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Oral history interview with Isabel Bishop, 1959 May 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Isabel Bishop on May 29, 1959. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by John D. Morse for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JOHN MORSE: This is a tape-recorded interview with the American artist, Isabel Bishop, regarding her painting techniques. It is being recorded in the offices of the Archives of American Art at 14 West Fortieth Street in New York City on May 28, 1959. John D. Morse speaking. Miss Bishop, suppose we follow the main steps in making any picture -- yours of course in this case -- the stretcher, the support, the ground, the paint layer, and the protective varnish film.

ISABEL BISHOP: When I paint on a canvas, I use a stretcher bought at Delsemme's Artists Material Company which is a place I have patronized for about twenty-five years, and the stretcher is called "Ansco." I didn't notice where it was manufactured, and I don't remember the price.

JOHN MORSE: You don't remember the price?

ISABEL BISHOP: But they are regular stretchers, not just nailed together pieces of wood.

JOHN MORSE: They have keys in them?

ISABEL BISHOP: They have keys, yes.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I understand that it is difficult to find them these days. Normally people are so easily content with simply what's in the store.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I should imagine this because of the passion now for painting extremely large, and large stretchers are a great problem. They're hard to buy and there have to be supports in the middle as well as just around the edge. Sometimes several through the middle.

JOHN MORSE: I understand that you paint primarily on -- you use another support, beside . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well, I like best to paint on panels because of the high reflecting surface of Gesso.

JOHN MORSE: What kind of panels?

ISABEL BISHOP: Usually prestwood, untempered, but sometimes tempered. I don't really know which is the best from the point of view of permanence, but the untempered is easier to use. It is not quite so heavy. In both cases, I rough up the surface which I do think is important. I know the commercial manufacturers of panels don't do this. I take a sharp pointed instrument and score the panel thoroughly in every direction so that it loses that firm resistant surface and becomes more absorbent.

JOHN MORSE: And then you size it?

ISABEL BISHOP: And then I make a gesso myself of rabbit skin glue, one part and the other part -- being two parts all together -- is half gypsum and half titanium oxide. I use two volumes of this powdered mixture to one volume of water, and allow this mixture to soak overnight so that the glue expands. After heating, I water the gesso down so as to get it quite thin and use eight coats on each side of the panel so that there is the same amount of ground on both sides.

JOHN MORSE: Why do you put it on the reverse side too?

ISABEL BISHOP: To avoid warping.

JOHN MORSE: Oh, I see. Eight coats, you say. How long do you allow it to dry between each coat of this gesso?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I let them dry until they feel dry, two or three hours.

JOHN MORSE: A number of hours.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I don't put a coat on when a former coat is tacky.

JOHN MORSE: So it would take at least a week or you to prepare a . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, no, it doesn't because they do dry. You see, they're quite thin and they do dry. I practically always put two coats a day on and . . . about four days, I guess.

JOHN MORSE: How thick a coat is it? Is it so thin that it could not be measured in inches?

ISABEL BISHOP: It could be measured, but I don't know what the thickness is. I don't know what part of an inch it is, but it is appreciable. I mean if you break a panel, or . . . .

JOHN MORSE: The eight coats, would they be as thick, say, as a piece of ordinary letter paper?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, I think equal to seven or eight.

JOHN MORSE: Seven or eight sheets.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I think that.

JOHN MORSE: And then on top of the gesso, is there a ground?

ISABEL BISHOP: The gesso is the ground. It has to be sandpapered down until it is smooth and then I spray it with a formalin solution of three percent . . .

JOHN MORSE: Three percent formalin?

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . to reduce the absorbency. This works pretty well.

JOHN MORSE: The formalin solution, is it in a sense acting as another size?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, it isn't. It just simply acts chemically on the gesso to tighten it up. It doesn't seal it at all; it just simply makes it less absorbent.

JOHN MORSE: How long do you let the formalin solution dry?

ISABEL BISHOP: A couple of hours, I would say.

JOHN MORSE: A couple of hours, that's enough?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well then, though, there is another step which is a striping. This is a notion of Doerner's as to Rubens' method, and I find it aesthetically so satisfying. I hope it's all right chemically. I make a solution of powdered charcoal and powdered flake white and make this very liquid with a solution of a half a teaspoon of gelatin, ordinary cooking gelatin, dissolved in a cup of warm water, and I brush this on, this solution of powdered charcoal and powdered white, in a rather rough way, that is allowing the brush strokes to show and wanting them to show.

