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Oral history interview with Dorothy Dehner,
1965 October-1966 December

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorothy Dehner in October 1965 and December 1966. The interview was conducted by Garnett McCoy for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The transcript involve discussion of Dehner's husband, David Smith. Rosalind Krauss is also present.

Interview

GARNETT MCCOY: Now could you say something about your first meeting with David Smith and the early days at the Art Students League.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I met him in 1926. He and I had the same landlady. He had just come to New York from Washington, D.C. And I had just come from California and he had announced to this landlady that he wanted to be an artist and wanted to go to art school, so she said, "Oh, I have a girl that lives in one of my rooms and she goes to the Art Students League and she'll tell you all about it." I arrived that afternoon and I hadn't put my bags down when there was a knock on the door and of course it was David. So he said that she had told him about the League and asked me all about it. We immediately fell into this enormous conversation that lasted until about 2 o'clock in the morning. It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon when we started. We sat down in my room and talked about all kinds of things and the teachers at the League. He had been very disillusioned by his college teaching, I mean the kind of teachers that he had that taught him as he said how to teach art but not how to make art himself. And his teachers were the same, they didn't know how to make art either but they knew how to teach art and this was before the days of the artist-in-residence.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: This was at Ohio University.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And didn't he go to Notre Dame, too?

DOROTHY DEHNER: He later went to Notre Dame. But the first whole year after he graduated from high school was spent at Ohio University. And then he talked, we talked about the freedom at the League. There were no marks, there was no attendance record, you chose whatever class you could be in, you could move from one class to the other, you could have any teacher you wanted after you had finished your month. And it appealed to him enormously. And we talked and talked about all kinds of things - our families, our training, our schools, my travels in Europe of course, which were very much on the top of my head at that time. And politics. I told him I was a Socialist and an atheist. And I remember that, "No," he said, "I guess I am too."

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, really! Had he thought about politics at all before that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Not very much. He said his father was a Democrat, and I said "Well, my father was a Democrat and had been very active in Cleveland politics and a strong supporter." He was sort of out of the populist movement in the Middle West.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Tom Johnson.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Tom Johnson! Of course! He was my father's hero. And I was brought to shake his hand at one time when I was an infant. And Baker, who was his - later Secretary of war under Wilson. When I was an infant they both ... Well, anyhow, that's about me. But David was interested in everything. But he hadn't had much exposure yet. He had just come from the Middle West and he had had exposure to the kind of things he got in college, he was very interested in poetry, he was interested in writing, he knew he wanted to be an artist. He had taken a course in cartooning. He picked up an ad in a magazine and sent for this, because he was floundering around...trying to find how it is you become an artist. It was then about six o'clock and we decided to have dinner. We went down into Harlem because this was on 118th Street near Morningside Drive. We went through the Park down into Harlem and we bought food and ate it on the street. We bought records, the "Rhapsody in Blue" I remember was one of them, to play on my old victrola. We bought all kinds of things in Harlem and we sat in Morningside Park talking until two o'clock in the morning. And after that I think that there wasn't an evening that we didn't have dinner together, practically. And we used to eat at Teachers College because it was cheap and good and close by. And that was the day we met.

GARNETT MCCOY: How do you suppose he decided to come to the Art Students League in the first place?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he had decided to be an artist. I told him about the League, he hadn't known about the

League. And when he met me I told him that is the place because this is a break-off from the old Academy, and Max Weber teaches there, and Tom Benton teaches there and curiously I didn't recommend my teachers to him because I felt something else in him I guess, unconsciously. And I knew that he wouldn't be able to stand to be in Kenneth Hayes Miller's class. He enrolled in Richard Lahey's class the following Monday. I believe I came in on Friday and we couldn't wait until we registered again for the new term, it was the most exciting thing in the world. And he was working then at the Industrial Acceptance Corporation that had offices next to the Art Students League, or one building away, and it was a typical office, job that he had gotten before he left Washington, D.C. He had some kind of recommendation from the Morris Plan Bank. And he went there and his job there was to write letters. It was a finance company.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Business letters.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Business letters. And he was very proud of those letters and used to bring them to me and they were very fancy, they were unbelievable letters, they were so great, formal and full of very large words.

GARNETT MCCOY: He was having fun with them.

DOROTHY DEHNER: He was having fun with them, yes, and he even once or twice called me up in the middle of the day to read one of those letters because they were so, you know, he thought that one really hit the nail on the head. So he went to the League at night, was a night teacher.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, because he was there at night I decided to enroll in the night class too and I went to Nicolaides' drawing class.

GARNETT MCCOY: At that point was he full of self-confidence and vigor and all that? Or was he not quite sure of what he

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, no, naturally he was young and he hadn't developed any kind of way of working at all. He was terribly interested and very vital, and I remember as a reaction from his spats and derby kind of dressing he would go home and get into a pair of old slacks and some things he called romeos - they were great flapping bedroom slippers with rubber sides you know. And he would wear those to the League and this made him distinctive you know. He was terribly cute and very, very tall and skinny, and quite a personality in the group there.

GARNETT MCCOY: And did his teachers - were they quite impressed with his work or ...

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I think his fellow students might have been more impressed at that time. I think Richard thought he had a lot of energy, but he was very, very much beginning. He hadn't even worked with himself very much as some people do, but he did tell me that when he was three years old he was being punished when he was a little boy and taken - because he used to run away - and he was tied to a tree with a length of rope so that he wouldn't run off, and there was a mud puddle there and he made a lion out of mud when he was three years old, and it was so remarkable and so lion-like that his mother was delighted with it and called in the neighbors to look at this wonderful lion that little David had done, and he told me he got the idea of the lion from pictures he had seen in his grandmother's bible, which he still had up in Bolton Landing. And there are pictures, tiny pictures of ruins in Egypt and so on. And hieroglyphics. And that's how he got the idea of the lion.

GARNETT MCCOY: And he remembered doing that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: And he remembered doing this, oh yes. And that was his first sculpture of course.

GARNETT MCCOY: Did his mother encourage him to be an artist do you suppose?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I don't think she thought of it as a career for him. She did show him pictures of Greek sculpture that she had in a book, and he remembered that, but as a career his mother had two ideas - that he should be a stenographer or a teacher. She had been a teacher.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And of course nobody in the area had ever been an artist that she had known, and to just start being an artist out of, you know, you have to be exposed to art to think in terms of being an artist.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, that is usual.

DOROTHY DEHNER: So that was the idea. But when he was in his teens he took this course in cartooning that he

saw "Learn How to Draw" you know.

GARNETT MCCOY: You mean a correspondence course?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. He sent for this.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, when he left home did he go to Washington from home?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. He went to Ohio University in Athens. And you know there's such a myth about "Oh, David left home." Well he didn't leave home any more than anybody does to go to college. He left home to go to college. And then he spent his summers back in Pauling, Ohio. And then he went to South Bend to Notre Dame.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, to Studebaker?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he worked in the Studebaker plant part time. And for a very short time. That was not a long experience, but it gave him a kind of feel. He said later he thought that these big forms he was pressing out were interesting forms to him just in an abstract way. But he wasn't thinking of himself as a sculptor at all in those days. And then when he stopped going to Notre Dame - I don't know whether he ever got any credits at all at Notre Dame, I don't remember. I know I did see his grade book from Ohio University. And from George Washington University too. I think he had quarterly grades or something, though he left there rather quickly too. And he met some man in South Bend who got him a job selling bonds and David sold bonds, if you can imagine this young, very young man selling bonds.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But even then he was expecting to be an artist sometime in the future, do you think? Or still feeling his way?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I think he was feeling his way. You see part of it was to find what kind of life he wanted to live. And I think that that wasn't totally formulated until he came to New York. But he wanted many experiences and reached out where whatever was going on. Then the same man encouraged him to go to Washington, D.C. and got him this job at the Morris Plan Bank. And he stayed there for a while and he thought of it as a milestone along the way to get to New York. That was his ultimate goal. Then he came up here to take the job at the Industrial Acceptance Corporation, and that was the point that I met him. He had been in New York a few weeks before I arrived from California, but he had done nothing about finding an art school. And then he enrolled in the League in Richard Lahey's class.

GARNETT MCCOY: Do you feel that he was quite close to his father and mother? You know so many young men rebel especially if they come from a small town.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I think he rebelled. I think he had great, close ties with his mother, more than with his father, and I think that he was a child that had enormous energy and probably they thought of him as very difficult to handle. I know that he had certain violent reactions. He told me that when he was - or his mother told me, I guess, that when he was two - or his mother had told him and he told me, I don't know how the sequence of this was, but there was a family story that his mother was going out and she didn't want him to go out and he took a pound can of vaseline when she was in the other room and he smeared her party dress with this entire pound of vaseline, thinking that that would keep her home. And for a two-year old child to have the energy and the application to sustain this job I think is most unusual. I mean it's like making some of his work you know, his dedication was so extraordinary. But he used to call his mother always at Christmas and in his voice when he'd say "Hello, Mom," there was warmth and connection but I think he rebelled to the restrictions of small-town life.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Although didn't he always have a kind of identification with that mid-western...

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, yes, but I feel that a lot of that was a facade that David found very comfortable to live with. This was not only part of his early days and everything, but it was even - he was much more middle-western toward the end of his life than when I first met him. You know, he exploited that.

