



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Norma G. Berger
regarding Marsden Hartley, 1973 June 28**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Norma G. Berger on June 28, 1973. The interview took place in Boston, MA, and was conducted 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 Norma G. Berger, the niece of Marsden Hartley, in Boston, Massachusetts, and the date is June 28th, 1973, and this is Robert Brown, the interviewer.

I thought we'd start out, as I suggested to you and thinking about here, with some of your earliest memories of your uncle, Marsden Hartley.

NORMA BERGER: Well, I recall how he used to come to our house so frequently and --

MR. BROWN: This was in Cleveland?

MS. BERGER: In Cleveland, and he -- he was just -- he loved to come. He used to love to come for meals and -- and he loved to play with the dog we had, a pug dog, and he just used to laugh so hilariously at the antics of that dog, and then he -- he used to -- in one of his letters that I read last night, he spoke about how he used to go and be waiting around on Christmas Eve until I went to bed so he -- he would help trim the Christmas tree and up until recent years, I had two ornaments that he had given me that I had had on our tree every year after that and I finally -- I don't know what became of them.

MR. BROWN: When was that that -- was this when you were a small child?

MS. BERGER: This was -- yeah. It was before my school days even and he even wrote letters to me then which my mother would read to me and she must have written some things to him, supposedly letters from me, you know, and then he would answer them just as though I had really written them.

MR. BROWN: She was very close to her brother?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, she and Uncle Ed used to -- when they were children, they used to -- of course, they lived in Maine and they used to go wandering around through the pastures and in the country and around town and she had told me how he would -- he would see a pretty stone or a piece of colored glass, he would always pick it up. He was only -- well, that was before he was seven years old, before his mother went, but he was always attracted by color.

MR. BROWN: He was younger than your mother?

MS. BERGER: Yes, I think he was several years younger than my mother, and when he was seven years old, their mother was very ill and that made a very deep impression on him and he was -- he just felt from the time his mother died that he was alone in the world and he never got over it and always had such a horror of death and that was why he -- when he came to visit me when -- his

last visit, he had told me the whole story of his life and told about how -- how terrible it was to see his mother lying there on the -- her head on the pillow, her face so white and finally she died, and then the funeral, a black hearse and all the people, the relatives and friends following along and going to the cemetery, and he always carried a horror of that and that was why he made me promise that I would never allow him to be buried and put in the ground and he wanted to be cremated and I -- at first, I didn't like to talk about those things and I sort of put him off, you know, and finally one day during his visit, there came a lull in the day and he said, "Now, let's take a walk down to the lake and we'll talk things over."

So we walked down to the foot of the street and stood there leaning on the railing at the end of the street looking out over the lake and he told me about what he wanted done, that he wanted to be cremated and wanted his ashes to be scattered either on the coast of Maine or the end of Skoggin River, and he insisted that I promise I would do that and he didn't want any relatives or anyone to be present.

So I promised and then when the time came and I was living in Boston and received the message that he was gone and my cousin in Lakewood, I finally called him. He didn't call me and let me know -

MR. BROWN: Lakewood, Ohio?

MS. BERGER: Lakewood, Ohio, and I called him and then he admitted he had received word. He wasn't going to tell me until he got up to Corea, Maine, where my uncle had been living, and so he said to me, "I don't suppose you want to go up there?" Knowing him well, I knew what his object was. I said, "Yes, I do," and it was during the war time, of course, and he said, "Well, now you know it will be hard to get reservations," and finally he said, "Well, would you mind sharing a" -- what do they call it? "A section with Frances and me?" I said, "Well, in war time, one can't be choosy." I know he wanted to sort of scare me out, you know.

So he got -- he engaged this drawing room. It was -- we went up on the train and went to the house where he lived and I had promised my uncle that I would gather up all of his writings, his manuscripts and letters. He was very concerned about that and knew that I was the only one that would know what to do with them and appreciate their value. So I gathered them all up and, oh, my, there was a whole trunk full of them, and my cousin's wife occupied herself by gathering up some of his clothes and which was rather horrifying to me.

There we were in the room where the dent was in the pillow where his head was laying. It hadn't been touched from the time he had gone and so his body was sent to a crematory. I think it's in Brighton, isn't it, here? And we had to wait over in Maine at my cousin's in Auburn until the box came back and then he drove -- we drove around to the -- it wasn't practical to get to the ocean. So we went to the Anders-Skoggin River and we walked along there looking for a suitable place to do this and came to a place where there was a big rock on the ledge of the river and I decided that would be it.

So he handed me the box and I opened it and I turned it up to empty it and to my utter astonishment, and a soft breeze that was blowing, his ashes blew back into my face and all down my coat and then when it came to the bottom of the box, there were a lot of little pieces of what looked like broken dishes and they went clanking on this rock and we hadn't noticed the rock had projected out beyond the water, under the water.

Well, my cousin and I both looked at each other with an expression of astonishment and neither of

us said a word and he walked off a little ways and cut a branch from a tree and handed it to me and I pushed these little clinkers into the water and we stood there for a minute and my cousin looked at me and I looked at him and there was a little peculiar expression around his mouth. He said, "I guess Uncle Ed would have got a kick out of this." I said, "He certainly would." Because when we went down to the lake and he was asking me to promise to do this, he said, "Toss them out over the water and as they float away, say there goes Uncle."