JOHN MORSE: I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: This gives me a kind of delightful variation in this white surface and the surface, I think, still has a tremendous reflecting power but its whiteness is reduced and it has a silvery tone, a lively silvery tone.

JOHN MORSE: I see. And you say that Doerner feels that Rubens did this?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes, of course, you can see it in Rubens' sketches.

JOHN MORSE: I see, on canvas.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, on panels.

JOHN MORSE: On panels, of course.

ISABEL BISHOP: It is not on Rubens' canvas pictures. It's only on the panel pictures, even on the large ones that you can see it. But the canvas pictures, of course, had a solid grey ground, a solid gray tone on which he painted. And I do that too on canvas pictures . . . . Usually with tempera, I lay a gray ground, silvery grey.

JOHN MORSE: Well, how do you treat a canvas support differently from this method of treating a panel?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think I should say that I do use a Winsor-Newton canvas . . .

JOHN MORSE: Winsor-Newton canvas.

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . called Hergo, whatever that means. It's a nice rather fine canvas.

JOHN MORSE: And how do you prepare it?

ISABEL BISHOP: And in that case, of course, I don't use any ground. Since the canvas is prepared. But over that I use a grey simply to change the color, a grey tone, even, not this time with brush strokes, but even, and as even as I can get it. I usually do that with tempera . . .

JOHN MORSE: With tempera. I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . even though it's an oil prime ground. And of course it doesn't come out perfectly even, the paint crawls a little bit, but it's so nice to have the tone dry so quickly.

JOHN MORSE: Oh, I see, I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: But sometimes I use turpentine and oil color, very think, instead of tempera.

JOHN MORSE: Well, does that bring us to the next layer of the painting, that is, the paint itself?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I think so. In both cases, in both the panel and the canvas but much more with the panel, I start painting with tempera. I use Martini tempera. I have made egg emulsion tempera myself and did for years, but the Martini seems to be satisfactory, so I use it. I think it's the only egg emulsion tempera that is manufactured.

JOHN MORSE: And is it not available at most art supply stores?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it isn't available everywhere, but it has been made for many years, and I've talked with Mr. Martini about its qualities because I did have some trouble which I will relate later. But in the case of panels especially, I find it extremely delightful to start with tempera. For one thing, of course, because you can proceed quickly but mostly because you can work with white, a nice dry bone-like white in a kind of a thread-like manner, if you like. The trouble there is to be sure that the tempera is going to adhere, the trouble at the time -- I have had with pictures later had been caused -- I didn't see it at the time, by the too thick white, which did not have enough connection with the panel because the tempera, you see, dries out so. It hasn't a great deal of hinder.

JOHN MORSE: I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: The binder dries so completely even though it is egg emulsion, you have to have something . . . . I find that if I lay a little damar varnish on the panel, dab it off so that it's merely tacky, and then paint into that with tempera, that is, with the white which I use opaquely, and I feel that will cause strong and lasting adhesion of the paint to the panel.

JOHN MORSE: Damar varnish, then, provides a sort of binder?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: And does Mr. Martini himself think that this is a good idea?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think that he does, yes. He suggested using his egg emulsion medium, but I think that I believe a little more in the Damar, which dries quickly also.

JOHN MORSE: Could that be the reason why many tempera paintings, even today, have flaked off? Is this the basic trouble?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think so. I think the trouble is here. In fact, Doerner quotes some German painter as saying, "It's all right to paint with anything that you can make stick."

JOHN MORSE: Well then, has this proved fairly satisfactory with your paintings?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I hope so. You see, it was only after some years that my paintings showed this defect, this flaking. It's only after years, and I've had them back from museums and places where they were owned to mend them. I've mended them by using damar on the flaked-off places, dabbing it off, and painting thin with white and oil color. I have painted this way in my recent work. But I don't know; there hasn't been enough time yet.

JOHN MORSE: How long will it take before we'll know?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, I think it might take about five years.

JOHN MORSE: Well, that's very interesting and very valuable to have. Now, let's get on with the paint itself although the matter here at this point is underpainting and overpainting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Well, underpainting is what I had been speaking of. I don't like a systematic underpainting, that is, an underpainting which would be a grisaille and then colored afterward. That has no aesthetic appeal for me. It seems dead to me and besides I never know before I start what the picture is going to be, which would be necessary in order to use a systematic underpainting. But tempera, I find if I use very few colors with it, does what I want it to do. As a first step, I use just yellow-ochre, black and white.

JOHN MORSE: Yellow-ocher, black and white is the first step?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: And this is what you mean by . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: And possibly just a little raw umber but nothing else, no red.