GARNETT MCCOY: He would talk about pioneer ancestors.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes. He liked that very much. He was very interested in that. And his mother wrote him a letter once in response to his questions about his great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather Rice, and his great-great-grandfather Rugg who came from Culpeper County in Virginia. They were Rices, Ruggs, Smiths, those are the names. His mother was a Stoler. She was Pennsylvania Dutch.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see. And his father was a sort of telephone engineer?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he was a self-made man in his engineering training. He began as a telephone lineman and was very competent in this area, and did the engineering part of the telephone business, then his father bought a quarter-share in the Paulding Telephone Company. They originally came from Decatur, Indiana and it

was David's great-grandfather who laid out the town of Decatur, Indiana and I believe presented them with large blocks of land that he had staked out in the pioneer days, that became the actual town, the center of town of Decatur, Indiana.

GARNETT MCCOY: So certainly you'd say that the general environment was that of a middle-class, small-town environment?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: You know, subsequently he would say in some of the writings that I've read, or at least at a certain period, he would refer to his identification with the working class, and I wonder if he felt that way when you first knew him, or is that something that he...?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. David was a middle-class boy. I think that the kind of freedom that he found, perhaps that he first related himself to in factory life at South Bend, might have interested him only in retrospect because his friends when he was going to Notre Dame, his best friend was Newell Rumpf, whose father was a vice-president of Studebaker Company. And when he came to New York he immediately became friendly with the Morris girls who were the daughters of old man Morris who had the Morris Plan Bank. And the first party David ever took me to was up at their house in Ossining. So you see his identification and his feeling about the working class was something that he --

GARNETT MCCOY: Sort of an ideological thing he took on later.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. This is correct, because he was distinctly a middle-class young man and his family were middle-class in their aspirations and their way of life. His mother was an elementary school teacher before she was married, briefly I believe because she was married rather young. She had gone to some normal school out there. It wasn't a moneyed family. I think there were certain relatives that were more acquisitive but his family was not a wealthy family in any sense.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Well, in the period of, say, between the time you were married and the mid-thirties, it was during this period that he began to develop sculpture.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. You see he didn't start to do sculpture until we were in the Virgin Islands.

GARNETT MCCOY: When was that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I think it was '31 and '32. We wanted to be like Gauguin. Only we couldn't get as far as the South Seas. So we had heard from a friend of ours who had a shark factory in St. Thomas - it was a wild venture this shark factory - because the sharks all got eaten up by the barracudas before they could get hauled into the boat. They were going to make great piles of money with shark leather and selling the fins as edibles to the Japanese and pulling the teeth and grinding them up for something. Anyhow we heard about the Virgin Islands. We never knew about the Caribbean Islands before, you know, there are certain parts of the map that are just kind of blank.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But exotic sounding.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Exotic sounding, yes. And she said, oh, this place is very tropical and wonderful and we wanted to be like Gauguin so David gave up his job at A. G. Spalding and we stopped going to the League at that time and never went back. That was the end of our art training.

GARNETT MCCOY: Did you paint in the Virgin Islands?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, I painted all the time and so did David. And David then picked up a chunk of coral one day and made a little figure, he didn't do much carving on it, it was almost objet trouve. But he did make certain indentations so that it would suggest a female figure and mounted this. And then he picked up another chunk that was rather larger, say about four or five inches in diameter, a rather round piece of white coral and carved the head of a Negro in this and then painted it a dark purplish brown. So there was painted sculpture. The beginning of his painted sculpture.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Subsequently he would say that he became a sculptor because his work began to rise out of the paper.

DOROTHY DEHNER: It did, but this was before it came off of the paper, you see. When we started rebuilding the house, well not rebuilding, patching it would be a better word, we used to have to go to the lumber yard and David found all kinds of bits of trimming and moldings and chunks of wood that he would pick up and he came back home with them and built them up into constructions. Now there should be one or two at least of those. He found also some patterns for metal casting that he used and there should be some of those around. I can

remember three distinctly. One that looked like a little city was all painted too. He also applied bits of molding to a couple of canvases and that was his first, that was when he spoke of it coming off the canvas. But there were only maybe one or two of that kind, and then he actually began constructing. Then about that time - previous to that we had a friend, John Graham, you probably know of John Graham who became a very, very close friend in the very early days. He and his wife, Elinor, also bought a farm in Bolton Landing and they were friends of the Furlongs, these people that brought us to Bolton Landing first.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Just for the record could you say something again about your first going up there. It was with the people named Furlong.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Furlong. They owned a farm in Bolton Landing about a mile from us as the crow flies.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And how did you meet the Furlongs?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, they were at the Art Students League. Miss Webber, who was Mrs. Furlong, was the executive secretary there and Tomas was on the board. They were both very much more sophisticated than any other adults that we had come in contact with up to that time, and we immediately became friends and they used to invite us to their house. They lived at 3 Washington Square, and they introduced us to Jean Charlot and various people, and the Grahams, Elinor and John Graham. The Grahams bought their place after we bought ours. They lived there until Elinor got divorced, which was very shortly after, maybe two or three years. So we didn't have much contact with them up there, but when they broke up Elinor went to Baltimore to live and Graham stayed in New York, and we were very close to Graham.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. He was a painter too.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he was a painter, he was a collector, he was an intellect, he opened great windows for both of us. A very sophisticated, a very intellectual man. And very erratic and as mad as a hatter in many ways, you know, but very wonderful. He had a great touch for being with young people and putting his finger on talented young people. I remember he took us to Gorky's studio. And he said to Gorky, "These are very talented young American artists." And Gorky said, "They look like college kids to me, they'll never be artists." And of course we hadn't acquired the kind of bohemian thing that was well-developed in Gorky at that time.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Of course he was from abroad anyway.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, yes, but he had been living in New York for quite some time and he had his studio at Union Square. Graham introduced us to Stuart Davis. And brought him to our house. And Jean Xceron. John Ferren and Milton Avery. He took us to Avery's house the first time we ever met the Avery's and we were both terribly struck with Avery's painting. And in fact all of these people were practically unknown at this time.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And were you doing abstract work at that time, too? Or were these influences that went into your developing as a abstract painter?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. I was starting to paint in an abstract way at that time. And I was very excited about art, but it is true that after I married David I found it very hard to grind out art, or try. I kept at it all the time but it was terribly slow and I felt it was grinding out. I was so absorbed with him it's very difficult to explain. Rosati said in his memorial piece about David, he said, "There wasn't enough oxygen in the room for anybody else when he was there." And it was true in the house, too. There just wasn't.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But how do you explain his giving in to the abstract manner?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I started to say a number of minutes ago that that summer when we vacationed with the Furlongs we talked to Tomas a great deal about abstract art. You recall we had already asked Kenneth Hayes Miller and John Sloan. And then David said once to Tomas, I remember at the dinner table, "Tell me about abstract art. What do you think?" And so on. And Tomas talked very intelligently about it because he had studied with Max Weber and Max Weber had not long before, or not too long before, at least he hadn't forgotten about his Paris experiences in which he became an offshoot of Cubism in America. Tomas told us about this. And David started to experiment, but not until some time later, because that summer at Bolton Landing with the Furlongs he made a very beautiful landscape in more or less Impressionist style which he presented and sent out to his family in Paulding and if I am correct they still have this painting. Rather large for those days, probably 36 by 24. And it was sometime after that that he began experimenting with abstract art. When we were in the Virgin Islands we both painted abstractly.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see. This was part of this thing about not wanting to do things like everybody else was doing. Wanting to reach out at something new.

DOROTHY DEHNER: To reach out. Yes. And to know what was happening because from pictures that we had seen we were much more interested in French art and even German Expressionism, which we didn't like nearly as well, but nevertheless it was a fresh impetus, than we were in what was being done in America with the exception of people like Gorky, Graham, Stuart Davis and so on. People like Rothko and Pollock and - well, Gottlieb were painting realistically when David was painting abstractly. Rothko was painting in a more or less German Expressionist way at that time and we didn't know anybody outside of Stuart and Graham and Gorky that were very interested in abstract art, and certainly nobody was interested in Abstract sculpture in America except Calder. Who didn't live here, you see, though it was Graham also that introduced us to Calder. He had his finger, you see on people. He had a wonderful gift --

GARNETT MCCOY: And the whole emphasis in the 1930s being on social realism didn't press either of you enough to revert to that, you continued to work in an abstract manner?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. Although I abandoned abstract art myself and began painting realistically. I had a feeling that I wasn't sure enough of what I was doing, and it wasn't then until the 40s that I began painting abstractly again and then it was total dedication. I knew what I was doing, that was what I wanted to do, that was how I wanted it to look. But it took an awfully long time for me, I had all kinds of inner problems about working at all that were going on in the situation.

GARNETT MCCOY: But he himself was always doing -- ?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Was doing abstract art. A lot of it, for instance, these - you could call those abstract but they're certainly not non-objective.

(Quite a long interruption)

DOROTHY DEHNER: Our friends in the '30s were mostly other artists in Brooklyn. We knew Rothko and we knew Gottlieb, of course; Edgar Levy and his wife, Lucille Corcos were our closet friends and we met during the '30s Mildred Constantine who now works at the Museum of Modern Art and who was a very close friend and very, very interested in David's work. And did a great deal for him in the way of introductions and so on. And of course it was in the '30s that he had his first exhibition with Marian Willard.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, in 1938.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. That's correct. January, I believe, 1938. Some other artists, I think Hananiah Harari and his brother-in-law Akiba Emanuel brought photographs to Marian Willard of David's work, which another artist had made, and she expressed an immediate interest. He had exhibited previously two small oil paintings that he made in the Virgin Islands, with the ACA Gallery. When it was on Madison Avenue some place.

GARNETT MCCOY: That was just started about that time, '32 or '33.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And Baron was very interested in his work and they were quite abstract. They were both beach scenes but nevertheless they were abstract in the way Braque might be abstract. It was really out of the Cubist concept of painting - I mean not analytical Cubism as much as the previous kind.

