably because I was influenced by my drawing and watching the bodies of the figures, that I -- I was awfully particular about the figures, and the dishes -- you were much more likely to find beautiful dishes than beautiful figures, at least within my course.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

The --

MS. BISCHOFF: I did have an awful lot of fun when the prices came in from the auction. There was one box with -- an armorial green box, snuff box, that I bought from the Waldorf collection in Baltimore, and I paid \$80 for it, and I got \$13,000. It was a good buy.

MR. BROWN: Yes, you might say so.

MS. BISCHOFF: Luck.

MR. BROWN: You continued collecting into the 1960s or so?

MS. BISCHOFF: I think I bought my last piece in the early '70s, and I sold the collection in 1977, I think it was, or '8.

MR. BROWN: And some of your pieces went to Harvard, didn't they?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. I started that collection in the Bush-Reisinger [Museum, Harvard, University, Cambridge, MA], the Germanic museum, with 20 very good pieces, and I asked my sister to give some, so she gave some, and Dr. Seech [phonetic], who gave a beautiful collection to the Smithsonian, and Mr. Fleeger, who has probably the greatest collection of porcelain in private hands, not only in this country but possibly in Europe, too, and he was the first one who went with me to Mr. Beckoff's shop, or house, rather, to see his porcelain collection. I started him on his way.

MR. BROWN: Was he a New Yorker, too?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, he was a German who made good here, a very able and rich man.

MR. BROWN: Did you know of the Bush-Reisinger before that?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. A beau of mine had taken me there once, and I thought, well, it's a German museum, and it's Scandinavian, too, but after all that -- that's my background, so why not give them something, particularly as they didn't have any old porcelain; they had copies.

At that time, the Bush-Reisinger had mostly casts when I went there first, but when I gave them something in the early '50s, they'd already had this wonderful curator, Charles Kuhn, who had substituted the real thing for the casts, really turned it into a first rate Germanic museum.

MR. BROWN: You were on its visiting committee from 1964 to '70.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: What --

MS. BISCHOFF: What did I do?

MR. BROWN: What did you do on that committee?

MS. BISCHOFF: I didn't do anything but give that porcelain, and talk, and then I left, because I really don't like committees. I never served well on them. They tried to lure me into one in the Cosmopolitan Club, and I failed very miserably there, because I wasn't any good at all.

MR. BROWN: Then you were on the board of overseers for a year here at Dartmouth [College, Hanover, NH], at the Hopkins [Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hanover, NH] --

MS. BISCHOFF: No, that was only a year. That bored me terribly.

MR. BROWN: Did it? Again, long meetings and --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. I only attended, I think, three or four of them, but that was enough. Anyway, they didn't want my know-it-all. They wanted my money. And when I heard what they wanted -- anything under \$50,000 was really peanuts, I felt this is no place for me.

MR. BROWN: Have you found that happens sometimes, people want --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, surely, surely, yeah.

MR. BROWN: All these years, or at least going back to the '40s, you were also writing, weren't you?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes. I wrote two books that I like. The others I think were awful.

MR. BROWN: Did they have much to do with art, the two you like?

MS. BISCHOFF: One was about my dogs, as you know, and the other was a children's book called *The Wonderful Poodle* [New York, NY: T.Y. Crowell Co., 1949], which I wrote and illustrated, and then I illustrated another one that I like, which I did not write, *GiGi* by Elizabeth [Foster] Mann [Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1943]. That was quite a success in 1942 -- I don't know. And then I did some others that I won't even mention, because they're terrible.

MR. BROWN: But you've done some art historical --

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I did a book about Gilbert Stuart [*Proud Heritage: A Novel Based on the Life of Gilbert Stuart*. New York, NY: Coward-McCann, 1949].

MR. BROWN: How did that come about?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I just thought he was an awfully good painter. I think he had style. I like style in things.

MR. BROWN: So, you just set yourself to writing without -- did you have outside encouragement?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes. I took a course in creative writing at Columbia under Ms. Mabel Louise Robinson, and I wrote it when I was in the class there. I wrote the book -- the dog book there, too.

MR. BROWN: You found that writing came pretty easily.