JOHN MORSE: What oil pigments do you use? Any of the commercial brands?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, Winsor-Newton.

JOHN MORSE: Winsor-Newton, those of course are English-made and do not come under the Bureau of Standards.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and I wish they did. I don't like that. I dislike very much to find that a Winsor-Newton varnish, for instance, has no analysis on its label of its materials. I think it's very wrong, and therefore I don't use the Winsor-Newton varnish.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I suppose they must feel that they've been doing it for so many years that they are self-tested.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, but I think, though, that it's very important to know what's in a varnish or medium because of the different methods different artists use. One artist's method might make a certain kid of varnish work and another's not. Then one might use a paint that doesn't dry for several years and a particular varnish could be very wrong to use over it. Everybody ought to know what they are using.

JOHN MORSE: Well, now we have this first layer of pigment, haven't we, on your picture . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: . . . yellow-ochre, as you say, a kind of underpainting.

ISABEL BISHOP: A kind of underpainting.

JOHN MORSE: Now what comes next?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, then I give it a very light varnish of diluted damar.

JOHN MORSE: Diluted damar, at this point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, very diluted, just simply to give the surface a uniform reflecting -- and to make it less absorbent.

JOHN MORSE: How do you dilute damar?

ISABEL BISHOP: With turpentine. Damar is a turpentine varnish.

JOHN MORSE: And how long do you allow this to dry before you proceed with the picture?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it dries very quickly -- I suppose in a couple of hours, or if you do use retouching varnish, it dries in twenty minutes. As far as I know, it's all right to use retouching varnish -- also damar -- in that way, to separate the under from the over painting.

JOHN MORSE: And then what? Let's go on with this painting -- I certainly can't imagine what it is going to look like.

ISABEL BISHOP: (Laughter) I can't either. Unfortunately these pictures . . . I get perhaps two done a year, working every day. It is very hard to achieve a methods that makes this possible. Unfortunately that's the way my imagination works.

JOHN MORSE: Well, you remind me to ask a question here. We've been working for a long time on this picture. About how many weeks have passed to reach this stage?

ISABEL BISHOP: This much would be done probably in a couple of days. Whatever the notion was, it has simply started on its way to being a painting by this means.

JOHN MORSE: By this time.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, just sort of started on its way, really as a drawing for the painting. It just has this little heightening of tempera. The tempera just heightens it really.

JOHN MORSE: Do you do any drawing on the panel?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, I forgot to mention that. I usually trace the drawing on with graphite paper. That is, whatever pencil is made of -- graphite.

JOHN MORSE: Graphite, yes, and on to what layer does that drawing go?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I usually draw immediately on the white panel and then put the striping on top.

JOHN MORSE: Well, by the time you finish the white panel, as you call it, you have some idea of what the picture is going to be like.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes, from the drawing.

JOHN MORSE: You have the drawing.

ISABEL BISHOP: But what's going to be in the painting, heaven knows, or whether it will have to go out the window . . . .

JOHN MORSE: Well, all right. We've finished with the underpainting. What comes next? The problem, as you say, now comes the difficulty.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well, now ideally I follow Doerner's idea of Rubens' method and that is to give the whole a light tone of an ochre-ish color that can move in any direction -- that is with oil. And then to paint into that with a restrained color which could again move in any direction. That's what I try to do, but the trouble is that, if the picture gets going in a direction that doesn't answer, it has to be washed out. The beauty of the tempera underneath, I find, is that you can wash the picture down with turpentine as hard as you want and you never disturb the egg emulsion tempera. I've tried using casein tempera, and I have found that turpentine disturbs it so there is no point in using it because what you want is that hard thing under there that will have its sparkle no matter how much scrub it. In fact, sometimes the panel gets quite sensuous by being rubbed down to the tempera.

JOHN MORSE: Well, now that you are beginning to use more pronounced colors, you're still working in tempera, however?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, this is after the varnish over the tempera. This is now oil paint.

JOHN MORSE: Oil, this is straight oil?

ISABEL BISHOP: But then I go back to tempera again sometimes on top, and I hope that is all right. Doerner thinks it is.

JOHN MORSE: Well, it seems to work in your pictures very well.

ISABEL BISHOP: And especially in changing a part without washing it out, I find it suitable to lay on a striping of opaque tempera -- not thick though, just sufficient to obliterate what is underneath -- but in stripes, just a neutral grey and then to paint in oil . . . . The spot has a little vibration which isn't quite like painting in oil over an oil. It has a little more life . . . .