GARNETT MCCOY: There's sort of a Leger feeling about some of them too.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I never thought of it in the way of Leger, never. David was not sympathetic to Leger's work, as a matter of fact. We visited Leon Rosenberg's place when we were in Paris and the place was absolutely stacked with Leger's and we could have bought any quantity of them for very little money. And neither of us wanted them. But we missed the real chance by not buying a Braque. Graham was in Paris when we were there and he, of course he was really our, one of our very close friends both in the '30s and the '40s. You were asking about friends. And in the '40s we were up in Bolton Landing so we didn't see so much of the artists because for not quite two years we were in Schenectady and we couldn't get away because of David's job in the factory.

GARNETT MCCOY: Did you know Pollock and de Kooning and people then?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, we knew Pollock and de Kooning from the WPA days. But not socially very much. The boys used to get together after they got their checks and go to George's and have beers, and once in a while I was in on those gatherings, which were afternoon things. But our evening friends and our close relationships with people were mostly in Brooklyn and Brooklyn Heights, or night meetings at the Artists Union or the Artists Congress.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. It was later there was this thing called The Club. That was the late '40s or was that -- ?

DOROTHY DEHNER: That was the late '40s, of course. And then David's work got to be known much better. And several people who were important in writing at that time - Clem Greenberg - was very interested in David's

work and before he went off to war he told Marian he would like to write something about David. So he did and I think that was the piece that he did about the three important artists that America had produced. One was David Smith and one was Hans -- well, he put Hans Hofmann in not as a painter as much in those days because Hofmann had never shown his work at that time but he was an important teacher. He was bringing up a whole second generation of abstract artists in America. And he wrote about Hofmann as being very important; Calder and, I think, Flanagan was the other one. And LaChaise he mentioned also, you know he was dead at the time. And of course Flanagan was dead then too. But this article was quoted near and far, I think it appeared in The Nation. And it was quoted by Time Magazine, it was quoted by Life, it was quoted all over the place. Of course the artists all knew David and were very interested in his work, especially the abstract artists. He belonged at that time also to the Abstract Artists of America, of which he was if not a charter member a very early member along with George L.K. Morris and Shaw and Bolotowsky and -- Alice Mason was in that group; Ad Reinhardt was in that group. But we didn't have close friends in that group because we were living up there. And our contacts in New York were of necessity rather brief. We would come down and once in a while we would go to The Club and David wasn't even a member but he was accepted there because of being David. Motherwell was very foresighted in that he took tape recordings at the time and everyone's words were on tape of many of these meetings.

GARNETT MCCOY: And then there's Philip Pavia who was very active.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Now it's very funny, I didn't meet Pavia until later, at least it's my impression that I didn't meet him until a good deal later but he was a moving spirit in The Club at that time. In fact I think most of the artists we knew were in The Club. Or we knew them because they were in The Club, I don't know which. But at any rate our contacts with them were rather brief because of going back. Our friends were up in Bolton Landing, mostly in Glens Falls. Doug Crockwell was a close friend and a good friend and an admirer of David's work from the very early period, and bought several sculptures from David before, long before many other people were buying sculptures from David.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But the people he would see up there would be not artists, they would be ---

DOROTHY DEHNER: They weren't artists, no. Well, Doug Crockwell was an artist. He had studied painting in St. Louis at the famous -- is it Art Museum School there?

GARNETT MCCOY: I think so.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And then he had gone into commercial art as most artists at that time did in order to earn a living. And he became very well-known doing covers for The Saturday Evening Post and illustrations and so on. But he had a terrific interest in abstract art and he did some remarkable movies, the very first abstract movies I ever say, truly abstract movies, not things like Man Ray did, surreal kind of things, but truly abstract painting that he did on movie film. And he is still involved in this and he still is a great inventor of fantastic cameras. And he visited me a few weeks ago and we talked again about all these things. The Museum of Modern Art I believe has a copy of at least one of his films. And they have exhibited it a number of times. Well, he was a close friend and a very great supporter of David's art, and a good personal friend of both of us of course. And the other people in Glens Falls did all kinds of things, they owned bookshops, or they ran the papers in the area and Dr. Irving Juster was a good friend of ours. And he and his wife bought a sculpture of David's in the very early days and bought a series of paintings of mine. And they were good friends.

GARNETT MCCOY: And then there's Mr. Greenberg.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, Boris Greenberg didn't begin buying until after I had left. He was interested and he used to come up. We were very good friends. We used to go to his parties and have wonderful times. They had a beautiful house on the lake and were very generous host, most generous hosts, and very, very friendly people.

GARNETT MCCOY: And did you know William Blake, the man who did the introduction for the "Medals of Dishonor?"

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, I knew William Blake and I had been reading - this is an interesting story - I had been reading a book of his called The World is Mine in which he described a series of etchings of satiricals, most cynical etchings which depicted the power of and the worst aspects I would say of the Catholic Church. And he wrote about these things in the same acidulous vein that David had made the medallions. Then we couldn't decide who should write the introduction of this and David thought maybe George Seldes should do it because he did this little paper "In Fact." I said, "Why don't we have William Blake do it?" So he wrote to William Blake and sent photographs and told him about the project and Blake was terrifically impressed by this, and not only he, but his wife Christina Stead who was a beautiful writer, a really fine writer, sat down and they both wrote introductions and they were both printed in this little pamphlet that was gotten out with the show of medallions and that's how we met William Blake.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see. Is he still around, do you know?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, he lives in England now. And Christina Stead's famous book, which should have been famous many years ago, has been reprinted by I think, I don't know whether it's Harper and Row, anyhow it's gotten tremendous reviews, and is being revived because it's a great book but it never was sufficiently recognized in this country. In fact, neither was Blake's though his was a more popular style of writing, kind of Count of Monte Cristo kind of thing with social overtones, you know. Very heavy social overtones. And they went off to England shortly after we met them to live there permanently and as far as I know they are still there.

GARNETT MCCOY: And did you know Elizabeth McCausland well?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh yes, I knew Elizabeth.

GARNETT MCCOY: She did a very good piece on the medallions.

DOROTHY DEHNER: She did a beautiful piece and she did a great deal for David in helping publicize his work. She came out to the Iron Works a number of times and David in appreciation drew a beautiful "E" for her in steel and gave it to her for a paperweight that day, and she and Ruth Green Garris who had been a critic for the New York Times of sculpture for many years and who was at that time sculpture critic or art critic for Newsweek magazine, she and Elizabeth came out to the house and went to the Terminal Iron Works and looked at everything and Elizabeth was very good and David was very appreciative.

GARNETT MCCOY: She and Greenberg were the two who did the most for him I think.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. But sometime later, and I suppose this story can be told now, Elizabeth came up to me in the Museum of Modern Art and attacked David bitterly. Because she said that he didn't really appreciate what she had done for him and he was opportunistic and blah, blah, blah. And I was really floored. I thought that she was speaking irresponsibly because when you write something about an artist, the artist's work, what it has done for you to make you write, that is the reward. There isn't any other. You know there was no financial aspect to this at all, but I suppose she felt neglected as a critic, which she was really.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, she was? But then I understand that she became quite difficult with almost everybody.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, that's chicken and egg, you know.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And she was in poor health.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Poor health. And a very close friend of hers said she died of a broken heart because she couldn't make her life work in some way and she was magnificently equipped.

(Interruption)

GARNETT MCCOY: Could you say something about David Smith's boyhood, or did he often tell you stories about what he would do?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I have a piece of paper that he wrote on, a strange little story about his boyhood. He put a heart in the middle of the paper and he wrote in it, "pure gold Dehner" and that was a kind of valentine to me and then all around it he wrote about harsh things that had happened to him in his boyhood. He spoke about his working in the beet fields when he was very young and how endless the rows were. And the doctor's son also worked in the beet fields. This is middle-west thrift and so on. You know, keep your boy busy on Saturday, don't let him get into mischief, kind of thing. But he felt very put upon about these early chores and this work that he did and he constantly referred to this. And then he worked for the candy kitchen man in Paulding, or maybe that was in Decatur, - they also sold fruit and what were considered fancy vegetables, and he had to clean celery early Saturday morning when it came in from the farmers from Michigan. And he had great resentments about this because he saw other kids playing around and he was working and it was probably somewhat financial necessity that his little bit of money either be put aside for his college, which was the idea, and it may occasionally have been borrowed by the family because he told me that, and then they would put it back for him. But he had great resentment about this because, I suppose, this was Saturday when he didn't want to be confined and he was bursting out with energies and desires for creative play and doing things. He used to run back and forth from moving railway trains going in opposite directions when they were slowly pulling out of the yard, he and this gang of kids used to jump back and forth on the coal cars and this just made my hair stand on end to even think about it. And it was kind of violent play, you know, taking terrific chances. And then he did tell me about shooting off dynamite. He used to get the dynamite from the stores that his father had, unbeknownst I'm sure to his father, and he knew how to attach caps and the mechanism by which you blow up dynamite and he used to take this out in the fields outside of Paulding and blow it up to hear it bang. And then one night he told the story of firing off the Civil War cannons in the public square when he was a high school boy.

GARNETT MCCOY: You mean he would load them with powder?

DOROTHY DEHNER: He would load them with powder or dynamite, I don't know what he used, he didn't ever tell me, but it made a tremendous roar through the town.