His sense of humor was always right under the surface and no matter how -- how sad or disconcerting the situation was, --

MR. BROWN: He did have an abiding fear of death?

MS. BERGER: He had -- oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Your mother, who was a little older, did she develop this fear as well?

MS. BERGER: No.

MR. BROWN: No.

MS. BERGER: But he had -- he never got rid of that horror of death and if you'll notice, so many of his pictures and poems are concerning the thought of death. Excuse me. Your smoke is getting into my throat. I'm sorry.

MR. BROWN: He -- well, you -- how old were you when your first met him, when he first came out? Your mother moved to Ohio, didn't she?

MS. BERGER: Yes. Well, he came to Ohio. He was in Ohio when I was a baby.

MR. BROWN: He was studying art there, wasn't he?

MS. BERGER: Not at first, but he did go to the art school there in Cleveland and that is where he met Nina Waldich and all through his letters, he refers to her as a great woman and she -- when he came on this visit, we went to see her in her office and she, of course, was delighted to see him and he was to see her, and they talked about various things and associations and then we did so many things together, but to continue with Ms. Waldich, after he had left, one time I found Ms. Waldich and she told me that one time when he came to school for a lesson, he was very distressed and she asked him what was the matter and he said, "My little niece doesn't love me." Whatever I could have done, I don't know, but he took it very seriously, and he thought it was because he was so homely and he had such a big nose.

Well, Ms. Waldich talked to him in a very comforting way and told him that he should be proud of his big nose and he looks like Ralph Waldo Emerson and she gave him a copy of Emerson's Essay and he carried that book of essays with him the rest of his life. Wherever he went, he had it in his briefcase and I found it up there in his room and so --

MR. BROWN: She was a very protective and comforting --

MS. BERGER: Oh, she was a lovely woman. She was German. Her family was German, and she was much interested in philosophy and her family, members of her family all had a deep sense of philosophy in their way of life and that's what comforted him so much.

MR. BROWN: Did he talk to you sometimes about this philosophy?

MS. BERGER: I can't remember talking about it, but all through his letters, he refers to it and let's see. What else?

MR. BROWN: Now, how would you characterize that, his philosophy?

MS. BERGER: Well, I think he was always searching for the original cause of things and as he grew up, he observed the hypocrisy of people, church members who followed church and yet didn't live it, and he turned against any -- any organizational church thought, and of course, he was always searching, always trying to find the cause of things, and at times, he got a glimpse of the fact that there was a divine law that is in everybody's consciousness and that was how he -- he satisfied himself and then when he was in -- of course, after -- years afterwards, we became interested in Christian Science and when I was nine years old, I had a really remarkable healing.

I was -- had suffered with very severe sick headaches from the time I was four years old and one day when I was in one of these spells, my aunt came to the house and she asked my mother if she could call a Christian Science practitioner. So she did and I was instantly healed. One moment I was suffering unbearably and the next moment I was completely free. So that established my faith.

Well, later on, of course, he knew we had become interested in Christian Science and when he went to Germany and so much -- many times in his letters, I began sending him Christian Science Monitor. He couldn't afford to buy English papers in Germany and so all through his letters, he would ask me to send him those Monitors and speak about how fine they were and he especially admired illustrations and drawings by -- what's her name -- Violet Oakley.

At that time, the Monitor had a magazine section and she did the decorations around that. He praised her very highly and --

MR. BROWN: He was very poor then?

MS. BERGER: Oh, he didn't -- he had to get along on \$25 a month sometimes.

MR. BROWN: Did the family try to help him?

MS. BERGER: Well, yes, that's another thing. One of my early recollections is watching my mother prepare boxes of food for him. At that time, he had gone somewhere down in Southern Ohio to study with someone named Chase or something.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. BERGER: And I would stand there fascinated and she would send these boxes of food, fried chicken and all sorts of baked things, and when he came to visit, he said, "If it hadn't been for the boxes of food your mother sent me, I would have starved." And of course, that made a deep impression on me in my childhood and I guess that was why I always was concerned about him and from my early childhood, I was always interested in drawing and painting and thought at one time, all the way through high school, that I would make art my career, but then I didn't.

MR. BROWN: Did he encourage you in that? Did you have discussions with him?

MS. BERGER: Well, in one of his letters, he said to me, "For heaven's sake, don't you ever be an artist." He said, "Don't ever be an artist and for heaven's sake, don't ever marry one." I wrote back

and said, "Don't worry."

MR. BROWN: Did he discuss that, art, with you at all when you were --

MS. BERGER: Oh, well, yes. I don't remember -- well, I went to the museums with him in Cleveland and, oh, he used to discuss things a great deal, but his letters are full of it.

MR. BROWN: When you went to the museums, what would he be interested in?

MS. BERGER: Well, --

MR. BROWN: Did he talk --

MS. BERGER: -- we went around the Cleveland Museum and I remember one room we were in and he was looking at some paintings and, oh, he was so disgusted at the worthlessness of that painting and that it had a place on the museum wall and I've never forgotten how, oh, he was -- he felt very deeply about everything and his emotional reactions to things were sometimes violent.

MR. BROWN: Well, you said he didn't care for organized religion. Did this also extend to places like museums?