JOHN MORSE: I see. Then with your oil layer, you're mixing -- correct me if I'm wrong here -- you're mixing Winsor-Newton pigments with straight linseed oil.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, no, no, with the medium which I make, which is a half part Venice turpentine.

JOHN MORSE: Venice turpentine?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, one part damar, which is made by Taubes (he learned it from Doerner) and one part linseed oil and about five or six parts of turpentine.

JOHN MORSE: Oh, I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: One adds just a little bit of the Venice turpentine which is a lovely material in that small amount.

JOHN MORSE: And you arrived at this particular mixture just simply because it seemed to work well for you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, it's a . . . I don't love Doerner only for his recipes, but this one I think is a Doerner recipe.

JOHN MORSE: But you say here interpreted by Frederick Taubes.

ISABEL BISHOP: Taubes has written books on method, after his studies with Doerner in Germany, and I think probably I got it from him. I don't think there is anything that could be wrong with these methods. It is a very nice medium. It is very simple.

JOHN MORSE: It seems to have considerable precedent, anyway.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

JOHN MORSE: And how long do you allow for drying between two applications of oil paint? How long does it take to dry?

ISABEL BISHOP: Of course, if the paint were thick it would be different from if it were applied thinly.

JOHN MORSE: But this medium of yours is very thin.

ISABEL BISHOP: But you don't use much medium if you want thick paint! You just perhaps use it at the tube consistency. But if you do that, I think it's important to paint into varnish, that is into damar varnish that is laid on and dabbed off. This of course requires that what's underneath be reasonably dry. It couldn't be wet. But the application of paint wouldn't lock up what is underneath, either, I think.

JOHN MORSE: Now is this technique that you're discussing . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: But then there is the aesthetic meaning. I think that the whole problem is so complex because of aesthetic needs not being exactly coincidental with the needs for permanence. They must be made to coincide as far as possible, but they are not identical.

JOHN MORSE: Yes, but let me just set this straight in my own mind. Are you saying that aesthetic needs cannot always coincide with the needs of durability or permanence?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, they must coincide, but they don't have the same impulse, you see. I mean you have an impulse to lay on paint because of its speaking back to you in a certain way, but then you have to take pains to see that that isn't going to be bad, you k now. The desire for permanence is one thing and the impulse toward whatever modicum of expressiveness . . . .

JOHN MORSE: Incidentally in this connection, Miss Cowdrey, my associate here, reported to me that one time at Smith College in the museum there, Ben Shahn was in town and went to the museum and saw one of his old paintings, and it was having some difficulty. It was flaking off here and there; it was a tempera, and he made what seems to be a very extraordinary remark. It was that paintings don't need to last more than twenty-five years anyway.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, well, I just say I think that was extraordinary on the part of Ben Shahn! I take the exactly opposite view, that one can only hope there will be some reason to save the picture, but it must be saveable, absolutely.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I'm happy to hear that you do not subscribe to this philosophy of expendability.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I do not. I certainly don't. It's such a romantic notion to me, a romantic notion, you know, as it were. You make a gesture into the air, and it disappears. That's all. The gesture was made.

JOHN MORSE: Now back to the technique. Would you call the process that you have been describing of a coat of

varnish, your own varnish and then paint? Would you call this overpainting? Is this what you mean by overpainting?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, that's overpainting in the sense that it's what comes over the underpainting, but it isn't what I meant by painting over and over which is such a hard thing.

JOHN MORSE: What do you mean by that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, if the picture isn't answering back to you . . . that's the only way I can think of putting it . . .

JOHN MORSE: A very apt phrase.

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . you have to just try one thing and another, and each time you do, it makes another physical problem. Each time you try something over something else, it's a new problem physically. And each step always after that becomes problematical in two ways: one, that it may make cracks and a situation for darkening, and on the other hand, it may make a most awful dullness in the paint so that aesthetically it's just dreadful.

JOHN MORSE: Well, when you are actually applying the paint with the brush, at that very moment of application, are you sometimes aware of the questions: will this stick? will this fall off? or will this last? Is that in your mind? You think about that when you sell it, when parting with it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I do think after having painted for about thirty years or so, you do think about it at the time in a way. That is you know the paint should go on in a certain way and not in some other way because you've felt for many years that one method has a better chance for permanence than the other. I mean tormented paint is bad from the point of view of permanence as well as aesthetically bad.

JOHN MORSE: Tormented paint? That's an interesting phrase. By that you mean paint that you've worked over?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, paint that you've fussed a lot with while it's still tacky.