GARNETT MCCOY: Did he get into trouble on that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I think he probably had domestic reprimands, I don't think the town did anything to him.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Sort of an imaginative prank.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Probably the Smith boy was quite a figure in the town I have a feeling. He had millions of scars and we used to go over all his scars and he would tell me how he got them. So and so threw a brick at him as he was going down the street. He had a big scar on the back of his head, it took a patch of hair out and you couldn't see it because his hair was tremendously thick. I always thought that a lot of his virility was like Samson's, you know, instead of one hair growing out of a little place he had three, so his hair was tremendously thick and strong and this scar in the back was well covered. But he had scars all over his body from his encounters in fights and dangerous things that he would do, falling off roofs and falling off fences and things, and this one came from this, and oh, I got that one when I was so and so.

GARNETT MCCOY: He never went through any sort of adolescent lassitude stage at all then? I mean he always had this vitality?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I wasn't around, so he may have had long periods of lassitude and depression and everything else that I didn't know anything about. Katherine has written me some things about his life and of course being his sibling she remembers a great deal about David's early life, and I think he was always a moody, a very moody boy, because he told me that he was often very, very unhappy.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, really? So in a way he would have regarded it as a rather difficult childhood?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh yes. He regarded it as a very difficult childhood. And I say he regarded it as that. And he used to run away to his grandmother's and one time he told me that in a snow storm he opened his bedroom - he had been punished - and he went out his bedroom window and slid down the porch and he was barefooted and he ran in his pajamas to his grandmother's house because his grandmother always was the comforter and the accepter and so on. I don't have the feeling from his parents that he was unjustly punished, but I think that his father's way of dealing with him was very hard for a little boy from what David has told me. David was whipped, for instance, and of course in my house you weren't ever whipped.

GARNETT MCCOY: That was not an unusual occurrence in those days.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I suppose it wasn't but it shocked me because we were brought up on the reasoning method, as my mother called it. And once in a while the hairbrush would appear but it never contacted anything.

GARNETT MCCOY: Maybe this had an influence on his strong sense of justice, you know, whatever that means.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, whatever that means. It can mean both ways, of course. I mean it can mean a violent attitude to other people. And also concern for injustice that he suffered that he could also apply to other people.

GARNETT MCCOY: That's what I mean, yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: That's what you mean but I am furthering this and saying that his strong sense of injustice could be also wreaked on someone else. He could project the violence that he suffered on another person as well, not only verbal but physical, and he was a very violent man, exceedingly - -

GARNETT MCCOY: He really wasn't a person with what you'd call a sunny disposition?

DOROTHY DEHNER: At times marvelously sunny! Why do you think I stayed up there twenty-five years? Marvelous! Just wonderful. full of gaiety, full of tenderness but with very unreconcilable extremes of temperament. And his angers and his rages were monumental.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Really a very contradictory person.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, very! Very extreme in both, but you know warm, delightful, tender, beautiful in his concerns and his tenderness. Once when I was ill he wanted to buy me expensive flowers, and I said, "Oh, no, I don't want any roses. Don't bring me roses." I said, "You know, really the only thing I want, I think about is the wildfloweres up on Bolton." I was in the hospital. And so you know he drove to Bolton one night and came back

all in one trip - and this used to take eight hours in those days - no thruways, and brought me a bunch of arbutus from under the snow. Beautiful, you know. He would so something absolutely lovely like that. And yet there was the opposite extreme that was equally prominent.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, the whole contradictory quality seems to come out so often in his writings, too. For instance he constantly says over and over again "you can't verbalize about art, words are a sort of reactionary force even, you have to get the instant impression, the visual thing is direct and simple and more natural." And yet he writes and he writes and he writes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Voluminously.

GARNETT MCCOY: There's a sort of wonderful contradiction there. And then again there's this thing about cannons, you see. He really evidently had a thing about cannons and yet he had this very strong anti-war feeling too.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, a cannon isn't only a war machine.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Oh, I see that. But you know it's a symbol of violence of some kind. And yet he did have a strong pacifist feeling too, apparently.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Of course. He did have a very strong pacifist feeling always. We both did. When I met David I had a subscription to The Nation and I remember there was a great deal of that time about pacifism. Oswald Garrison Villard was editor at that time and I remember I became a pacifist myself through reading The Nation and other publications of that kind, the New Republic and so on. And I had seen the battlefields of France when I went there as a girl and I saw the destruction of the cathedral at Rheims and I was tremendously upset by this because before that, war was something in the movies. And the Kaiser was the "Beast of Berlin" and "my country right or wrong" was about as far as I had thought about it and so I read Bernard Shaw in California when I was still in high school. That was my first introduction to the world of ideas, as it was for many of my generation and I became a vegetarian even, because Shaw was one; and an atheist and a Socialist, essentially. I remember going to Gilmore Brown, who was the director of the Pasadena Playhouse, where I acted and asking him what a Socialist was and how could I find out, and he couldn't tell me a thing.

GARNETT MCCOY: You didn't read An Intelligent Women's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism?

DOROTHY DEHNER: David gave me that book and he put in the front, "To you my cabbage most representative" and I have the book. He gave me that shortly after we were married.

BREAK IN TAPE

DOROTHY DEHNER: ...you know with his mother he was much more difficult and much more complex but I think actually his mother was an encouraging figure and he often said, told about the book of Greek sculpture that she got for him and showed him pictures.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Was he then the driving force that sent you both to Greece? Or did you - was that just a natural thing? Or do you think that he was responding to some earlier encouragement?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. We knew - we had met Jean Xceron and he was very encouraging and then we bought this book of, oh, who was it? I can't remember the book - it's the art of Greece, a big book like that - photographs one of the French, that group around Gide and so on got that book out; and that really determined us, that and the fact that I didn't have a winter coat. We had spent our money on African sculpture.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Oh, you mean you got the book when you were in France?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, before we went. So it was very cheap to go to Greece. It was only \$40. And it was cheaper than a coat.

GARNETT MCCOY: Forty dollars!

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. On the Conuivial Mail Line third class out of Marseilles.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh. Well, that was in 1935, wasn't it?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: And then did you go to - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Pull the chair around, Rosalind, if it's more comfortable.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Oh, no, because it - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Why don't you sit here. And I'll sit here.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, that's difficult.

GARNETT MCCOY: What was it that made you decide to go to Europe in the first place?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, we were very politically aware and we felt that certainly a war was coming and that Hitler would start something terrible in Europe and we wanted to see it before it was all smashed up.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see. But you had in mind going to Paris chiefly? And then Greece? And London? Or did you - -
-

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, yes. We wanted particularly to go to Paris and I think that Paris was probably less sympathetic than we thought it would be. We found Greece very sympathetic as far as people. And David had a very hard time adjusting in Paris because he didn't know the artists. We had met a few artists. On certain levels we had a marvelous time. Graham took us all around and introduced us to a lots of people that we wanted to know. He knew where everything was in Paris, just absolutely everything and how much it cost and who - I mean objets d' art - and who had it and who bought it from somebody else and all of that. And in that way we had a wonderful time because we were exposed to things we never would have seen had we not had access to private collections. But just the artist's life bumming around in cafes and drinking and that kind of thing we didn't have because Graham was not that kind.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, he wasn't?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, no, never. He was very adaptable in any situation but he wasn't well, I guess he wasn't an American boy, you know. He didn't belong to the - he wasn't the WPA type which we were at that time.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Well, how did you get along with the language? Your French is pretty good.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, it's only fair. And I studied like mad at Berlitz the whole time I was in Europe, that whole year; I worked hard, I took two classes a day sometimes.

GARNETT MCCOY: But David Smith himself didn't know French, did he?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, he didn't, but he could spot an English-speaking person at ten blocks. He'd say, "That guy is going to tell us where we are," and sure enough the guy would have spent three years in Pittsburgh or something and be able to talk.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, how long were you in Paris?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, let's see, we were there November - about four months altogether, four or five months.

GARNETT MCCOY: And had you been to London before that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. We went to London at the tail end and we were only there for about three weeks, perhaps a month. and then we went to the Soviet Union from England.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, after you'd been to England you went to - - - ?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. We went on the little boat, you know, that came up the Thames Estuary and went around the Baltic.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And let us off at Leningrad.

GARNETT MCCOY: How long were you there in the Soviet Union?

DOROTHY DEHNER: We had a 28-day tour.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, really?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And we met Graham's wife there. I guess I told you all of this, didn't I? I forget who I say what to.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: That's all right.

GARNETT MCCOY: It's good to get - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Anyhow that was a very interesting situation because Graham had given us their address and told us to look them up. Of course, we didn't even know how to get there, all this Russian language, you know, and there wasn't one word that sounded like any word we'd ever heard of, it wasn't like French or German you can catch a little...But in Russian there wasn't a thing. Anyhow, we got there.

GARNETT MCCOY: In Moscow? Or - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: In Moscow. And we invited Cyril, Graham's son, to have lunch with us at the hotel. Which he did. And he was an architect and is an architect now and has been to America several times since then. Cyril his name was. And then he brought us to their home and they lived in the same house that they lived in before the Revolution only they only had part of it. But it was a great, beautiful house and all built around a courtyard with beautiful stonework. And the horses, you could hear the horses come clattering in, you know, and the wolfhounds leaping up and all of that. And they had a band playing outside. They had just dedicated the street on which the house was to her father and had named it for Mrs. Graham's father who was Russia's most famous mathematician.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And she was curator of icons, of all the icons in the Soviet Union and she was at the Tretyakov Museum.

GARNETT MCCOY: And is the son's name Dubrowsky?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mhmm. They're all named Dubrowsky. And Maria, his daughter, was 18 at that time and she was studying to be a painter.