MS. BERGER: No. Well, I know he -- he said to me one time, "I hate museums," and I said, "Well, why do you go to them?" He said, "I have to. They're in my business." And I've come to understand how he felt. I very seldom go to a museum myself. I suppose the unhappy circumstances concerning the settlement of his estate have made me realize the dishonesty and the skulduggery that's in back of all these things, you know, these paintings that millionaires buy and present to museums and then claim tax deductions for their magnanimous gifts and that's the story in back of it all.

MR. BROWN: When he was with your family when you were a girl and all, did he stay to himself or was he quite gregarious and talkative?

MS. BERGER: Oh, well, he didn't live with us. He stayed with my aunt, Aunt Sarah and Uncle Roy for awhile and then from there, he went to New York and that was where his career began.

MR. BROWN: What did you like to talk to him about when you were a little girl?

MS. BERGER: Oh, my. I don't -- of course, I was always fascinated with talking about art and I don't recall. I was very small. I suppose we talked about things that went on in the family.

MR. BROWN: When you grew up, was your relationship the same?

MS. BERGER: Oh, it just grew more vital, of course, as I grew older and I really didn't have too much personal contact with him. It was -- our relationship was through letters.

MR. BROWN: You wrote a lot of them?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: You frequently corresponded?

MS. BERGER: He wrote a lot to me and, for instance, oh, he -- he would write 10-12-14 letters -- pages and always express appreciation for my letters and urge me to write again and he -- there were two letters I came across, one's dated on the 15th, this would be in 1934, I think, and on the

18th, I got another letter, dated the 18th, and he, you know, he was spontaneous.

He -- if he thought of something he wanted to talk about or convey to me, he'd just sit and write letters and he was very apologetic if he went for some time without writing a letter and I recall one time, I hadn't heard from him for so long, I took a sheet of typing paper and I wrote in big letters, "Hey, write me a letter or I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in. Yours without love, Norma." I got a long letter, several pages, by return mail and he said, "So, I'm a pig, am I?" And then when -- later when he came to visit us, he had -- that just struck him right. He said, "Oh, my, when I opened that letter and saw that pig," he laughed. It struck him just right.

MR. BROWN: He had a deep sense of humor?

MS. BERGER: Oh, a very deep sense of humor and no matter what kind of a position or situation he was in, his sense of humor would always come to the surface and carry him through, and I could see in reading over those letters, I have a great many characteristics that he expressed.

MR. BROWN: What did he -- what did he do?

MS. BERGER: Oh, my, most everything.

MR. BROWN: People?

MS. BERGER: People, everything, wherever he went. He -- I was reading last night the letters he sent me from Mexico and, oh, he spoke about how horrible the Mexicans were, especially the men. He told about one man that's had three grown-up families, one legitimate and the other two illegitimate and supported them and educated them and they thought nothing of it down there and that disgusted him.

MR. BROWN: He thought things should be done our way?

MS. BERGER: Well, he -- he couldn't see any reason why their egotism should compel them to litter the earth with their offspring.

MR. BROWN: I see. What -- how did he feel about family in general?

MS. BERGER: Well, he expressed a great deal of appreciation, but he loved the idea of being loved and -- and valued in a family, but he expressed also a great deal of satisfaction that he never married and had a family. He thought he couldn't have accomplished what he did and he wrote about and spoke about how few marriages there were that were really -- really came to be happy ones and logically justifiable.

MR. BROWN: He worked very long hours?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he did, half the night, and he used to go out -- he would go out and make sketches in all kinds of weather and he'd do his painting back in his room or studio or wherever he happened to be.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose he went to Europe? He stayed there quite awhile.

MS. BERGER: Well, he wanted to see the art in Europe, of course, and he went to Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Paris, London, everywhere, and went to all these museums, and he spoke about one portrait in particular. What was the name of that? Which he said was the finest portrait that had

ever been done by anyone. I think it was -- I don't know.

MR. BROWN: He was very decided in his ideas?

MS. BERGER: Oh, definitely, yes. Absolutely, yes. It was this or that.

MR. BROWN: He had a fairly traditional art education under some pretty conservative men, like Dumond and Wade Chase and the National Academy of Design. When he was in Europe, he began meeting the avant garde, --

MS. BERGER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- someone associated with [inaudible] --

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, and he was invited to exhibit in all these places.

MR. BROWN: How do you account for that? Do you think he was very independent and always -- how do you account for him getting involved with these very avant garde artists --

MS. BERGER: Well, --

MR. BROWN: -- rather than the traditional artists?

MS. BERGER: -- of course, his -- there was a modern movement at the time coming up in Europe and --

MR. BROWN: You said earlier he was always searching. Was there any connection there?

MS. BERGER: Always searching. He -- he saw in places things that no one else would see. Now, for instance, this picture that I have, the Whale Yaw, --

MR. BROWN: Mm-hmm.

