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Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Sarkis Sarkisian,
1973 February 23-March 23**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sarkis Sarkisian on February 23 and March 23, 1973. The interview took place in Detroit, Michigan, and was conducted by Dennis Barrie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Sarkis Sarkisian and Dennis Barrie have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DENNIS BARRIE: The following interview is the first of a series. The subject matter will be the early life and career of Sarkis Sarkisian, painter, educator, Director of the Society of Arts & Crafts in Detroit. The date is February 23, 1973. We are in Sarkis's studios in Detroit. All right, that's the formal part. Okay. Well, what I thought we'd start with is your life in Turkey and just some essentials there. For example, you were born in Smyrna, Turkey, in 1909.

SARKIS SARKISIAN: In 1909.

MR. BARRIE: However, your ethnic background is not Turkish?

MR. SARKISIAN: No. We are Christians by religion, born in a Mohammedan country.

MR. BARRIE: What was your actual ethnic background? Christianity was your religion.

MR. SARKISIAN: Our religion was Gregorian; that is our Armenian religion. My mother was Greek in her background. She came from Kabakin [ph], from Crete.

MR. BARRIE: What about your father?

MR. SARKISIAN: My father was a true Armenian.

MR. BARRIE: Why were they in Turkey?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I really don't know why they were there. But they were all born-I'm speaking of where their origin was. I know about my mother's. However, I couldn't tell you about my father's.

MR. BARRIE: How long did your family live in Turkey? Or I should say how long did you live there?

MR. SARKISIAN: We lived there until I was about 13 years old.

MR. BARRIE: What was it like for your family in Turkey?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I think for a while it was very enjoyable. We accepted Turkish rules. We had very close Turkish friends. My father was connected with a bank, an agricultural bank, which was controlled by the government. My mother was a housewife. It was compulsory to learn the Turkish language in the schools. So all the schools, Greek, Armenian, French, or whatever, had to teach Turkish as a compulsory language. They left our religion alone. We went to church. And it was really

fun. I think that that early period was very, very good until World War I. That was when the tragedy began. My father being in the bank-let's say being associated with the government bank- was exempted from going into the army. So we kept on as before and gradually we raised resentment between the Christians and the Turks. This didn't help very much because we were rationed. Everything was rationed. We were allowed just so much bread, so much sugar, which was very little, so much flour. But we pulled through it because my mother's father was a retired tobacco man. He had a beautiful farm, oh, about five miles up on the Fleda. We used to go there. He was retired. He had all kinds of chickens. He grew the most beautiful fruits. He had all kinds of olive trees, fig trees and melons. So that did help a great deal. By the way, this was not in Izmir. We were on the outskirts of Izmir. The place was called Aydin.

DENNIS BARRIE: Aydin? This is a small town?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, compared to Izmir. Izmir is the port near the river which is called Meles [now called Kiziltjullu] that went right through the center of the city which really separated the Christian world from the Turkish world.

MR. BARRIE: How many Christians do you think there were in the city?

MR. SARKISIAN: I really couldn't even guess. I was very young. And we didn't actually feel the need of knowing whether-I think the only count of how many Turks and how many Armenians, or how many Christians and how many Mohammedans there are considered when you are really getting ready for some action. But, under the circumstances, we didn't feel any-because up to that time we had a very interesting kind of relationship. So there was no need for-

MR. BARRIE: Did you receive any formal education when you were in Aydin?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I studied French and Armenian and Turkish. But there was no Greek taught. So, during the summer vacations, I went to the Greek School to learn Greek. Although I could speak Greek very well, I wanted to be able to read and write in that language. So my father insisted that I should go and take a summer course instead of going fishing.

MR. BARRIE: What kinds of schools were there? Were these public schools?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes, in a sense they were public schools. But nevertheless they were controlled by the Turkish government as to what our literature should be and so forth and so on. So it wasn't a free sort of school. We used to give pageants and plays, you know, old plays, and we were always very careful not to-well, insult the Ottoman-the Turkish Empire. So we just kept away from these aggravating situations for the Turks by censoring a lot of things.

MR. BARRIE: I'm interested to know if, while you were growing up in Turkey, you were interested in art, in becoming an artist?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I think that's a very important part of my life. I think the origin of a potential artist comes in the very early days. This may sound kind of funny and unimportant to you, but it does indicate that at an early age the atmosphere in which you live, the country in which you live, the philosophy, and so forth, have a great deal to do with your future life. At my grandfather's farm there were a lot of Greek and Roman tombs. There were a lot of ruins. As a matter of fact, I carved my name on one of the gates of what used to be the city naturally where my grandfather was. And also when he plowed the farm he used to find little coins. I wish I had collected Roman and Greek coins when they were there. So that somehow gave me a start in sculpture and in the arts as a

whole. I used to go to the banks of the river and get clay. There was some beautiful red clay there. And I used to sculpt with it. The first sculpture I remember doing was Adam and Eve. I enjoyed it. This is true.

MR. BARRIE: How old were you then?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh, I must have been six years old. That was the first thing that I really made. I found it very interesting. Another interesting thing was that, once I was sick with some-I don't know what it was, smallpox or measles or whatever it was-and I had to stay home. So I started experimenting with making kites. Kites are a very, very important thing not only for children but for grownups as well. To see who makes the most beautiful kite is really something. So I did these kites myself. Then as people saw them they wanted to buy them for their children. So I started a pretty good business.

MR. BARRIE: How old were you when you were making kites?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh, I suppose I was about seven. When I see seven year old kids today I think that they are very able to do things like that. Then I started making instruments, for example, flutes. I wanted to find out how I could make the holes. A friend of ours, a Greek, who was a very good cabinetmaker, carpenter, told me to use a spike such as you use when making shish-kabobs. He said get it real hot and push it right into the bamboo. You see, we have this bamboo all over the Sluika-goes through. So I started making flutes and selling them.

MR. BARRIE: What did your family think of all this?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, my father was a very strict man, however, very philosophical. I think he was a great man. He encouraged me in doing these things. He felt that a person who can do something with his hands is always accepted in any society because he's needed. I think that this was a very, very important lesson for me to have learned from my father. And later on I realized that it was true; that nothing is more expressive as generations go by except that things are made by hand by common ordinary people, by children. So he really encouraged me very much and I was very happy about that. I kept on drawing and sculpting. Also, my father was very much interested in our learning some of the classics-well, what at the time we thought were classics. He used to read to us a lot of Alexander Dumas's things which were very interesting, very good for children. Every night before we went to bed we would gather around and he would read a chapter or two, or a page or two, and then we'd go to bed. Not only that but he also was very much interested in the opera. We used to have some Viennese people come to Aydin who played Viennese music in the open-air cafes. My father always used to take us there. He would order some beer. He didn't drink much, just a little. My grandfather drank a lot, but my father not so. We would have ginger beer. You know what that is?