GARNETT MCCOY: And the wife was cordial and friendly and all?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, marvelous! Just marvelous. And we had a great time with a great Russian spread of tea and kind of hors d'oeuvres, a kind of a mixed thing; not an English tea at all; a real Russian tea. And they had brought along a young Russian girl who was a friend of Maria's who spoke perfect English. And I said, "Where did you learn your English?" It was phenomenal; it was perfect. "Oh," she said, "in high school." And I wondered if any American ever learned any foreign language in high school so beautifully. And when she left we all went out in the courtyard and we took pictures and we felt like giving them things, you know. David wanted to give his shirt to Cyril and I gave my umbrella to Maria. They were so warm and lovely, you know, we felt like divesting ourselves of everything because they - they were well off in relation to people in Europe but they probably didn't have many luxuries. A pale blue silk umbrella was probably a luxury in Moscow in those days.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But on the whole you enjoyed the trip and felt that it was well worthwhile?

DOROTHY DEHNER: We did. We enjoyed it very much. But David at each new place had a terrible time adjusting. He couldn't talk to people and he couldn't find his way. We had a much better time than we would have otherwise because we met a newspaper correspondent on the boat. Lily Bennett, who was a correspondent for International News Service. And she immediately introduced us to all the newspaper people there and would give us her interpreter to go around with us for a whole day at a time, get us theatre tickets and ballet tickets and so we got around very much better than we did...She had been in Russia for seven years. And was a wonderful person.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, you hadn't planned to stay beyond this 28-day tour?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, no. It was just a tour. Oh, no. And we were very interested in seeing it.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And how long did you stay in Greece?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, we stayed in Greece from sometime in December until May.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh. In Athens, I suppose?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Or April. April, I guess. And then we spent another month in Paris. And then we left for London.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And did you meet English artists and sculptors and people?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. None. We had met an English architect [in Greece] and his wife; he is now Sir William Holford. His wife was a painter. And we went around to ruins and things with them at Doris and part of the Peloponnesus. They had hired a car for this but we were hiking with knapsacks, but we did go to some places with them. And then when we came to England we went out with them a bit. We went to a lecture, I remember Salvador Dali speaking and he came out in a diving suit and, you know, with this great ball thing over his head but he got hot in the middle of it and he must have really lost face because he had to get this thing off of him, so he was panting and sweating. And he didn't look nearly as impressive after he took this diver's helmet off, of course. And what he had to say we didn't know much about it because it was in French and very rapid.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: So in London you didn't see Moore? Or wasn't Marian Willard a friend of Henry Moore's?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. Not at that time. Not at that time. She met Moore much later and then brought - it was she who really introduced Moore to America because she convinced Curt Valentin to give Moore a show. And he didn't want to. But she convinced him that this was good. And at the same time they got a show on for him at the Museum of Modern Art just about that same time so the two things really introduced Moore to America.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And this was the first time Smith had seen Moore's work?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't know whether we saw any of Moore's work when we were there.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: No, I mean at the time of the Museum of Modern Art show which was in the forties.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: It must have been early forties.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, very early forties. It was when the war - when we were first in the war.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well then, when you came back from abroad you settled in Brooklyn? Or had you been there before?

DOROTHY DEHNER: We had been there before, yes. And we settled in a different apartment, we had a different apartment every time we came because we were always up at Bolton Landing in the summer. We used to buy furniture and then put it out on the sidewalk and put a sign on "For Sale." And quick like a bunny everybody would grab a chair for a dollar and a half or this for two dollars, and a refrigerator, you know, not electric, of course - ice. And I would sit in one of the chairs and in about 25 minutes everything would be gone and then we'd get in the truck and go up to Bolton Landing.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, at that time - this was in 1936 I gather - were you and he quite active in the artists' organizations of the 1930's? Of the Artists Union and the Congress?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes, very; not to the extent of being officers or anything like that. But David used to go to the meetings faithfully. He belonged to the Artists Union. I didn't; I never thought of it because I wasn't on the Project mainly because everybody in the Artists Union was really on the Project. At least that's how it seemed to me at the time. But I used to go to all the meetings with him. And then the Artists Congress was another very active artists' organization.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And when they had the big - there was a big split in the Artists Congress over the Finnish War.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Finnish. Yes, that's right.

GARNETT MCCOY: Did you all react to that quite strongly?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes, we reacted like mad because they wanted everybody to sign a petition about how Finland invaded Russia, you see. And of course, we thought that was right. We thought the guys that wouldn't sign this were perfectly terrible at that time.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: That's where our sympathies lay. And so a split occurred and then later another organization, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, was an offshoot of the Artists Congress. And those were primarily people that split off from the Artists Congress proper which was pro-Russian. I know Gottlieb was one of the people that wouldn't sign. And we thought that was terrible at the time, you know. And Rothko wouldn't sign either. We were really dumb, you know. Well, we were involved. We believed in something. We believed in it so strongly that we couldn't - I don't think they really saw any more clearly than we did. We just happened to fall on the other side of the fence.

GARNETT MCCOY: Mmhm. Well, there were an awful lot of people who did the same thing.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, of course. Of course.

GARNETT MCCOY: There's an article by David Smith in a local Artists Union small magazine that I think only had two or three issues.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhm. I remember when he wrote it.

GARNETT MCCOY: And the editor of the magazine, I've forgotten his name but he's now a very well-known abstract expressionist painter, who looks back on this whole period with great distaste. But at that time he was the editor of this union local magazine.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Was that Ben Shahn?

GARNETT MCCOY: No, no.

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, he's an abstract expressionist.

GARNETT MCCOY: No, it's the man who was at the Yale art school.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Tworkov?

GARNETT MCCOY: Tworkov, yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, really? I didn't realize that he was one of that group. We didn't know him then. It was called The Art Front.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, no, this particular one wasn't The Art Front, it was much smaller and it was not the Artists Union paper but it was one of the locals of the Artists Union.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, I see.

GARNETT MCCOY: And I think it only had two or three issues. And this was in 1939 or 1940.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I see.

GARNETT MCCOY: And I know that there was a great appeal for not getting involved in the war because the Soviet Union hadn't been attacked yet by Germany.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. I guess one reason we were so pro-soviet was that that faction was more aware of Hitler than any other - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And that was really the dividing line between the two factions; that we felt that anything that was against Hitler was on the right side.

GARNETT MCCOY: And they were the most effective anti-Fascist people.

DOROTHY DEHNER: That's right. And the most effective and stuck their necks out and did things and screamed loudly long before the New York Times ever wrote an editorial on it.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, did you know Baron - Herman Baron?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. He had the A.C.A. Gallery.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And he was quite active in the Artists Congress.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, he was.

GARNETT MCCOY: Although unofficially, I believe.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I think so.

GARNETT MCCOY: And then when the war came you both went up to Schenectady? Is that correct?

DOROTHY DEHNER: We had been up in Bolton Landing before that. We left New York just before the Project broke up. You see Congress really beat it to death. And they were investigating everybody and they were

investigating our friends and they would come and sit in the house and ask questions about different artists that we knew and it was all terribly unpleasant.

GARNETT MCCOY: It was like the McCarthy period.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, it was the McCarthy period in a very real sense. So we decided to just go up to Bolton Landing. And then we stayed there until - by the time we got in the war we were already up in Bolton - because everybody was remembering Pearl Harbor Day a few days back and I remember what we were doing when this happened and it was definitely in Bolton Landing.

GARNETT MCCOY: I want to get back to the WPA. David Smith had some sort of supervisory position, did he not?

DOROTHY DEHNER: He did. He was technical supervisor of the Mural Project.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see. What did that involve?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, it involved terrific decisions about all these murals that were being painted on every available wall. And he had to decide what kind of a wall it was, what kind of paint would stick, what would be permanent, what would not be permanent and so on.

GARNETT MCCOY: Technical details?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Technical details. Very complex.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: How did he happen to get that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he thought it would be a good supervisory job. You got much more money for that. I think he got \$35 a week for that and the other boys on the Project were getting \$22 or something like that.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, that's right.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And David went around and bought a lot of books and read them and studied them, Every - English books and translations from German books, Durriner, I remember was one. Anyhow he had all of them. This was before Ralph Mayer wrote his book on the techniques of the artist. And David was very good at this, very enterprising; he was so enterprising that he experimented in our house. Did I ever tell you about it? Well, he put some dry color in an iron pan and he was going to mix it with something. But in the meantime he went out and I came in and I smelled this funny smell and I thought this is a strange, pervasive, poisonous kind of smell. Well, I stayed in the house with this smell for a couple of hours because David was always cooking up something, you know. Finally it got really bad and I called up some chemical company that I looked up in the red book. I knew what it was, I think it was Indian Red or some - it was an earth color and it was in an iron pot and I said, "What is this gas that's being created?" And they said, "Oh, that's prussic acid gas. Throw it out of the window." That's what they used in the first World War to kill everybody. So I threw it out the window. David was very dismayed that I spoiled his experiment.

GARNETT MCCOY: But he didn't continue any interest in mural painting as such?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Not at all. He wasn't interested in mural painting at all but he wanted to be - he was good at whatever he did - and he wanted to be a good technical supervisor. And he was.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see. And did this last for a couple of years?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I suppose it was a couple of years. And then we went to Europe. And when we came back he wanted to be not on the technical project but on the sculpture project. You see previously they would not accept his work, it was too avant garde, it didn't look like sculpture and they wouldn't let him be on it; his work was much too abstract for them. And besides it didn't pay enough. But by this time he wanted to be on the sculpture project and he decided that he could make enough sculpture for them to satisfy them and at the same time be working full time with his own work, and he would throw them a bone once in a while, often enough, you know, because he was so prolific he could make ten times as many things as anybody else; so this was no - I mean it didn't take anything away from the U.S. Government, but it allowed him time - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, that's one of the great controversies over that period. Many of the abstract artists today were saying that it was a very bad program because the government demanded that they paint in a certain way, but others of them say, no, the government did no such thing; and even Stuart Davis said he wasn't required to paint in a certain way.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't think he was. I never heard anybody say at that time that they were required in a certain way, but David said he never could get on the Project because - well, I guess he felt he wasn't recognized

as a sculptor, for one thing he was young, very young and he had just started to sculpt. And when the technical job came along he thought that would be better for him. But later on when he was more developed as a sculptor that's what he wanted to do. And so he did.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And he did get on the Project?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, he did, but he didn't stay on very long because the Project broke up shortly after.