MS. BISCHOFF: I thought it was an awful lot of fun. I knew my limitations. I knew I couldn't -- everybody said you ought to write a novel. I simply haven't got anything to say in a novel.

I think that my prose was good, but I didn't have anything to say, and you shouldn't write books if you don't know what to -- I did have something to say in the dog book, in the poodle book.

MR. BROWN: What was that?

MS. BISCHOFF: That was *The Wonderful Poodle*.

MR. BROWN: What did you have to say in that?

MS. BISCHOFF: Just what happened with my experiences with dogs, which people could identify their own experiences with dogs, and -- what else did you ask me?

MR. BROWN: Well, the Gilbert Stuart book -- what did you try to say there?

MS. BISCHOFF: I just wanted to write a fictionalized version of his life, and then I realized, when I was through with it, it was not the way to write a biography. You should write a definitive biography and not -- at least I don't like fictionalized biographies, but I found out too late.

MR. BROWN: What sort of reviews did you get?

MS. BISCHOFF: Medium. Good and bad.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: Re-reading, I thought it was kind of thin, but the dog one had lovely reviews. Charles Jackson, a very unlikely man to write a dog book review, who reviews for *The Times* -- *The Times*, *The Tribune* in New York, I had good reviews. So, that was lots of fun.

MR. BROWN: You also, later, had written a couple of other things that have to do with art, don't you -- haven't you?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I wrote two articles for the *Russian Review*, one about Vigée LeBrun in Petersburg, and what was the other one? Oh, Etienne Falconet, the sculptor in St. Petersburg.

MR. BROWN: For that, did you go to Russia for research?

MS. BISCHOFF: I had been in Russia. I didn't go over to gather research. I could get that here. There were articles in art books.

MR. BROWN: But they involved --

MS. BISCHOFF: But I -- I did go to Paris to look at the Vigée LaBrun there, where she did her best paintings, and I tried to write about her, her biography, but she had a thin life. You know, you can't write a biography about a woman in the 18th century unless you can pin down her affairs, which I couldn't, so it wasn't very good, and it wasn't published, but I had a lot of fun doing it.

MR. BROWN: Do you think you identified a bit with her?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I couldn't have painted a portrait the way she did. She was much better at that.

MR. BROWN: At one time, you were trying, weren't you?

MS. BISCHOFF: No, I wasn't trying to paint the way she did.

MR. BROWN: No, but you were trying to be a portrait painter at one point.

MS. BISCHOFF: No, I was never going to be a portrait painter. I liked to draw people and paint people but not -- That's a Vigée LaBrun.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: Now, do you want to know something else?

MR. BROWN: Well, you've told me that you moved into casein by 1960 -- and also --

MS. BISCHOFF: I began the casein in about 1955.

MR. BROWN: Did you -- how did you happen to do that?

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, Paul Cadmus told me to try it. He was living in my cottage there for several years.

MR. BROWN: Where was that? In New York or --

MS. BISCHOFF: No, here.

MR. BROWN: Oh, here.

MS. BISCHOFF: He was my guest in the cottage, and I had been doing very meticulous little drawings and big drawings of -- drawing things, things I found in the woods, in watercolor, and he said, "Why don't you try to casein." So, being very curious, I tried it and loved it.

It's a very easy medium when you're used to it, but in the beginning, it's very hard, because once the thing is down, it's down. You can't scrub around it the way you do with oil painting.

MR. BROWN: But you found that you liked this rather exacting medium.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, very much, because you've got such beautiful washes and brilliant color. Those are all with casein.

MR. BROWN: And you have concentrated in the last 20 years or so on --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: -- still life.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. I did do some drawings of young men and girls, but spasmodically, because I couldn't get the models up here, and as I only painted in the summer here, and in New York, I didn't have a studio anymore which was big enough for painting from life, I gave it up.

MR. BROWN: And you did still life.

MS. BISCHOFF: As examples of what I call good --

[Interruption in recording.]

MS. BISCHOFF: What was I talking about? Oh, you always look back to the great painters of whatever subject you really want to paint, and I found that I didn't like the Flemish or Dutch still lives at all, except for the quality of the painting, but I thought they were overloaded with objects that weren't even related to each other.