MR. BARRIE: Yes, I know what it is.

MR. SARKISIAN: So we used to listen to all this wonderful music. As a matter of fact, I even learned some arias from *Tosca* in Greek as a child. My friend in Greece was very much surprised that I knew the words in Greek. He was an opera lover himself. He said, "How did you-where did you learn this translation?" I told him that I learned it [inaudible].

MR. BARRIE: Was there anybody else either in your family or outside your family who encouraged you to pursue any kind of artistic endeavors?

MR. SARKISIAN: No, I don't think so. I think that my father and mother were the only two people who

encouraged me. My teachers, the other teachers, encouraged me in my academic work, but as for the arts-as far as my artistic development was concerned, they were not interested. They did not even understand the need for self-expression. But I did learn from them a lot of things that I would not have learned from my father, for instance. So I was very grateful for that. We had a good teacher in my grandfather-my father's father-who I didn't know. He was a wonderful man according to what I've heard of him. He was a musician to start with. He was a silversmith and he did the most intricate and beautiful inlays of silver and gold-the Arabs and Turks-their knives and guns. And he was very much needed. But he had other ideas, too. He was a good drinker. He drank a lot. He loved life. He used to bring the whole opera-you know, I'm amazed that a person like that could go and see an opera and bring the whole opera, the whole staff, bring them to our house at three o'clock in the morning and make my grandmother get up and cook. She'd have to get up and cook. We had a lot of chickens. So she had to fry them. It was really something. It's too bad I didn't see it.

MR. BARRIE: It sounds pretty amazing. You didn't have any formal art education in Turkey?

MR. SARKISIAN: No.

MR. BARRIE: They didn't have art classes in the Turkish schools?

MR. SARKISIAN: No, they never had any art classes except they gave me a prize once for Turkish writing which is called calligraphy. In Turkish you write from right to left. There were some judges from the Turkish university who came and judged our writing. And they gave me a prize. They thought that my calligraphy was the most well-controlled and beautifully executed. Which from an Armenian doing Turkish writing is really something. I think this was really very interesting. Before they gave me the prize, they asked me who I was. When I told them who I was, they said, "No wonder. We know your father. He himself has a great feeling for calligraphy." So that's how I-

MR. BARRIE: -got the prize.

MR. SARKISIAN: No, I didn't get the prize; this was after I got the prize that they asked me who I was. So the prize was completely on my own merit, not on the influence of my father.

MR. BARRIE: Your family eventually left Turkey. Why did they leave and where did they go?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, let's see. There was a period where they were-after the Versailles Treaty, they gave a certain part of Turkey all the way from Ankara, as a matter of fact, to the Greeks. Venizelos, who was a great Greek leader at the time, and Clemenceau, and all the powers- I think that President Wilson was connected with this. They gave all this big section of Turkey to the Greeks. So the Greeks came and occupied it. Of course, the Turkish people and their government were very lax. They were not well-organized. They were all bandits-well, not bandits-they were just farmers and there was no order. So the Greeks came very easily and went right through to Ankara. It was then that the Turkish government-I don't know, I think you may have heard of Ataturk?

MR. BARRIE: Yes.

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, he and two other of the Turkish leaders decided that they should organize and try to take back this area that the United Nations [League of Nations] gave to the Greeks. And, to my surprise, even as little a boy, as I was at the time, English people themselves actually helped the Turks with all kinds of ammunition. And the reason was that the Turkish government was very lenient about taxation and so forth and so on. As soon as the Greeks came, exports and imports were all organized like they would be in Greece or in Italy or in France. So they didn't like that; they

didn't like to lose the privileges they had. So they actually helped the enemy really. They fortified them with the best equipment for working to take Turkey back. So the Turks came back. And stupidly, they burned everything on the way, all the way to Aydin, which was our town. They burnt everything. And here there were really the most beautiful things that they should have conserved. That's when we decided to move. We had to move.

MR. BARRIE: Were you physically in danger?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh! In danger? I saw a little creek, that little creek where I used to listen to the Viennese music; it was red with blood. I stepped over the bodies of my friends to go over to walk. What happened was that, when the Greeks came back again and they pushed the Turks away from there, we decided that it was time for us to move. So one day my father came to our house and said, "Just don't take anything; just few clothes. There's one boat left in Izmir." This was when we came to Izmir. We had to leave from Izmir for Greece because they were coming to Izmir. We had a difficult time making that deadline but we did get on the boat. And just as we were moving away, as we were leaving the bay, which is very lovely, we saw that the fire had already been started there too. And I'll tell you it was the most fantastic thing. Here were the Russians and the French and all these people, you know, were trying to evacuate the Greeks and Armenians and the French, and Germans who were there. At the same time the Turks were burning this town, this whole city, a beautiful city. Smyrna was really considered a second Paris, a city second to Paris. When I saw the fire, even then I thought, well, how stupid can they be? I knew how much wealth there was. There were stacks and stacks about 15 feet high of oriental rugs from Persia, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, from Turkistan. These were rare things. Now why should they burn those things? Why should they burn the beautiful homes by the seashore? Why should they do that? And then we found out that they had burned everything down and they started living in mud huts. Now this is stupidity that I think all the nations do at some time.

MR. BARRIE: It's nationalism.

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes.

MR. BARRIE: You went to Greece and stayed there how long?

MR. SARKISIAN: I think we were there about three years, two or three years. In the meantime, while we were in Smyrna my sister got married to an Armenian fellow who had come from the United States to look for an Armenian girl. He found my sister and married her. There was a big wedding and so forth. He took my sister and my brother who is older than I to the United States. So my father, my mother and I were alone. So they got a visa for us. We had to wait for our turn to get here. And we finally did get here.

MR. BARRIE: Did you come directly to Detroit?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes, because they were Detroiters. So, I came, we stayed-my mother had a little limp because she carried my grandmother when she died and something happened to her hip and for that reason they kept us at Ellis Island for several days, about two weeks, I should say. They treated us very nicely. Of course, by that time my father had asked the man to give me lessons in English. So I spoke fluent English. That helped. We came directly from Ellis Island. We went to New York. We saw the Statue of Liberty.

MR. BARRIE: Were you excited about coming to the United States?

MR. SARKISIAN: You see, really we had an opportunity to go to Russia or France, but to me the United States-I liked the sportsmanship that I heard about, I felt that the United States was a country that I would like to live in because there's no censorship of a person; if he's a good citizen he's treated the same way as any other American. As a matter of fact, it was very interesting when my father-I had told him that there was no use in trying to make a lawyer or a doctor out of me. I said, "I want to paint." He said, "You're going to have a lot of trouble because you're a foreigner. You're in America now." He said, "They're going to call you a foreigner." I said, "No, they're not going to call me a foreigner. They're going to call me a European." I said, "It makes a big difference." You know, the word "foreigner" has a connotation.