GARNETT MCCOY: It was about 1941 or thereabouts.

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, it was before - well, maybe it broke up then but we left for Bolton Landing in 1940 in the spring and then we made that our permanent home from then on.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: The thing he did for the municipal building...

DOROTHY DEHNER: Is that so? For the WNYC?

GARNETT MCCOY: A sculpture?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Yes. You wrote to Dorothy Miller about it.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, I did.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: That's how I heard about it, a sculpture which I suppose was in one of the offices at WNYC.

DOROTHY DEHNER: It was supposed to be in the reception room.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: The reception room, yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: That was done under the WPA?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Colored.

GARNETT MCCOY: And nobody knows where it is.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, that's what's happened to most of the WPA art. Nobody knows where it is.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Well, we're trying to find out.

DOROTHY DEHNER: It was thrown out.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: I have - there's a photograph of one of the things that's been destroyed. That's published, one of Smith's, of a horse and rider. I believe I showed you - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, you showed me a drawing of this; that's correct.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: But I've never seen any other reproductions. You say this one was painted?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Painted, yes; it was gaily painted. Mostly light, pastelly colors.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Really?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Orange, pale pinks, lavender.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Was it abstract? Or - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, very abstract, yes. It was much more abstract than this. You see he did this first.

GARNETT MCCOY: But it was perfectly acceptable to the Federal Art Project people.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, but because Piccoli who was the head - then became head of the sculpture project - was very sympathetic to David and to his work.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, good.

DOROTHY DEHNER: He is in Rome now. He was all for getting David on the sculpture project and actually he was the one that accomplished this for David.

GARNETT MCCOY: But he is an American?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, he's an American.

GARNETT MCCOY: But is living in Rome?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Living in Rome now, yes. I guess he's an Italian-American, he came from Italy.

GARNETT MCCOY: How do you spell his name?

DOROTHY DEHNER: P-i-c-c-o-l-i. And he lived in Croton-on-Hudson. And in a strange co-incidental way he was a friend of Ferdy's because Ferdy lived in Croton.

GARNETT MCCOY: Who is Ferdy?

DOROTHY DEHNER: My husband.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh!

DOROTHY DEHNER: My present husband.

GARNETT MCCOY: I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: We had a lot - you see Ferdy's wife was the head of the WPA art gallery in the short time that that existed.

GARNETT MCCOY: No kidding?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. So we have a lot of inter-winding friendships that we didn't know about until long after.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, one of the things that constantly crops up in the David Smith Papers is a frequent reference to an article that he saw in the magazine Cahier d'Art.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: On Picasso's work and Gonzalez' work and how impressed he was by it.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: Could you say something about the circumstances of that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I can remember the day we went to Graham's house and I believe Graham had just come back from Paris.

GARNETT MCCOY: You don't know the year?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I can dredge it out but you better turn off the tape while I do it.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: You said something about in 1933 on seeing this and then he made this - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: On seeing the Gonzalez? Yes. Yes. Yes. And Graham brought this Cahier d'Art to us. We were at his house and he gave us this magazine. And on the page, on the outside column on each page was a spread of small photographs of Gonzalez' sculpture. And of course we couldn't read all this but it was obvious that we didn't have to. And David was terribly impressed with it. And it was about that time that he wanted to get a welding set. Before that he forged things, he had a little forge in the woodshed up there and had set up a little studio; we pulled the woodshed away from the house for him so we'd have a separate kind of place and set up a forge and a blower and anvil and all the things and he actually forged. Well, you know those early things that are forged; they're not welded.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. And he was doing that before he saw the article?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, I think he did this after he saw the article. Before he saw the article he was doing those constructions of wood that I spoke about in our last tape, the bits of things from the lumber yard, and the patterns, the wood patterns for machinery, he made some constructions out of those, and that was at the same time he was making, pasting those things on canvases. But he didn't do that much of that, one or two. And whether they preceded or followed the actual constructions I don't remember.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: I'm curious about this, is the insistence that he did those heads in 1933.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhmm

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Did he really?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, what did you think? What do you have in mind that is curious? What do you mean?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Well, Graham showed you the article in the summer?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Of 1933?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes - I think 1933, you see I can't be all that positive.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Because I think that - I know the article you're talking about and it had lots of photographs of Gonzalez' things and I don't think that was until 1934.

DOROTHY DEHNER: 1934? I see. Maybe - - -

ROSALIND KRAUSS: The Archives has photographs taken by Smith of those heads, those three heads, with little notations "Head 1933 exhibited at Julian Levy's 1934." I just wonder - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, we can check it.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And you could check it through Eleanor probably too, cross check.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: But it really was that big spread of Gonzalez' photographs that first -- because you see before that, prior to that big spread it was at the Gallery Mercier Show there were miscellaneous little photographs of Gonzalez' things in the Cahier d'Art. But he didn't see those.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, the one that I remember was a big spread and a big article about him.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And you feel that that was the first time that Smith saw the work of Gonzalez?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, that is my feeling. I am subject to error, of course, but it is my feeling that that was the important time. And of course Graham came back from Paris with a lot of stories and he had met Gonzalez and he had met Picasso, of course, and those stories and the article and everything together kind of merged and melted together into being the influence, it wasn't just the photographs, it was talking about it and how it was made.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Did he see - do you remember when he saw the Picasso, you know, construction in metal rods? Did he see that before he saw the Gonzalez things?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't remember.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Do you know that 1928 thing? Because that was also reproduced in the Cahier d'Art and I wonder if he saw that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he probably did because Graham had endless Cahiers d'Art and they used to keep them around a lot and David and I were at their house a lot and David was always reading a magazine when everybody else was talking. So it's very likely that he saw what was going on there and he himself made some thing out of rods. Did you see the one I gave you?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: That's the one I - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: That David Levy owns, yes, with ball bearings, rods and at every juncture, at every joint there's a ball bearing.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: You were living on State Street when that was made?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, I think that was the place.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: So that would be - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: We moved so many times in Brooklyn Heights. That was 124 State Street.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And do you remember? - well, I can - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: But certainly David Smith was very conscious of Picasso's work at a very early period?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes! Oh, yes. Because you see we belonged to a group of students at the League that was considered very avant garde. We were, oh, rebels in many senses.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Who else was in that group?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, Edgar and Lucille Levy, I. Rice Pereira, George McNeil, Michael Lowe - who else? Burgoyne Diller. You see all of them have carried on sort of in an avant garde way too.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Were most of them Lahey's students?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, they started to be Lahey's students and then Lahey left the League and went to the Corcoran. And the class split, half of it went to Harry Wicke and the other half went to Matulka. And it was Matulka who had studied with Hofmann that gave us the real boot and all of us were in that class, I think there were 13 in that class.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, that's interesting.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. The man that Irene Rice married - Pereira was also in that class. He died not very long after that so he was not heard from.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Was Gertrude Greene a student at the League?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't know. I didn't know her until much later.

GARNETT MCCOY: And certainly through the Matulka thing why the Picasso news would be around.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Oh, definitely! We were all very conscious of Picasso and I recall in that first tape about inquiries about Picasso. Because David asked Sloan about Picasso and Sloan said, oh, he just turns them out of a piece of machinery, you know, this is just...and so on. And Sloan threw off the suggestion that Picasso was important in any way. And then when we talked to the Furlongs who were great appreciators and who were sophisticated and knowledgeable, they talked very well about Picasso and explained abstract art because that's also on the tape, David's first inquiry. And it was Furlong who put it in very good words. And then of course Graham who had first-hand knowledge was in the picture at that time too.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: But we weren't the least bit affected by this thirties proletarian art at all. It just didn't seem to touch either of us.

GARNETT MCCOY: No.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Were you affected by the thirties? Were you interested at all in that thing that went on in the thirties of the on, you know derisive attitude about concretism? You know, that whole split between the surrealist and concretist artists?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't think we were involved in that at all. Neither of us were very involved with surrealism at that time because what we had seen of surrealist art was not very exciting.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Did you admire the concretist art like Arp and - - - ?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, David was interested in Arp. We thought Arp was interesting.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY DEHNER: Somewhat. Somewhat, but not with the interest that we were in the Cubists, which was really the thing that we centered around and our group centered around those concepts.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, I find it interesting, you know, most of the people who were doing the social realist art in the thirties, the proletarian thing, were the people who were the most ideological and, you know, the ones who are still ideological are still doing more or less that type of work.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhmm. Evergood and so on.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Whereas the people who did the, you know, non-social realist work weren't very ideological and it's interesting that David Smith was.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: But still insisted that he didn't want to do that.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Oh, definitely! And it was corny, you know. I think their social idea was probably valid but their aesthetics were so bad that we couldn't get involved.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. But there is an article he wrote in like 1938 or 1940 or so, or something he wrote that indicates that he felt that, you know, the working class could understand his work, or at least he wanted to feel this.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Well, that was probably in defense of - we both felt that, that it was in defense of our own position, the working classes better understand it or ... Well, that's the time that we had - they had that big thing at the John Reid Club. Graham had brought us to the John Reid Club one night, to which we did not belong, but this was an open meeting. And Gorky was there and - well, the other people all said, oh, you have to paint the way the working class wants you to, that they can understand it, landscapes, mothers and children and especially proletarian mother and child. And Gorky stood up and said, "Why don't you just teach them to shoot!" And the meeting practically broke up because everybody laughed, of course.