JOHN MORSE: And normally . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's interesting that that should just be bad physically. It's so bad aesthetically.

JOHN MORSE: Yeah, there's a point of coincidence.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, indeed, certainly there's more coincidence than not. But just a few times there isn't. For instance, just this matter of working over and over. A complex method I mean from the point of view of permanence; it's not good.

JOHN MORSE: I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: It really isn't, and you have to just keep watching and try to obviate the adverse things that may happen.

JOHN MORSE: Well, if I may say so, your pictures don't look as it they had been tormented.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I don't think they've darkened too much. I really don't think so. I've had pictures back for flaking, but I've never found that they've darkened. So there's that, you see, and that's one good thing because working over and over might cause a situation for darkening very easily. It's been pointed out that -- well Doerner certainly feels it -- that a direct painting lightly done and left has about the best chance for permanency, but aesthetically the problem may be quite different. If an artist has that gift for spontaneous creation, he is very lucky -- to be able to make his expression in that way. But if he can't, then he has to just try to keep hedging, don't you see, and try to keep the situation as good as he can.

JOHN MORSE: You mentioned earlier that you finished possibly two pictures a year. This is the process that is time-consuming.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, that's it. It's going backwards and forwards on it and changing it and perhaps sawing down the panel and scraping and all of that which would never be recommended as a method. It's only just an unfortunate necessity.

JOHN MORSE: Well, that's the way you work.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: You mentioned your disappointment at seeing one of two paintings begin to flake or fall. Now what

part of the painting surface was it that flaked, this overpoint that you've been talking about?

ISABEL BISHOP: Now that's interesting. The worst example of that was a picture in St. Louis -- it's in St. Louis now, but this happened several years ago. They wrote to me and I asked them to send the picture, and they said, in the letter, that their temperature swings were terrific, and that they'd had a great deal of trouble with many paintings because of their temperature swings and dampness and dryness swings. But I had painted that picture in a kind of a medium that I never used again. The formula was Mr. Maroger's. It was a kind of a mayonnaise mixture. It was an emulsion, sort of like mayonnaise.

JOHN MORSE: Yes, he was working in Baltimore at the time.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, that was before he went to Baltimore. He was here, and I took the picture to him. But that medium was . . . I blamed it on the medium. The St. Louis people said that it was partly blameable on their situation there.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I've heard this about some other painters and other pictures.

ISABEL BISHOP: Have you?

JOHN MORSE: Yes, I remember Reginald Marsh went through a terrible time with that Maroger medium.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think that he did indeed . . . I think he went through a terrible time with it, but I didn't think it was so much that it flaked off as that it was just unpleasant, in his use of it.

JOHN MORSE: I see. But the painting in St. Louis, what was the title of that, by the way? I have trouble recalling it.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it's called Encounter. It's a man and a woman -- the man's leaning up against a building and the woman is standing in front of him.

JOHN MORSE: That was done with the Maroger medium?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, but I never used it again.

JOHN MORSE: And was it the outer surface of the paint that flaked off or did it come from underneath?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it didn't flake off in the opaque parts. That was curious. It came off in half opaque, what you call half-covering tones.

JOHN MORSE: Oh, I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: It flaked off.

JOHN MORSE: Well, that means, back to the German who said it's all right to paint with anything that you can make stick. Did you have enough binder?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think there was enough binder there. It's just that I suppose in the opaque part, one had the binder plus the oil in the tube paint . . . I used this with tube colors, mixing the tube colors half and half with this mayonnaise, you see, so that I suppose that as you say where it was opaque, it had enough binder.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I can well understand why you've gone back to your own painting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well then, I was very disappointed to see that a picture at the Metropolitan Museum had a patch on it that simply rose up. It was the most disturbing thing. I saw it and they saw it too.

JOHN MORSE: A blister?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, a blister. They saw it too and they mended it perfectly. And Mr. Hale mentioned that they had found no difficulty in dealing with that situation.

JOHN MORSE: How do you account for that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, that was painted at a time when I didn't realize that tempera was dangerous in this respect.

JOHN MORSE: I see.

ISABEL BISHOP: And in fact I'm not quite sure it mightn't have been my striping that caused it. But by striping,

perhaps which may have had too much gelatin in it. I wonder if that could be.

JOHN MORSE: But this, has it happened on other pictures?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, that hasn't. I have had trouble with little pieces flaking right off, down to the panel. And in that case I have thought that it was simply that I didn't lay the tempera into a dabbed off damar.