MR. BARRIE: Yes. You said you were going to be a painter. When you arrived in Detroit did you decide at that point that you were going to be a painter?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh, I decided that-yes, in Detroit. So, while I was in elementary school I had a teacher by the name of Myrtle Mogk [ph]. She goes way back in her background; she comes from the Mayflower-a very wonderful person. She gave me enough money to go to the [John] Wicker Art School.

MR. BARRIE: This was in elementary school?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I went to the Wicker Art School nights right after school and weekends. After John Wicker saw what I was doing, he gave me the money-not her-he gave me the money to spend for paints and things like that.

MR. BARRIE: How old were you at this time?

MR. SARKISIAN: I must have been in the early 20s or younger.

MR. BARRIE: Why did she give you the money?

MR. SARKISIAN: Because I did paint. I remember what I painted once was the Mayflower, the boat. You know, we were having a play in school and they asked me if I could make a boat. And then they asked me-there was a contest to see who could paint Abraham Lincoln. So I painted Abraham Lincoln. Besides that I was a very good athlete. And I think that the kids at school liked me for that. They were really very nice. There's an interesting story connected with this. You know, the *Detroit Free Press* used to sponsor a decathlon, gymnastics, everything-jumping, high jump, and so forth-shot-put, pushups, you know, the whole business. I didn't think that I was especially good. The bus was ready to take us home after school. The teacher said to me, "Just wait a minute. You're getting close to winning a prize." My English was quite suffering, you know, and at the time I didn't quite realize what she meant when she said, "Well, just wait for a while." So I waited. There were photographers there taking pictures. They put three people-I was one of them-there was a colored boy, a big, tall fellow. They put him in the center and they put the two white boys on either side. The colored boy won first prize; I won second prize; this other kid, a white boy, won third prize. The late edition of the *Free Press* had our pictures on the front page. My father, of course, could read but he couldn't understand. He saw this picture of me and the fact that I was delayed in getting home because of having the picture taken. I didn't get home until later than my usual time. And he was sweating blood. As soon as I got home he said, "Are you in trouble or something?" I said, "Why?" He said, "You're so late. And look at the picture." And when I looked at it, I realized what they were taking the picture for.

MR. BARRIE: He thought you were in trouble.

MR. SARKISIAN: He thought automatically that I was in some kind of trouble.

MR. BARRIE: That's funny. You went to Wicker's School. How long did you go there?

MR. SARKISIAN: I went there until Mr. Wicker died. Which was, I'd say, after about four or five weeks.

MR. BARRIE: Four or five weeks? And what was it like?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, Wicker was not really what you would call a good painter today.

MR. BARRIE: Excuse me for one minute. We ought to clarify this. Wicker's School was specifically an art school?

MR. SARKISIAN: An art school.

MR. BARRIE: Okay.

MR. SARKISIAN: He himself was not-let's say, he was not a great painter. You see, he studied with [Adolphe William] Bouguereau in France. And you know the Bouguereau School?

MR. BARRIE: Yes.

MR. SARKISIAN: However, he was very much interested in Puvis de Chavanne who was quite revolutionary at the time. So he did have some very progressive thinking. I remember his telling us once that when Bouguereau came into the class he looked at all the paintings that the students had done during the weekend and when he came to Wicker's painting he kicked it because it looked like Puvis de Chavanne. We laughed about it because we thought that was kind of funny. I used to like Puvis de Chavanne. Wicker took a lot of interest in me; he told me I had a wonderful sense of color. He was a great friend of Dr. Valentiner at the time. Dr. Valentiner used to come over and see what the students were doing and so forth. He, too, was a foreigner, you know, at the time. Well, when Mr. Wicker died I wrote a letter to Mrs. Simpson who was head of Arts and Crafts in Detroit. In the letter I asked her whether it would be possible for me to have a scholarship because "I don't want to stay at Wicker's any more," because one of his assistants at the school wanted me to pay. And I couldn't pay.

MR. BARRIE: How did you afford it in the past?

MR. SARKISIAN: My teacher paid.

MR. BARRIE: She was still paying for you?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes.

MR. BARRIE: All this time?

MR. SARKISIAN: You see, I wasn't going full time. I was going part time. Well, by that time I was working for the Department of Recreation in the summers. I even worked in a factory in the summers. And I was able to pay what I had to pay. I wasn't taking any more money for my education. I even got a scholarship, what I had to pay was minimal. As I said, I wrote this letter to Mrs. Simpson who was president of Arts & Crafts. I told her what my situation was and asked whether she could find someone to sponsor me for a scholarship. So I just waited and waited and waited. Finally one day she called me and said, "I've got a wonderful person who is more than willing

to help you. He has seen your work, has seen what you're doing." By that time I was already exhibiting things in the museum and so forth. She said, "He is very much interested and would like to help you." She gave me his number. It was Dr. Kamperman. I called Dr. Kamperman. He said, "Well, Sarkis, I'm glad you called. I want you to go full time to Arts & Crafts. I've talked it over with the director there. It won't cost you anything. You'll have a charge account for everything, which will be charged to me." I was amazed that a man would take a chance like that. He didn't know me; he hadn't met me.

MR. BARRIE: He had seen your work?

MR. SARKISIAN: He had seen my work, that's all. And what he had heard from people who knew me. I went to Arts & Crafts for a whole year without knowing who the Kampermans were. They never called me. They never came to see whether I was goofing off or what. So one day I got a call from Mrs. Kamperman. She said, "You know, it's been a year now that we've known of you and have been helping you and we would very much like to meet you." I said, "Well, that's fine. Where should I meet you?" She said, "Well, we're going over to have dinner at the Russian Bear." There was a Russian restaurant here that had a balalaika orchestra and everything; it was quite interesting. She said, "When you go there, ask the headwaiter to direct you to us." So I did. I could recognize them immediately. They were very outstanding. After that, they took me to their house where I saw all these wonderful paintings they had.

MR. BARRIE: Did they have any of your paintings?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh, yes. They had a lot of paintings.

MR. BARRIE: At that time when you first saw them, did they already have your paintings in the house? At the time you first met them?

MR. SARKISIAN: No. I'll tell you why. At that time they were more interested in the Barbizon painters. I remember they had a [Jean-Baptiste-Camille] Corot. That's about all. Then gradually they began getting interested in-I don't know whether or not I had anything to do with it. But we talked, you know, about people like Matisse, the Impressionists, the Expressionists and so forth. Oh, I'm sorry, they did have some of my paintings; not too many, but some. He used to ask us if we would like to go to see the International Show at Pittsburgh. Which we did. We used to go to Washington because I showed in Washington. I was in shows in Washington. I used to show in Edinburgh. Then we went to New York together. And gradually he began to get interested in the more contemporary artists and started collecting them. I remember the first painting that I think he got was a little Matisse about this big.