I liked the Spanish better, and I liked the French better -- Florentine Tole [phonetic], [Paul] Cézanne.

MR. BROWN: But even 17th century Spanish.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, I love that.

MR. BROWN: Still life painters.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. And [Michelangelo Merisi da] Caravaggio was awfully good. He has a wonderful one in the Brera [Pinacoteca di Brera] in Milan [Italy] -- you know that one?

MR. BROWN: In your work, you, similarly, work from deep, dark areas to ones of great intensity.

MS. BISCHOFF: They're almost -- what is it -- *trompe l'oeil*, I did that in my oil paintings years ago, the contrast between dark and light. It always interested me.

MR. BROWN: And fairly few objects, right?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes.

MR. BROWN: As you were saying earlier.

MS. BISCHOFF: I like it much simpler than -- than the Flemish and the Dutch.

MR. BROWN: In your still life, what are you -- are you trying to convey a likeness --

MS. BISCHOFF: You know, I don't think I was trying to convey anything but the sheer pleasure of painting, which is something I think people forget. It isn't grim. It should be joyous.

MR. BROWN: I think it's evident here that it's --

MS. BISCHOFF: What?

MR. BROWN: You've worked very intensely on these. They're very personal.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And yet they can be shared.

MS. BISCHOFF: I hope so.

I think that a good painting should appeal to the knowledgeable man and to the one who just likes what he sees, and a very famous sculptress, who did metal things for Dartmouth [College, Hanover, NH], came over with the head of the Dartmouth Museum [Hood Museum of Art] at that time, [Jan] van der Marck, and I was kind of scared of having her see my paintings, because they were so -- the antithesis of what she was aiming at.

MR. BROWN: Because she was an abstract --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. And so, she stared at that painting there, and I said, "Oh, come away, you don't like that kind of work." She said "I always like quality," which I found very nice of her.

MR. BROWN: Did you exhibit your work in the last 20 to 30 years?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes, only at Dartmouth, in Hopkins Center.

MR. BROWN: Otherwise, except as people came to visit, they didn't know much of your work.

MS. BISCHOFF: No. No, only my friends.

MR. BROWN: Did that bother you? Did you ever have much -- you never had much desire to be --

MS. BISCHOFF: I didn't care.

MR. BROWN: -- widely known.

MS. BISCHOFF: I like -- I like people to like my paintings if I think they know something or just have simply good taste, but I never craved publicity. I liked it when I got it, but I didn't go out for it.

MR. BROWN: Did you mind having your work given away or sold to other people, or do you like to keep --

MS. BISCHOFF: No, I like to keep them. I sold quite a lot of them, but lately, I've turned down all offers, because I don't paint much anymore. I didn't paint -- I painted half a picture last year, one picture the year before, and three the year before that. So, there isn't very much.

MR. BROWN: And you want to keep what remains --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: -- to look at. Do you like looking at them? Are they like old friends that you --

MS. BISCHOFF: Well, I sort of -- did I really do that sometimes?

MR. BROWN: Why do you think --

MS. BISCHOFF: And then I think they're awful at other times. What?

MR. BROWN: Sometimes you're astounded by your facility, right?

MS. BISCHOFF: The fact that I had the patience to do them.

MR. BROWN: When did you come up here to Hartland, Vermont?

MS. BISCHOFF: 1942.

MR. BROWN: How did that happen?

MS. BISCHOFF: Because I couldn't go to Europe in the summer.

MR. BROWN: How did you learn about --

MS. BISCHOFF: A very good friend of mine bought a house in Woodstock, and so, they wanted me to buy -- they were very tall people, and they bought a very little house, and I'm not very tall, and I wanted a larger house. So, they found this one for me, way away from them.

So, that's how I came up. I loved it.

MR. BROWN: Were you --

MS. BISCHOFF: And I was very lucky to find myself near Dartmouth, because they have a wonderful library there, and when I did the Stuart book, I could take the famous four-volume Frick Museum edition [John Hill Morgan. *Gilbert Stuart: An Illustrated Descriptive List of His Works... With An Account of His Life*. New York, NY: William Edwin Rudge, 1926] of all of his works known at that time -- I could have it here all summer.