JOHN MORSE: This really leads me to another question I wanted to ask you. Do you keep any record of your paintings?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I don't. Do you think one should?

JOHN MORSE: Well, I only heard the other day from Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon Keck that Georgia O'Keeffe does this. She has a notebook in which she has a record of the day the painting was done, the temperature, the humidity, the kind or canvas or support and so on, and a sample of it even.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think that's very laudable. I think it does imply a kind of attitude that it's very hard to take about one's own work.

JOHN MORSE: Well, not everyone is built like that, so methodical.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, and not everyone just starts a painting and just works it through right to the end, and there it is, as I think she does. I mean I think, as far as I know, she paints in this way, and it's admirable, but it is to me very uninteresting. I mean the canvas just simply has a thin even layer of paint, nothing else. There is nothing under it, no vibrations, just a . . . .

JOHN MORSE: No cause for damage.

ISABEL BISHOP: Less cause for damage, and so it's ironic that she should take this extreme amount of trouble just when the precautions are not so necessary. I mean nothing could happen to the paint as she uses it, except it could just get dark.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I'm sure, however, that you do wish you could remember what went on under that blister in that painting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, that's very true. I think it would be a good thing to do.

JOHN MORSE: And yet I can see how that might impede the progress.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, because, you see, you're always at the point of throwing the thing away, and so it's harder to put down in the notebook just what you're going to throw away. It would be better to do it, though.

JOHN MORSE: Yes, I should think it would. You referred to Doerner. You use his book on painting. What is the title, The Painter's Materials?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well I use his book for inspiration because of his consideration of method from the point of view of its aesthetic meaning. In his discussion of the techniques of the old masters you find this, and that is to me the true relation to method. You see, consideration of permanence must be there, but the way you say a thing is part of what you say.

JOHN MORSE: Yes, of course. Now, back to this picture in the Metropolitan with the unfortunate blister, which, however, is fortunately cured . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, yes it is.

JOHN MORSE: . . . couldn't Mr. Murray Pease up there have told you his notion or his theory?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I think I ought to ask him.

JOHN MORSE: I should think that would be helpful.

ISABEL BISHOP: I really ought to ask him.

JOHN MORSE: And I'm sure that he'd be more than glad . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm glad you suggested it. I didn't think of bothering him, and I will bother him.

JOHN MORSE: Well, surely it was he who fixed it.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I should think so because the picture disappeared and then it came back mended.

JOHN MORSE: Well, then he might be able to help you forestall any blistering in the future.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I will ask him.

JOHN MORSE: What are you doing at the moment? What are you working on, and is what you are working on . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm working on a canvas painting, and I'm thinking of starting over again on a panel today. It's a subject entirely new. Lately I have been really experimenting with subjects that I never would have thought of tackling before. The figures in this picture are hardly discernable, I'm sorry to say. I think that, I hope that they'll become a little more discernable. There is something very moving to me, visually, and also in its meaning, in a lunch counter at the corner of Twenty-third Street and Fifth Avenue. It's an open sort of plan in hot weather, and it's closed . . . it's open in hot weather and closed with glass in cold. And it has a fascinating, beautiful warmth and at the same time it's backed by mirrors which reflect the cool of the street and the outside world. And figures seem phantasmagorical in there as you look at the place from across the street because they're both reflected and seen directly. Well, I love it, but how to make this say what I feel about it, I don't know. But I've been working on this for a couple of months. I've made endless small sketches, not, I'm afraid, with the aim of making the subject more literally right, but simply to keep the feeling that I have about it alive.

JOHN MORSE: Is there a particular medium, I mean your way of painting, you think it will lend itself to this?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I've tried something absurd, I think, really. And that is to roll to paint on the canvas with an etching roller, in part.

JOHN MORSE: How does it work?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it's very sensuous. The trouble is in working over it. You can't. That's the trouble and yet it wasn't enough as it was. I'm having trouble. I am having to scrape it now. I put a rather dark veil in this case, on the canvas instead of the grey, a dark burnt umber veil, and let that dry. And then I sketched on that with white tempera lightly, and then painted the counter in very opaque white paint, half oil and half tempera mixed together which I think is all right -- so it has a tremendous lot of reflecting power, and then this part above this mysterious world of mirrors and things, I painted on with a roller, an etching roller, in white and ochre tones. It was a lot of fun, but perhaps I'll have to try it again. This time . . . .