MR. BARRIE: A very small Matisse.

MR. SARKISIAN: From Pierre Matisse. Then after that, he started getting [Georges] Rouault. He had some of the Germans-Karl Hofer, [Karl] Schmidt-Rottluff and I think then [Andre] Derain. He had a beautiful [Maurice] Vlaminck. I think it's one of his best that I've seen. Gradually he kept on selling his Barbizon paintings and buying others. I was glad that he sold them except I was sad that he sold the little Corot landscape; it was beautiful. So he sold those and bought other things. This was the way that he was able to pay for the contemporary art. Then they started buying, naturally, the American artists. He bought quite a few of them. Could we have a little break?

MR. BARRIE: You certainly can. I was just going to ask you if you wanted to.

[Audio break.]

MR. BARRIE: -just for a moment and talk about the kind of training you received at the Wicker School in comparison with the type of training you received at Arts & Crafts, and whether your training with Mr. Wicker had any influence on you.

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I think that Wicker, as I've said, was not a great painter. But he had tremendous taste. I think that taste was the most wonderful contribution that he had to give to his students. In other words, he saw things in a student's work that I don't think any other instructor would have seen. Of course, having been in Paris, he was aware of all the Impressionists. However, he tried to teach and so forth, but he never really-if he had lived longer, he might have, I don't know. But the thing that I give him credit for is that he never really let anything go by that was important. He had a tremendous eye for the beautiful.

MR. BARRIE: Did he personally supervise the art training?

MR. SARKISIAN: He was the only one.

MR. BARRIE: He was the only instructor?

MR. SARKISIAN: It was a very small school.

MR. BARRIE: How large was your class?

MR. SARKISIAN: The day classes were probably about at most 25 people. He taught drawing and painting. He had models that we drew from. Then he had evening classes. When he died I took some of the classes, evening classes. An assistant was taking care of-I taught drawing. As I said before, I think he made me aware that I was really doing something significant. Not that I thought so. He made me go and look at that Matisse. I remember this so vividly. He bought that chair at the Art Museum, the chair at the window, that big painting by Matisse, right about that time. Valentiner died. And I couldn't see anything in it. I was completely oblivious to that type of art. But he said one thing to me which was really very important. He said, "I want you to go there at least once a week and sit in front of it and look at it for a half hour. Don't tell me anything, but when you are ready to talk to me about it, you come to me." And really that knocked me for a loop because it wasn't long before I really began to see the fine, fine quality that this man had. Well, wouldn't you call him a good teacher really?

MR. BARRIE: In the sense that he made you see?

MR. SARKISIAN: That's right. And I think that's the important thing that he gave us.

MR. BARRIE: I've heard from both you and your wife that Valentiner visited this school-the Wicker school-did he not?

MR. SARKISIAN: He was a good friend of Wicker's.

MR. BARRIE: I see.

MR. SARKISIAN: You know, we always used to hang pictures on the walls of the school. One day when Valentiner came to the school he found he went to my picture and said, "Who did this one?" "Oh, our little Sergius." You see, I changed my name to Sergius because in high school there were two Sarkis Sarkisians. So Alice then insisted that I should change to my real name. But Valentiner

and Wicker were very good friends, and Valentiner came occasionally to talk with Wicker and to see our work. Valentiner knew, too, that he had a good appreciation for contemporary art. I think that gave him a sort of close relationship.

MR. BARRIE: As to the actual training at the Wicker School, was there some sort of set discipline that you had to follow?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I think that, as in every school, you had to learn to draw anatomically and you had to learn to draw three-dimensional forms or forms from statues and things like that, which we did. I think that's something that every school does, or should do. But it was the way that he looked at this painting business, that meant more to me than merely coming and saying, "Well, [inaudible]." He was more interested in the creative qualities that the line had, that tonality had, you know. I think this is something that a very, very few instructors really see in a student's work. They're so demanding always. They try to create-to put themselves into the student's work. And I think it destroys the student. It doesn't give the student the freedom that he needs. He needs to be himself for what he has in him.

MR. BARRIE: When you finally left Wicker and went to Arts & Crafts, did you find a difference there? Or did you find the same qualities of-?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I had a drawing teacher whose name was Roger Barent who had the drawing class. Then we had John Carroll. John Carroll was not a good teacher. As a matter of fact, he was not very nice to us. But I thought that I would like to learn everything-I liked his paintings. That's why I went there; I liked his paintings because I thought they had some substance. I still do. But he was very much interested in social life, riding at Metamora to the fox and hounds, and things like that. The school didn't mean very much any more. And actually he took an antagonistic attitude towards his most talented students for instance-and I count myself in that. And I didn't realize why. The *New York Times* gave me a wonderful write-up, you know, about some work that I had at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art, Washington, DC]. The reviewer said, "We welcome this young artist with open arms," and so forth. I was so anxious to show this review to John Carroll. He said, "That's no good. That's no good. All the artists will hate you for it." I couldn't understand that attitude. I would be the most delighted person if one of my students got that kind of publicity. I mean this. From that point of view I felt that he was a rather small person. I think that I learned enough from him so that I didn't have to be scared of him any more. As a matter of fact, I learned some good from him-his technique. He asked me if I would paint his portrait full-length and then he would put the finishing touches on it and sign his name to it. A self-portrait. And this is God's truth.

MR. BARRIE: Did you do it?

MR. SARKISIAN: No! You know what I said? I said, "I'll be more than happy to paint your portrait but you're not going to touch it, not a hair on it, and I'm going to want to put my name on it." That was that.

MR. BARRIE: Was he your main teacher at the Arts & Crafts?

MR. SARKISIAN: No. There was this-no, I took just painting and drawing. That's what I was interested in.

MR. BARRIE: This is full time?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. Barent was another teacher. He was a very fine person. But he and John

Carroll didn't get along. So finally Barent left. Then the war came on. When World War II came on, the school was frantic. They couldn't keep it up. So they let John Carroll go. And then they made Jay Boorsma director. He was teaching commercial art. A very fine artist he was, too, Sam Cashwan was the sculptor. He was teaching sculpture there. Of course we heard that the school would close. So we said, "Well, we will try, just Boorsma and I. You will take half of the art and I will take the other half. We'll try it and we'll see what happens." Which we did. Boorsma and I were the only teachers that we had there. Eventually, in retrospect, that saved our lives because they came in hordes. Then we started adding to our curriculum, to the staff and so forth.

MR. BARRIE: Getting back to your training at Arts & Crafts, was the approach that much different than Wicker's school? I mean the men were different. Obviously, John Carroll-and what was Wicker's first name?

MR. SARKISIAN: John.