MS. BERGER: -- you have seen that and you know how it shows -- who else would have seen those two rocks and -- and gone and painted them as a whale yaw and yet you look at it and there it is and in many of his pictures now in that New Mexico desert thing, you saw that, too, didn't you?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. BERGER: Down at one corner, the right-hand corner, was a growth of some kind, a bush or something, and yet you look at it and it had the appearance of the head of a steer or something of that sort, and down in the left-hand corner was something that looks like a little carcass and when he -- some of his pictures were on exhibit in Cleveland I went to see and he spoke in one of his letters about "how I express my reactions," and at first, I didn't like it, but I kept going back to it and I sat there looking at it and I would have sworn the clouds were just melting into each other and when I wrote -- evidently I wrote to him and said, "There's something in the clouds that I want," and that pleased him, and then when I went West by train years ago, long after he had left, I saw clouds over New Mexico that looked like white bleach and at the time I saw his paintings, I thought there are no such clouds but when I saw those clouds floating over New Mexico, I thought, well, there they are.

MR. BROWN: So he -- part of his searching really is a recording of what he was seeing?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he -- he -- he just -- he saw things that other people never saw and he said to me a number of times and in his letters, he wrote, "I am not a surface painter."

MR. BROWN: Did he ever say what he was getting at?

MS. BERGER: Well, he said a lot in his letters.

MR. BROWN: Never in so many words?

MS. BERGER: Not that I can remember.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. BERGER: Yes, yes, he expressed himself very definitely.

MR. BROWN: Did you ever work with him? At one time, you were working on going into art. Did you ever work with him?

MS. BERGER: No. He expressed a thought that he wished that I were -- he were near enough so he could give me some lessons and if he had been, I probably would have followed through on it, but my sister Gloria became an artist and she has one-man shows in Florida and her work was compared to his and he wrote to me and told me that she had talent and that he wished that he could be where he could give her some lessons because it was worth -- she had talent worth cultivating.

MR. BROWN: He took a great deal of interest in your family.

MS. BERGER: Oh, he loved us very much. In all his letters, he would mention each one and send his love in a message of one kind or another.

MR. BROWN: You were his main family, weren't you? I mean, there was other family back in Maine?

MS. BERGER: Well, yes, he was fond of them, too, but they were people who -- well, they were not interested in that sort of thing. They didn't -- they had no background and no educational background, but he was very fond of Mary Libby and he was fond of his sister Elizabeth and, of course, he speaks about them in my letters, but he had more -- he and I had more in common and he and my mother.

MR. BROWN: You indicated before some special bond you had with him.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes. Somehow or other, it was something we felt and because I seemed to discern the depth of his character and to understand his emotions and ambitions and that's what held us together all those years.

MR. BROWN: And this came from the time you were a little girl?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm.

MR. BROWN: After that one-up that he had when he thought you didn't like him.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, and, you know, --

MR. BROWN: [inaudible].

MS. BERGER: -- I had no recollection what I could have done, but after I grew up and he was visiting us, I reminded him of something, of what he had said, and my mother told me I had to tell him I was sorry, and I said, "I did it because I knew I'd be punished if I didn't, but I wasn't sorry."

MR. BROWN: Because you didn't know what it was and he accepted it?

MS. BERGER: He didn't even make a reply. Now it may have gone very deep with him, never could tell.

MR. BROWN: Do you think later in life, he was quite self-conscious about his appearance?

MS. BERGER: Oh, then after Ms. Dyke had pointed out to him, then he could see it objectively and he felt that he had something to be proud of and he was very distinguished looking and I used to noticed whenever I went anywhere with him, people would turn and look at him. He was one that stood out in a crowd, you know.

MR. BROWN: The way he would carry himself?

MS. BERGER: Well, his whole -- yes, his whole appearance and his -- his countenance and his expressions.

MR. BROWN: Did you -- did he ever talk to you much about his fellow artists?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: He seemed to be particularly close to them.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he spoke about Karl von Freyburg who was -- he and one other man were his closest friends and he -- he was very fond of him. He and Karl corresponded for years and Karl had a collection of his letters and then the letters that Karl wrote me, he spoke of and told about their association together. I think he met Karl out in California the first time.

MR. BROWN: Did -- well, you've gone over your letters and all, but things like travel, was travel important to him?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: He did a great deal.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Did he like to travel?

MS. BERGER: He wanted to see the world. He wanted to see -- get his own impressions of places and -- and the people and he was very enthusiastic about the Bavarians and the Germans.

MR. BROWN: Really? Why was he? Do you remember?

MS. BERGER: Well, because he said they were so wholesome. They were healthy and they were normal and -- and they -- they were so friendly. He didn't care for the French. He said the French were so neurotic and --

MR. BROWN: So although he had his own fears, like of death, he really liked to be around people

who were stable?

MS. BERGER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: He didn't like to be around other people who were disturbed or --

MS. BERGER: Well, he didn't -- I don't think he exactly had that attitude, but he always endeavored to comfort other people who were disturbed and he -- he did a great deal to comfort other people, especially Iris or Frances Hart Crane, who, as you probably know, committed suicide.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. BERGER: Well, in one or two of my letters, he speaks of it, and Hart Crane was from Cleveland. His father was a candy manufacturer, and I can remember the Crane Candy was very desirable, and he said -- told about how Hart Crane's mother and father, I think, were separated and Hart never had any love or -- or companionship of parents. So after -- I don't know whether they separated or his mother died.

Well, then eventually his father took more interest in him, but he became an alcoholic and when he was on a boat out in California, I think it was, he jumped over and my uncle had said, "If I had been with him, I could have saved him."

MR. BROWN: Your uncle had great persuasive powers.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he -- he had a way of comforting people and pointing out the worthwhile things and directing them down the right road, you know, or up.