JOHN MORSE: I"m very eager to see it. Have you ever tried, and have you found it congenial to what you want to say, watercolor?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, what I have had in some watercolor shows have been tempera paintings. I mean relatively transparent tempera, you know. Not polychromatic things.

JOHN MORSE: Then the straight watercolor is not congenial to you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

JOHN MORSE: Why, do you think? I'm interested.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know, really, because I do love wash drawing. I just love wash drawing. I mean wash is so beautiful to me. Well, I think the reason is that I really am so interested and have been all these years in figurative work, and I don't think watercolor is very suited to it, and I've never painted landscape. But wash drawings have the line, the black and white, that you don't have in watercolor, and then a wash just enriches it a little bit.

JOHN MORSE: I think that's very likely . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: And I think that watercolor is seldom successful in rendering figures.

JOHN MORSE: The best ones have been landscapes without question.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I think so.

JOHN MORSE: One other question which this discussion reminds me of. You were a student of Kenneth Hayes Miller.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: And were some of these techniques that you've used and used so successfully stressed by him? Did you learn some of them from Mr. Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: Miller's method was different, I think, but Miller's greatest quality as a teacher -- by far his greatest quality -- was that he pointed to the masters so that -- I mean he pointed, he addressed his students to the masters. And, in going abroad, as I have many times to look at the museums -- I derived this method myself. Miller didn't paint on panels very much, hardly at all. And he didn't use striping. He didn't want that vibration. He did use a veil, but his method, his aim was a little different. He didn't want a sense of mobility which intrigues me forever. Mobility -- that's quite a different aim from the wish to make a formal static series, you know.

JOHN MORSE: Did he -- and I'll tell you why I ask this question in a moment -- did he spend much time in his classes on techniques, on such subjects as we're discussing here this morning?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, he as well as Doerner did make a point of the aesthetic meaning of method. But he stressed only the art itself, you know, to a great extent. But method was not something one could just forget, and just throw paint around. That was quite opposite to his point of view.

JOHN MORSE: But the actual methods themselves, did he take time out in class from -- I don't know how he works -- from his criticism to talk about how to size a canvas or a panel?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, he didn't.

JOHN MORSE: Where did you learn that then, from books?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and also Mayer. You see, long ago, before Ralph Mayer wrote any books, he had a few artists come in and he talked to them, and I went there and listened to those talks. I wrote down the formulas from him in those talks.

JOHN MORSE: Well, the reason I bring this up is that in the interview I mentioned a moment ago with Sheldon Keck and his wife, Caroline, they deplored this lack of technical training in art schools. They say that's why they're having so much business these days. Paintings fall apart.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well, I think the clue to it is this inseparability of aesthetic aim and method, so that if an art school attempts to teach method, they're teaching an aesthetic aim at the same time, and they have to recognize that. Now for instance Miller really wanted his students to underpaint in a kind of grisaille manner. He felt that this was the most serious method that had been used throughout the past to render the form and then color it. But there is a very definite aesthetic aim in that. It is unsuited to some aims, entirely unsuited. He didn't make this clear. So some of his students were very disillusioned and perhaps just felt that his concept was all very binding, very constricting, you see, that attitude toward strictness of method, without deliberate consideration of the individual aim.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I of course can see almost a dichotomy of aesthetic concern and method.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, but on the other hand, even these action painters and so on must really not take the view of Ben Shahn. I mean it's really up to them to devise the methods for action painting that will stay on the canvas, and I must say I am not impressed with it.

JOHN MORSE: Well, if they don't seem to care in the first place, there's very little chance that . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: But they don't care. It's quite a comment on their aesthetic aims, I think.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I should tell you, referring again to this interview with the Kecks. They reported to me that they did have in their shop a painting by Robert Motherwell owned by Governor and Mrs. Rockefeller. It was falling apart and could not be restored, just hopeless.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think that is interesting. I think that is a very severe comment on the aesthetic aim.

JOHN MORSE: Well, tell me another thing, back to the League -- you studied there for a number of years. Does anyone at the League talk about technique, talk about the things we've been talking about this morning?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, just after my day, they had a man who had studied with Doerner.

ISABEL BISHOP: What was his name? I can't think. But in any case, he was there just for the purpose of teaching the results of Doerner's analysis.

JOHN MORSE: What we're talking about here.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and I think if you could have someone who is really knowledgeable go into it as far as possible apart from aesthetic aim, but relating the two, it would be very useful. Then in fact the Skowhegan school makes an effort in this direction. They have some technical person come there and criticize for a week each summer just from the point of view of . . .

JOHN MORSE: Technique.

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . physical permanence.