MR. BARRIE: They were different in their personalities. But in the actual discipline of painting, was there a different approach at Arts & Crafts? A more professional approach?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I think that John Carroll was a much better painter. And for that reason I think that I learned certain things from John Carroll that I wouldn't have learned from John Wicker. But actually most of the training is on your own, really. I think that if you have an instructor who is smart enough to leave you alone and to anticipate what direction you're taking and that, if he likes that direction and leaves you alone, I think that this is wonderful. I think that what we do is often the opposite. We take the most important contribution that the student has to make and we squeeze it to death until there's nothing left and we start training him and re-training. I think this what kills a student. I think an instructor should really be enough of a psychologist even from the first drawing lesson to realize the potential of the student. And if he doesn't, he's not a good instructor.

MR. BARRIE: Of the two schools, or the two men-Wicker and Carroll-which do you think influenced you the most later on as a painter?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, philosophically I think Wicker did. There's no question about it. As for painting, I learned some things from Carroll, enough so I could leave him alone. I never thought about him. He didn't bother me, you know. I could paint a Carroll today that no one would actually think that it was not a Carroll. So, you see, I mean here's one man who gave me his philosophy, another man who gives me a certain technical service; and it's hard to think which is better or which is worse. A student gets something from everybody. If he's smart I think he should. I learned more-now really this is the truth-I learned more from students, from children, than I did from my teachers.

MR. BARRIE: Did you learn a lot from your fellow students at both Wicker and Arts & Crafts?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I learned what not to do, and I learned what to do; and I learned that sometimes something that occurs accidentally in a very amateurish way for a student or a child may start-will really do something and actually instill in him inspiration. You see the potential there is in this kind of-. Let's say the heavy outline like a child will paint colors and shapes. And if you don't learn it, if you don't take that-I think you're missing.

MR. BARRIE: I think so, too. Just for the record, do you remember what was the year that you started at Arts & Crafts and how long you stayed there as a student?

MR. SARKISIAN: Let's see. I think I have that written down some place. I think it might be in that

catalogue. [Sound of turning pages.] Oh, yes. In 1933 I started teaching there.

MR. BARRIE: You started teaching in 1933?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I was director from 1947 to 1967-head of the art department-painting department.

MR. BARRIE: So you were a student there in the 1920s?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes.

MR. BARRIE: It wasn't a very big school at that time, was it?

MR. SARKISIAN: No. It was really almost the same size of school as Wicker's.

MR. BARRIE: I know that you had a scholarship from the Kampermans. Was that enough for you to live on? Or did you have to work or did your wife have to work?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, no. By that time I was already starting to teach in private schools and I had some private groups. I even taught one of Eliel's best friends. He used to come to the studio. So I got along. Then I used to sell an awful lot of paintings.

MR. BARRIE: Yes. Did you exhibit a great deal while you were a student?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes.

MR. BARRIE: While you were a student?

MR. SARKISIAN: While I was a student. As a matter of fact, I think that, while I was at Wicker's, I was exhibiting in the Michigan Artists Show, so you can imagine-

MR. BARRIE: Did you also exhibit out of the state at that time?

MR. SARKISIAN: While I was at Art & Crafts-

MR. BARRIE: -you exhibited out of state?

MR. SARKISIAN: I exhibited in New York, in Washington, in Philadelphia, practically in all the major cities. I think Alice was the whole-then I was showing with the Rehn Gallery [New York, NY]. And *Life* magazine wanted to give me a big spread on what I was doing. I told them that I wasn't ready yet to show like that, so I didn't take it. You know, they used to have these color reproductions and so forth. But not any more. But that was a good thing. And I won a lot of prizes like in Pepsi-Cola Shows that they wanted to have and so forth. So I was really very much active.

MR. BARRIE: That's okay. Go right ahead. We're going to stop for today.

[END OF TAPE 1.] [BEGIN TAPE 2.]

MR. BARRIE: Let me just announce again who we are. My name is Dennis Barrie and I'm talking with Sarkis Sarkisian. This is tape number two. It's Friday, March 23, 1974. Today we're going to talk basically about Sarkis's career at the Arts & Crafts School in Detroit. Last time we talked about the fact that you had worked with both John Wicker and John Carroll and we talked about the personalities and the approaches of both men to art. So would you like to continue with that now?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes, I think I would. I've been thinking about it. I think last time I talked about some things which I received as a student from Wicker. I also received certain things from John Carroll. Now what is the difference between John Carroll and John Wicker? What did I get from Wicker and what did I get from John Carroll? I think this is the main issue to discuss. I think that John Carroll taught me—John Carroll was a good painter. At least I thought so at the time and I still think he was; I still think he is. Although he's dead now. I think he gave me an awful lot of help technically. He was very lax about teaching and so forth but when he knew that someone really had something to offer he really did not teach but talked with them. For instance, he would ask you to his studio and ask you how you liked what he was doing right then and whether I liked it or not. Well, it takes a man who respects your thinking at least to do that. However, as a human being he was, philosophically speaking, a very jealous sort of man. I've said that many times. And he didn't seem to be proud of his students. And I think he was wrong. On the contrary, speaking about Wicker. What did he do? Now Wicker was not a good painter; oh, he was a mediocre painter. He studied with Bouguereau. But he always admired the Impressionists. At the time he studied with Bouguereau he was quite interested in Puvis de Chavannes. As an assignment Bouguereau gave him a problem to paint a certain subject. When the students brought their work, Bouguereau went around and looked at all the things. When he came to John Wicker's, he kicked his canvas, you know, put a hole in it; he kicked him out practically. John Wicker couldn't understand why Bouguereau did that and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Bouguereau said, "If you're going to copy a man, copy a good man." They were deadly enemies at the time. I think that John Wicker always had a wonderful eye for the young, progressive-thinking students and always encouraged them to bring out what they really felt in themselves. And he didn't try to influence them. But John Carroll influenced his students to a point where we all painted like him. As a matter of fact, I could paint so much like John Carroll that they couldn't tell the difference.

MR. BARRIE: Yes. I think you told me something about that.

MR. SARKISIAN: He even wanted me to paint his portrait, you know, in his riding outfit. I said, "I'll be glad to." He said, "Well, when you get it almost finished, I'll put my final touches on it and I'll sign my name to it." I said, "Oh, no, John, you can't do that. If I'm going to paint your portrait, my name has to be there. As a matter of fact, I want to put my fingerprints there." I mean it's so silly to ask a kid, a student, to paint your portrait like that. Although [Peter Paul] Rubens did it, but we're not in that era. I said, "When I paint something I paint it and I sign it." He couldn't understand this. So he didn't have the kind of understanding that Wicker had. Wicker was a very good friend of Valentiner's. He was very happy that we had a man like Valentiner in Detroit because here was a man who was expert not only in Renaissance art and archaic art but also in the contemporary artists such as [Edouard] Manet, [Claude] Monet, [Auguste] Renoir, and the German Expressionists. In Germany he bought many paintings that we now have, such as work by Otto Dix, Schmidt-Rottluff, [Oskar] Kokoschka, and several others. He got these works I think for practically nothing because these artists wanted to be introduced to a different market which was the United States. He really collected a wonderful, wonderful collection for the Museum. Then he started bringing some Italian artists like [Amedeo] Modigliani. He brought—what is his name—*The Savage Messiah* [Henri Gaudier-Brzeska], by an American artist. As a matter of fact, he wrote a book on sculpture.