MR. BROWN: Did he ever seem -- do you remember times when he was very depressed himself or when he --

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, and he writes in his letters so much about how depressed he was, how alone he was in New York. He was living in a little cheap room and eat the cheapest food and when he was in Berlin, he -- he was very lonely if he was in his room. Everywhere he went, he would have a room. Sometimes he found places to live with a very nice family, loving sort of family who took him in and made a fuss over him, just like the people in Corea, the Youngs in Corea.

MR. BROWN: These were people, the Youngs, who did not know him before?

MS. BERGER: No, he hadn't known them before.

MR. BROWN: [inaudible].

MS. BERGER: He -- oh, he thought a great deal of them. He was one who had no interest whatever in society as such. He liked people who were genuine, not people who would gather in the drawing room and chatter or sit at a dinner table and carry on inane conversation. He just couldn't stand it and I've always been that way myself.

MR. BROWN: Well, in that, your family, he found a wholesome acceptance when he would come to visit.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, we were always thrilled to have him come, but he didn't come often enough.

MR. BROWN: Did he -- did he get to tell anecdotes at all, story telling?

MS. BERGER: Well, he would tell many things about the people, his friends and the people he knew, the people he met, and -- and they were fascinating, of course.

MR. BROWN: What was your mother's relationship with him?

MS. BERGER: Oh, they were very close. They were children together. Uncle Ed was the youngest of nine in the family and my mother was the next oldest. Well, in between them were two other boys, one passed on when he was an infant and the other one, I don't know how old he got to be, just very young child, and --

MR. BROWN: The other aunts and uncles you mentioned in the Cleveland area, they were older?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: The brothers and sisters?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes. Well, the uncles were the in-laws, you know.

MR. BROWN: Your Aunt Sarah was a sister?

MS. BERGER: She was, yes. Aunt Elizabeth was the oldest in the family.

MR. BROWN: She lived back in Maine?

MS. BERGER: She lived in Maine.

MR. BROWN: In Maine.

MS. BERGER: Mm-hmm.

MR. BROWN: Was he happy in Maine or happy to stay there?

MS. BERGER: Well, he was happy everywhere at times, but wherever he was, there were times when he would be very depressed and very unhappy and that was why he was always going and going and going, wanted to -- to leave a place because he got tired of it, but then he would eventually come back to it with great joy, but finally, the reason he decided to spend his last days in Maine was because he wanted to paint in Maine, to put Maine on the map artistically and the art world and he certainly did, and he was recognized as the one who -- who -- the only one who ever got Maine, as they say, just as he was recognized as the only painter who ever got the New Mexico Desert.

MR. BROWN: And he felt that he could do it, that he could --

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: He had a great deal of self-confidence?

MS. BERGER: Oh, absolutely. He knew -- he used to speak about his intuition and he would be compelled to do these things and follow through on his intuition and that is why his -- his career was so productive.

MR. BROWN: His intuitions came fairly frequently, didn't they?

MS. BERGER: Oh, well, yes, he would get the intuition to move here or move there.

MR. BROWN: What are your last memories of him? Was he ill? Did you see him at all when he was --

MS. BERGER: No. He had planned to have me go up there to visit, at least for a weekend, but in the meantime, he had this illness and one thing he always had such a fear of being alone, that he would die alone and that's what happened. He was so ill. Mrs. Young took care of him as long as she could and then they had to take him to the hospital. He was in the hospital only two days and he was alone.

But to go back to this cremation, this scattering of ashes, I forgot to say that as my cousin and I stood there and I contemplated these ashes and what my uncle had said to me down at the lake, "there goes Uncle," I turned to my cousin and I said, "The man never lived in a flesh and bone body" and that I recognized that his real being was never in that body and the very comforting thought came to me as we walked away was Marsden Hartley still lives and he does around the world.

His paintings are in museums all over Europe, all over this country, private collections, and gaining in value all the time. The paintings that I love.

MR. BROWN: Since his death, you've been pretty much concerned with -- with just that, what has happened to your uncle's work and his reputation.

MS. BERGER: Well, naturally. Of course, his reputation was made long before he died and -- but his -- his writings, where some people didn't even know that he did any writings. He had had several books published, books of poems and essays, but no one had any idea and in his -- one of his letters, he referred to them and he had told me he had these manuscripts ready for four books.

One was a book of essays on the circus and [inaudible] performance and one was he started his autobiography and the title is "Somehow A Past." There was enough to make it interesting. What was that book that the Museum of Modern Art had?

MR. BROWN: Star Spangled?

MS. BERGER: Spangled Existence? Was that it?

MR. BROWN: Spackled, Spangled.

MS. BERGER: Spangled Existence.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MS. BERGER: And I never could trace that. I never got any word from them. So what became of that manuscript I don't know.

MR. BROWN: The one on the circus, was he really fascinated by them?

MS. BERGER: Oh, my.

MR. BROWN: Had you known that?

MS. BERGER: He and I were -- had from our childhood gone to see circuses and then he did when he was a child in Maine and my father used to take me from the time I was four years old and I loved to go see them unload and to me that's far more fascinating than the performance itself and so we

had that in common

MR. BROWN: What do you think fascinated your uncle about the circus?