It's a wonderful library -- they aren't as good anymore, because everything's gotten so much bigger. They have so -- and it costs, I think, \$10 to belong every year, not that I care about that, but I don't like to go and look for books in the library anymore.

MR. BROWN: It was a much smaller place then.

MS. BISCHOFF: Oh, yes. The college itself was -- Hanover was a lovely town. Now it's a city. You can never park a car. But it's a charming city.

MR. BROWN: In the beginning, you would just spend summers up here.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. I was here from about the first of May until the 15th of October. Then I went to New York.

MR. BROWN: And in the beginning, you were fairly isolated here?

MS. BISCHOFF: Not really. They were very friendly.

MR. BROWN: The people were friendly.

MS. BISCHOFF: And Hartland isn't a fashionable place like Woodstock.

MR. BROWN: So, you could go over there to see friends if you wished --

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. And my sister and her husband bought a house in South Woodstock.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: So, that was very nice. It was very sociable those first years. I was very surprised at how they opened their arms to strangers in the country, because I'd never lived in the country.

MR. BROWN: Did you ever find yourself tempted to sort of become rustic or --

MS. BISCHOFF: Never.

MR. BROWN: Nothing like that.

MS. BISCHOFF: Never. I wanted my New York comfort in Hartland, and I loved giving parties. That was lots of fun. When I got the pool, we would have cocktails over on the terrace here, then go over and have a buffet supper in the studio, and then we'd go swimming, lots of fun, and then lovely Christmas parties.

MR. BROWN: You had some memorable costume parties, didn't you?

MS. BISCHOFF: I had three costume parties. They were lots of fun.

MR. BROWN: They were.

MS. BISCHOFF: Yeah. I think giving them was as much fun for me as it was for the people to come. I love the preparation of a party.

MR. BROWN: Do you? What do you think there is in it, in the preparation, that appeals to you?

MS. BISCHOFF: It's creative. You really -- to be a good hostess, you've got to do it nicely. You can't have sloppiness, and I think you need pretty things to be a good hostess, and also not be a dolt, which is rather important.

MR. BROWN: Did you have sometimes certain themes for your parties?

MS. BISCHOFF: Yes. The first was just a costume party, and people came -- they came in whatever they wanted to come, and the second one was a *Fête Galante*, and the third one was an opera, come as your favorite role in opera. That was lots of fun. I had a tent in the middle of the

turn-around.

I think you've covered my life.

[Interruption in recording.]

MS. BISCHOFF: It was so different, and one of the -- I think the best thing I wrote was a story about the telephone operator here, who shut the telephone off at 9 o'clock every night, no matter what it was, but she -- I think you may -- if you read that -- she's the one who let the -- did I have that -- no, I didn't have that in the dog book. It was in an article that appeared in *Vermont Life*. She knew when my dog was going to have puppies, and she got me the vet after closing office. She was just -- we got to be very good friends.

Well, that story, I think, was the -- I enjoyed that more than any other, almost, and I have a -- not this nice woman -- a wonderful native Vermonter for 31 years who is the most wonderful subject for a story, but I never wrote it, because I knew she'd leave me if I did.

MR. BROWN: What is it about some of these Vermonters that has appealed to you?

MS. BISCHOFF: How they are themselves. There's no side to them at all.

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MS. BISCHOFF: This woman has no running water in her house. It's a shack. She has an outhouse, summer and winter. She owns 200 acres which people want to buy from her, and she won't do it. She lives so primitively, it's just awful, but she's an awfully nice, good woman.

I enjoy her very much, but her love life is so interesting. She always has these long skinny dark-faced lovers. She always had a man. She's 74 now. She still has a man. Her husband is dead now, and the other man that I knew her to be with is dead. But she has a new one.

That would be a wonderful story, but you would have to get all that Vermont coloring in, and you'd be absolutely nobody here anymore, because when the telephone story appeared in the *Vermont Life*, one of the very nice men -- he said when I first started reading the story, I thought I'm going to be very angry at her, and he loved me at the end, because she came out as they all knew her.

They are very particular what you write and say about them, and I'm still an outlander. I'm never accepted, but I don't care about it. I'm a New Yorker and I always will be, and that's all.

[END OF RECORDING.]

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