MR. BARRIE: Yes, I know.

MR. SARKISIAN: He brought the work of those artists to the Museum. He bought some of the most beautiful Chinese and Greek things. So he wasn't a man with a one-track mind. He really knew the old era. I respected this man tremendously because he was one of the greatest experts on the Renaissance. For instance, people used to call him up and ask him whether this a true Renaissance work, or a true Rubens, or [Sandro] Botticelli, or whatever it was. He really started buying things for

the Museum-Botticellis, [Domenico] Ghirlandaios. The El Greco we have is a beautiful one. I have seen other El Grecos at the Art Institute in Chicago. I don't think they come close to the *St. Francis* that we have. Well, a man like that was a tremendous influence on Detroit artists. And artists just adored him because he always remembered every painting in the Michigan Artists Shows-the painting, the name of the artist; he could describe the whole thing. This man didn't only look; he really looked with an eye to seeing what the person was doing. I think there is a big difference between merely looking and remembering names, and really seeing what the potential is in a particular artist's work. I was terribly sorry when he left Detroit. I think he really had something big to give, which he did. I suppose he probably made his contribution more than is expected of anybody. He brought Paul Klee's and all this wonderful Bauhaus influence to Detroit. When he left Richardson succeeded him. Richardson was a scholar. He was a very timid person. He was very much interested in American artists and in Michigan artists as well. We used to have periodically a show-

MR. BARRIE: Michigan Artists Exhibition?

MR. SARKISIAN: Michigan artists Exhibition. I mean they were displayed for good, not just for an exhibition. Then he did a lot of good where he brought-they affiliated with the Pennsylvania Academy of Art-a jury selected certain things-they had them at the art museum for a while, then they sent to the Pennsylvania. So in this way they shared the expense of the jury, the prizes, and so forth. And they also fostered a nice feeling between the two states.

[Audio break.]

MR. SARKISIAN: You could learn it fast.

MR. BARRIE: Really?

MR. SARKISIAN: And you could learn English from it, too; you know, words-

MR. BARRIE: I just had a tough time with it.

MR. SARKISIAN: You know, between Latin and Greek practically all the English language.

MR. BARRIE: I know quite a bit of-

MR. SARKISIAN: Architect.

MR. BARRIE: Politics.

MR. SARKISIAN: Politics. Just think how many of the words-you know, I think that President Wilson was one of the most scholarly presidents that we have had. He said that if a person knows-I don't know whether it was five hundred words in English-he could express himself beautifully. If he knows the meaning truly he doesn't need any more than that to speak good English.

MR. BARRIE: Is that the same to speak good Greek?

MR. SARKISIAN: I think so. I think the biggest problem you have in Greek translation is you have to learn to pronounce it right and, if you don't, it doesn't mean anything. In Greece I've seen so many people ask the waiter for something and, to be nice, they try to use the Berlitz School of teaching, you know, and just the slightest little mispronunciation, or accent grave, or accent aigu, you know, where the emphasis should be. We have an awful lot of English words that one can't make out unless one was born and raised here and has heard them used. There is no reason for that. In

English you have 10 words spelled the same way, sounding the same way, and they all mean different things. It depends on where you use them.

MR. BARRIE: I know. That's true. Maybe one of those days when I go back I'll learn Greek.

MR. SARKISIAN: You will only have to learn just a few-but when you do study it, learn the real pronunciation. That's the best. Without that you'll get nowhere. Like the Americans could never say "conversation". You know, they don't have that nasal quality, "conversation," "election". They can't do it. [Gives these words the French pronunciation.]

MR. BARRIE: Yes, that's true. It's hard for Americans to-I'll learn.

MR. SARKISIAN: You're young. You learn all these things. But learn them. Being Armenian and Greek, I'm just giving you a little fatherly advice as to what if you want a language-that's what you have to do unless you want to have a Greek-what do you say-expurgated Greek language. Then it has to come from-otherwise it's very simple.

MR. BARRIE: Maybe you could teach me.

MR. SARKISIAN: I'll be glad to. I'll teach your girls here.

MR. BARRIE: We'll do a couple of words each time I come. We've talked about John Wicker; we've talked about John Carroll, about Valentiner and Richardson. Now all these people were in Detroit in the community when you started at Arts & Crafts. Well, John Wicker was dead. I'd like to ask you now why did you ever decide to stay at Arts & Crafts School?

MR. SARKISIAN: One of the reasons that I stayed at Arts & Crafts was that I was on a scholarship. I had met Dr. Kamperman. Well, I didn't meet him actually. But he came to see a show in one of the galleries and he was very much interested. He had just gotten on the board of Arts & Crafts. So he asked who I was and whether I had any talent. I think it was Gurrie, Mr. Gurrie, from Boston. He said he thought I had a lot of talent. One day I got a call from Mr. Kamperman.

[Audio break.]

MR. BARRIE: You were talking about Mr. Gurrie?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. So he told him that he thought that I had a lot of talent but that I couldn't get help from anywhere at all. I deserved it. So the Kampermans decided to give me a scholarship. Gurrie, the director, called me and said, "I have a Dr. and Mrs. Kamperman who are very much interested in your work. They've come here and made arrangements for you to go to school full time and everything will be paid by them: materials, paints, brushes, canvas, tuition, everything.

MR. BARRIE: Now was Gurrie head of Arts & Crafts?

MR. SARKISIAN: He was the director.

MR. BARRIE: At that time he was the director?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. And he was a nice man. I think he was a little bit too perfumed, you know, but he was nice. Then I got a call from Dr. Kamperman. He said, "I've made all the arrangements for you. Probably Mr. Gurrie has already told you. You go and paint and don't worry about anything. If you ever feel that you want to go to New York or to Europe I'll see to it that you do." Well, I had the

feeling that I have to find the things I'm looking for right where I am; if I can't see it there or find it there, I'll never find it in Europe or in Timbuktu. So that's the reason I stayed here.

MR. BARRIE: How long were you a student at Arts & Crafts?