MS. BERGER: Well, of course, he always loved the animals and he loved -- he loved the trapeze performance. He loved everything that expressed beauty and symmetry and accomplishments, physical accomplishments, and he -- oh, yes, he and I loved the circus, and when he was in Cleveland, there was a circus, Ringling's was putting on a circus at the Big Cleveland Auditorium.

By that time, there was no place for a tent, for a circus tent. So we went, he and Kristen Newell. Kristen Newell invited us both to go, and we were sitting up in the balcony and the first number on the program was an operatic number and this group, operatic group came out on the platform and began singing and I watched Uncle Ed's face. It was a study. He always looked very intently. Finally, he leaned over to me and said, "Wow! Once you realize that this is a circus, it's not bad."

But -- and -- and at one time, a friend of his who knew John Ringling, and I don't remember whether it worked out he met John Ringling, but John Ringling was going to arrange for him to travel with the circus on their train so that he could mix -- mix with all these performers and get the picture and satisfy his desire to put the circus on the map.

MR. BROWN: Did he ever get to do that?

MS. BERGER: Well, he wrote this book and then when he came -- oh, he had written to me that he was -- the title was "Elephants and Rhinestones." Well, when he came to Cleveland the last time and we spoke about that book, he said he had decided to change the title and just call it "Circus." I said, "Oh, Circus, that doesn't mean anything. Who'd take a book off the shelf in the library just because it said Circus?" I said, "Elephants and Rhinestones would arouse interest in anybody." I said, "Leave it that way." He said, "Well, we'll see." And from previous experience, I had learned whenever he said, "We'll see," it meant I had my way.

So when I found the manuscript in the trunk, the title was "Elephants and Rhinestones," and he had made two drawings for the jacket, to be used for the jacket. One was red and the other was beige, light tan, with a string of elephants across, and I think I still have one of those.

MR. BROWN: Did he try to get his books published?

MS. BERGER: Well, he had -- yes. There were always people who were interested in getting his things published and, of course, he did have several things published, and he had articles in magazines always and catalogs and things like that, but, of course, his -- the manuscripts that I found, some had not been edited and made ready.

MR. BROWN: Had you thought or known when he was writing his autobiography?

MS. BERGER: Yes, he referred to it in one of his letters. I guess there's nothing in his life I didn't know about. He -- he discussed very freely everything he did, everywhere he went, all his friends, and he had many famous friends. He had William C. Bullitt, who was the first ambassador to Russia, was a close friend of his, and --

MR. BROWN: How did that come about? Did he like his work?

MS. BERGER: Well, he met him in New York. The Bullitts were social people and I think Mr. Bullitt and his wife were later separated. He had one little daughter. So one time -- when Mr. Bullitt was

appointed ambassador to Russia, there was an article about him in the Christian Science Monitor and so I sent that to Uncle when he was in Berlin and he was delighted with it. He wrote back and said that he had written a letter to Bill and he had received a very cordial letter back from him on official stationary. Well, I found that letter among his things and foolishly I turned over all those things to Yale University. I was so eager to be sure that they would be safe because I knew nobody else would take the trouble to really guard them or place them, and if I had -- if I hadn't come to Boston, if I had stayed in Lakewood, I would have kept those things.

My goodness, there's a fortune in them now, and I could have had a very interesting collection on my wall of these letters framed.

MR. BROWN: Now, he kept his correspondence pretty well. He was pretty orderly about his.

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he kept up his correspondence. He had a very --

MR. BROWN: What about his relations with his dealers, his collectors?

MS. BERGER: Well, --

MR. BROWN: Was that taken care of for him? Since he traveled so much, --

MS. BERGER: -- Mr. Stieglitz was -- did the most for him. He was the man that opened the way and, of course, he had --

MR. BROWN: Stieglitz had the auction in 1921 that enabled him to go back to Europe.

MS. BERGER: Oh, I don't remember the date, but --

MR. BROWN: He was fairly close to Stieglitz or what?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, but then in later years, Mr. Stieglitz -- Uncle had said Mr. Stieglitz -- well, he was advanced in years and he was not well and -- and various people had difficulties with him, but he always -- Uncle had always made an excuse for him and, of course, he had done much for him and he could just forget about it and Mr. Stieglitz took on Georgia O'Keeffe's work and sort of, as I remember, dropped Uncle Ed's work and featured hers and I've never forgotten when he told me that when he was having an exhibit, a show of his paintings at the New York Gallery, they didn't -- he couldn't -- didn't have money to have them properly framed, so they just had ordinary wooden frames on them and Georgia O'Keeffe turned to somebody and said, "What do you think of Hartley's wood frames?" And of course, it cut him to the heart and that frame on the Mexico, New Mexico Desert scene is one of those frames and Karl von Freyburg wrote on that frame in its presentation to me of the picture, he was lying in bed and my friend lifted him up so he could write, it's almost illegible, but -- and I think that must have been one of a number of pictures that Karl von Freyburg had which he got at the time he and my uncle was at Gloucester.

We got word that if he didn't pay his warehouse bill at a certain date, which was very close, his paintings would be sold at auction or they -- to pay the storage. A little sum -- it was something like a \$100 and which had accumulated over several years and he said his dealer, a woman, had agreed to pay that storage bill and she never had done it. Well, he was frantic. I got a letter from Gloucester from him just frantic and said he had to rush back to New York and do something about his paintings.