GARNETT MCCOY: It's sort of odd that Graham who was a White Russian and an old aristocrat and all that should be so left wing in the thirties.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, well, he was one of the first influences that came to us to make us left wing. Though I had always been kind of left wing because of my great grandfather's interest in Socialism in Germany, but when he came to America he stopped being a Socialist, you know, because he thought America was a paradise anyhow and didn't need any such thing. But still a lot of it hung on to my father.

GARNETT MCCOY: But Graham was just the opposite.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he was indeed except that he was a very independent thinker and when this idea came to him through God knows who - I don't - because we didn't give it to him, he brought it to us, he was very convinced and very convincing. But then he turned back, you know.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, he did?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. He wrote an autobiography called "From White to Red."

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh! Was this published?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No, never published. And I always wondered if he ever wrote a sequel "And Back to White Again."

GARNETT MCCOY: I wonder where this is? Do you have any idea?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I haven't any idea. It was a fantastic book. The manuscript was about that thick.

GARNETT MCCOY: I'd love to see it.

DOROTHY DEHNER: I would too. And he made drawings in crayon, "crayola" crayon drawings of his childhood and so on that were inserted in this manuscript. And I read the first chapter; I suppose knowing the Graham so well and so casually we didn't realize this was going to be an historic document so we didn't read it. I don't know whether David read it at all.

GARNETT MCCOY: Do you suppose his first wife, I mean the Baltimore wife would have it?

DOROTHY DEHNER: She might know where it is or what he did with it. Although -no - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: They would have been divorced by that time.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, they were divorced before that. But there was contact constantly between them. I know Graham was very fond of Eleanor and they kept writing up until the time of his death.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: How much older was Graham than ?

GARNETT MCCOY: Lots. He was born in 1880.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Let's see, he died when he was 81.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes, he was born in 1880.

DOROTHY DEHNER: 1880. Yes. So he was a generation.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, did David Smith keep up with him through the '40s and '50s?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. He and David more or less broke on ideological grounds. Graham was convinced that Picasso had become - was a fake. You see he renounced his Socialistic ideas.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Would this have been about 1940?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I would think about that. And that Picasso was a charlatan and all of these things that he had preached to us then he went back on. And this was a terrible blow from a close friend whose world was gospel especially when we were young. And Graham was difficult to follow also because he married Constance and we were mad for Eleanor. You see a divorce is always an affront to the friends, of course, you don't realize it, we didn't realize it, but it was true that we were angry that he could leave a wonderful woman like Eleanor and marry Constance who was the hostess for Vanity Fair. We all called her The Duchess. She had a huge bouquet of American Beauty roses on her desk all the time. She was really a character. And in Paris when we'd go around to dinner she would always take her fur piece and sit on it and she'd say to me, "Now if you do that you don't ever have to have your furs insured." You know I don't even have a cat skin and she was telling me how to save my mink from theft. She was really mad. Anyhow, that was one reason we sort of broke off from Graham: The ideological thing. And the social thing was not as comfortable as it had been. And all of our friends stayed with abstract art. And the Levys - Graham came to Brooklyn Heights to live because we were all there and we had all been friends but somehow it didn't work. And nobody liked Constance. She's a very affected kind of girl and probably innocent and well-meaning and we didn't give her credit for her niceness. But whatever - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: But Graham's views on aesthetics didn't change?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, they changed drastically. He said Picasso was a charlatan and that's when he began....

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see what he means. So he went back to social - to at least - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Women and lips and wounds and face, and portraits, and that sort of thing. Did you see the painting that I have of Graham's?

GARNETT MCCOY: No.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I'll show - I'll bring it in to you. I just had it rest.....

ROSALIND KRAUSS: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY DEHNER: He was an influence on us, yes, because we didn't meet de Kooning through him. Or he was not one of de Kooning's associates at that time.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh. And then besides didn't he go off to Europe and live the last several years of his life?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He lived quite a number of years there.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, one thing that I'm continuing to be interested in is, you know, David Smith's own ideological evolution. After this break with Graham, did David Smith continue to feel strongly about Socialism and the general left-wing approach to society --

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: - - but he must have changed at some point in the fifties or late forties. Can you say anything about that?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't know that he ever changed.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh.

DOROTHY DEHNER: In his interview with Motherwell in his last show at Marlborough-Gerson he states his premise rather strongly I think for a Socialist world and said that he doesn't see that anyone is doing it, he was not pro-Russian or pro-any country but that he maintained his basic faith in that ideology - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: I see.

DOROTHY DEHNER: - - not as actively as he once did in the thirties when everyone was stirred up and we'd all march in the May Day parade and so on because that kind of thing was all over.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. That whole period was over.

DOROTHY DEHNER: That was over. That was past.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: But did he feel that during the war the United States should be been fighting at all?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He was for it?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes. He felt that this was inevitable. We were terribly sorry that this thing hadn't been stopped before it started when it should have been stopped at the very beginning.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: But you had the conviction that - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmm.

GARNETT MCCOY: I think everybody did.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. I think so. Both right and left.

GARNETT MCCOY: Earlier when you talked to me you mentioned the fact that David Smith when he was a very young man had thought about writing poetry and wasn't quite sure what he - how he wanted to direct his life.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, he hadn't thought of being a professional poet at all. No, it was just that he had an interest in writing of all kinds. He had told me that he used to read The Golden Book when he was back in Indiana and Ohio. I don't know if you know that magazine.

GARNETT MCCOY: No, I don't.

DOROTHY DEHNER: It was not a magazine of contemporary literature but it was a compilation of past literature, poetry and prose, that came out monthly and all very good writing. I don't think The Golden Book lasted very long but while it did we were very impressed with it. He had brought it to my attention, though I had read a lot of that before it appeared in The Golden Book.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Well, did he continue to be interested in literature and poetry and reading?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, I don't think poetry so much. And he used to make - I used to like the 19th century romantic poets at this time, Shelley and Keats and Byron and that kind of thing, and he thought that was terribly mushy and all that says "I die, I faint, I fall." Oh, crap!

GARNETT MCCOY: Apparently his favorite author was James Joyce?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he liked - Rosalind and I talked about that a good deal. He liked the idea of Joyce. I think he felt some kind of kinship with his work.

GARNETT MCCOY: Sort of experimenting with the language.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. But the actual time spent in reading Joyce was, I would say, exceedingly brief. Though David was very involved with all kinds of reading. He read archeology, he liked Petrie's books on Egypt; and he read everything as a matter of fact. He was widely read in many different fields with no special thing but he felt a kinship with Joyce. He felt Joyce was doing something with the language that he was doing with image.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And the punnings there too were very strong and we even named the dog Finnegan.

GARNETT MCCOY: When was it that - well, I know the answer to what I was going to say - it was in 1940 or '41, wasn't it, that Greenberg first wrote that piece on David Smith's work?

DOROTHY DEHNER: It was some time at that time because it was just before Greenberg was called off to war. And he had told Marion that he wanted to do something for David before he went away.

GARNETT MCCOY: Was it '43 in The Nation?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhmm.

GARNETT MCCOY: But Greenberg hadn't been a part of your group in the thirties?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. Not at all. Not at all. Because we were Brooklyn Heights. I don't know where Clem was at that time either, you know, or what group he was with.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, I think he was with The Partisan Review people.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, I see. Oh! They were Trotskyists.

GARNETT MCCOY: That's what he was, yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He wasn't with Partisan Review until after he came back from the war.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh!

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He was with The Nation first and then with The Partisan Review during the forties.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, I see. But he did have that Trotskyist slant I think.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I don't know about Clem personally but Partisan Review that started out being Stalinist turned into a Trotskyist organ.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Yes. Very soon.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. They were always attacking rather than putting forth a program of their own.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Meyer Schapiro was with that group, wasn't he?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't know. But this man down at NYU - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, Sidney Hook?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. He's my daughter's teacher.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, he's a monster.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. We thought he was a monster.

GARNETT MCCOY: He still is.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Is he.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, he's just absolutely terrible, you know, the worst kind of sort of right-wing liberal.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, dear! But he'll turn into a Buckleyite before he's finished.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: What about George L. K. Morris? He wrote stuff in The Nation that was very interesting.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Well, he was one of the intellectual kind of people. Wasn't he married to Susie Frelinghuysen? Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He was quite respected among the abstract painters.

DOROTHY DEHNER: He was indeed. He was one of the leading figures in the American Abstract Artists group.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Yes. Because I read something that he wrote and he was a tremendously intelligent man, really great.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he was very, you know - well, he was very well-educated to begin with and he was very articulate.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And beautifully written.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And he probably, you know, was a big college man whereas most of the boys on the Project - most of them that I knew didn't go to college at all.

GARNETT MCCOY: I think Balcomb Greene is sort of the same idea.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, Balcomb Greene and - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Articulate writer and - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: -- and Shaw I think was in that group too.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Was Sidney Geist? When did Sidney Geist - - ?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, he's much younger. Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Because he wrote something. I guess it was much later. I wondered what Smith's reaction to that was.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, that was long after I left.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: You mean Sidney's piece on David? Or - - -

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Well, it was something that was more about frontal sculpture.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh! I see.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: It was on hybrid art.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh! Well, Sidney must have been very young then? He must have been about 20 years old or something. Well, he's an intellectual type too sort of like the people we've mentioned before, Morris and so on, though probably not as graceful in his writing.