MR. SARKISIAN: No too long, really. About two years. Then I think the Depression came. A lot of people couldn't support the school, you know. John Carroll had to leave because he was drawing a big salary. Actually they wanted to close the school. So I said to Mrs. Simpson, a member of the board, "Why don't you let us try to keep the school going? We will all do the cleaning, sweep the floors and everything." We needed the job. And we wanted to keep the school going because, once it's closed, you're done. As many schools have done. They said, "Fine, we'll try it."

MR. BARRIE: Now when you say "we," you're talking about-

MR. SARKISIAN: Jay Boorsma and myself. Boorsma was teaching commercial art. I was teaching fine arts. I was teaching drawing, painting, watercolor. He was teaching things like perspective and cars and things. He was a good artist, a very fine artist. And so we both decided that we shouldn't try and close the school. Just then the GI Bill started and then we were all set. The government was paying for these kids' tuition and materials and everything they needed. Any GI who didn't have any kind of training at all took up art. They thought that was the easiest thing to get into. And some of them made good. Like, you know, the WPA artists like Ben Shahn. But those GIs were really a lifesaver for us.

MR. BARRIE: What year did you first join the faculty of Arts & Crafts? Because the GIs came in after World War II.

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. Let's see, World War II ended in 1945. It must have been around 1943 or so. You see, I was 4F so I couldn't get in. I had phlebitis.

MR. BARRIE: So you were teaching in 1943?

MR. SARKISIAN: That's right.

MR. BARRIE: That was about your first year of teaching?

MR. SARKISIAN: No, I was teaching before that. I took a year off. But it was around that time. After we were there I think about two years, the GI's started coming right after that.

MR. BARRIE: You and Boorsma were the only two there?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. All the teachers had been laid off. I mean [Samuel] Cashwan, John Carroll, who taught design, interior designing, we let him go. We kept the school going.

MR. BARRIE: How many students did you have during the war?

MR. SARKISIAN: You'd be surprised how they kept building up. But before the GIs came, we were very short of students. I think we had probably something like not more than twenty full-time students. I think Alice has the information.

MR. BARRIE: Really!

MR. SARKISIAN: Honest. Then we had some part-time students. I used to teach from Sunday to

Sunday, morning, noon and night. You see, when Boorsma was there I wouldn't be, and when I was there he wouldn't be. We took care of everything. We took care of all the bookkeeping, all the teaching, all the cleaning. Then gradually when the GI's began coming, they helped us. Then we started adding teachers as we went along. Well, from then on it kept on going until it got so big there was a time when we had something like three hundred students there.

MR. BARRIE: This was in the old building on Watson Street?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes, that's right. Then we took part of the next building there. We were trying to make all kinds of repairs, which we did in a way. We started teaching costume design so that the students could help us, which they did. But this really caught fire and started growing really fast. Before we knew it, Wally Ford came in and became president of the school. After that we were all set. He really worked hard to get the new school. Now they're building a whole block.

MR. BARRIE: I know. I see it. What was it like in those early days of Arts & Crafts? What was it like to be a teacher there and what was it like to be an artist there?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, let's see, Wayne University was also going through a period. They used to send us a lot of graduate students. They could not understand the way I taught. As a matter of fact, some of them were crying. Do you know Louise Nobili?

MR. BARRIE: I don't know her, but I know the name.

MR. SARKISIAN: Actually she came one night and, before I even had a chance to talk to her, she left and never came back. Later we became real good friends. I mean, you see, in those days they wanted proof. I was young and they wanted to know if I was able to draw and paint. I used to get mad once in a while. I used to take one of their canvases and I'd say, "All right, now I'm going to paint this." And I'd paint it. That would satisfy them when they saw what goes through to bring it up to a certain point that you want. Also they would like to take that thing with them. They'd say, "Well, sign your name to it." But I never did. Any painting that I worked on I'd say, "Well, I'll give you a stretcher and a canvas of the same size, and the same shape, but I'm going to keep this myself." We had some really black students that were very good. One of those was Roy Foster. He was really tremendous. Oh, he could draw like an angel. He really was a genius.

MR. BARRIE: What became of him?

MR. SARKISIAN: He still is. He called me one night and told me that he'd be on the "Black Talk" program on Channel 56. He said, "Do you want to watch it?" I said, "Certainly." And it's the funniest thing; he told me what he was going to say about Arts & Crafts but when it came to Arts & Crafts they cut it off.

MR. BARRIE: I wonder why?

MR. SARKISIAN: Who knows? Who is this man-what's his name, on Channel 56? That guy doesn't know anything about art. Braddock, isn't it? Isn't it Braddock, that interviews some of the leading black citizens?

[A voice suggests "Maddox."]

Maddox? Well, Mannix, who is Armenian, by the way. Did you know that? He is. Anyway, Roy Foster is a tremendous artist. He painted this mural for the Black Museum. I don't know where it is. Have you heard of it? I'd like to see that. I don't know where it is but I'll find it. We had people like Chuck

Bean. We had Al Hale, you know, and all those black kids because the other schools didn't accept them at the time. They were very prejudiced, you know, but we were very democratic. We opened our doors to them.

MR. BARRIE: Was this in the '40s?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. One of the schools-Meinzinger's [Detroit, MI]-actually made a public announcement in the newspapers that the Negroes, whether they were veterans or not, should not come to that school; they didn't want them. Can you imagine that? I mean a person running a school like that to do that? It's hard to believe. The black students didn't know what to do so they all came over to our school. And, boy, Meinzinger's had the lousiest teachers. They had only one good teacher there, really one good one. That was Chico Lopez. You've heard of him?

MR. BARRIE: Yes.

MR. SARKISIAN: He was good. A very good friend of mine. He was deaf and whenever he'd go to faculty meetings and things like that, you know, at the University of Michigan here, he'd take off his hearing aid and he wouldn't hear. You know, he was a smart kid. But he was good. He was a good man. And, you know, [Zube] Kachadoorian studied with him. Well, anyway, Meinzinger, the old man, called me one day and said, "I'll pay you double what the Arts & Crafts pay you." I said, "Look, Mr. Meinzinger, I'm not working for the money. I'm saving enough pennies. I'm making a living. I don't want to change." He said, "Isn't there a way that I could get you here?" I said, "I'm sorry but no. I can't do that." So that was that. And then two or three years later they had to close. And all his teachers came over to ask for a job. Well, how could I hire them? They never thought like I did. They were very poor in their craft, they couldn't draw, and they couldn't paint. They did a typical kind of pseudo-drawing. They were pseudo-Ash Can type of artists. But they were bad.

MR. BARRIE: What was so special about the way you taught at Arts & Crafts? Was it just the very atmosphere of Arts & Crafts?