Well, what he did was to take them out of the storage room and Karl von Freyburg -- he spent two

days at it and Karl von Freyburg was with him and Karl told me that he took a stiletto and he gashed -- gashed those paintings, those canvases from right to left to right. He said it was terrible. He stood there with his canvases up to his knees.

MR. BROWN: Why?

MS. BERGER: He wanted to -- he had to reduce them to make them -- put them in one room, so he could get them into one room, and of all the people in New York who had money who could have done something for him, no one came forward.

MR. BROWN: He really never had any patrons that helped him alone?

MS. BERGER: Well, not -- not that amounted to a great deal. His friend, Mrs. Adelaide Koontz, was not a wealthy woman, but she bought paintings from him and paid -- I think it was \$50 a month over the years to pay for them, so that gave him money to live in Germany, and she bought several.

MR. BROWN: Was she here?

MS. BERGER: She lived in New York. She came to Boston some years ago and I met her and we discussed that now that Uncle's gone. She mentioned that he -- of course, he had become very deaf. He had written me about that and his doctor wanted to perform surgery on him and his doctor asked Mrs. Koontz if she would --

MR. BROWN: Provide --

MS. BERGER: -- authorize that and she wouldn't and he asked her if she knew whether he had any relatives who would and she said no, she didn't know any of his relatives.

Well, after she paid him, she told me about it and she said that the doctor knew that if he performed the operation, there was the danger of his either being killed by it or becoming an imbecile because it was so close to the brain. He never had the operation, but he wrote me that one day suddenly he could hear. He felt like a lousy fart in his ear and he could hear perfectly.

MR. BROWN: So in his last years, he was able to hear?

MS. BERGER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: What were your last -- the last time you can remember being with him?

MS. BERGER: Well, that was when he came to Lakewood to see me and that was when he talked to me about the cremation and -- and -- oh, and then he talked to me about his -- he said that I was the one. He said, "You are the one." He mentioned other members of the family and that they were taken care of, and he said, "You are the logical one," and he said, "Of course you will have the paintings and whatever else there is, with the exception of a few personal things that are to go to my men friends."

So I have that in letters and he told me that he was going to make a will. He -- he wanted to get that done as soon as he went back to New York and that my cousin, Ted Newell, had agreed to see that the will was made up. Well, I am confident that the will was drawn up but Ted never revealed it and when I was in New York, Ted took me to a bank and two or three places presumably hunting for the will.

MR. BROWN: This is after?

MS. BERGER: That was after he was gone, and I knew he was just bluffing.

MR. BROWN: So in the end, it wasn't clear who was to get what?

MS. BERGER: Well, in the end, what happened was Ted got -- he wanted to be appointed administrator. I wouldn't agree to it because I knew how dishonest he was and my sisters -- he had told my sisters that these paintings didn't amount to anything and he had told the cousins in Maine that they might get \$1,200 apiece out of the estate. There was \$16,000 in the bank cash, and they expected it and so my sisters and these cousins in Maine all signed a paper having him appointed administrator. The cousins in Maine had a relative-in-law who was a judge of the Supreme Court there, Judge Harry Manchin, and I wrote to him and implored him to prevent them from disposing of that estate and he ruled that the estate was to be disposed of, liquidated, within 10 years.

Well, that's no way to -- to dispose of valuable paintings and I wrote and implored him to -- not to do that, that -- that the paintings were so valuable and would increase in value and he said, "Well, these elderly people," the cousins of Maine, "should have some money now while they could still use it."

Well, my sisters had no idea what the estate was worth until I persuaded them to go to New York, meet me there, and see the paintings and they were simply dumbfounded, my sister and her husband, and he had pulled -- my cousin had pulled the wool over their eyes, they just swallowed everything he said, but --

MR. BROWN: Then your family took steps to --

MS. BERGER: Well, I got a lawyer through a friend in New York. I got a number of the biggest law firm in New York, Wickersham and Taft, and a member of the firm was a friend of this man that opened the way for me to have their services. So my cousin thought that he could -- he tried to prevent me from going to New York to see what was in the estate in the warehouse.

MR. BROWN: This is the same cousin who had --

MS. BERGER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- gone to Corea with you?

MS. BERGER: Mm-hmm. And so I went there to meet him. I was to meet him a certain place. I don't remember if it was a hotel or what, and this lawyer was with me. Well, when he walked in with his Maine lawyer and he saw that I had a lawyer, he was pretty much taken aback and he was good at covering up, but anyway, we went to the warehouse and I saw everything and all these paintings. There were hundreds of them and drawings and everything and we listed them.

Well, then there were many paintings in the Roseburg Gallery and I went there to see them and my cousin was there and my cousin and his lawyer had a list of paintings and Mr. Rosenberg's secretary had a list. One list was according to labels, the other list according to numbers. Well, you couldn't locate paintings that way. Finally, I insisted that we go upstairs to the gallery and list those paintings according to the title and found that numbers had been changed, the titles had been changed, the labels had been changed.