GARNETT MCCOY: David Smith was never influenced in his work by the critical writings of people like Greenberg and so forth, was he?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't think so. I don't think David was - he was influenced I think by visual things, visual works of people perhaps, but I don't think anybody writing about his work made much impression except if somebody said something bad he would, you know, go off on that person's competence and that would have been a rare moment to be hearing this: but it didn't affect him.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. The Archives is now microfilming the very large collection of the papers of Archipenko. There was never any inter-relationship there, was there?

DOROTHY DEHNER: No. I think David was a little bit interested in Archipenko in the early days but I think he soon lost that. As a matter of fact, I think he felt that he was a rather society portrait man rather than a deeply serious sculptor who was pushing out. He was not one of the figures that David was impressed with except at the very beginning when this group was very isolated and fresh and new.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: What about Giacometti?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he was very impressed with Giacometti but that was in Giacometti's Cubist period, his earliest work.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Which he saw at the Museum of Modern Art?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I think we saw photographs of it in Cahier d'Art before - - -

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Before?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And I remember we both looked at that piece that's like a game, it's a slab with indentations. I don't remember where we saw it.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Well, I know that was reproduced in Cahier d'Art.

DOROTHY DEHNER: But we saw the actual piece some place. It was exhibited some place in New York.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: That was exhibited very early in the Cubism and Abstract Art Show, I mean it was in a very early show at the Museum of Modern Art.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhm. And he was very influenced also by that piece of Giacometti's The Palace at Three A.M. And that definitely relates to the Harvard piece Interior for Exterior.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Right.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Up there that was a kind of Smith image after image of memories of that, I think. And that was one of the wonderful things about David's work actually that he could take the world and what it had produced and make his own image out of it, everybody, anybody and he felt, you know, that this was right, that this was the world, and this was what you did with it, just the same as Picasso did.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: I was also wondering about Miro, whether he was at all interested in or saw much of Miro's work in Paris or in this country.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, he did see Miro's and he was very interested in Miro in the earlier days. I think he lost his interest in Miro at some point. But he was very influential at the beginning. I believe he showed at the same gallery that Calder showed at. Was that Pierre Matisse in those days?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He showed at Pierre Matisse.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Pierre Matisse, yes. And I remember going up on a Saturday afternoon and looking at a Miro show that was very impressive. I think that had The Dog Barking at the Moon picture in it. And many of the pictures that had ladders. It was when he was doing ladders, bright, flat color background and small figures spread over in bright colors and black lines and so on; that period. He was impressed. But I think also that Miro disappointed him because he didn't go on.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. In the same way that Archipenko began as such an innovator in 1912 and 1913 but didn't really go on.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Exactly.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Got sort of stuck in a rut. Well, I'm sort of out myself. Do you have any - can you think of anything else to add, Rosalind?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: I think I've asked all the things I wanted to.

DOROTHY DEHNER: You did have?

ROSALIND KRAUSS: No, I think we've covered - between the two of us we've covered pretty much the ground.

DOROTHY DEHNER: There seems to be so much to say.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: I know. It's impossible really - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. Can you - do you have anything that you would like to get on?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, if you have any subject that you would like to talk about tell me and then I will talk about it. Well, the way he went at art ... go on, you first.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: You said that Graham's criticism of surrealism was that it was so literary.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: What I'm interested in is the whole feeling that Smith had about image and whether he considered the problem of punning visually, or using images in a double and triple way would lead him into any sort of literary art? Whether this was a problem?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I don't think it was a problem. I think he accepted anything that came to him and I think the medallions are the high peak of inclusion of surrealist ideology in his sculpture. I think he used it in other things too. He often used it. He did it whimsically whenever he felt he could use it. But I don't think that it was as basic to him as his interest in Cubism was.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: And he wasn't worried that the same criticism could be leveled against him?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, no, he wasn't. Though some people leveled it. Some people did level it to him. I don't think Stuart Preston, for instance, ever gave David a good review in his whole life. And it's incredible now to think of it. These shockingly brief reviews were the only reaction of the - - -

ROSALIND KRAUSS: They must have been so important that it was the only reaction he had.

DOROTHY DEHNER: That's right. That's right.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: [Inaudible]

DOROTHY DEHNER: And yet - well, there were certain people - I spoke of Elizabeth McCausland - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: - - and Ruth Green Harris; and another woman who was very important in her encouragement was Emily Genauer and she was the first New York critic to recognize David and I had mentioned that when I spoke to you before.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And she got him on the Herald Tribune Forum and things like that and she would always single his work out when he was in a group show and she was very encouraging.

GARNETT MCCOY: I think she may even have bought a piece.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, she did, but that was later because I have a letter from David - it was about 1951 - because he sent a watercolor of mine to Emily Genauer - I used to make little tiny watercolors and David would buy them for five cents, and he sent one of them to Emily Genauer and said that I was having an exhibition in New York. That was after I had left Bolton Landing. And Emily responded very warmly and I have the quote from her letter. He cut out the part where she spoke about my work. And then he said in a postscript that she and her husband had just bought a piece of his sculpture. But you see that was in the fifties; but it was in the thirties that she started to write about him.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: This is getting a little disconnected but I just see a note here, you say that Smith was not terribly interested in Arp and yet in the letters that I've read, or the notes that I've read, there is no mention of Arp at all, but there's a continuing interest and continuing conviction about the greatness of Brancusi - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Mmhmm.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: - - who was very far from Cubism.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, that is true. Yes, you wondered how Arp escaped and Brancusi got in.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Well, you wonder how Brancusi got in with his almost exclusive interest in Cubism in terms of sculpture.

GARNETT MCCOY: Brancusi was the great hero, wasn't he?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. And he was much older too, wasn't he? And his interest in bases, the way he made his pedestals part of his sculpture. David did that too in that piece that the Museum of Modern Art has, the head. And he abandoned that idea because it certainly didn't fit his kind of sculpture as he soon found out. But that was a direct homage to Brancusi.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: Did he know that Brancusi had taken, had photographed all his own work?

DOROTHY DEHNER: I don't know whether he did or not. I never heard him speak of it and I would doubt if he knew. It was just very convenient because we had that promontory right outside of his studio and then the drop off so that anything he brought out there was smack against the sky with just a very distant like and cloud formations usually there and so it made an ideal spot for him.

GARNETT MCCOY: Perfect.

DOROTHY DEHNER: And absolutely simple to do it. And I don't know if he continued to take his own photographs but he was taking them up to the time that I left.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, he did? Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: He did. He continued to do. I have some photographs of David photographing his sculpture on the dock at Bolton Landing.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, you do?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. With the ice on the lake and David crouched down, you know, looking through the viewer.

GARNETT MCCOY: One of the things that the Archives has sort of found is some - just a few snapshots from the Russian trip showing - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Cyril!

GARNETT MCCOY: - - showing David Smith with some Russian people.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, that's Graham's family.

GARNETT MCCOY: Oh, is that it?

DOROTHY DEHNER: Sure. You know, I'm dying to have some of these photographs and I've asked both Jeannie and the lawyer if I might - look, I took half of these photographs myself, you know. And it was so difficult to ask for anything or take anything because it was like dismantling my own house, you know, it was a purely sentimental kind of attitude. And I didn't want to spoil this house that I had made so much . . . So those things were all left, like all these photographs from the European trip. But nobody will ever - - -

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, I could send you copies of them.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, can you?

GARNETT MCCOY: Of the European ones. Sure.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Do you have all the films? Who has the films?

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, we have that, I mean the European snapshots. See, when I went up there I took away a great many snapshots but I don't think I got all of them. But I did get most of them. Don't you think that was the situation? Well, the ones I didn't take I know were things like pictures of the children and things like that.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes.

GARNETT MCCOY: But I was interested in anything earlier so I'm pretty sure I got - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes. Well, I have a lot of photographs earlier.

GARNETT MCCOY: Maybe we could exchange.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, sure. You may have any films you want because I took a lot of 35 millimeter things. But then I used David's big camera too quite a bit but of course who has them now I don't really know. I asked Jeannie and she didn't respond so - -

GARNETT MCCOY: She probably - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Oh, yes, she told me she had them. She said there were a lot of photographs of me there, and I said I would like to look through them. But perhaps it has to go through the estate before anything can be said about it, permission.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes. I don't really know what the legal aspects of it, the technical - - -

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I think that the trustees are very anxious for the estate to be completely intact.

GARNETT MCCOY: Yes.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Though Ken Noland was up there about two weeks ago and took a great truck full of stainless steel. He's going to make sculpture, I guess.

ROSALIND KRAUSS: He bought it.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, he bought it; oh, sure. Because he was there the day David Reedy came for the piano and he couldn't get through because the truck was there and he had to wait three hours; they wouldn't move the truck. Leon has become a little obdurate I think. I think he's probably very tired of this whole business.

GARNETT MCCOY: He must be.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Well, I would be too, you know. This man is a simple man and to be suddenly catapulted

into a situation like that, I think is very hard and he doesn't have the slightest natural understanding probably of what this is all about, you know.

GARNETT MCCOY: Well, I think he may have a natural understanding but not, you know, a social understanding.

DOROTHY DEHNER: Yes, but I mean the value of the work, for instance, because those guys were often in David's studio and they'd say, "What are you making, Dave?" And David would say, "I'm making a sculpture." And they'd say, "How much are you going to get for that?" And David would say, "Oh, you know, I'll get a thousand dollars for that." He'd say, "Well, Dave, I wouldn't give you a dollar for it."

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... July 23, 1965