MR. SARKISIAN: You know what? I hate to say this, because I don't want to sound egotistical about this. I think when I went to Arts & Crafts the first day I could tell by just going through the room how wrong it was. That's one thing. I never denied a student who wanted to discuss his problems. Never. No matter when or what, if they wanted to talk with me I'd talk with them. I'd talk with their parents. I'd call their parents long distance to talk with them. You know, when you're really sincere about what you're doing they feel it; they know that you're trying to help them. Oh, you can help them just so much, after that you leave them alone. If they can't make it alone they shouldn't be in the business. But I did gain their respect and trust. And I think that this counts. For instance, I never felt that with John Carroll.

MR. BARRIE: Along with gaining their trust in your teaching method, what did you try to emphasize to them?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I don't know. I'm very much interested in the Greek philosophers-Socrates. You know, there is nothing in the world that we don't know. You know it. But you have to ask the student and you have to ask him in such a way that he will be able to answer. In other words, I didn't go to a student and say, "This is wrong and this is wrong and that is wrong." The first thing that I would do is say, "Well, what do you think?" I ask them. I think this is really the secret of good teaching. You don't tell the student; you ask him. And 90 percent of the students react to that; they would say what's wrong with their work. Then I'd say, "Well, whenever you need any help, you ask me and I'll help you." I know every technique that there is. I could paint like Renoir, like Vlaminck,

like the old masters. I mean I learned this all through the war. I did nothing but experiment with all kinds. I made my own gessoes, you know, gesso panels, and my own mediums; and I disregarded some, got some. It's a matter of constant research. And the students know that. As soon as you touch a brush to the paper, they can tell whether you could do it. You see, I follow them. I never want to change their thinking. I never once tried to impose my philosophy on their philosophy. They all had their own philosophy. I used to feel jealous of them sometimes; I mean happily jealous; not in a small way. If I felt that this person really had big talent, I wasn't an especially jealous person. I was what you would call an average artist, you know, not bad, not a giant. But I did the best I could in a certain sense and I think that that's important.

MR. BARRIE: I read somewhere that you—this is a quote: "You believe that freedom in art is something that must be earned by constant self-discipline."

MR. SARKISIAN: That's right.

MR. BARRIE: How did you apply that to your students?

MR. SARKISIAN: Well, I think that we go back again to leaving it up to the student, to their honor. I think that if you say to the student "What do you think?" he immediately is self-disciplining himself. He may say, "It's lousy," or "It's good." Then you say, "Well, now, if you think this is lousy, why do you think it's lousy?" Or if he says, "This is tremendous," you say, "Why do you think so?" You know, "why" is an important word. That's the trouble nowadays; you know, we never ask; we always tell youngsters what they should do. I think that's wrong. You know, we'd learn a great deal if we'd only ask them.

MR. BARRIE: As far as the curriculum goes, how did you try to express this idea? Did you make them learn different techniques?

MR. SARKISIAN: Yes. I told them that technically there are some things that they have to learn. Like the alphabet—you can't write unless you know the words; you have to have a vocabulary, right? And I think that goes for painting too. You have to learn certain technical applications and what we can put over what. For instance, you can put oil paint over watercolor, but you can't put watercolor over oil. These are technical things that they could get in many books in any library. This is not really teaching. This is merely making them get acquainted with these things that it would take them a little longer to learn by themselves. But the true teaching is when you say, "What are you doing? What are you trying to do? I'm interested. I'd like to know." When he has enough confidence in you to tell you what he is trying to do then you judge, you judge within yourself. Maybe his is right.

MR. BARRIE: Two things we talked about before in your teaching. You told me that you used to send the students to the Museum to look at a painting.

MR. SARKISIAN: That's right.

MR. BARRIE: What was the object of doing that?

MR. SARKISIAN: The object of doing that was because I had the experience when I was at Wicker's. We bought the first Matisse, *The Window* [1916, at the Detroit Institute of the Arts]. It's a beautiful painting, you know. And frankly I wasn't up to it. I couldn't see it. You see, that's where Wicker was very wise and very advanced. He said to me, Sarkis, will you really do me a favor?" I said, "Why, sure." He said, "Will you go once a week and stay in front of that picture for one hour. Don't try to analyze it or anything. Just look at it. After a month then you tell me what you see in it." And it was

really surprising how many things became clear. The painting became something that I could never do. I realized the freedom, the emotional application of the paint, the content, the reality of the thing; whether it was flat or round didn't matter. But I did understand the painting so much more. So why then shouldn't I pass that experience onto my students? I'd say, "Well, we have at the Art Museum a beautiful Ghirlandaio. It's the head of an old man with a tam. You go and look at it and then we'll talk about it. Look at it. Then we'll discuss it. Also notice the underground; what is it? How did he get that pink?" Well, as soon as they become serious enough to wonder how, then they discover it. And it's up to them to find it. If they need any help, I'll tell them that the pink in the background is so rare; it's pink but it's not too pink. It's kind of an ashes of roses type of-I don't know if you're acquainted with it.

MR. BARRIE: I've seen it, yes.

MR. SARKISIAN: It's beautiful. It's really one of the most beautiful paintings I think that they have. When the student gets something out of that, he's got something. As a matter of fact, I've painted some things on plaster. I used to pour the plaster on the sidewalk, you know, a rough kind of sidewalk. And when I'd get it, oh, about an inch, or a half-inch, or three-quarters of an inch thick, the plaster which was on the sidewalk would have a design with all these beautiful folds in it. And what is this but really appreciating the minute, the small but very interesting patterns.

MR. BARRIE: The second thing about your teaching is that I understand that, for two years, you required of your students disciplined study before you allowed them to experiment. Is that true?

MR. SARKISIAN: Oh, yes. I think that's absolutely important. They have to learn how to draw. At that time all the schools from New York to San Francisco didn't even have a model. This is the truth.

MR. BARRIE: No figure models?

MR. SARKISIAN: No models at all. They just painted a lot of abstract things. Well, of course, Hofmann and all those rather well-known Abstract Expressionists did abstract paintings and things like that. The students got influenced by all that. I didn't stop them from doing that. When Jackson Pollock did it, he had the taste to stop where he wanted to stop. I mean just dripping paint is not hard to do. Anybody can do it. But to drip it in such a way that when you reach a certain point where you think it really has a certain depth, a certain reality, where even the line has a certain lively quality, well, if you're smart enough to do that, to be able to stop, then you get something out of it. Otherwise to me it's just dripping. The same thing with [Piet] Mondrian. All right, it's squares. People say, "Well, any kid can do that." But when you look at a good Mondrian, at the early Mondrians, at the early Paul Klee's, at early anybody-they tried to draw so hard. Like Jackson Pollock was a student of-oh, what's his name [Thomas Hart Benton]? He did some murals-

MR. BARRIE: [Arshile] Gorky?

MR. SARKISIAN: No. No, Gorky was good. No, no. Who was that guy who did all those-he used to paint the South?

He was wise enough to really stop when he had to stop. And this is what art is all about. To know when to start, when to call it finished, when to put a little black here, maybe some more red here-

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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