MR. BROWN: Really? In anticipation of his --

MS. BERGER: Oh, they thought I'd never find out, you see, and Mr. Rosenberg was pretty much taken aback, but, of course, being the type he was, he recovered himself and -- and so when I went one day by myself to check to see how many paintings were in storage, he had his man bring them out to show me and his man -- he had several out there and then his man started out with a painting of a white flower and Mr. Rosenberg said, "Put that back. Put that back." I said, "I'd like to see it." He said to the man, "Put that back. Put that back." He said to me, "That's almost sold." I said, "I want to see it." So the man brought it out and held it up for me to see it.

When the big show was put on in New York after my uncle was gone, the great big show, I've forgotten how many galleries full of paintings, Monroe Wheeler took me to the last gallery and that painting was there and he said to me, "This is the highlight of the show." Of course, I never knew what Rosenberg got for it, and in the meantime, I had gone to the Rosenberg Gallery one day and I was sitting there, I hadn't -- I had called up and said I was coming which it would have been wiser for me to just walk in and not say anything so he wouldn't have been prepared to take any steps, but his secretary -- I sat down and she said that he was out and that he had gone. He had to meet a very important woman, a very important lady, and pretty soon after I had sat there for perhaps 20 minutes, half an hour, Mr. Rosenberg walked in and this woman was with him and he just glanced at me and didn't even greet me and they went upstairs and so I bet she was the one that got that painting.

MR. BROWN: The paintings were merely on consignment to Rosenberg?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: They were brought back to the family until the estate was settled?

MS. BERGER: Well, they figured that the family wouldn't get any inroad on it. He was just going to do what he wanted with it.

MR. BROWN: You were able to bring them back?

MS. BERGER: Oh, I was able to -- how was that? They stayed with the Rosenberg Gallery. You see Hudson Walker --

MR. BROWN: They were sold for the estate?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes. The -- Hudson Walker was appointed as the administrator. When we were -- see, I'd only met him. I had never met him until we went to New York and Dr. Henry W. Wells at Columbia invited Mr. Walker and my cousin and me and someone else along to have lunch with him at the college and when we were discussing the appointment of an administrator, that was before an administrator had been appointed, and, of course, naturally I thought, well, Mr. Walker would be the logical one. He knew

he knew the value of the art and he was interested in my uncle and I said, "I thought perhaps you might do it," and he said, and he sounded so flat, he said, "Well, I'll -- I wouldn't be able to do it because," he said, "I would come in the next draft and it wouldn't be practical for me to do it.."

Well, if anyone has ever heard of a millionaire's son being drafted into the service, they heard more than I have and I could see -- you see, he didn't want to be appointed administrator. He would have had to account for everything, but he was appointed the administrator. So he didn't have to account for anything, but he was behind the scenes.

MR. BROWN: What was his duty?

MS. BERGER: Well, just suppose to be assistant and I don't know what he did, except that he got hold of many, many paintings for practically nothing, and one day I went to the Whitney to see what paintings they had and he and I walked in. The woman there, I don't know who she was, said, "Oh, I'm so glad you came." She said, "We have these paintings here and I've written two letters and got no reply," and she said, "They weren't listed" and that was just another incident that showed what was going on behind the scenes.

MR. BROWN: And these were paintings that had been taken to the Whitney but not listed?

MS. BERGER: Yes, and not listed under the -- they didn't own them, but they were supposed to be there for sale or something, I guess.

Well, then -- let's see.

MR. BROWN: Who was the administrator?

MS. BERGER: My cousin was appointed administrator because my two sisters with the five cousins in Maine, four cousins, and they thought, well, that was the only thing they could do, you see, and you can imagine how it made me feel, knowing what would happen, and --

MR. BROWN: But you did receive the literary effects?

MS. BERGER: Oh, I got those. They didn't know those were worth anything. Oh, they made no objection to my picking up the manuscripts in Corea.

MR. BROWN: Of course, you were interested in was the correspondence and the --

MS. BERGER: Oh, of course, of course, and it -- I was glad to be able to save them because I wouldn't have been surprised if my cousin had thrown them out.

MR. BROWN: What do you suppose your uncle would say about all this?

MS. BERGER: Oh, he'd have been furious. He'd have been furious.

MR. BROWN: He was a very principled and prudent man?

MS. BERGER: Oh, yes, he -- he had no use for anybody that was dishonest. Oh, I know what I was going to say. After I got this lawyer and was seeing what was in the estate and so forth, we were at the Rosenberg Gallery, Mr. Rosenberg in a little aside to me said, "If you want some paintings, you can get them from me. Nobody'll know." I didn't even answer him. But that indicated to me what was going on, you know. If I were willing to -- to line up with them for all this dishonesty and this subtlety, --

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MS. BERGER: -- cut me in on some, but I couldn't descend to that level even if I lost everything.

MR. BROWN: Well, Walker had been your uncle's dealer, though.

MS. BERGER: He had years before. Well, --

MR. BROWN: He knew him not too long before his death.

MS. BERGER: -- he had a gallery in New York and I've since found he had a gallery here in Boston, but he had this gallery in New York and he was handling my uncle's things and he -- he didn't sell -- I don't know whether he sold any, but anyway, I have a letter from my uncle where he said that Mr. Walker decided to give up the gallery and go back into the lumber business, that he wasn't -- he liked the lumber business.

Well, what he really did was he -- he got paintings for the expense for his gallery and he told me when I met him that time that his father didn't approve of his being -- having a gallery, that he had lost \$6,000 on it, but he didn't tell me how many paintings he got out of it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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