JOHN MORSE: It would seem to me that that's essential.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: In the older days, the painters learned it as a matter of course.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes, of course.

JOHN MORSE: So it has to be learned.

ISABEL BISHOP: You know really I was so delighted yesterday when someone at your meeting deplored Vasari's misinformation, and I really think that Vasari is deplorable. When you think of what he could have given you, the knowledge of the studios, and he just simply let it all go down the drain! And this is of course what you're trying to avoid.

JOHN MORSE: Well, we're trying to correct that this very morning with your generosity. But it still surprises me that not enough people -- I'm not a painter, I'm an art historian -- it surprises me that I know more about how to put a picture together just from theory than many painters I talk to. It seems to me that many painters I talk to do not seem to know exactly what they've been doing as you do.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I do take it seriously, very seriously, and that's really why I wanted so much this opportunity. But then you were speaking about varnish; I think you had a question about varnish.

JOHN MORSE: Yes, as a matter of fact that was my final question, the protective film of varnish.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I usually give a painting a final varnish if I can because -- fortunately they do go out of my hands mostly -- I think it's right to varnish them. I wouldn't like to varnish one within one or two years of its having left my hands. So when I can get them back, I do varnish them, or go where they are and varnish them.

JOHN MORSE: You would like your paintings to dry one or two years?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: And you don't varnish them unless you can get at them after such a length of time?

ISABEL BISHOP: Then I give them just retouching varnish which of course is temporary.

JOHN MORSE: Well, doesn't the retouching varnish then give it some protection?

ISABEL BISHOP: I suppose a little, but very soon it volatilizes.

JOHN MORSE: Well, that is an unfortunate situation.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I really don't think it matters because I do use some varnish in painting them, you see. I mean this varnish that I speak of laying paint into isn't my medium, it's damar itself which is a much faster drying substance than this medium is and holds the paint permanently, you see. There's no linseed oil. It's simply if a part of the painting you're going to paint on is dry as far as you can see, you lay on a little damar which is Taube's formula. The varnish is two to one, two parts turpentine to one of damar -- and paint into it. -- damar crystals.

JOHN MORSE: Oh, I see, yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: And dab that off with a clean cloth so that it is just tacky, and then lay some opaque paint into that. I must say I believe in that. I think that it will hold and that there's sufficient binder present.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I've always understood that the final varnish coat was simply a protection, that's all.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, but it shouldn't be put on until the paint is really dry, and how are you going to know, you see, if you have several layers.

JOHN MORSE: True.

ISABEL BISHOP: I should think one year, maybe you'll ask Mr. Keck, but I should think one year. In fact, the books say so. Wait about a year.

JOHN MORSE: Wait about a year, but if you've sold the picture in the meantime, why couldn't you do this? Why couldn't you put on the back of each picture that leaves your studio . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: I should.

JOHN MORSE: . . . this picture should be varnished and the date.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and tell them with what. Now I got a picture which was flaking back because I asked them to send it to me from the Pennsylvania Academy, I saw it down there. It was quite early, about 1935 that I painted it, and I was laying in tempera striping which I love to do because of a certain glitter you can get. It has to be quite thick, and it has to have real body, threads, threads across and you get a little glitter. These threads were popping off, and I got the painting back, but they had varnished it. I don't know what the varnish was, but it was a shiny varnish that I thought was quite distressing.

JOHN MORSE: You had to take it all off?

ISABEL BISHOP: I couldn't get it all off, but I had to get it off somewhat on the part I was working on, but I wish they would use a little more aesthetically agreeable varnish. I mean you can use a varnish with a little wax in it that's much much nicer.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I think back to our idea of your putting data on the back of the picture; you should also put what kind of varnish to use.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, well I noticed that the Whitney Museum, which did buy a picture lately, sent me a form to fill out asking for all the information you've asked for here.

JOHN MORSE: Really?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and so they get this information evidently on every painting they buy.

JOHN MORSE: How excellent! I didn't know they were doing that, very good. Well, the time is over, however, for this morning. We're very glad to have this for the Archives, and we thank you very much.

ISABEL BISHOP: Could I just interrupt with one sentence?

JOHN MORSE: Of course.

ISABEL BISHOP: And that is that I do find that etching which I do carry on is refreshing to me as a painter because of the most definite requirements of record so that you really are back on the track of one step having to follow another, you know. I think the change to etching is useful in that way.

JOHN MORSE: And you know they'll last forever.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, yes.

JOHN MORSE: Well, thanks again, Miss Bishop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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